

Social Media Facilitating Teens' Performances in Visual Bullying

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Abstract

This study explores how social media facilitates visual bullying among Chinese teenagers, focusing on its manifestations, impacts, and preventive strategies. In-depth interviews with high school students—active users of multiple social media accounts who had experienced or witnessed visual bullying—were analyzed using thematic analysis on social facilitation and visual-metaphor bullying. Findings indicate that the features of networking, information exchange, and anonymity constitute the technical architecture and algorithmic logic of social media enabling performative bullying. Such practices manifest in three primary forms: defamatory, humorous, and stereotype-coding, often expressed through memes, group chats, hashtags, and anonymous accounts. Although frequently rationalized as “joking”, these behaviors reveal adolescents’ recognition of bullying and its adverse effects. Impacts include emotional scars, amplification through algorithmic spread, persistent harm from digital footprints, and symbolic attacks underestimated in severity. A critical gap of ‘awareness-leading-but-ability-lagging’ characterizes teens’ cyberbullying literacy, underscoring the need for interventions that move from operational competence to proactive critical curation, from abstract awareness to applied empathetic action, and from personal risk management to collective responsibility. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of enhancing social media literacy to cultivate a safer digital environment both for and by teenagers in mitigating visual bullying.

Keywords: Cyberbully, Media literacy, Social facilitation, Social media, Visual communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary teenagers inhabit a hyper-visual digital environment in which social media platforms dominate everyday communication. Recent studies show that 95% of Chinese adolescents aged 6–18 are active Internet users (Qi et al., 2024), with platforms such as Douyin (TikTok) and Weibo (comparable in relevance to Facebook) serving as primary arenas for identity expression and peer interaction. This paradigm shifts toward image-centric communication—driven by algorithmic prioritization of visually engaging content—has fundamentally redefined the processes of adolescent socialization (Li, 2020). Within this digital context, visual figures function as the primary vehicles of meaning, simultaneously facilitating interpersonal connection and enabling new forms of cyberbullying. Advances in digital media exemplify social facilitation theory in explaining this rise. Social facilitation describes how the presence of others influences performance,

articulated through three dimensions: intrinsic motivation, social comparison, and cognitive processes (Van Meurs et al., 2024). In this landscape, social media operates as both a catalyst for interaction and a fertile ground for cyberbullying, especially through visual metaphors that exploit imagery's polysemy and emotional resonance (Pires et al., 2021).

Bully is identified as the essential performances in the intentional infliction of harm upon others, the occurrence of such harm in a repeated and persistent manner, and an inherent power imbalance between the involved parties (Lee et al., 2024). Unlike textual harassment, visual bullying as an extension of the relationship between visual communication and cyberbullying is the harmful attacks directed at specific individuals or groups through social media platforms, utilizing images, videos, emojis, and other visual elements. The resulting effects is particularly acute among teens, manifested through emotional trauma, amplified exposure, persistent impact, which collectively lead to profound distress, widened victimization, prolonged psychological effects, and imperceptibly affecting the formation of their correct social concepts. The fact is that, on the one hand, the young guys who are not mature tend to more easily generate cyberbullying. On the other, they are more impactful from bullying. Preventing cyberbullying is still overlooked due to the increase of social media facilitation in many contexts (Hu et al., 2024). Thus, research is urgently needed on how social media facilitates visual bullying, why it fosters adolescents' engagement in bullying behaviors, with what consequences, and which strategies are ultimately essential for strengthening teens' literacy in recognizing and resisting visual bullying on social media platforms.

Social Facilitation

Social facilitation, defined as behavioral changes induced by real or imagined audience presence, undergoes radical transformation in digital environments. According to Camilleri & Kozak (2022), traditional theory identifies two primary pathways through which social facilitation operates: the *audience effect* and *evaluation apprehension*. The audience effect suggests that individuals tend to perform better on tasks they have already mastered when aware of an audience's presence. In contrast, evaluation apprehension indicates that performance on complex or unfamiliar tasks may be impaired due to anxiety about being judged or evaluated negatively. However, McCarty and Karau (2017) determine that there are two significant forms of social facilitation: *co-action effects* and *audience effects*. Co-action effects occur when the presence of others performing the same task enhances one's performance, whereas audience effects arise when the mere presence of observers leads to improved outcomes. Steinmetz (2025) extends these frameworks by highlighting *social inhibition*—the tendency for performance to deteriorate in the presence of others—as the inverse of social facilitation.

