

Multidiscursivity of Cyberbullying as the Epiphenomenon of Social Media Communication in a Screen Society

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ABSTRACT

Communication modes have significantly changed in recent years. Digitalisation and cybernation of social, scientific and cultural life have caused the emergence of new forms and means of communication. That induces shaping some specific behavioural profiles and manifesting negative traits on the web that sociocultural shifts drive. Cyberbullying has become a highly unwelcome epiphenomenon in social media communication. The inevitable transformation of rapidly changing worldview paradigms, cultural sets and stereotypes actualise the processes determining it. Language reflects those processes and objectifies the modes of communication in cyberspace. They require new research strategies within an interdisciplinary approach. Nonverbal forms of cyberbullying are also fairly common; they combine with language structures to form syncretic patterns. The article discusses the theoretical bases of circulation of those patterns in the multimodal aspect as that approach moves beyond merely language analysis and reveals the polymorphism and multidiscursivity of online communication. Depending on the type of cyberbullying, using various verbal and nonverbal techniques may be of interest in controlling a cyberbully. Clarifying the strategies for representing cyberbullying contributes to a greater understanding of one of the most crucial aspects of social media communication.

Keywords: Networking, Bullying, Cyberspace, Language, Multimodality, Internet

INTRODUCTION

Informatisation is one of the fundamental traits of modern social progress. The reconstruction of the current worldview in the culture of a postindustrial society in the early twenty-first century is occurring under conditions of the sustainable growth of information technology. A new kind of information becomes available, world culture receives new meaning and the processes of globalisation are developing greatly. At the same time, human mind control by people with access to information resources is increasing. A new type of man is emerging, dependent on screens. A postindustrial society appears to be of a specific kind, called a screen society (Cashmore et al., 2018). However, regarding TV screens, nothing in films or TV has prepared us for the revolution that the combination of screens and the Internet has wrought in this century. In this context, some researchers praise the technical aspects of informatisation and draw attention to the lack of good social perspectives on it (Wu et al., 2018).

The current trends of social development are responsible for specific behavioural profiles of modern humans. The rise of Internet technology, a source of vast volumes of data (Wu et al., 2016), inevitably leads to an increase in online activity that the total immersion of the human in cyberspace and the blurring of the line between real-world and virtual-world activities characterise (Bayraktar & Amca, 2012), causing the axiological traditions to change and transforming the verbal and the nonverbal. Cyberspace functions as a notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs. Cybercrimes pose great challenges for society (Haynes, 2018).

The specific character of communication processes affects the actualisation of the personality of any communicator on the Internet. We believe that the following significant influences cause them. The first is anonymity. Although it is sometimes possible to get some personal details and even images of a person with whom you communicate, they are not sufficient for real and proper personal perception. Anonymity and overindulgence on the web reveal the characteristic features associated with reducing psychological and social risks in a communication process. People on the network can often exhibit greater freedom of expression and actions (sometimes insults, obscene expressions and sexual harassment), and the risk of exposure and others' personal negative evaluation is small. The second significant influence includes schemes of stereotyping and identification that strongly affect personal perception. The third is the ambiguity of the emotional component of communication, the persistent desire for emotion to fill a message. And one last influence is a desire to implement atypical, abusive action patterns. Most often, users present themselves in a way other than they do in real social life, representing those social roles that they cannot represent offline. Sittichai and Herkanaidu (2023) provide a quite interesting discussion of the links between online and offline harassment in Thailand. All the influences mentioned above become the basis for identifying specific media challenges and broach the subject of scientifically understanding these pivotal sociocultural processes, in view of the sustainable growth of information technology.

