

The Impact of Cyberbullying Experience on Willingness to Speak Out: The Mediating Role of Fear of Isolation

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Abstract. With the widespread adoption of social media, online platforms have become a core venue for public opinion expression and social interaction. However, the growing prevalence of cyberbullying has threatened users' daily online communication behaviors. While existing research has extensively documented the adverse mental health impacts of cyberbullying, the underlying psychological pathway regarding individuals' willingness to engage in public online discourse remains underexplored. This study investigates how cyberbullying experiences affect people's Willingness to Speak Out on social media. Drawing on the Spiral of Silence theory, the study proposes that experiencing cyberbullying increases fear of isolation, which in turn reduces Willingness to Speak Out. As a conceptual study, this paper develops a theoretical framework and derives a set of testable propositions based on a comprehensive review of the extant literature. This study is expected to enrich the application of the Spiral of Silence theory in online communication contexts and provide practical implications for improving the online expression environment.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Fear of Isolation, Willingness to Speak Out, Spiral of Silence, Social Media

1. Introduction

With the rapid expansion of social media, online platforms are becoming an important venue for people to communicate and engage in social dialogues. People can easily participate in discussions, share their thoughts, and express their opinions on public issues. This lowers the threshold for public participation in social activities and enables a wider range of viewpoints to be heard [1]. However, with the increase in accessibility, cyberbullying has also become increasingly prevalent.

Global surveys show that 37% of adolescent social media users have encountered online abuse or cyberbullying [2]. These encounters frequently involve hostile remarks, mockery, and verbal assaults. In addition to exerting an adverse effect on individuals' mental health, such experiences may also shape their communication behaviors [3].

When frequently exposed to online antagonism, people may perceive the online environment as dangerous and high-risk for self-expression. This situation raises an important question regarding whether people's experience of online bullying affects their subsequent Willingness to Speak Out. More specifically, the psychological mechanism that causes this effect needs to be examined. While

prior studies have documented the immediate impact of online harassment on user behaviors, they have paid limited attention to the internal psychological processes behind such changes.

This study fills this gap by examining fear of isolation as a mediating variable. According to the Spiral of Silence theory, individuals tend to remain silent when they perceive a risk of social sanction for voicing their opinions, and cyberbullying constitutes a key trigger of this perceived risk in online settings [4]. To provide both theoretical and practical insights into online communication behavior, this study develops a conceptual framework that specifically investigates whether experiences of cyberbullying influence individuals' Willingness to Speak Out through the mediating mechanism of fear of isolation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The Spiral of Silence theory

The Spiral of Silence idea put forward by Noelle-Neumann serves as the foundation for this investigation [4]. According to the theory, individuals tend to constantly monitor the opinion climate around them. When they perceive their views to be in the minority, they are less inclined to speak out, primarily driven by fear of social rejection. Conversely, individuals are more willing to express their opinions when they believe their views align with the majority [4].

2.2. Spiral of Silence in the online social media context

In the context of online communication, the core mechanism of the Spiral of Silence theory not only remains valid but may also be amplified. On social media platforms, mainstream viewpoints are prominently highlighted through interaction metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. With these intuitive cues, users can quickly assess whether their own views are likely to be accepted or rejected by others [5].

However, algorithmic recommendation systems tend to amplify popular or emotionally charged information, leading to biased perceptions of opinion consensus among users. Individuals may believe that opposing viewpoints are less socially accepted, while in reality, this perception overestimates the actual prevalence of dominant views [6].

Additionally, because online spaces are semi-anonymous, there is less social accountability, which increases the frequency of aggressive actions like cyberbullying. The combination of high visibility of dominant opinions and low accountability for hostile conduct creates a communication climate where aggressive voices predominate, while more cautious users withdraw from public participation [7].

This gives rise to a reinforcing loop: dissenting views are further suppressed, while aggressive or dominant opinions become increasingly visible. This dynamic offers a solid basis for investigating how cyberbullying affects people's Willingness to Speak Out and strongly corresponds with the Spiral of Silence idea.

3. Conceptual model and proposition development

3.1. Conceptualization of core variables

3.1.1. Cyberbullying experience (independent variable)

All core constructs must be precisely described and conceptualized to ensure the study's validity and clarity. The term cyberbullying experience describes people's personal encounters with hostile online actions, such as threats, harassment, insults, and social exclusion [2].

Unlike traditional offline bullying, cyberbullying is permanent, highly visible, and can reach a wide audience instantly. The semi-anonymous nature of social media also reduces social accountability, making aggressive behavior more frequent [7]. In this study, cyberbullying experience specifically refers to direct victimization, while witnessing others being attacked online is not the core focus. Within the Spiral of Silence framework, cyberbullying experience is treated as an environmental cue that signals which opinions are unsafe to express [4]. This perception of risk is expected to shape individuals' subsequent fear of isolation and Willingness to Speak Out.