The effects of social facilitation are most evident in three domains (Ryan et al., 2017). First, enhanced performance on simple tasks: individuals often excel at well-practiced or routine activities when others are present. Second, impaired performance on complex tasks: the scrutiny of observers can heighten anxiety and distraction, undermining success in demanding or unfamiliar activities. Third, social inhibition: performance may decline outright, particularly in tasks requiring higher-order thinking such as analytical reasoning or creative problem-solving, where external pressure can suppress innovation and risk-taking. In contemporary digital contexts, however, these traditional dynamics are reconfigured. Online platforms transform social facilitation into algorithmic social facilitation, wherein behavioral modification is driven less by physical co-presence than by anticipated algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics—likes, shares, and other forms of digital validation.

Social Media

As social media encompasses digital platforms and technologies that facilitate the creation, sharing, and interaction with content among netizens, specifically active Internet users. 'Post and share' act on social media are deemed as perpetual audiences, rewarding performative cruelty and triggering dopamine-driven engagement loops. By offering a diverse range of functionalities, social media enhances online experience for users through mechanisms such as *information exchange*, the establishment of *social networks*, and the ability to share content quickly influences how information does *viral spreads*. One more typical feature of social media is *anonymity* that users can choose varying degrees of identifiability, from verified real-name profiles to completely anonymous accounts or persistent pseudonyms detached from offline identities. Anonymity allows consistent online personas without direct offline linkage can empower marginalized voices, facilitate sensitive disclosures on health issues and political dissent, and enable identity exploration. Also, the internet has a memory; *archiving* in relevance, unless users or the platforms themselves take proactive measures to delete information, it can be retained and accessed on social media for an extended period, the storage capabilities of social media contribute to keeping the impact of cyberbully (Zheng & Che, 2021).

Visual Bullying

The audiovisual affordances of social media convert visual metaphors into powerful instruments of aggression, capable of dehumanizing victims through refuse imagery, stigmatizing biological traits, or exploiting algorithmic mechanisms such as duets and hashtag aggregation to amplify both reach and permanence (Hu et al., 2024; Jackson et

al., 2020). Visual bullying functions through the intentional and repeated circulation of images that reinforce *stereotypes*, employ ridicule as *humor*, and convey *defamatory* insinuations. Its impact is amplified by adolescents' developmental drive for peer validation, with 60.8% of teenagers reposting bullying content as a means of accruing social capital (Lee et al., 2024). This dynamic illustrates how complicity and co-action effects between digital affordances and social facilitation theories scale localized aggression into collective harassment (Van Meurs et al., 2024). It represents a distinct and understudied form of cyber aggression that profoundly shapes adolescent cognition and behavior, often leaving victims unable to resist safely.

Media Literacy

Possessing strong digital literacy can enhance user's ability to communicate effectively across various formats, with the awareness of cyberbullying, which is aggressive online behavior facilitated by the advances in social media technology. Media literacy develops through young people's continuous engagement with social media, shaped both by their desire to connect with peers and by familial influences in navigating digital platforms (Festl, 2021). Yet, social media infrastructures often institutionalize harm through three mechanisms: algorithmic amplification—such as TikTok's "For You Page," which circulates controversial content at a rate twelve times faster than neutral material—low-barrier creation tools, and governance failures that overlook polysemic forms of violence (Zhang, 2021). Social media literacy encompasses three core competencies: accessibility, critical thinking, and responsibility. The urgency of these skills lies in the diverse content adolescents encounter on social platforms, ranging from educational resources to misinformation and harmful material. As such, social media literacy enhances adolescents' ability to critically assess information and communicate effectively across formats.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

Research Framework

This study employed a qualitative approach, integrating documentary analysis with in-depth interviews to investigate the weaponization of social media in shaping Chinese teenagers' performative bullying and their responses to its effects. Particular attention was given to Douyin and Weibo, which have emerged as the primary platforms of social media affordance among Chinese teenagers (Hu et al., 2024). Their distinctive formats privilege visual engagement over textual communication, thereby reinforcing the dynamics under investigation. To explore these dynamics, in-depth interviews were conducted using a structured set of questions. Coding was applied to both items and

responses, aligning them with the focal themes of the five core features of social media—networking, information exchange, anonymity, virality, and archiving—as well as the three forms of performative visual bullying, categorized as defamatory, humorous, and stereotypical.