The annual Digital 2022 Global Overview Report, which the global agency We Are Social publishes in partnership with the platform Hootsuite, reveals that digital,

mobile and social media have become an indispensable part of everyday life for people all over the world, and most of the connected world continues to grow faster than it did before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the report, the world's population stood at 7.91 billion in January 2022. The number of people around the world using the Internet has grown to 4.95 billion, an increase of 4 per cent (192 million new users) over the past year. Globally, more than 5.31 billion people used mobile phones at the start of 2022, with user numbers up by 95 million (1.8 per cent) over the preceding year. Worldwide, there were 4.62 billion social media users in January 2022, with this number increasing by more than 10 per cent over the preceding 12 months, with 424 million new users. An average Internet user now spends almost 7 hours online per day, using the Internet across all devices. That equates to more than 106 days of connected time per Internet user, per year. The world's Internet users will spend more than 12.5 trillion hours online in 2022, more than one-third of that spent on social media (Digital 2022, 2022).

These processes have caused the emergence of new epiphenomena of online activities. One of them is cyberbullying, a "worldwide phenomenon" (Jenaro et al., 2018, p. 113) that needs special attention from researchers, due to its global spread and unpredictable consequences. Since language as a complex system reflects these processes and responds to the relevant transformations, studying the language through the lens of linguistic performance specificity on the Internet, as well as the strategies and modes of communication by which participants interact in cyberspace, urges applying new approaches in the modern paradigm of multidimensional representation. At the same time, nonverbal types of cyberbullying, which often occur during interactive communication, combined with language structures, form complex syncretic patterns, investigation of which induces appealing to a theory of multimodality (Bucher, 2017; Norris, 2004; Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). Only this approach explicates the polymorphic nature of social media communication.

Although there is a sizeable body of research on many aspects of cyberbullying, the lack of a consensual definition has limited the ability to study it. Conventionally, the definition of cyberbullying is bullying using electronic means of contact. Myers and Cowie (2019) consider the definitions of cyberbullying falling into two main categories. In one respect, cyberbullying is a new way of traditional bullying. On the other hand, "cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in distinctive ways since it can invade all aspects of a target's privacy day and night, both at home and at the educational institution where the target studies". It "involves the deliberate intent to hurt a person or persons repeatedly over time" (Myers & Cowie, 2019).

Social media challenges are the topical subject of the latest research, studied from the perspectives of psycholinguistics (Li et al., 2019; Buğa & Ögeyik, 2018; Tettegah & Espelage, 2016); social, developmental, and cyberpsychology (Wachs et al., 2020; Jenaro et al., 2018; Wright, 2017; Young et al., 2016; Van Cleemput et al., 2016; Grieve & Kemp, 2015; Bayraktar & Amca, 2012; Kirwan & Power, 2012; Olweus, 2012; Li, 2010; Spears et al., 2009; Heirman & Walrave, 2008); communication theory (Savage et al., 2017; Goodboy et al., 2016; Montepare, 2014; Ramirez et al., 2010; Andsager & White, 2007); social anthropology (McLoughlin & Hermens, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Corcoran et al., 2015); information science and technology (Ioannou et al., 2018; Fidel et al., 2004); education (Blumenfeld &

Cooper, 2010; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Willard, 2007)—in short, an interdisciplinary approach.

Research papers in sufficient volume cover the nature of cyberbullying (Akbar et al., 2020; Myers & Cowie, 2019; Sittichai & Smith, 2018; Campbell & Bauman, 2018; Slonje et al., 2013; Gradinger et al., 2010; Ramirez et al., 2010; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009). All of them underline that the distribution of cyberbullying requires “the use of information and communication technologies, such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal websites, and defamatory online personal polling websites” (Li, 2010, p. 373).

The study outlines the verbal and nonverbal forms of cyberbullying representation and ways of interacting in the Internet environment, demonstrating the polymorphic and multidiscursive nature of social media communication..

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO CYBERBULLYING IN A MULTIMODAL DIMENSION

Outlining the problem of multidiscursivity of cyberbullying occurs by applying cognitive and communicative approaches (Hengst, 2020; Hart, 2019; Contini-Morava et al., 2004; Semino & Culpeper, 2002), the procedures and methods of social semiotics (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018), discourse analysis (Catalano & Waugh, 2020) and the tools of content and intent analysis in the multimodal aspect. Multimodality describes communication practices in terms of textual, aural, linguistic, spatial and visual resources—or modes—used to create messages (Kress, 2010). This paper considers the ways of cyberbullying a specific representation of human verbal and nonverbal behaviour.

