

The Induction of Emotions in Online Subcultural Groups and Its Relationship with Cyberbullying: Taking E-Sports as an Example

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Abstract. E-sports, which are marked by fierce competition, strong group identification, and high emotional commitment, have emerged as a dominant type of modern online subculture due to the quick growth of Internet technology and digital culture. This study investigates how the distinct cultural ecology of e-sports—which includes anonymity, instantaneous communication, and fiercely divided fan communities—creates an environment that is conducive to cyberbullying and emotional escalation. Based on the SIDE model, social identity theory, subculture theory, and mechanisms of moral disengagement, the analysis demonstrates how e-sports communities create inflexible in-group and out-group boundaries through player, team, and community hierarchy allegiance. While cognitive methods like responsibility dispersal and dehumanization justify hostile acts toward competitor groups, depersonalization and group polarization exacerbate collective emotions. Because of this, emotionally charged competition settings frequently turn casual onlookers into participants in online animosity. Developing successful governance measures and educational interventions to promote healthier involvement and lessen cyberbullying in digital subcultures requires an understanding of these socio-psychological processes.

Keywords: E-sports subculture, social identity, moral disengagement, cyberbullying, group polarization

1. Introduction

In today's era, with the rapid development of Internet technology and the widespread penetration of digital culture, the network subculture has become an important cultural phenomenon that cannot be ignored in modern society. As a typical representative of digital subculture, from January to June 2025, China held 72 non-performance competitions with the participation of professional players at or above the provincial level. E-sports has attracted hundreds of millions of viewers and participants around the world, and has built a virtual community space characterized by high emotional investment and distinct identity. In this space, the induction of collective emotions, the strict division of group boundaries, and the resulting cyber behavior - especially cyberbullying - have become important socio-psychological issues worthy of in-depth discussion.

The field of e-sports has gone beyond the category of simple game competition and has developed into a cultural form and become a field that can trigger deep emotional resonance. This kind of emotional atmosphere can enhance the participants' sense of immersion and belonging, and also bury hidden dangers for confrontation and conflicts between groups.

2. Key concept

2.1. Subculture

Subculture is defined as a form of cultural expression, which shows identity and expresses resistance through unique styles, symbols and practices. However, with the emergence of the Internet, the form and nature of subcultures have changed significantly. Contemporary online subcultures no longer rely on class- and geographical-based physical communities, but are rapidly formed and spread in virtual space through social media, forums and video platforms. The core of its style construction has also shifted from offline elements such as clothing and music to online slang, derivative works and specific interactive rituals. The symbolic challenge of online subculture to mainstream culture is increasingly evolving into a "symbolic resistance" based on irony and internal circle identity. This kind of irony usually comes in the form of joking jokes and sarcastic comments against competitors. For example, the "slang" of bullet culture and specific communities can be regarded as a new way to rebuild identity and participate in cultural practice in the digital age [1].

2.2. Cyberbullying

The conceptualization of cyberbullying has been a widely debated topic. This study adopts the definition of the term in mainstream academia, that is, intentional, repetitive and power-unequal attacks through electronic technology. It is worth noting that considering the characteristics of the dissemination of network information, some scholars believe that "repetition" may no longer be a necessary criterion for judgment. The complexity of cyberbullying is also reflected in the dynamic transformation of the roles of participants. Individuals may play the roles of bullies, victims or bystanders, and switch multiple roles in different situations [2]. In the field of e-sports, this kind of role change often occurs due to game results and emotional reactions. At the same time, this study will focus on the concept of anonymity, which is a derivative feature of cyberbullying and a sign that distinguishes it from traditional bullying.

2.3. Social identity theory

According to the social identity theory, an individual's self-concept mainly comes from his or her group membership and emotional investment in that identity [3]. In the field of sports fan research, this theory is often used to clarify how fans can meet human needs for self-esteem, sense of belonging and certainty by identifying with specific groups. Two of the closely related concepts are BIRGing and CORFing. These concepts refer to the fact that fans maintain a positive self-image by connecting with the winning team or keeping a distance from the losing team [4]. Due to the immediacy of the online community, this phenomenon is more prominent in the highly digitalized e-sports fan group.