The study also concentrated on the post-2020 digital landscape, a period characterized by rapid technological advancement and the proliferation of AI-driven content across social media platforms. This era has been marked by the emergence of deep-fake technologies and algorithmic moderation systems, both of which have significantly reshaped how content is created, circulated, and regulated online. By situating the research within this contemporary context, earlier periods of pre-social media cyberbullying—such as those associated with online forums in the early 2000s—were deliberately excluded. This exclusion ensured a focused examination of current challenges shaped by modern technological dynamics, rather than historical precedents that may no longer be directly applicable.

Data Collection

The study engaged Chinese adolescents aged 15–18 enrolled in high schools in Changsha, Hunan Province, People’s Republic of China. This developmental stage is characterized by significant physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional transitions, alongside intensive engagement in social media communication. Participants were purposively selected based on three defining attributes: (1) active use of Douyin and Weibo, typically maintaining multiple accounts; (2) varied experiences with visual bullying, including victimization, witnessing, or perpetration; and (3) demonstrated willingness and availability to the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven students, guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby recruitment continued until no new thematic insights emerged. Ethical safeguards were rigorously maintained: approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board, compliance with the Law on the Protection of Minors was ensured, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Personal identifiers such as usernames, avatars, and locations were anonymized and used solely for scholarly purposes. To enrich the analysis, a two-stage coding process was integrated with three reference images (Figure 1), each illustrating performative bullying through distinct modalities—defamatory, humorous, and stereotypical. These visual prompts facilitated participants’ articulation of perceptions regarding aggression, humor, and stereotype reinforcement in digital environments.

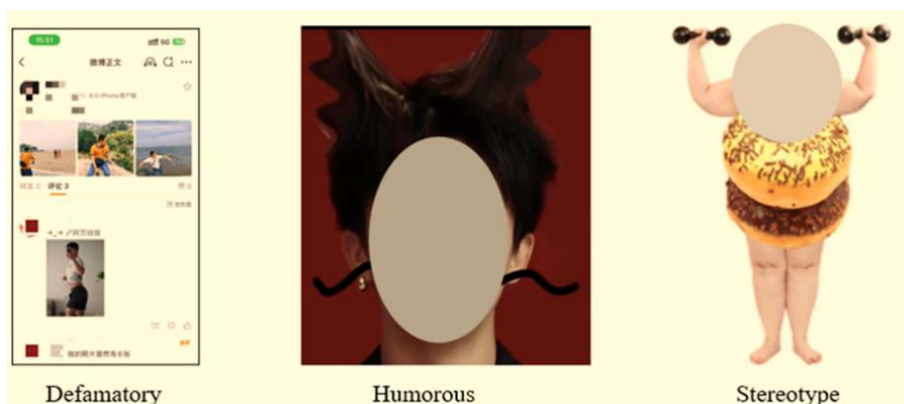


Figure 1. Three forms of visual bullying: Defamatory, Humorous, Stereotype coding
Source: <https://baidu-searchbox.th.uptodown.com/>

For open coding: Codes were generated inductively, capturing participants' descriptions of bullying experiences, emotional responses, and interpretations of visual stimuli. This stage emphasized staying close to the data, allowing emergent themes such as "hidden aggression in humor," "body stigma," and "gendered stereotypes" to surface without imposing preconceived frameworks.

With axial coding: Relationships among the open codes were then explored to identify bullying form. Codes were clustered around central phenomena, linking conditions, actions, and consequences. For example, "humor masking aggression" was connected to broader categories of "normalization of bullying" and "peer complicity," while "body stigma" was situated within "visual labeling practices" and "identity regulation". Axial coding thus enabled the integration of individual codes into coherent thematic framework, highlighting the interplay between performative bullying and broader representation.