Multimodal discourse outlines a theory of communication for the age of interactive multimedia (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). Two things propel the application of a multimodal approach to multimedia communication. On the one hand, a theory of multimodality elucidates the meaning of not only linguistic signs but also visuals, sounds, colours and design. On the other hand, the meaning of a communication act seems complex and multilayered, requiring consideration in the light of reception studies. Unlike most theories of multimodality that approach meaning-making from the perspective of the initiator of a communication act, Bucher (2007) puts the recipient at its centre since the recipient integrates different modalities into coherent meaning.

That approach is relevant. An increase in technology tools and associated access to multimedia composing software has led people to the ability to easily use many modes in interactions with each other (Kress, 2010). Since identity is mutable, multilayered and subject to many modes of construction and deconstruction, its representation in the discourse has recently been attracting attention in different disciplinary areas. The representation of identity in the multimodal dimension of communication actualises the crucial aspects of studying the influence of sophisticated forms of expression that the development of communication technologies, especially in computer-mediated or web-based settings, has made available. Communication is considered the locus where identities are constructed and negotiated (Garzone & Catenaccio, 2010).

New media can forge identities well beyond mere textual representation, making interconnected meanings that form a discursive space. Researchers proclaim that the demarcation lines between modes and media of communication are blurring, requiring a new way of thinking (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001), the recognition of the impact that technology is having on social interaction and multimodal discourse (Scollon & LeVine, 2004) and multiple modes of human interaction (Norris, 2004). More than what is said shapes the perception of everyday interactions. The participants of a communication act, including cyberbullying, draw on both verbal and nonverbal behaviour to consider all the experiences.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS OF CYBERBULLYING

Contradictory tendencies of globalisation trigger the processes of emerging and developing phenomena that significantly impact the sociocultural environment and realise the communication core. Of great interest are today's social media challenges that the rapid growth of Internet technology and mass media in a postindustrial society has caused. Among today's most widespread Internet threats, including fake news, the escalation of radicalism and extremism, cyberbullying attracts particular attention. It affects not only young people, the most active users of modern technology and communications, but also the adult population. The processes occurring in the virtual environment predictably affect the linguistic worldview as well as the nonverbal aspects of human communication. Technology characterising the development of communicative practices implies the transition from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional space. The new environment produces virtually infinite possibilities for using communication tools. Reconstructing the linguistic worldview and extralinguistic practice on the Internet—in particular, through studying cyberbullying manifestations—is an important task for understanding, rethinking and overcoming some negative epiphenomena of social media communication.

Some researchers believe that “many aspects of cyberbullying (such as gender differences, or impact) seem to vary by the specific type of cyberbullying experienced” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 5). Willard (2007) presents one of the most common classifications of cyberbullying types. She describes the following ways that cyberbullying may occur:

- Harassment → repeatedly sending offensive messages.
- Flaming → angry, rude arguments.
- Denigration → ‘dissing’ someone online by spreading rumours or posting false information.
- Impersonation → pretending to be someone else and posting material to damage that person's reputation.
- Cyberstalking → creating fear by sending offensive messages and engaging in other harmful online activities.

- Outing and trickery → disseminating intimate, private information or talking someone into disclosing private information that is then disseminated.
- Exclusion → intentionally excluding someone from an online group.

