

Social learning theory implementation in studying the normalization phenomenon of digital bullying among adolescents

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Abstract

The transformation of information technology has become an identity among teenagers without being accompanied by digital ethics, resulting in negative impacts among teenagers, one of which is the phenomenon of digital bullying or cyberbullying which is increasingly prevalent on various social media platforms. This study was conducted to comprehensively examine how the implementation of Social Learning Theory can explain the mechanisms behind the normalization of digital bullying. This research method uses a normative approach using sources relevant to this study. The results of the study indicate that the normalization of digital bullying occurs through exposure to viral aggressive content from popular figures on social media that triggers verbal violence and forms collective social norms to gain recognition and conformity within peer groups. These acts of aggression transform from mere impulses into planned adaptive behaviors to maintain social status, thus creating a permissive digital ecosystem and killing individual empathy under the shadow of group solidarity.

Keywords: Social, normalization, phenomenon, digital, bullying

Introduction

Massive digital transformation has shifted the landscape of adolescent social interactions from physical spaces to the near-boundary cyberspace. Information and communication technology is no longer merely a supporting tool, but has become the primary ecosystem where adolescents form identities, seek recognition, and build social relationships. However, the rapid adoption of this technology is often not accompanied by a mature digital ethics, giving rise to various negative consequences, one of which is the phenomenon of digital bullying, or cyberbullying, which is increasingly prevalent on various social media platforms [1]. Digital bullying is more destructive than conventional bullying due to its anonymous, viral, and permanent nature. A teenager can become the target of ridicule by thousands of people in a short time, and the digital traces of this violence are very difficult to completely erase. What is most concerning about this phenomenon is not just the frequency of occurrences, but the shift in perception where cyberbullying is starting to be seen as something commonplace or even just a joke among teenagers [2].

The normalization of digital bullying creates a toxic cyber environment, where empathy is eroded by the desire for social validation in the form of likes or comments. When demeaning others is seen as entertaining content or a way to demonstrate one's existence, moral values in communication begin to be ignored. This phenomenon demonstrates that deviant behavior does not occur spontaneously, but rather through a long and systematic process of social acceptance within peer groups.

From a sociological psychology perspective, this phenomenon can be analyzed in depth using Social Learning Theory developed by Albert Bandura. This theory states that human behavior is shaped not only by direct reinforcement but also through observing and imitating the behavior of others who are considered role models. In the digital context, adolescents constantly observe how public figures, content creators, and peers interact, including aggressive behavior that often garners significant attention.

The implementation of this theory suggests that adolescents learn digital bullying through modeling. When adolescents observe others engaging in digital bullying without experiencing negative consequences or even gaining popularity, they tend to internalize the behavior. Social media serves as a giant laboratory where this observation process occurs every second, where the boundaries between right and wrong behavior become blurred due to the abundance of unfiltered examples of bad behavior.

Reinforcement processes in the digital environment also play a crucial role in this normalization. In Bandura's theory, an individual's motivation to imitate a behavior is strongly influenced by perceived rewards. In cyberspace, these rewards take the form of collective support from peer groups who view bullying as a sign of courage or a strong sense of humor. This social reinforcement provides psychological justification for adolescents to continue engaging in similar behavior without feeling guilty [3].

Furthermore, the digital environment facilitates reciprocal determinism, where personal, behavioral, and environmental factors mutually influence each other. A teenager with aggressive tendencies (personal factor) finds himself on a platform that promotes provocative content (environment), leading to digital bullying (behavior). This cycle continues, reinforcing each other, until the bullying behavior becomes part of the communication culture considered standard in their digital interactions [4].

The lack of active involvement and understanding of the dynamics of social learning on social media by adults further exacerbates this situation. Many parents and educators focus solely on the technical aspects of device use, failing to understand the subtle process of imitating values that occurs behind the scenes. As a result, adolescents lose their moral compass and positive role models online, preferring to follow the dominant group, which tends to condone bullying [5].

This research is crucial for comprehensively examining how the implementation of Social Learning Theory can explain the mechanisms behind the normalization of digital

bullying. Understanding the processes of adolescents' attention, retention, and motivation in imitating negative behavior online is key to formulating appropriate intervention strategies.

Method

This research uses a normative legal method because the focus of the research is based on norm ambiguity. The approach used is a statutory approach. This research understands legal phenomena occurring in the field and conducts legal analysis using legal sources relevant to the problem being studied. This type of research aims to analyze and understand legal phenomena using data obtained directly from situations or sources relevant to the legal problem being studied, which are then interpreted argumentatively.

