

Anomie and Reconstruction in the Virtual Field: A Sociological Examination of Cyberbullying among College Students

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Abstract

Cyberbullying has become an increasingly prominent social issue among college students in the digital age. From a sociological perspective, this paper systematically analyzes the occurrence mechanisms, social causes, and coping strategies of cyberbullying among college students by comprehensively applying social structure theory, social learning theory, and field theory. The research finds that cyberbullying among college students is not a simple individual psychological deviation but a projection of social structural contradictions into virtual space, a product of the interplay among institutional tensions, cultural conflicts, and individual socialization dilemmas. The mediating role of relative deprivation, the cognitive mechanism of moral disengagement, and the procedural influence of social learning constitute the core dimensions for understanding this phenomenon. Resolving the problem of cyberbullying among college students requires moving beyond the limitations of individual attribution to build a comprehensive governance system from three levels: institutional reshaping, cultural guidance, and subject empowerment.

Keywords

College Students; Cyberbullying; Sociological Perspective; Social Structure; Field Theory.

1. Introduction

The rapid development of internet technology has profoundly changed the forms and boundaries of interpersonal communication. According to recent research, more than a quarter (27.5%) of Chinese college students have been involved in cyberbullying incidents, with 10.1% being pure victims, 4.7% being pure perpetrators, and 12.7% holding the dual identity of both victim and perpetrator [2]. This data reveals that cyberbullying has become a social fact that cannot be ignored among college students.

It is worth pondering: why do college students, as a highly educated youth group with relatively mature cognitive development levels, still become involved in cyberbullying behaviors? Existing research mostly analyzes the influence of individual traits from a psychological perspective [6]. However, cyberbullying is essentially a social behavior, and its occurrence and evolution are embedded in specific social structures and cultural contexts. This paper attempts to start from a sociological perspective, transcending the limitations of individual attribution, to examine college student cyberbullying within the macro background of social transformation, institutional arrangements, and cultural change, revealing its deep social roots and exploring systematic pathways for response.

2. Theoretical Perspectives: A Sociological Framework for Understanding College Student Cyberbullying

2.1. Social Structure and Anomie Theory

Merton's anomie theory provides an important perspective for understanding cyberbullying [1]. When a disjunction exists between the culturally prescribed goals of success and the institutionalized means available to achieve them, individuals may experience strain and pressure, leading to deviant behaviors as adaptive strategies. In contemporary society, goals such as material success and social recognition are widely internalized, yet not all college students possess equal resources and opportunities. Differences in socioeconomic status are particularly evident in this regard—research indicates that college students from families with poorer economic circumstances face a significantly higher risk of involvement in cyberbullying [2]. This structural tension seeks release in virtual space, making cyberbullying a distorted form of adaptation.

2.2. Social Learning Theory

Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes that individual behavior is acquired through observing and imitating others. The anonymity, immediacy, and wide dissemination capabilities of cyberspace provide convenient conditions for the observational learning of aggressive behaviors. Cross-cultural research shows that the influence of social learning variables on cyberbullying behaviors among college students in different countries varies: for American students, behavioral definitions (i.e., an individual's attitudes and evaluations towards the behavior) are key predictive factors; while for Korean students, differential association (i.e., the strength of connection with peer groups that engage in bullying) is more significant [3]. This indicates that the learning mechanisms of cyberbullying possess cultural specificity and must be understood within specific social and cultural contexts.

2.3. Field Theory

Bourdieu's field theory offers a powerful tool for analyzing social interactions in cyberspace. Cyberspace can be regarded as a relatively autonomous field with its own logic, rules, and forms of capital. The position of college students within the network field, and the cultural and social capital they possess, profoundly influence their behavioral strategies. The occurrence of cyberbullying is often a strategic behavior adopted by actors to acquire symbolic capital and establish their own status within field competition. Simultaneously, the relative autonomy of the field implies that the forces of the external social structure are refracted and transformed by the field, manifesting in specific forms.

3. Empirical Landscape: Current Status and Characteristics of Cyberbullying among College Students

3.1. Basic Status

Large-scale survey data indicates that the participation rate in cyberbullying among college students has reached 27.5%, with the proportion holding the dual identity of both victim and perpetrator being the highest (12.7%) [2]. This finding challenges the binary cognitive framework that simply categorizes individuals as either "victims" or "perpetrators." The fluidity of bullying roles suggests that cyberbullying should be understood as a dynamic social process rather than a fixed personality trait.

Regarding demographic characteristics, college students who are male, younger, have left-behind experiences, come from families with poorer economic conditions, or have chronic diseases or a family history of mental illness face a higher risk of involvement in cyberbullying

[2]. The common thread among these factors is that social marginalization and cumulative vulnerability constitute important sources of cyberbullying risk.

3.2. Consequences and Impact

The impact of cyberbullying on the mental health of college students is multifaceted and far-reaching. Compared to those not involved, cyber victims and bully-victims report significantly higher rates of sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation; even pure perpetrators show significantly higher rates of sleep disturbances and depression compared to those not involved [2]. This finding suggests that the harm of cyberbullying is universal, and perpetrators themselves may also be victims of social structural pressures.

