

How Social Media Platforms Increase Cyberbullying against Marginalized Populations

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Abstract: Cyberbullying is a serious problem in society at present, and it affects marginalised groups, such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities, more severely. Protection of these groups is required because they have structural disadvantages at present and are more vulnerable; digital attacks may increase their isolation and cause serious mental and social harm. Three frameworks were used in this paper to study how the functions of a site, such as filtered viewing and a lack of defence mechanisms, exacerbate cyberbullying directed at marginalised groups. It has too much exposure, deliberate concealment and a lack of security in practice. Networks increase the gap and discrimination among groups, worsen injuries, and intensify virtual marginalisation. Policy proposals put forward more robust site protection, digital literacy and educational training.

Keywords: cyberbullying; marginal populations; platform

1. Introduction

As cyberbullying has become a global social problem, research has found serious psychological harm to the victims, such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation [1]. Scholars have pointed out that vulnerable groups, such as women, LGBTQ+ people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, are especially vulnerable [2]. Many studies have investigated the psychological reasons for bullying, but few have examined how the features of digital platforms themselves promote bullying behaviour. As a leading force in modern society, social networks have attracted much attention and thus are now widely studied. This paper will employ conceptual models such as social constructionism, marginalised identities and the bystander effect to explore the structural reasons for the spread of online harassment against vulnerable groups on social media, thereby increasing public awareness of this problem and putting forward countermeasures.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Marginalized Populations

Marginalised communities refer to groups in society that face systemic discrimination, exclusion or limited access to social, economic, political and cultural resources due to attributes such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, poverty and other differences. Social networking sites spread this oppression through algorithms and are thus more likely to target these groups with cyberbullying. Structural deficiencies in the digital infrastructure have continued to result in discrimination and restricted access to communication and

participation for marginalised groups. For example, women and LGBTQ+ individuals are often the targets of online abuse due to prejudice against them, and curation algorithms frequently show their content to users with aggressive views. Similarly, people with disabilities may be subjected to verbal abuse when sharing their lives online and will thus avoid using the Internet. Under these circumstances, the marginalised group faces a double jeopardy: they are not only more vulnerable to online bullying but also lack adequate defence mechanisms on the platform, and thus, the electronic system exacerbates the harm to this particular group.

2.2. Social Constructivism

Social constructionism believes that the meanings of inclusion and exclusion are created in society through interaction. In other words, the platforms present the “marginalisation” of underrepresented groups as neutral mediation, but they also have inherent biases in their recommendations and regulations that reflect existing social problems. For example, mentions or tags such as LGBT and political extremists are more frequently mentioned and often the targets of online abuse; other categories, such as feminist discourse, are overlooked. In addition, these platforms apply different degrees of protection to different groups of users; that is, they determine which groups are worth protecting based on values and often do not respond promptly to threats against well-known influencers but frequently ignore attacks on marginalised minority communities, thereby creating a hierarchy of perceived importance and neglect.

2.3. Bystander Effect

Latané and Darley were the first to propose the bystander effect [3], which is a situation where, in the presence of several bystanders during an emergency, people are less likely to help because the responsibility has been spread out. More and more people have been exposed to cyberbullying in recent years through the Internet. Although the spread of offensive behaviour on the Internet has increased, no joint action has been taken, and some users believe that others will take the blame for intervening. The lack of a response allows the harm to continue, and the disadvantaged group is already facing hostility. The problem of the digital bystander effect is not solely due to individuals’ psychology but also stems from structural defects in platform design; for instance, the complaint process may be vague, and algorithms may prioritise interaction over the safety of marginalised groups. Therefore, the bystander effect is not merely an individual choice but a system-wide phenomenon resulting from platform design and social environment.

3. Analysis

Social networking sites are organised to promote the spread of ideas and materials. Furthermore, the site’s governance is inconsistent, and safeguards prioritize celebrities above regular or fragile participants. Such attributes seemingly facilitate online harassment because they enhance prominence for certain individuals while suppressing others, creating unfair display and security.

3.1. Overexposure

Overexposure refers to the amplification of marginalised voices by platform algorithms. For example, people from marginalised groups may be exposed to society unexpectedly and excessively due to platform recommendation systems. Visibility can give people the power to speak out and be more visible, but it will also attract organised harassment. Marwick and Boyd found that the women who received much of the attention were often the targets of large-scale cyberbullying [4]. Daniels found that racial minorities who put forward political opinions online were also more likely to be victims of abuse after the platform spread these posts [5]. Thus, overexposure shows how platform architecture affects particular cyberbullying phenomena.

