Cyberbullying in Fan Culture: Drivers, Platform Dynamics, and Governance in the New Media Era

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Abstract

In the era of new media, fan culture has become a powerful cultural and economic force. It shapes collective identities and influences the entertainment industries worldwide. However, this cultural phenomenon has also given rise to new forms of cyberbullying, where online harassment and violent behaviors are amplified within highly organized fan communities. This study investigates the dynamics of cyberbullying in fan culture using a multidimensional approach combining literature review and case analysis. Methodologically, it combines a literature review with case analysis, focusing on K-pop fandom practices in South Korea and governance measures on Chinese platforms such as Weibo's fanquan regulation and the national Qinglang Action. Findings are summarized across three dimensions: psychological and social drivers of cyberbullying, platform mechanisms that facilitate or fail to prevent such behaviors, and governance strategies employed by both platforms and policymakers. By integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology, and information science, this study not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of online fan dynamics but also provides practical implications for platform governance, cultural industry management, and policy development.

Keywords

Cyberbullying; Fan Culture; New Media; Platform Governance; Online Violence.

1. Introduction

The advancement of new media technologies has ushered in cultural innovation. Particularly for fan communities, the emergence of new media technologies has provided a platform for all enthusiasts. These platforms are subdivided into distinct micro-platforms, each possessing unique characteristics and discussion atmospheres. Different micro-platforms attract varied audiences, ultimately forming distinct groups. This reveals the differences between various fan communities. Among these, social media, as the most accessible and widespread platform, remains the choice for the majority of fans. These social platforms, relying on organized and timely communication, stimulate fan communities' creativity and participation. They drive the growth of the fan economy and the entertainment industry. Yet precisely because of this organization and immediacy, social media platforms like Weibo and TikTok are rife with various societal issues. Among these, the most representative problems are cyberbullying and online harassment. Cyberbullying and online harassment have existed since the dawn of the internet [1]. Much like how positive developments inevitably bring negative consequences, these phenomena are an inherent byproduct of digital communication [2]. Wherever people gather, bullying persists; when this occurs online, it is termed cyberbullying [3]. Technological advancements have not only facilitated communication but also transformed the nature of cyberbullying [4]. From its origins as mere online verbal abuse to its current capacity to impact victims' real-world circumstances, cyberbullying has undergone significant evolution

[5]. For instance, during the 2022 controversy surrounding celebrity Xiao Zhan on Weibo, the star's fervent fans attacked anyone disagreeing with them, even publishing victims' personal information online for further assault [6]. Such actions undoubtedly represent an escalated form of cyberbullying. Existing research on cyberbullying tends to focus on perpetrators' psychological motivations, platform governance, and solutions [1]. For instance, social identity theory posits that individuals derive self-validation and societal recognition through group affiliation [2]. When conflicts arise between one's own group and external groups, antagonism is likely to emerge. Building upon this, group polarization theory offers deeper insight. Within highly homogeneous groups or communities, the echo chamber effect intensifies [5]. Shared beliefs regarding a particular issue become increasingly extreme. The combination of these two theories effectively explains the cyberbullying behaviors exhibited by certain extreme fan groups [7]. This study aims to analyze cyberbullying behaviors across three dimensions: driving factors, platform dynamics, and countermeasures [8]. First, it examines the psychological and cultural mechanisms of fan bullying through the lens of social identification and emotional mobilization. Second, it analyzes how technological and institutional designs—such as algorithmic recommendations, reporting mechanisms, and community rules—either exacerbate or mitigate violent behavior. Finally, it evaluates the effectiveness of existing platform governance and social intervention strategies, proposing improved countermeasures. In terms of contribution, this research aims to provide theoretical integration and practical guidance for understanding and governing cyberbullying within fan cultures.