2.4. Moral detachment

Moral detachment means that individuals use specific mechanisms to rationalize their immoral behavior cognitively, so as to escape the constraints of moral self-regulation. Specifically, the phenomenon of moral separation can be defined as: redefining behavior in a way that minimizes harm, maximizing the blame for the consequences on others, and reducing recognition of the suffering of the victim. The mechanism contains eight interrelated cognitive strategies: moral defense, euphemistic labeling, favorable comparison, transfer of responsibility, decentralization, ignoring or distorting consequences, dehumanization and blame attribution. Through these mechanisms, even after individuals commit morally controversial behaviors, they can still escape guilt and self-blame, thus conducive to the persistence of such behaviors [5]. These mechanisms are particularly prominent in the network environment. For example, the perpetrators of cyberbullying may justify their own attacks by dehumanizing victims as labels that deserve to be attacked, such as collectively giving derogatory nicknames to rival fans. Or use diluted responsibility, "others do it, so it's not just my fault", so as to justify your own aggressive behavior.

3. E-sports: an arena of emotional agitation and group identity

The 2025 League of Legends S15 Global Finals attracted 6.73 million viewers to watch online at the same time, which reflects the important position of e-sports in global cultural communication and industrial structure. Since the 1970s, e-sports has developed into an important form of mass entertainment and emotional interaction platform. In this field of virtual and real world integration, a large number of participants and audiences have invested a lot of time, energy and emotions. This cultural environment is characterized by high excitement, tension and emotional resonance, as well as unique group motivation. E-sports can be regarded as a typical representative of the contemporary digital subculture, and its internal ecosystem provides an ideal sample for studying the possibility of emotional arousal, collective identity formation and cyberbullying. It is a complex cultural system that combines high-intensity competition, a strong sense of community belonging and a unique symbol system. In this system, the audience is no longer just bystanders, but also active emotional input. The nature of the competition has also evolved from a simple technical competition to a field of emotional sharing and collective resonance. This section will discuss why e-sports culture is so easy to arouse strong emotions, and deeply analyze the social and psychological factors behind it. This book uses the theory of social identity to clarify how processes such as depersonalization, group polarization and moral separation aggravate the strict boundaries inside and outside the group, and ultimately lead to the occurrence of cyberbullying. Through the systematic analysis of this phenomenon, we can have a deeper understanding of the emotional foundation and socio-psychological mechanism behind the behavior of subcultural groups in the digital age.

3.1. High competitiveness and anonymity: emotional trigger engine

In the field of e-sports, emotional arousal is jointly driven by the expression de/inhibition effect brought about by competitive pressure and anonymity. The intertwining of these two factors forms a dynamic mechanism, under which emotions are constantly accumulated and enhanced. This dynamic interaction creates an experience, which is characterized by higher emotional intensity and more infectious enthusiasm, which is also a prominent feature of e-sports watching.

The high competitiveness in the field of e-sports directly links the team and fans with victory, defeat and honor. The results of e-sports competitions, including decisive victories in team battles,

promotions or honorary titles in the competitive system, will have a significant impact on the interest and emotional input of players and spectators. Compared with traditional sports activities, e-sports is faster and more unpredictable. Providing instant, exaggerated and visual feedback is the key feature of live broadcast of the game. The integration of design-driven user interface, in-game special effects and supporting commentary creates a dynamic audio-visual experience, mobilizes the audience's senses, and triggers rapid emotional fluctuations. In traditional MOBA games such as League of Legends or Honor of Kings, the situation may change dramatically in just a few seconds. Continuous uncertainty and instant feedback make the audience always in a state of tension. Research shows that continuous tension can exacerbate impulsive reactions, thus amplifying the joy of victory and the frustration of defeat to the extreme. This polarized emotional response is not limited to professional players on the field, it penetrates the consciousness of millions of spectators and fans. Through interactions such as real-time comments on the live broadcast platform and real-time discussions in community forums, emotions are rapidly spread and enhanced in the group environment through the infectious effect, thus creating an "emotional resonance" phenomenon. When thousands of viewers express joy or anger through comments at the same time, individual emotions will be integrated into the collective emotional wave, thus amplifying the psychological experience.

In addition to the high level of competitiveness observed in the game, the anonymity and relatively convenient expression provided by the Internet have created an atmosphere conducive to the spontaneous and impulsive release of emotions. Compared with the real world, the network environment simplifies personal identity into a series of IDs. This vagueness of identity has been proven to make individuals more susceptible to group behavior, while physical "absence" has been proven to significantly weaken the constraints of social norms [6]. In traditional stadiums, the audience may also be emotional; however, the actual presence and social supervision of the surrounding crowd can curb extreme behavior to a certain extent. In the online viewing environment, when the audience witnesses the defeat of the team they support, they can almost subconsciously make fierce comments without facing the direct consequences of face-to-face conflicts.