3.2. Selective Exposure

Filtered exposure refers to a network that selectively amplifies certain individuals and suppresses others systematically in cases of controversy over feminism and politics. As a result, it has been difficult for

underrepresented groups to voice their opinions and demands for rights, as their comments, posts or discussions are often suppressed, hidden or shadow-banned without clear reasons. For example, Weibo, a well-known Chinese social networking service, has been regularly shadow-banning feminist dialogues on gender-based violence and anti-marriage campaigns. Leisure materials are not popular enough to go viral and do not attract many users. This phenomenon can also be understood in light of social constructionism; that is, the rules for selecting which conversations to promote and which to suppress are value-based.

Deliberately excluding disadvantaged groups will omit necessary views. If the feminist writers are not well-known, they will not receive support and will face increasing hostility. Diffusion of responsibility may also be a reason for such harm; some people may have seen the abusive behaviour but did not speak up, thinking others would.

The Weibo case shows the mechanisms clearly. Although the content about domestic violence and women's empowerment was censored in 2020, organised attacks on feminists continued to occur [6]. Thus, the digital forum has institutionalised gender-based exclusion. From the perspective of social constructionism, these selections are not merely technical but also carry various values that the community attaches to the governance of the platform.

3.3. Lack of Protection

There is no protection; thus, the digital platform cannot protect vulnerable groups from online bullying. For example, the demand for equity among marginalised groups is often ignored in favour of celebrities, and thus the harm to these groups is exacerbated.

Research shows that Twitter has been slow to address allegations of racial abuse [7], and Black people have reported that their complaints have gone unanswered without any action. This shows that the system has given more weight to some wealthy individuals and ignored others. Through the lens of social constructionism, networks determine which perspectives are given more weight, thus reinforcing such prejudice and intensifying the persecution and marginalisation of the excluded group.

Other typical cases also have this trend. In 2016, Leslie Jones was the subject of online abuse on Twitter and some users were temporarily suspended. However, scholars have noted that the response was defensive and limited, as severe intimidation continued [8]. Therefore, the absence of defence is not an isolated fault but a problem in the system that fails to consider marginalised groups and thus causes harm to these individuals.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Establish Protection Mechanisms for Marginalized Groups

Frameworks can build AI-powered defence systems that meet the special requirements of marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, feminists and people with disabilities. Improve filtering of feedback and promptly ban the spread of offensive comments. Tech Networks and its related organizations can help train machine-learning algorithms to recognize toxic language more effectively. An extra complaint channel will be added to the website for vulnerable groups to file complaints at any time. The above measures will reduce the occurrence of violence and strengthen the supporting system for protecting the rights and freedoms of marginalised groups online.

4.2. Promote Education of the Rules of Digital Platforms or Social Media

Public institutions and educational institutions should also add cyberbullying prevention education to their official school curricula to highlight the serious consequences of such behaviour and thus prevent it from occurring in the first place. Curriculum-based activities can be organised to learn about the long-term social effects of cyberbullying. These courses can address the particular susceptibilities of the excluded group by teaching students how to recognise and deal with prejudice. Besides institutional schooling, society can also conduct some campaigns through media projects to promote these ideas, such as the harm caused by cyberbullying among the general public. Gradually, this campus-centered and community-oriented training will foster a strong sense of social responsibility among students to combat internet abuse and make it a shared responsibility.

4.3. Enhance the Related Rules

The public authorities can build a wholehearted system of supervision and regulations to make social networking platforms more accountable to the oppressed community and grant individuals the right to file a lawsuit against the platform. As social networking has developed in recent years, many existing governance systems are no longer suitable for the current situation; thus, problems such as online harassment by individuals lack legal awareness in electronic forums have emerged. Therefore, strict regulations need to be introduced for the digital platform to protect the rights and interests of the public and prevent harm to them.

5. Conclusions

This study shows how the platform's structure intensifies online bullying of vulnerable groups. Social constructionism, marginalised group theory and the bystander phenomenon are used to explore how structural imbalances, such as excessive visibility, filtered feeds and a lack of safety, contribute to the persecution of oppressed groups. However, this study is limited to the application of prior research and does not collect new data. The following research will be a qualitative case study that collects original data from a disadvantaged group to gain a deeper understanding of their daily lives.

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