2. Cultural and Economic Drivers of Cyberbullying in Fan Culture

The essence of fan culture lies in the evolution of community culture. Since the dawn of humanity, community culture has occupied a central position within human civilization [2]. This explains the coexistence of diverse local customs and traditions with instances of intergroup hostility and abuse. It is also due to the existence of community culture that humans witness the development of ideologies such as nationalism and Nazism [4]. From a psychological perspective, an individual's psychological traits ultimately evolve into collective behavioral patterns [5]. Among numerous psychological states, the most representative are narcissism, inferiority, and poor emotional regulation. Prior research indicates that an individual's narcissistic tendencies often manifest as a craving for others' attention and validation. This stems from the narcissistic trait of unclear self-perception, where external recognition and attention bolster one's sense of self, thereby fulfilling the narcissist's psychological expectations [2]. However, if the narcissist fails to secure others' attention and validation, this mindset can devolve into inferiority [1]. This inferiority complex then buries resentment and envy within the individual [4]. Such aggressive tendencies influence their behavior and interactions with others. When confronted with a lack of recognition or attention, adopting aggressive tactics becomes a means to preserve their narcissism and conceal their inferiority. Simply put, the aggressive behavior of narcissists or the inferior seeks to coerce others into acknowledging them. Both the inferior and the narcissistic often lack the capacity to regulate their emotions. This deficiency leads to uncontrolled behavior—namely, the unchecked tendency to attack those who fail to validate them [9]. By extension, such behavior can proliferate across various scenarios: attacking those who challenge their views, attacking those who disapprove of their preferences, attacking those who fail to comprehend them [10]. Within this chain reaction triggered by such psychological states, the inherent rightness or wrongness of the matter becomes irrelevant. What matters is whether the other party acknowledges them or agrees with their views [11]. For instance, a 2020 survey on Weibo revealed that 40% of respondents would attack those who disagreed with them or sought validation to derive a sense of worth. This constitutes the core motivation

behind polarization and cyberbullying [8]. From a sociological perspective, we discern another fundamental aspect of cyberbullying: the interdependence between individuals and groups emphasized by social identity theory. This theory posits that individuals derive essential self-esteem from their group affiliations. Within fan cultures, this phenomenon is strikingly evident. Fandom divides supporters into distinct groups based on their preferences, as a celebrity's image is transparent and public. Initially, fans who admire the same celebrity discover shared traits, so they coalesce into a tight-knit group. As a result, each member gains recognition from peers and a stronger sense of identity. To defend the group's legitimacy, individuals begin to attack outsiders—often targeting rival fanbases. This process is further intensified by group polarization, which amplifies collective aggression; consequently, isolated insults evolve into systematic cyberbullying. Within these groups, such cyberbullying and online violence are packaged as more legitimate and concealed. From both a cultural perspective and the standpoint of the entertainment industry itself, we observe that the cyberbullying stemming from fan culture is considered essential. Competition is built into every cultural phenomenon, so rival fan groups naturally compare themselves with one another. As this rivalry intensifies, the need to outdo the other side shifts group behavior from mild criticism to coordinated attacks. Consequently, these collective assaults escalate into sustained cyberbullying and online violence. The entertainment industry itself favors such intense rivalry. Fierce competition between fan groups substantially boosts the sector's overall revenue. Take Weibo fan communities as an example: whenever a favored celebrity releases new music, fans collectively purchase the album in large numbers to bolster their idol's standing in the competition. The profits generated during these contests are entirely pocketed by entertainment companies.