3.1.2. Fear of isolation (mediator)

The degree to which people worry about social exclusion or unfavorable opinions from others is known as their fear of isolation [4].

In the context of social media, this fear manifests in several concrete ways. People may hesitate before posting, repeatedly edit or delete their comments, or choose to scroll silently instead of participating. Some may check whether their views have received likes or supportive replies, and feel anxious when there is no response. Others may avoid expressing opinions on controversial topics altogether, even when they have strong views.

These manifestations are directly related to the Spiral of Silence theory. According to the theory, individuals constantly monitor the perceived opinion climate and become silent when they fear social rejection [4]. Cyberbullying amplifies this mechanism by making rejection visible and permanent. When people witness others being attacked for certain views, they learn that expressing similar opinions could lead to social isolation. Over time, this learned fear shapes their online behavior and reduces their Willingness to Speak Out.

3.1.3. Willingness to speak out (dependent variable)

The term "Willingness to Speak Out" describes people's readiness to voice their thoughts in public, especially when those beliefs may not align with the majority [5].

This willingness can be further distinguished into several types. First, it varies by audience: people may be willing to express opinions to close friends but not to strangers or larger online audiences. Second, it varies by platform: users might speak freely on anonymous forums but remain silent on identifiable social media profiles. Third, it varies by topic: controversial or sensitive issues tend to suppress willingness more than neutral or safe topics. In the context of cyberbullying, these distinctions matter because hostile experiences may affect each type differently.

Within the Spiral of Silence framework, Willingness to Speak Out is treated as the outcome variable that is negatively influenced by cyberbullying exposure, both directly and indirectly through fear of isolation [4].

3.2. Overview of the conceptual model

Based on the theoretical framework, this study proposes a model in which cyberbullying experience affects individuals' Willingness to Speak Out both directly and indirectly through psychological mechanisms.

3.2.1. Direct effect of cyberbullying on willingness to speak out (P1)

People's perceptions of the online communication environment are significantly influenced by cyberbullying experience. After encountering unpleasant interactions, users may begin to view online environments as dangerous and unpredictable. This perception of risk is particularly pronounced among direct victims, who internalize the potential consequences of voicing their own opinions [8].

Cyberbullying tends to be more severe in online settings than offline for several reasons. First, online content is enduring and highly visible. Comments and posts can be shared, preserved, and revisited, which amplifies the potential impact of negative feedback compared to face-to-face interactions [9]. Second, the semi-anonymous nature of online platforms reduces social accountability, making aggressive behavior more frequent and intense [7]. Third, the algorithmic amplification of popular or emotionally charged content can disproportionately increase individuals' exposure to hostile interactions [6]. These platform-specific features make cyberbullying psychologically more damaging and more likely to suppress expression than offline bullying.

To prevent unfavorable outcomes, people may speak more cautiously or choose to withhold their opinions. This behavior reflects the fundamental process of the Spiral of Silence, in which self-censorship results from fear of negative social repercussions [4]. Thus, cyberbullying experience is negatively associated with individuals' Willingness to Speak Out online.

3.2.2. Positive association between cyberbullying experience and fear of isolation (P2)

The core tenet of the Spiral of Silence theory is that people's expression is influenced by their extreme sensitivity to the possibility of social isolation. Given how obvious and instantaneous social feedback is in online settings, this sensitivity may become even stronger. Cyberbullying experience exacerbates people's fear of isolation in several concrete ways. First, after experiencing such attacks firsthand, individuals may start to anticipate rejection before they even post anything. This anticipation manifests as hesitation, repeated editing or deleting of comments, and a tendency to scroll silently instead of participating. Second, people may become hypervigilant to negative cues, such as dislikes, critical replies, or having their comments left unanswered. Third, direct victims of cyberbullying often report feeling that "no one agrees with them" or that "speaking up will only make things worse." These internalized beliefs make social withdrawal feel safer than expression [4].

The impact is frequently more pronounced for people who have firsthand experience with cyberbullying. These encounters may reinforce the belief that voicing certain opinions will result in mockery or rejection, making people more reluctant to do so in subsequent interactions [2].

Over time, repeated exposure to negative social interactions on the internet, whether direct or indirect, increases an individual's sensitivity to social evaluations. People may imagine negative evaluations they might encounter in a previously calm environment, which intensifies their fear of social exclusion. Taken together, these processes contribute to a stronger fear of isolation, which in

turn shapes individuals' Willingness to Speak Out in online discussions. Thus, cyberbullying experience is positively associated with fear of isolation.

3.2.3. Mediating role of fear of isolation (P3)

Cyberbullying experience may have a direct negative impact on people's Willingness to Speak Out, but it is also likely to have indirect consequences through fear of isolation.

People are more likely to follow perceived social standards when they fear social isolation. People are more inclined to keep quiet to avoid unfavorable social repercussions when they feel their beliefs are not generally accepted [4].