Results and Discussion

1. The Modeling Process in Social Learning Theory Contributes to the Normalization of Digital Bullying Behavior Among Adolescents

The modeling process is a key pillar of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which explains that human behavior is largely learned through observation. In the digital ecosystem, adolescents are constantly exposed to various role models, from influencers and internet celebrities to peers. When these influential figures engage in aggressive or bullying behavior online, whether overtly or covertly through sarcasm, adolescents tend to adopt this behavior as their new standard of communication [6].

The first stage of modeling is attention, where adolescents focus fully on content deemed interesting or viral on social media. Digital bullying content is often packaged in a provocative, humorous, or dramatic manner, making it highly effective in capturing the attention of adolescent audiences seeking emotional stimulation. The characteristics of social media, whose algorithms prioritize high engagement, give bullying acts center stage, forcing adolescents to subconsciously learn these aggressive interaction patterns as an effective way to gain attention. [7]

After the attention stage, the process continues to retention, which is the ability of adolescents to store information about the bullying behavior they observe in their memory. In the digital space, this retention is reinforced by the permanent and reusable nature of the content. Teens don't just see a single incident of bullying; they can see screenshots or videos shared widely across various platforms. This repeated exposure reinforces the cognitive structure of teens that bullying is a common and readily available response to certain social situations. To practice the behaviors they have observed and stored in their memory. In cyberspace, this behavioral reproduction is very easy due to minimal technical barriers; simply by typing a harsh comment or sharing a derogatory meme, an adolescent has successfully modeled the aggressive behavior they have previously witnessed. This ease of access makes the transition from observer to perpetrator very rapid, so that initially unfamiliar acts of bullying become routine behavior in their digital lives [8].

Normalization occurs systematically when digital bullying behavior is not only reproduced but also considered the "new norm" in social interactions. According to Bandura, modeling is most powerful if the model being imitated has high social status or is perceived as having similarities with

the observer. When adolescents see popular peers engaging in bullying without any social consequences for their standing, moral values prohibiting verbal abuse begin to loosen. This process gradually erodes adolescents' sensitivity to the suffering of victims, as their focus shifts to imitating styles of interaction deemed "cool" or "brave."

This modeling process is also supported by the phenomenon of learning through observing the consequences experienced by others, known as vicarious reinforcement. If a model receives praise, an increase in followers, or support after engaging in digital bullying, observing adolescents will conclude that such behavior is beneficial. This creates a strong motivation for adolescents to engage in bullying in order to achieve similar social rewards. Normalization occurs when the goal of gaining group validation is perceived as far more important than digital etiquette [9].

Furthermore, modeling in digital environments often occurs anonymously or through pseudonyms, which reduces psychological barriers to aggression. In Social Learning Theory, the environment plays a crucial role in providing opportunities for learned behaviors to emerge. The often unmoderated comment sections on social media platforms act as a permissive environment. Here, adolescents learn that online bullying is a safe way to express aggression because they do not have to face the physical reactions or actual cries of the victim [10].

Collectivity in the digital world accelerates this normalization through behavioral contagion. When many individuals within a digital friendship circle model the same behavior, the pressure for conformity increases. Teenagers who were initially reluctant to bully may begin to imitate these actions to avoid being perceived as different or ostracized by their peers. In this context, digital bullying is no longer viewed as individual deviance, but rather as a requirement for social membership in the digital ecosystem they inhabit.

Based on the above description of this modeling process, digital bullying becomes normalized among adolescents due to the cycle of observation, storage, and imitation supported by the structure of social media. Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that without intervention in the form of positive role models who promote empathy and prosocial behavior, adolescents will continue to be trapped in imitation aggression. Therefore, understanding this modeling mechanism is crucial to breaking the chain of normalization of bullying by redirecting adolescents' attention to more dignified models of digital interaction that have positive social consequences [11].

2. Social Reinforcement Mechanisms in Social Media Motivate Teenagers to Continue Digital Bullying as a Form of Group Adaptation

The mechanism of social reinforcement is the primary driving force that ensures that observed behavior is maintained and repeated. In Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, reinforcement does not always come in physical form, but more often manifests as a favorable environmental reaction for the individual. On social media, this reinforcement is instantaneous and widespread through interaction features such as likes, views, and supportive comments. For adolescents, every positive reaction to the bullying content they post serves as a psychological "reward" that validates their actions as correct and acceptable [12].