3. Platform Architecture and its Role in Cyberbullying

The digital advancement in contemporary society has significantly intensified the phenomenon of group polarization within fan communities [1]. This reflects both the influence of social media platforms and a natural consequence of their development [2]. Within such platform ecosystems, algorithms constitute the most crucial component. Their existence enables individuals scattered across platforms to discover their respective communities [4]. Notably, recommendation algorithms allow everyone to find content aligned with their interests. This represents both the platform's filtering of individuals and the collective's filtering of individuals. Following this initial screening, individuals undergo a refinement process [7]. This refinement involves a secondary selection of already filtered individuals. Through their behavior, these individuals are allocated into increasingly granular categories [9]. For instance, those who frequently like polarizing videos will be served more similar content. The comment sections beneath such videos become saturated with like-minded individuals. Consequently, content brimming with antagonistic sentiment and provoking anger garners increased likes and wider distribution. According to technological determinism, we recognize that algorithms possessing these characteristics incentivize the creation of more similar content [10]. This fosters a vicious cycle: the platform's technical architecture influences user behavior, which in turn reshapes the platform's structure [11]. From the perspective of platform architecture, user discourse on social media exhibits anonymity and immediacy. Anonymity allows all users to express opinions without revealing their true identities. Immediacy means any exchange can be completed within a short timeframe, without delay. These characteristics empower users to speak freely and encourage more individuals to voice their views on the platform. However, the exceptionally low cost of expression carries corresponding negative consequences. Namely, this minimal cost significantly reduces the consequences of behaviors such as cyberbullying. Users who post comments bear no responsibility for their words or actions; even if they cause harm to others

online, they face no real-world repercussions. This characteristic fuels the proliferation of cyberbullying and increases the difficulty of platform governance. Every platform aspires to foster a healthy discussion environment to promote its sustainable development. Yet, any platform grappling with governance inevitably faces challenges in effectively managing individual user behavior due to anonymity and immediacy. Striking a balance between freedom of speech and controlling online violence proves particularly difficult. The existence of the network disinhibition effect diminishes users' sense of personal morality and responsibility, eroding their sense of reverence. The immediacy of platforms also accelerates cyberbullying, amplifying its destructive power. For violations of platform rules, oversight proves challenging for platforms, and reporting is difficult for individuals. Collective behavior fragments accountability; even when platforms wish to penalize cyberbullies, precise enforcement is unattainable. Consequently, policies often suffer from ineffective implementation.

Take Weibo as an illustrative case. As one of China's most representative social media platforms, Weibo has established comparatively sophisticated reporting mechanisms and multiple channels for user complaints. Paradoxically, however, it has also long functioned as a major epicenter of cyberbullying in China. In response, the Chinese government launched the Qinglang (Clean and Clear) campaign in 2021, targeting eight key problem areas: (1) online nihilism, (2) toxic and abusive discourse, (3) algorithmic abuse, (4) harmful or illegal content, (5) bullying within fan communities, (6) click-farm and traffic-manipulation operations, (7) illicit profit chains, and (8) weak platform accountability. As a result of this intervention, incidents of online violence declined markedly, contributing to the reconstruction of a comparatively healthier digital discussion environment. From a broader perspective of platform political economy, commercial entities inherently prioritize profit generation, valuing market metrics and user engagement. Enhanced user activity and discussion volume are essential for platform growth and corporate financing—an inevitable consequence of market economics. Even platforms rife with cyberbullying and online violence possess inherent commercial value. Consequently, it is rare to observe platforms effectively addressing cyberbullying issues. For governments and nations, however, policy often proves the most potent solution. To redirect the invisible hand of the market requires state intervention. Only through robust legislation can platforms be compelled to relinquish certain commercial interests.

4. A Multidimensional Framework for Addressing Cyberbullying

According to this study's analysis, addressing the issue of cyberbullying prevalent on current online platforms necessitates consideration across four dimensions: the individual, the platform, policy, and cultural levels [1]. Furthermore, an integrated framework must be developed by synthesizing these four aspects [2]. This comprehensive framework incorporates elements from psychology, sociology, information science, and law [3]. Applying this integrated framework to the individual level requires first addressing psychological issues. This can be achieved through government-led initiatives promoting rational fandom behavior, including relevant education and courses. Furthermore, incorporating relevant case studies into educational materials will help individuals develop sound outlooks on life, values, and societal perspectives [6]. To protect adolescents from cyberbullying, platforms and legal frameworks must implement a multi-layered system of enhanced safeguards across three key dimensions: First, minimize exposure through access and content controls [7]. Restrict adolescents' online usage time and contexts to reduce opportunities for cyberbullying. Simultaneously, employ protective algorithms that systematically decrease the promotion of violent, conflict-driven, or emotionally provocative content to users under eighteen [8].