3. RESULTS

Social Media Facilitating Visual Bullying

For Chinese teens, creating a network on social media is the most preferred feature, followed by information exchange and anonymity. The mechanism of networking facilitates emotional support, community formation, and cross-domain interactions while information exchange promotes multimedia engagement, concise content formats, and shared symbolic systems, and anonymity offers a safe space for identity exploration and unfiltered discourse, albeit with associated risks. The teenage participants consistently rank virality and archiving features of social media as secondary. They view virality more

as 'social currency' for peer interaction and a 'foundation' for social cohesion rather than as the primary and high-stakes dissemination engine. Archiving is also seen as a tool for 'self-documentation' and 'identity exploration', not as a permanent public ledger of potential harm, though it allows for lasting consequences. It means a disconnect between user intent and platform reality is underestimated by most teens.

Moreover, the teens often opt to respond with humorous or creative emojis as it captures greater attention and fosters a more relaxed conversational atmosphere compared to text-based responses which tend to be more serious. The finding emphasizes the integral role of social media in teens' visual communication practices, shaping their behaviors, participating in viral trends as social currency.

Teens' Performances in Visual Bullying and Impacts

The study found three predominant and interconnected forms of visual bullying prevalent among Chinese teens with social media facilitation: defamatory, humorous, and coding of stereotype-based bullying.

(1) Defamatory visual bullying includes circulating harmful content in group chats or amplifying "super topics" in semi-private spaces, posting abusive comments alongside images or maliciously altering victims' photos through duet or remix functions. The consequences are enduring: victims often withdraw socially or replicate aggression themselves to gain acceptance. The persistent harm is that victims are publicly humiliated, their self-esteem erodes, and anxiety about personal representation.

(2) Another form of facilitation arises when incidental images are circulated for entertainment. Humorous bullying expressed through memes, satirical images, and symbolic hashtags functions as a socially facilitated performance. The teens like pushing these images into "hot searches" or amplify them through information squares, increasing exposure and interaction. While framed as humorous, such practices gradually normalize visual bullying and encourage bystanders to transition into perpetrators. This enables blurring the boundary between benign amusement and offensive aggression. Victims, excluded from the shared amusement, experience isolation, gradually normalize visual bullying, and turn from bystanders into perpetrators underscoring how humor in group contexts becomes a mechanism of social bonding at the expense of ethical boundaries.

(3) Stereotype coding amplified by the affordances of social media are intensified in the presence of peers, who function simultaneously as spectators and co-participants. These dynamics not only inflict direct harm on victims, ranging from diminished self-esteem and heightened anxiety to broader societal consequences such as reduced empathy and entrenched prejudice, but also reshape group norms, normalize harmful

behaviors, and reinforce existing biases. This perspective underscores the importance of addressing not only individual perpetrators but also the collective environments that enable and amplify visual bullying in digital contexts.

Social media is not merely passive background; rather, it actively participates in constructing the complete visual bullying among adolescents. In online spaces where many interactions occur without face-to-face contact, it becomes easier for certain adolescents to adopt these indirect and covert forms of bullying. Due to the absence of immediate feedback mechanisms, most teens express that they may not fully comprehend the repercussions of their actions. It is obvious that when confronted with humorous bullying, teens frequently encounter a moral dilemma, despite feeling discomforted by the situation, they fear being labeled as unable to appreciate humor. This internal conflict often compels teens to either remain silent or conform to peer behavior. Beyond superficial harm, the psychological identity and social image through the distortion also result in their covert and persistent mental oppression. It amplifies destructive potential and confers lasting harm. In particular, the interplay between social media attributes and the polysemy and metaphorical nature of visual symbols significantly exacerbates both the severity and duration of cyberbullying.

In addition, most teens employ a covert strategy referred to as 'symbolic attack' in the context of visual bullying. This method relies on visual metaphors that are shared within peer groups, which further obscures the distinction between acceptable humor and harmful behavior, complicating identification for both teenagers and platform systems. Specifically, symbolic attacks often manifest through the transmission of negative messages via images, emojis, or other visual elements that do not overtly disclose malicious intent. Consequently, perpetrators can partially mask their true intentions while effectively impacting the psychological well-being of their victims.

Teens' Literacy in Cyberbullying

The research finding leads to identify a significant gap between the literacy competencies essential for combating visual bullying and those currently possessed by teens. The findings reveal a prevalent 'awareness-leading-but-ability-lagging' phenomenon across three core dimensions of media literacy where are social media accessibility, critical thinking, and media responsibility, indicating an urgent need for targeted educational interventions.