Peled (2019) provides a detailed list of the additional types of cyberbullying:

- Fraping → accessing the victim's social media accounts and impersonating them, in an attempt to be funny or to ruin their reputation.
- Dissing → sharing or posting cruel information online to ruin one's reputation or friendship with others.
- Trolling → insulting victims online, to provoke them to respond.
- Catfishing → stealing one's online identity to recreate social networking profiles for deceptive purposes. An example is signing up for services in the victim's name, so the victim receives e-mails or other offers for potentially embarrassing things.
- Phishing → a tactic that requires tricking, persuading or manipulating the target into revealing personal and/or financial information about him/herself and/or loved ones.
- Stalking → online, when a person shares her personal information publicly through social networking websites. With this information, stalkers can send personal messages, mysterious gifts to one's home address and more.
- Blackmail → anonymous e-mails, phone calls and private messages, often targeting a person who bears secrets.
- Photographs and video → threatening to share these publicly unless the victim complies with a particular demand, distributing them via text or e-mail, making it impossible for the victim to control who sees the picture, publishing the pictures on the Internet for anyone to view.
- Shunning → persistently avoiding, ignoring or rejecting someone, mainly to prevent the target from participating in social networks.
- Sexting → sending sexually explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone.

Cyberbullying occurs on blogs, interactive journals and websites, in e-mails, chats, instant messaging and text and digital image messaging via mobile devices. It can relate to racial, religious and cultural biases (Li, 2010, p. 374). It shows social media to be one of the most common means of cyberbullying.

The range of stand-alone and built-in social media services makes defining them challenging. Social media experts broadly agree that the term social media includes the following types: social networks, microblogs, enterprise social networks, forums, photo sharing, blogs, business networks, products/services reviews, collaborative projects, social bookmarking, social gaming, video sharing and virtual worlds (Aichner & Jacob, 2015, pp. 258–260). Some of the most popular social media websites, with over 150 million registered users, include Facebook,

YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, VK, Weibo, Viber, WeChat, QZone, Tumblr, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit and more.

Some researchers suggest that social media on the Internet can empower young people to create a sense of connectedness. This can help them to be healthy and happy and even more connected with others than having only face-to-eye communication could enable (Grieve & Kemp, 2015).

Researchers debate defining cyberbullying since it is constantly changing, due to new technology and new communication platforms. They consider bullying to involve a power imbalance between the victim and the bully (McLoughlin & Hermens, 2018). In other words, the bully appears to be physically stronger than the victim (Olweus, 1993). But this may not always be the case in cyberbullying; 'stronger' is also harder to define, as bullying occurs via technology, so the 'strength' differential is not easy to identify. Cyberbullying (bullying) can have severe negative effects on all concerned, especially its victims (Sittichai & Smith, 2013, p. 32).

In a sizeable body of research on cyberbullying (Akbar et al., 2020; Campbell & Bauman, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Savage et al., 2017; Corcoran et al., 2015; Grieve & Kemp, 2015; Olweus, 2012; Gradinger et al., 2010; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Willard, 2007), there is no consistency in the approaches to establishing the causes of that phenomenon. The most common are (1) insufficient parental supervision of children's Internet use or online activity (Peebles, 2014); (2) conformity, matching attitudes, beliefs and behaviours to group norms, politics or being like-minded (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004); (3) lack of knowledge about appropriate online behaviour and educational gaps (Arıcak & Ozbay, 2016); (4) ethnic, racial or religious differences between a cyberbully and victim (Xu et al., 2020); (5) low-level empathy, i.e., lack of understanding feelings or insight into another person's experience (Steffgen et al., 2011); (6) superiority and dominance as a central principle of human life (Milosevic et al., 2022); (7) a low level of self-esteem in a cyberbully and a victim (Extremiera et al., 2018); (8) revenge as the act of committing a harmful action against a person or group in response to a grievance, real or perceived (König et al., 2010).

Cyberbullying manifestations are processes due not only to psychological and mental reasons but also to the specific socio-informational conditions that contribute to its spreading and attaining the status of a vexing problem, now recognised worldwide and requiring new approaches to solve it. Furthermore, researchers assert that the explanations for cyberbullying may have roots in a cultural context (Wright, 2017). The latest research by Bauman (2023) shines a light on the social nature of cyberbullying and online harassment, emphasising the importance of culture in understanding those phenomena. Bauman believes that cyberbullying occurs within a cultural context (pp. 7–8). Therefore, cyberbullying manifestations appear to be a complex of psychological, social, informational and cultural conditions.