Second, strengthen accountability [9]. Promote the development and adoption of real-name registration systems to increase the personal cost and traceability of engaging in cyberbullying, thereby deterring potential perpetrators. Third, mandate educational remediation [11]. Individuals who have experienced cyberbullying or perpetrated such behavior should be required to complete targeted online education before regaining full access, addressing both victim support and perpetrator rehabilitation. At the platform level, strict implementation of national cybersecurity laws is paramount to reduce anonymous users. Criteria for identifying cyberbullying incidents also require refinement. Taking the EU's Digital Services Act as an example, the authority to establish standards and conduct reviews on platforms should be delegated to third-party institutions [12]. This ensures policy implementation and standardization, making platform governance more efficient and transparent [8]. It also mitigates issues arising from platforms prioritizing commercial interests over their environmental responsibilities [6]. Finally, advancing information science should utilize the latest AI language models to automatically identify all user speech and behavior. This enhances both the intensity and scope of oversight. Defining keywords and critical behaviors assists platforms in identifying latent perpetrators and instigators within user communities. Upon detection, real-name registration systems can facilitate educational interventions and dialogue [10]. At the policy level, consideration must be given to cyberbullying's societal repercussions and psychological impact on individuals. Immediate action is required to address existing incidents [9]. Establishing counseling services is essential for both perpetrators and victims. These non-profit organizations must provide unconditional support to all parties involved. Through psychological counseling, victims can recover normal functioning while perpetrators are guided toward repentance. Secondly, enforce the implementation of online real-name registration. This policy is central to purifying the online environment and reducing cyberbullying. When platforms strip away anonymity, speech suddenly carries a price tag: users—knowing their words echo in real life—think twice, act nicer, and count the cost before bullying. Finally, improvements to the Cybersecurity Law are essential. China's current Cybersecurity Law remains at a macro level without detailed categorisation. Therefore, it is necessary to classify types and standards of cyber violence, establishing corresponding penalties for each distinct behavior. At the cultural level, fostering a positive culture is the core objective. A sound cultural environment will cultivate a constructive atmosphere for discussion. Conversely, a restless cultural environment inevitably breeds discourse saturated with violence and hostility. Thus, improving the existing cultural landscape and societal mainstream culture is imperative. Through three steps—encouraging, regulating, and managing fan culture—this phenomenon can be effectively shaped into a healthy cultural force. Encouraging civilized and constructive discussion will embolden more individuals to express their thoughts and opinions, creating positive feedback loops that ultimately foster a virtuous cycle.

5. Conclusion

This study conducts a multidimensional exploration of cyberbullying phenomena within fan culture during the new media era. Firstly, at the psychological and social motivational level, the research reveals that narcissism and inferiority complexes, group polarization effects, and the need for social recognition constitute significant driving forces behind cyberbullying. These factors are amplified within fan communities, thereby rationalizing and normalizing aggressive behavior. Secondly, at the platform dynamics level, algorithmic recommendations, anonymity mechanisms, and content moderation deficiencies have been demonstrated as fertile ground for the proliferation and escalation of online violence. Platforms, in their pursuit of traffic and commercial gains, often neglect the health of the user environment, creating a vicious cycle involving technology, behavior, and structure. Thirdly, at the

governance and response level, research indicates that both China's 'Qinglang Campaign' and the EU's Digital Services Act demonstrate the importance of policy intervention in improving the online environment. However, these efforts face limitations such as ambiguous enforcement standards and significant regulatory challenges. It needs to be addressed from the perspectives of individuals, platforms, policies, and culture. And it requires the integration of elements from psychology, sociology, information science, and law. The ultimate goal is to purify the online environment and prevent the occurrence of cyberbullying.

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