Social reinforcement in the digital world has a powerful appeal due to its quantitatively measurable nature. A teenager who digitally bullies a "common enemy" online often experiences a rapid surge in popularity. The numbers on the screen are not mere statistics, but rather symbols of social acceptance, highly coveted during adolescence. When aggressive behavior results in reinforcement in the form of increased digital status, adolescents are internally motivated to continue repeating the behavior to maintain their social standing [13].

In addition to direct reinforcement, there is a mechanism of vicarious reinforcement, or indirect reinforcement, where adolescents observe others benefiting from cyberbullying. When they see a peer being praised or considered "heroic" for cyberbullying, observers may conclude that aggression is an effective tool for gaining social power. This lowers adolescents' moral inhibitions about engaging in similar behavior, as they anticipate receiving the same social "rewards" as the model they observe [14].

In adolescent group dynamics, digital bullying often serves as a coping mechanism to demonstrate loyalty and solidarity. Social reinforcement in this context takes the form of a sense of belonging provided by the core group (in-group). Adolescents feel compelled to participate in bullying individuals outside their group (out-group) to avoid being perceived as weak or different. By going along with the bullying, they gain reinforcement in the form of social security and recognition as legitimate members, which is crucial for adolescents' emotional stability in both school and digital environments [15].

Conversely, social media also provides negative reinforcement that prevents adolescents from stopping bullying. This negative reinforcement operates through the fear of social exclusion; if an adolescent does not participate in the bullying perpetrated by their group, they risk becoming the next target or being ostracized from their social circle. Therefore, engaging in digital bullying becomes a way to "eliminate" the threat of exclusion. From Bandura's perspective, the motivation to avoid negative consequences is as strong as the desire for praise, making the normalization of bullying even more difficult to break [16].

The speed of feedback on social media creates a cycle of addiction to social reinforcement. Unlike real-world interactions, which take time, digital reactions occur in real time. This speed shortens the delay between deviant behavior and social acceptance, neurologically triggering the release of dopamine in the adolescent brain. As a result, digital bullying is no longer simply an impulsive act, but rather a planned behavior designed to achieve a quick "shot" of social validation, ultimately cementing the behavior into a habit [17].

This reinforcement process also leads to deindividuation and the diffusion of responsibility within the group. When many people provide positive reinforcement for a single act of bullying, individuals within the group feel that their moral burden is equally distributed. Adolescents feel less personally responsible because they are acting in the name of "group pleasure" supported by many others. This collective social reinforcement dulls empathy for the victim, as the individual's focus is entirely diverted to satisfying the social needs of their own group [18].

The normalization of digital bullying is further exacerbated when social media algorithms act as reinforcing agents.

Algorithmic systems tend to serve content that receives high engagement to a wider audience. This allows popular bullying to receive a continuous stream of reinforcement from people outside their initial circle of friends. Teenagers perceive the wider digital world as approving of their actions, creating the perception that the bullying is not only accepted by their small group, but by the norms of digital society at large.

Based on the above explanation, the social reinforcement mechanisms on social media create a highly permissive ecosystem for digital bullying. According to Social Learning Theory, adolescents' motivation to bully is maintained by a combination of the benefits of popularity, a sense of security within a group, and relentless validation from the digital environment. Breaking this chain of normalization requires systematic efforts to change this reinforcement structure by minimizing the appreciation of aggressive content and replacing it with positive reinforcement for empathetic and ethical digital behavior [19].

Conclusion

1. The normalization of digital bullying among adolescents occurs through a systematic modeling mechanism, where the stages of attention, retention, and reproduction are reinforced by exposure to viral aggressive content from popular figures on social media. This phenomenon suggests that adolescents do not simply imitate verbal violence but internalize it as a new standard of interaction due to vicarious reinforcement and a permissive digital environment, transforming bullying from a deviant into a collective "social norm" for recognition and conformity within the peer group.
2. Social reinforcement on social media is the primary driver of the normalization of digital bullying because it provides the instant validation of popularity and group recognition that adolescents crave. Through mechanisms of positive reinforcement (such as likes and collective support), vicarious reinforcement (seeing others successfully bully), and negative reinforcement (fear of ostracization), these acts of aggression transform from mere impulses into planned, adaptive behaviors to maintain social status, creating a permissive digital ecosystem that stifles individual empathy under the shadow of group solidarity.

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