This anonymous phenomenon has been proven to significantly reduce social constraints on behavior and create a unique sense of psychological distance. In the context of virtual identity, it is observed that individuals are more likely to show aggressive and impulsive sexual behavior, which are usually suppressed in real life. When watching e-sports competitions, the audience often only pays attention to the content of the competition and their own immediate reactions, and often ignores the possible consequences of their own verbal expression. When these mechanisms are combined with the convenient comment system usually provided by live broadcast platforms, the threshold of emotional expression is significantly reduced, resulting in emotional expression becoming a reflexive behavior.

3.2. "We" and "they": the formation of group boundaries in the context of social identity theory

The theory of social identity believes that individuals establish self-concepts and gain self-esteem through social classification, social comparison and positive differentiation. After the rise of mass media in the 19th century, the popularity of Hollywood movies and television promoted the flourishing of fan culture. The fans of these idols, including politicians, entrepreneurs and entertainment stars, constitute one of the most influential groups in subcultures [7]. In the e-sports culture, fans establish their identity through the strong loyalty of the team, thus forming a clear

boundary between the inner and the outer groups. The formation of group boundaries is crucial to the organization of e-sports communities. However, this boundary may also become a hotbed of group conflict and cyberbullying.

In the field of e-sports, social classification shows multi-level and intertwined complexity. From the macro level, the basis of the division is the game itself. Obviously, players and audiences of games such as League of Legends, DOTA 2, Honor of Kings and The Fifth Personality have formed their own independent communities and created subtle competitive relationships within the community. With our in-depth study of specific games, the classification criteria have become more and more complex and diverse. The most important basis for division is the attribution of the team. Take the Honor of Kings Professional League as an example, each team has cultivated its own loyal fan groups, thus forming a stable competitive relationship among these groups. For example, the fan groups of Chengdu AG Super Team and Chongqing Wolves reflect the deep-rooted competitive tension and hostility in history and culture. In addition to the sense of belonging to the team, the formation of the fan group is also affected by the personal charm of the players. The many individual fans attracted by star players go beyond the boundaries of the team, which may trigger emotional conflicts between personal loyalty and team loyalty. The organizational structure of the fan group is more complex. In the team fan community, there are often distinct identity labels, and this hierarchy often increases peer pressure among members. "Big coffee" fans usually have great community influence, and they guide their fans' emotions through specific words and strategies. Research shows that the internal hierarchy of the e-sports fan community has a significant impact on the power dynamics within the community and will exacerbate normative pressure.

This concept is further elaborated through the concept of social classification. Members of the e-sports community improve their self-esteem and group value through social comparison and active distinction. In order to prove the rationality of their choices and show a sense of superiority, members often belittle foreign groups in various fields. This "1" phenomenon is common in the e-sports community. Members will selectively pay attention to and remember the information that supports the inner group, and ignore or question the evidence that is not good for the inner group [8]. Against the background of this rigid group classification, aggressive behavior is seen as a necessary part of defending the interests of the group. For example, if a person who identifies with a specific fan group attacks supporters of a hostile team on the forum, this behavior is not just an expression of personal emotions. On the contrary, it can be regarded as fulfilling group obligations, and its purpose is to enhance the cohesion and sense of superiority of the inner group by belittling the outside group. This psychological mechanism of rationalizing aggressive behavior is a key root cause of cyberbullying in e-sports.

3.3. From group confrontation to cyberbullying: the role of group polarization and moral separation in the development of cyberbullying

The emergence of cyberbullying can be explained by examining the interaction between emotional rise, group boundary rigidity and specific psychological mechanisms. When these factors are combined, the probability of cyberbullying will increase significantly. As key intermediary variables, depersonalization, group polarization and moral detachment play the role of emotional transformers, promoting group confrontation into obvious aggressive behavior.

The depersonalization-social identity model (SIDE model) is based on social identity theory and self-classification theory. The SIDE model believes that self-identity includes not only individual self-awareness, but also social identity. When individuals join a group, they will not lose their self-awareness; on the contrary, various depersonalization processes will weaken their self-awareness.

Group members are increasingly inclined to regard themselves and others as part of the collective, resulting in their thoughts and behaviors being bound by social or group norms and acting according to group expectations [9]. In the huge e-sports community, individual identity is easily integrated into the collective identity of "specific team supporters", thus entering a depersonalized state. This psychological state is characterized by reduced self-awareness, increased obedience to group norms, and weakened sense of responsibility for individual behavior. When a large number of viewers gather on the streaming platform to watch sports events, their individual identity and background will be covered by collective experience. On the contrary, they become collective symbols, such as "fans of a team". This identity change has been shown to make it easier for individuals to adopt group behavior patterns, even if these behaviors may be considered inappropriate or offensive in other situations.