4. Social Causes: A Multidimensional Analysis of Cyberbullying among College Students

4.1. Institutional Tensions: The Mediating Role of Relative Deprivation

Relative deprivation refers to an individual's subjective perception of their disadvantaged position after comparing themselves with a reference group. Research has found that relative deprivation can significantly and positively predict cyberbullying behaviors among college students. In the context of the massification of higher education, heterogeneity within the college student population continues to increase, and the scope and intensity of social comparisons correspondingly expand. When college students perceive themselves to be in a disadvantaged position regarding resources, opportunities, or recognition, this sense of frustration seeks channels for release. Cyberspace, characterized by its anonymity and low cost, becomes a convenient field for venting frustrations and seeking compensation.

More importantly, the influence of relative deprivation does not occur directly but is realized through the mediating effect of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement refers to the cognitive mechanism through which individuals exempt themselves from self-sanctions for unethical behavior by redefining the behavior, obscuring responsibility, or disregarding consequences [1]. When relative deprivation weakens an individual's identification with moral norms, moral disengagement provides cognitive legitimacy for cyberbullying behaviors.

4.2. Cultural Conflicts: The Moderating Role of Moral Identity

Moral identity refers to the importance of moral traits to an individual's self-concept. Research has found that the mediating effect of moral disengagement is moderated by moral identity: compared to individuals with high moral identity, the predictive effect of moral disengagement on cyberbullying is stronger among college students with low moral identity levels. This implies that moral identity, as a stable self-schema, can buffer the negative impact of moral disengagement on behavior [4].

The value pluralism and moral relativism of contemporary society, to some extent, blur the boundaries between right and wrong. College students are in a critical period of values formation and consolidation, making them susceptible to the influence of "de-moralization" tendencies within online subcultures. When a collective consensus emerges in cyberspace suggesting that "bullying is just joking" or "everyone does it," individual moral judgment may be overridden by group norms.

4.3. Procedural Mechanisms: Social Learning and Behavioral Acquisition

The acquisition of cyberbullying behaviors is a social process. College students observe others' behaviors and their consequences during online interactions, forming cognitions about the effectiveness of actions. Research from the perspective of social learning theory confirms that differential association—the strength of connection with peer groups that engage in bullying—significantly predicts cyberbullying behaviors among Korean college students [3]. This suggests

that cyberbullying may spread through peer group transmission, forming "behavior chains" that proliferate within specific groups.

The algorithmic recommendations and community aggregation functions of online platforms objectively create conditions for the observational learning of aggressive behaviors. When negative emotional expressions and aggressive comments receive high attention and numerous likes, these behaviors receive positive reinforcement, increasing the likelihood of imitation [5].

5. Governance Pathways: Sociological Coping Strategies

5.1. Institutional Reshaping: Alleviating Structural Tensions

Addressing the problem of cyberbullying among college students requires, as a primary task, mitigating the projection of social structural contradictions onto individuals. This necessitates improving the social support system from a broader macro level, particularly focusing on disadvantaged student groups such as those from economically challenged families or with left-behind experiences [2]. Comprehensive measures including financial aid, academic support, and psychological care can help reduce their sense of relative deprivation [1]. Simultaneously, higher education institutions should establish and improve fair and equitable evaluation systems, reduce unnecessary competitive pressure, and provide multiple pathways for every student to gain recognition and realize their value.

5.2. Cultural Guidance: Strengthening Moral Identity

The malleability of moral identity provides opportunities for intervention [1]. Universities should integrate moral education throughout the entire process of professional instruction, campus culture, and daily management. Through methods such as role modeling, situational experiences, and reflective discussions, institutions can help students establish a stable moral self amidst the impact of diverse values. Simultaneously, attention should be paid to guiding online subcultures, cultivating norms of rational and friendly online interaction, and making civilized expression the dominant form of cultural capital within the network field.

5.3. Subject Empowerment: Enhancing Coping Capacities

College students' media literacy and emotional management abilities serve as crucial defenses against cyberbullying. Systematic media literacy education should be implemented to help students understand the unique characteristics of online interaction and cultivate skills in rational expression and information discernment. For students already involved in cyberbullying, timely psychological counseling and behavioral intervention should be provided to break the solidification of the "victim-perpetrator" roles. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to participate in the practical process of network governance, enhancing their sense of responsibility and capacity for action through such engagement.

6. Conclusion

Cyberbullying among college students is a complex social phenomenon, with its roots deeply embedded in the interweaving of social structure, cultural environment, and the process of individual socialization. Simplifying this problem as individual moral failure or psychological deviation neither facilitates a deep understanding of its essence nor leads to effective governance pathways. The unique value of the sociological perspective lies in helping us move beyond the limitations of individual attribution, recognizing the potential structural pressures behind each perpetrator and the possible lack of social support behind each victim.

Only through coordinated efforts at the institutional, cultural, and individual levels—simultaneously alleviating structural tensions while strengthening moral identity and enhancing individual capacities—can the spread of cyberbullying be fundamentally curbed,

returning a clear cyberspace to college students. This is not only a practical necessity for safeguarding individual physical and mental health but also a long-term strategy for promoting harmonious social development.

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