

How Social Media Platforms Increase Cyberbullying Against Marginalized Populations

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Abstract:

Cyberbullying is one of the most pressing social issues in the digital age, with a disproportionate impact on marginalized groups—including women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. Protecting these populations is essential because they already face systemic inequalities and vulnerabilities, and online attacks can amplify their marginalization and cause severe psychological and social harm. This paper employs three theories—social constructivism, marginalized populations theory, and the bystander effect—to examine how platform features such as selective exposure and weak protective mechanisms exacerbate cyberbullying toward marginalized groups. It focuses on overexposure, selective suppression, and lack of protection with real-world cases. The discussion shows how platforms increase inequalities and bias, magnify harms, and deepen digital exclusion. Policy recommendations emphasize stronger platform protections, digital literacy, and school education.

Keywords: cyberbullying; marginal populations; platform

1. Introduction

As cyberbullying has emerged as a global public concern, with studies pointed out its serious mental health impacts such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation [1]. Scholars have highlighted that marginalized populations, which including women, LGBTQ groups, racial and people with disabilities are disproportionately victimized [2]. Existing research often emphasizes psychological mechanisms,

but fewer works systematically examine how the structural features of platforms create some bully behaviors. This research gap is notable given the central role of social media in modern interpersonal communication.. This study discussed how social media platforms amplify cyberbullying against marginalized populations by analyzing platform structures through theoretical frameworks like social constructivism, marginalized populations and bystander effect, trying

to make some deep analysis on it to rise the attention of the society of this problem and make some suggestions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Marginalized Populations

Marginalized populations refer to social groups that experience systemic discrimination, exclusion, or limited access to social, economic, political, or cultural resources due to characteristics such as race, gender, sexual, disability, socioeconomic status, or other identities. Through social media, these discriminations can be enlarged by platform biases, making such groups easier to face harassment. This is because the structural inequality in digital platforms reinforce stereotypes and limits marginalized population's opportunities for expression and participation. For instance, women and LGBTQ individuals often receive harassment online, not only because of prejudiced individuals but also because recommendation systems disproportionately expose their content to audiences with hostile attitudes. Similarly, people with disabilities may encounter hateful comments when they share their life experiences, which discourages them from taking part in online communities. In this context, marginalized populations face a dual disadvantage: they are not only exposed to higher risks of cyberbullying but also have access to inadequate protective measures on platforms, highlighting how digital platforms exacerbate attacks against these groups.

2.2 Social Constructivism

Social constructivism considers that the definition of inclusion and exclusion are constructed through social. More specifically, the "marginalization" of marginalized groups is constructed by the platforms, they seem in a Neutral place, however, they have some tend in recommendations and rules which is similar with the exist tends in the society. For example, some notes or keywords like LGBT, political radicals will receive more exposures and

easier to be the object of online violence, otherwise, some group might be ignored, like the content related to the feminism. Furthermore, platforms apply inconsistent protection standards across user groups—a practice that embeds value judgments about "who deserves protection.". For more specific, platforms always respond immediately when some influencers face attacks, but often ignore the attacks received by vulnerable minority groups, which actually create a value judgment of who is important and who is not.

2.3 Bystander Effect

The bystander effect, first proposed by Latané and Darley [3], describes a social psychological phenomenon in which individuals are less likely to intervene in an emergency when others are present, as responsibility becomes diffused. In digital platforms, this effect is even be more serious because online harassment is often happened among larger numbers of audiences. The increase in visibility of bullying behaviors on digital platforms does not lead to collective intervention, instead, users frequently remain silent, assuming others will take action. This lack of response allows harmful behaviors to persist, particularly against marginalized groups who already face attacks. Furthermore, the online bystander effect is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon but is systematically shaped by platform design: for example, reporting mechanisms may be unclear and algorithms might prioritize engagement over user safety, especially among marginalized populations. Consequently, bystander effect is not only an individual choice but also a systemic phenomenon shaped by platform structure and social environment.

3. Analysis

Social media platforms are designed to prioritize user engagement and content virality. Also, the platform's regulation is uneven, and protections favor influencers over ordinary or vulnerable users. These features seemly contribute

the cyberbullying behaviors as they magnify visibility for some while silencing others, producing unequal exposure and protection.

3.1 Overexposure

Overexposure occurs when platform push marginalized voices visibility. For instance, marginalized groups may experience sudden and excessive public exposure due to platform recommendation mechanisms.. While visibility can empower, and give them more opportunities to express themselves, it also makes them vulnerable to coordinated harassment campaigns. Marwick and boyd found that women who gained plenty visibility often became targets of large-scale harassment [4]. Daniels also observed that racial minorities who voiced political opinions online faced intensified harassment when their posts were amplified by the platform [5] Thus, overexposure illustrates how platform design contributes some cyberbullying behaviors.