Furthermore, in the online environment, people may fear that their content will be criticized by the public and thus lead to social isolation. As a result, they may engage in self-censorship. Specifically, they may reduce their Willingness to Speak Out on sensitive issues and choose to communicate only in private or anonymous settings, or even completely withdraw from public discussions. These behavioral adjustments indicate that when people believe their opinions may not be well received, they tend to remain silent.

This implies that the effects of cyberbullying experience go beyond immediate behavioral reactions and influence more extensive online engagement behaviors. People may eventually stop participating in public debate altogether and become less inclined to voice opposing views.

Additionally, people's perceptions of the opinion environment may enhance the mediation process. People are more inclined to monitor prevailing opinions and modify their conduct as their fear of isolation grows. Because of this increased sensitivity, there may be a feedback loop whereby some users' silence reinforces the prevalence of dominant viewpoints. Because of the apparent lack of social support, those who might otherwise voice opposing opinions may choose to remain silent, exacerbating the spiral effect [5].

Therefore, fear of isolation serves as a key psychological mechanism that explains how cyberbullying experience influences Willingness to Speak Out. Thus, fear of isolation mediates the relationship between cyberbullying experience and Willingness to Speak Out.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical contributions

This study expands the application scenario of the Spiral of Silence theory by incorporating cyberbullying as a concrete form of online social sanction. Most existing studies on cyberbullying focus on its impacts on mental health, while this study shifts the focus to individuals' public expression behaviors, extending the research scope of cyberbullying's social consequences.

Second, this study clarifies the mediating role of fear of isolation, revealing the internal psychological mechanism between cyberbullying experience and reduced Willingness to Speak Out. It provides a theoretical explanation for how external hostile experiences are transformed into individual self-censorship behavior, complementing research on the formation process of online silence.

4.2. Practical implications

This study also has some practical implications for different groups. For social media platforms, there are several actionable approaches to improve the quality of online communication and promote

users' Willingness to Speak Out. Platforms should consider designing more robust content moderation systems to reduce the spread of hostile comments. If users encounter less cyberbullying in daily use, they may perceive a safer expression environment and be more willing to voice their views publicly. In addition, platforms could add built-in warning prompts before users post potentially aggressive messages, which may help restrain impolite expressions and reduce the overall level of online hostility.

For individual users, the conclusions of this study can help them better understand their own psychological changes and behavioral tendencies after experiencing cyberbullying. Users should recognize that fear of isolation is a natural psychological response to such negative experiences. Awareness of this emotional mechanism may help them better understand their own hesitation to speak out and avoid excessive self-censorship due to temporary negative encounters. They can also seek out smaller or more private online communities where disagreements are less likely to escalate into personal attacks. In such spaces, people may feel less afraid of social isolation and express their opinions more freely.

For policymakers, targeted regulatory guidance can be put forward to standardize the governance of cyberbullying on social media. Policymakers can encourage social media platforms to be more transparent about their cyberbullying governance mechanisms, including complaint handling procedures and enforcement standards. Clear community rules and consistent rule enforcement may help users trust that reporting behaviors will lead to effective responses. When users believe that online attacks will be properly addressed through official channels, they may feel less worried about potential negative consequences and more willing to participate in public discussions.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

This study has three main limitations. First, as a theoretical paper, this study does not include empirical data collection. Therefore, the proposed relationships between cyberbullying experience, fear of isolation, and Willingness to Speak Out remain to be empirically verified. Second, this study only focuses on the mediating path of fear of isolation, and does not discuss other potential psychological mechanisms, such as online self-efficacy or perceived social support. The explanatory scope of the model has certain boundaries. Third, this study does not consider the boundary conditions of the proposed effects. Factors such as topic type, user personality and platform attributes may affect the strength of the relationship between variables, and the generalizability of the conclusions needs further validation.

Future research could address this limitation by using longitudinal or experimental designs to empirically examine the causal mechanisms proposed in this study. In addition, future studies may explore moderating variables, such as personality traits or platform differences, to better understand variations in individual responses to cyberbullying.

5. Conclusion

This study primarily examines how cyberbullying experience affects people's Willingness to Speak Out in online settings, especially through fear of isolation. Grounded in the Spiral of Silence theory, cyberbullying can be seen as a form of social pressure. After personally experiencing targeted attacks or social exclusion, individuals may start to worry about potential negative consequences, so they become more cautious about what they say. Compared with previous studies, this research places cyberbullying experience within the Spiral of Silence framework. It shows that these negative experiences bring not only direct harm, but also changes in how people perceive the online

environment. Over time, they may feel that certain opinions are "unsafe" to express, even if no one is directly targeting them. For this reason, they may speak less or avoid public discussions.

The framework also implies that reducing online hostility (e.g., through better moderation and clearer rules) can make people feel safer and more willing to speak. However, empirical validation is needed. Future studies should test the model with causal designs.

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