From the global perspective, expressing the ways cyberbullying occurs takes on verbal and nonverbal dimensions. This encourages researchers to study it in detail through the lens of a multimodality theory.

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL PERFORMANCES OF CYBERBULLYING IN SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, different sciences and studies find *homo loquens* with ideas about the principles of communication as their object. The abovementioned issues not only continue to be relevant but also appear in a new perspective, covering a new communicative environment—the Internet—with its specific conditions for communication processes. A very pragmatic goal determines the meaning of such research, namely, to identify effective tools and means for optimal communication. At the same time, the impossibility of optimising communication processes without thoroughly studying those verbal and nonverbal phenomena that online communicators actively use is obvious.

The implementation of linguistic practices in the web environment involves the principal patterns of linguistic behaviour, which usually differ from those of a person in real life and emphasise their focus on a particular object. This transparently demonstrates the principle of intentionality (Turner, 2017; Jacob, 2011), a basic property of consciousness and language that leads to the development of specific communication strategies. At the same time, the very specific dynamics of social media interaction encourage the widespread use of nonverbal forms of communication, including signs, sounds, pictures, smileys and such forms in combination. Tomlinson (2018) emphasises the particular role of the “vast realm of information” (p. 11) and “the perception and manipulation of signs” (p. 10) in the cultural evolution that includes modern people communicating. Verbal and nonverbal forms often interact to produce complex syncretic patterns, of considerable interest in terms of their impact on the recipient.

All that is especially relevant in the study of representing cyberbullying since specific verbal and nonverbal structures embody its ways, transformed and become fundamental in the processes of online interaction, given their powerful impact on the digital person in the information age. Cyberbullying in the multimodal dimension is a powerful tool for actualising the processes occurring in the online environment.

One of the most common means of cyberbullying is *flaming*, which occurs when messaging on Internet forums, online chats, or social networking services. It is a kind of wordy warfare that often has nothing in common with the original conflict. Messages can contain personal affronts, often aimed at further inflaming. Sometimes flaming occurs in the context of trolling, but more often it occurs because of an affront. Flaming emerged from the anonymity that Internet forums provide, covering users to act more aggressively (Cho & Kwon, 2015). The most common causes of flaming are mockery, unfortunate jokes, and insinuations that are offensive in usual interpretation; harsh remarks about foreign objects (e.g. games, corporations, sports teams, programmes, movies, actors, political parties, ideologies), though not affecting the other party, can be taken to heart; unfounded accusation or jest; heated comments, different points of view on the circumstances; debate, controversy, demagoguery with the use of offensive remarks.

No less common and dangerous is another way of cyberbullying, *cyberstalking*, which involves using the Internet to harass a person, group or organisation. It includes false accusations, gossip and slander, threats, vandalism, extortion or the

collection of information to use to intimidate or harass. Cyberstalking may occur in various ways: harassment, embarrassment and humiliation of the victim; harassing family, friends and employers to isolate the victim; emptying bank accounts or other economic control, such as ruining the victim's credit score; scare tactics to instil fear, and more (Moore, 2014, as cited in Haynes, 2018, p. 107). In most cases, cyberstalking entails criminal liability.

Denigration in the Internet environment includes defamation – actions qualified by criminal law as a crime. This type of cyberbullying is close to slander but differs from it in two ways. First, denigration requires the disclosure of any damaging facts in a fixed form, while slander can spread in words (publicly). Second, the criminal design is the very disclosure of damaging information on the Internet, regardless of its veracity, and slander is always a message of knowingly false stories.

With *outing* or *trickery*, a person shares another's personal information, such as pictures, videos, audio and chat messages. This outing of information is illegal. Messages asking for an account password or money transfer belong to *fraping*.