3.2 Selective Exposure

Selective exposure refers to platforms amplifying some topics while systematically suppressing others, especially happened on some sensitive topics like feminism, political. This practice creates significant barriers for marginalized groups to express themselves and advocate for their rights, as their comments, posts, or discussions are often banned, locked, or shadow-banned without clear justification. For example, on Weibo, which is a popular social media platform in China, feminist discussions such as cases of gender-based violence or anti-marriage movements have frequently been shadow-banned. In contrast, entertainment content dominates trending lists and occupies the majority of platform traffic.. This could also be explained by social constructivism as platforms encode value judgments into algorithms, deciding which discourses deserve attention and which should be hidden.

For marginalized populations, selective suppression silences critical voices. When feminist bloggers are muted,

their ability to mobilize support is restricted, leaving them more exposed to attacks. The bystander effect compounds this harm while even some users may see evidence of the bullying behaviors but remain silent, assuming others will challenge it.

The Weibo case illustrates these dynamics vividly. In 2020, posts about domestic violence and women's rights were restricted, while coordinated attacks on feminist users remained visible [6] This shows how platforms institutionalize gendered marginalization. As social constructivism suggests, these are not neutral technical choices but reflect broader societal values encoded in platform governance.

3.3 Lack of Protection

Lack of protection refers to platforms' failure to protect vulnerable users from cyberbullying. For instance, the appeal for justice of the marginalized population often be ignored compare to the influencers which might increase the damage to them.

Research shows that Twitter has been slow to act on reports of racial harassment [7], with Black users frequently reporting that complaints were dismissed without meaningful response. This neglect reflects institutionalized inequality that high-profile figures receive comprehensive protection, while marginalized populations remain exposed. From a social constructivist standpoint, this indicates that platforms make a judgement of whose voices matter, which may reinforce this bias and increase the discrimination and attack on these marginal groups.

Other famous cases could also illustrate this phenomenon. In 2016, journalist Leslie Jones faced racist abuse on Twitter, prompting temporary bans for some perpetrators. However, scholars noted that the response was reactive and limited, with serious harassment persisting [8]. This shows that lack of protection is not about isolated failures but a widely governance problem which ignore marginalized voices and increase the attack on them to some extent.

4. Suggestions

4.1 Establish protection mechanisms for marginalized groups

Platforms might develop AI-assisted protection systems tailored to marginalized groups created by or about marginalized groups like LGBTQ individuals, feminist or disabled. This includes enabling stricter comment filters and automatic blocking of hate comments at an early stage. For example, digital platform and related groups can help train AI models to better recognize harmful language. Additionally, platforms can create dedicated reporting channels for marginalized users, ensuring their complaints are prioritized and solved immediately. These measures would not only reduce the frequency of attacks but also provide a stronger machine to protecting marginalized population's voices in digital areas.

4.2 Promote education of the rules of digital platforms or social media

Governments and schools should also integrate cyberbullying prevention education into formal school curricula and its terrible impacts, as this is one of the most direct ways to prevent harmful behaviors before they take root. Educational programs could help discuss on the long-term social impact of online harassment. This is because such lessons could address the unique vulnerabilities of marginalized groups, teaching students to recognize and challenge discriminatory behaviors. Beyond formal education, public could also do some promotions through media initiatives to reinforce these concepts including the negative impacts of cyberbullying among broader communities. Over time, this school-based and public-based education can create a stronger social awareness to fight against online harassment and make it becomes a collective responsibility.

4.3 Enhance the related rules

Governments can also establish comprehensive regulatory

frameworks and laws to hold social media platforms accountable to marginalized groups and give users the right to legally challenge platform decisions. As the social media became popular in only a narrow time, many existing regulatory frameworks remain outdated, fragmented, and insufficient, thus, the problems, especially the happening of cyberbullying behavior as people lack of legal awareness in the digital platform. Therefore, a well-conduct regulation on digital platform is necessary to ensure users' rights and protect them from attacks, especially for the marginal groups.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown how platform design intensifies cyberbullying against marginalized groups. Using social constructivism, marginalized populations theory and the bystander effect to make analysis about how the structural inequalities including overexposure, selective exposure, and lack of protection increase the attacks to marginalized population. However, the study is limited in its reliance on secondary sources and lacks of case studies. Future research could focus on case study and collect primary data from marginalized users to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences.

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