Group polarization is a concept in the field of social psychology, which refers to the strengthening of the prevailing tendency among group members, so that a certain view or attitude rises from the average of the group to the dominant position [10]. In the context of group polarization, with the increase in the proportion of aggressive views, such views will become the main expression. Research shows that the recurrence of these views will lead people to adopt an increasingly radical attitude. In the e-sports fan group, some members often attack hostile teams or players. In response, other members may fight back or intensify these attacks to show their loyalty to the group. This dynamic will eventually create an atmosphere full of competition and insults. In this environment, individuals may give up rational judgment in order to cater to the group, thus joining the ranks of aggressive behavior.

In order to avoid a sense of moral responsibility in cyberbullying, people have observed a "moral detachment" phenomenon, that is, the aggressive behavior is rationalized into a legitimate move, thus reducing the moral burden. Moral detachment refers to the use of cognitive skills by individuals so that they can do behaviors that are morally unacceptable without feeling any remorse. The first step in this process is to establish a foundation for moral legitimacy. It is worth noting that people involved in such behavior may try to rationalize their behavior, such as describing it as "just criticism", "reasonable emotional catharsis" or "correct fan attitude". For example, when a fan makes a personal attack on a player who makes a mistake, they may reflect on the following points: the motivation behind his behavior may be to help the player improve his performance or for the benefit of other teammates. Depicting aggressive behavior as a means of achieving higher goals helps to avoid moral self-condemnation. Secondly, this article discusses the concepts of responsibility transfer and decentralization. In the context of collective attacks, each member of the group may feel that their own responsibility is diluted. The general mentality that supports this phenomenon can be described as collective responsibility, that is, that individual behavior does not represent the whole group. In the discussion about cyberbullying, there are often things like "Everyone is scolding them, why me?" Or excuses such as "They did it first, and we just hit back". Blaming the blame on groups or victims has been proven to reduce the moral burden on individuals. It is worth noting that certain specific elements in e-sports culture provide additional support for these moral evasion mechanisms. For example, online e-sports media actively incites divisive narratives and controversial topics. The extreme tendency of these events has exacerbated the emotional confrontational tendency of fans, thus further exacerbating the hostility between hostile groups. At the same time, the use of "stalks" and "slang" in the e-sports community packages offensive language into subcultural symbols. Once symbolized, the harmfulness of such attacks is more likely to be ignored, thus reducing people's awareness of the seriousness of such behavior.

The convergence of these mechanisms has turned cyberbullying from a hypothesis into a reality. The highly tense competitive atmosphere in this environment has been proven to promote aggressive behavior. In addition, strict group boundaries play a key role in guiding the selection of attack targets. In addition, group polarization and moral detachment are also considered to be key factors in breaking the psychological defense line, thus contributing to aggressive behavior. Against the background of these psychological dynamics, it is observed that traditional e-sports audiences may turn into malicious cyberbullies, attacking players, commentators and other audiences.

4. Conclusion

In a word, e-sports subculture, with its inherent high competitiveness and online anonymity, has become a field where emotions are easily stimulated and amplified. The fast pace of the game and the real-time commentary further aggravated the emotional excitement. As explained by the theoretical framework of social identity, the clear boundaries between the inside and outside the group constitute the psychological and social basis for promoting confrontation and conflict between groups. E-sports enthusiasts build a complex identity system through multi-level social classification, and attacking outside the group is no longer considered misconduct, which puts a legal cloak for hostility between groups. When individuals with high emotional intelligence experience depersonalization in their social groups and resort to the moral separation mechanism to justify their behavior, it may lead to cyberbullying incidents against members outside the group.

It is worth noting that this highly emotional state is not harmful in itself. The strong emotional investment unique to the phenomenon of e-sports is the key to its attraction. This profound emotional experience meets the needs of modern people for a sense of belonging and emotional expression in the digital age. However, in the game, people tend to lose control when there is a controversial referee's penalty or a player's mistake. When this emotional experience becomes difficult to control, it is easy to break through the boundaries of reason, leading to collective emotional outbursts and aggressive behavior. Therefore, it is very important to deeply explore its cultural core and examine the intricate interaction between emotions, identity and moral mechanisms. Understanding these profound psychological and social mechanisms can guide us to formulate corresponding regulatory systems and educational programs like a compass, so as to promote healthier participation.

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