The simplest way to cyberbully is *exclusion*. Everyone, especially in childhood, associates himself/herself within a certain group or outside it. The desire for inclusion in a group is the motive for many actions. Exclusion from the group is perceived as 'social death' when the wider society does not accept people as fully human. The more a person is out of the picture (e.g. in a game), the worse they feel and the lower their self-esteem. In the web environment, exclusion also exposes a person to emotional distress. Exclusion is possible in any type of environment that uses password protection, blacklists or friend lists. Exclusion also occurs in the absence of a quick response to instant messages or e-mails (Peled, 2019; Willard, 2007).

Impersonation appears to be a particular way of cyberbullying when someone creates a fake profile in another person's name or hacks into another person's account on social networking services, such as blogs, emails or instant messaging systems. A cyberbully pretends to be their victim online, tarnishes the victim's reputation and may go on to disseminate messages that may provoke Internet users to attack the victim. A cyberbully may also share real information like humiliating photographs or contact details about which the victim does not want others to know.

A quite specific way of cyberbullying, *happy slapping*, has recently started. It is a fad originating in the London underground where teenagers walking along the railway platform suddenly slapped each other on the face while someone videorecorded those actions. The videos of rape or imitation attacks are sometimes referred to as *hopping* (especially common in the United States), posted on the Internet where thousands of people can watch them, usually without the victim's consent. Another way of happy slapping is sending such videos via smartphones.

Cyberbullying requires a bully with verbal and nonverbal means. The processes of interactive communication generally express a paradigm shift in communication in cyberspace. This leads to transforming the schemes of these processes, in turn contributing to the emergence of negative phenomena with unpredictable consequences that these changes provoke. The formation of the linguistic worldview, in terms of the development of linguistic identity in cyberspace, also has its specifics and requires consideration in the context of modern media challenges. Language is a powerful tool for manipulating and changing

human consciousness. At the same time, nonverbal means of communication influence the formation in humans of axiological focuses. The phenomenon of cyberbullying that we have analysed through the lens of a multimodality theory best demonstrates the polymorphism, multidiscursivity and unique character of each act of communication.

CONCLUSION

Cybernation in a postindustrial society—a screen society—has led to the emergence of new challenges that modern humans must face. The immersion of humans' lives in cyberspace—in particular, the transition of a society to new modes of communication in the web environment (e.g. social networking services, messengers, e-mail, chats, websites)—provokes the undesirable phenomena related to an invasion of privacy, harassment, humiliation, affronts, threats, defamation, traducement, divulging of personal and compromising information or false statements that unjustly harm one's reputation.

A huge increase in social media, thanks to the wide spread of the Internet, characterises the early twenty-first century. Interactive forms of media allow users to communicate and publish with each other. Cyberbullying appears to be an uncontrolled epiphenomenon in social media communication and a powerful means of manipulation. It has become increasingly common, especially among adolescents, as the digital sphere has expanded and technology has advanced.

The paradigm shift in communication in cyberspace leads to the reaccentuation of the nature of communication processes and the emergence of some negative phenomena this shift has provoked. Multimodal analysis of relevant data from cyberspace provides significant opportunities for studying language development, linguistic identity and specifics of the linguistic worldview. A multimodal approach seems most relevant in the analysis of network content, allowing the conversion of information coming from different channels, moving beyond the analysis of merely linguistic structures and exploring new ways of communication and sensemaking.

The implementation of specific modes of communication and strategies of verbal and nonverbal behaviour actualise the ways of cyberbullying in verbal and nonverbal web space practices. The analysis of cyberbullying demonstrates its complexity, emphasising the polymorphic nature and multidiscursivity of online communication processes. Social networks and instant messengers appear to be the most common means of cyberbullying. Different ways of cyberbullying in the Internet environment require a cyberbully to use different verbal and nonverbal means of influence, of great interest in counteracting this present negative phenomenon.

The growth of the Internet and the emergence of specific phenomena of web communication encourage the continuation of research into cyberspace in an interdisciplinary context. Studying today's challenges, including verbal and nonverbal strategies for disseminating fake news on the Internet and their impact on social conscience, may be the subject of new academic pursuits.

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