(1) Social media accessibility: It appears that most teens begin to pay attention to their privacy settings only after witnessing similar issues faced by others, rather than proactively implementing preventive measures. Teens possess only foundational,

reactive skills, they are competent consumers and sharers but use privacy and account management tools passively, primarily in response to negative incidents. Their approach is defensive rather than empowering, with limited understanding of how to actively shape their online environment. In such instances, the teens seek assistance from peers or family members, including utilize search engines to acquire relevant information on effectively managing their online identities.

(2) Critical thinking: The divergence lies in depth of analysis and empathetic action. Teens possess the awareness necessary to assess intentions. They can identify obvious distortions but struggle profoundly to interpret satire, stereotypes, or covert aggression. While they cognitively know bullying is wrong, their empathetic response is weak, often leading to inaction due to fear, perceived futility, or victim-blaming. They also lack practical strategies for emotional regulation and constructive engagement. When queried about their consideration of the reasons behind a decision to upload a particular image, nearly all students responded affirmatively. They demonstrate an abstract understanding that allows them to evaluate the motives and purposes of the visual contents. Nevertheless, it is exceedingly challenging for them to comprehensively analyze the underlying intentions behind various forms of content. This difficulty arises from their need to integrate specific contextual elements of visual content and associated tags.

(3) Media responsibility: A chasm exists between systemic understanding and superficial awareness. All teens demonstrate a superficial grasp of platform algorithms, often mistaking promoted content for organic popularity. They feel powerless and pessimistic about intervention, lacking confidence and skills for de-escalation or effective reporting.

4. DISCUSSION

Facilitation of Social Media for Visual Bullying

The study's findings regarding the salient features of networking, information exchange and anonymity for adolescents' visual communication largely reinforce established concepts proposed by Vorasiha (2022) revealing that these features are systemic and inherent to contemporary social media architecture, aligned with Li (2020) concluding that Chinese teenagers are active agents navigating digital spaces driven by image-centric interfaces and algorithmic prioritization, leading to redefine their socialization. According to Zhang (2021), the teenagers prefer the concise information format of Weibo and the visual content creation of Douyin. These contribute to an echo chamber effect that compels user to conform to prevailing trends at the expense of

individualized expression. Critically, a self-identified perceptual disconnect exists, where teens often rationalize harmful visual acts as mere 'joking', fundamentally undermining their recognition of bullying.

This is also concurrent to Zheng and Che (2021) indicating that symbolic violence, where visual tools are used to enact and reinforce social hierarchies becomes the mechanisms of defamatory bullying. For example, technical tampering and symbolic grafting directly illustrate the application of visual metaphor communication, where a source domain (a negative image) is mapped onto a target domain (the victim) to reconstruct meaning. The prevalence and characteristics of humorous bullying, reliant on contextual decoding and perceived by most students as group entertainment alongside its potential harm in blurred moral judgment and participant desensitization. This bullying illustrates the use of humor to disguise aggression, where surface-level amusement cloaks underlying hostility (Hu et al, 2024).

According to Jackson et al. (2020) and Qi et al. (2024), social media engagement is resumed as normalized-aggressive behavior under the guise of fun. The characteristics of social media allow for its widespread and covert dissemination. The teens have no idea how the features of social media enable them to do stereotypical visual bullying. Also, they often struggle to accurately identify aggressive visual content associated with 'coding of stereotypes' and tend to interpret numerous images containing derogatory or biased symbolism as ordinary, neutral, or innocuous. Stereotypical visual bullying employs oversimplified and biased visual symbols to reinforce negative coding of stereotypes against specific groups, thereby facilitating systematic exclusion.

Enhancing Teens' Literacy in Cyberbullying

The effects of visual bullying on the adolescents include mass exposure enabling thousands of anonymous viewers, potential harm on sexual harassment, ridicule and bullying in comment sections, emotional scars, and persistent harm as digital traces can resurface prolonging trauma impact (Lee et al., 2024; Olweus & Limber, 2019). Protecting the teens requires redefining bullying and enhancing their media literacy by strengthening technical accessibility, deepening critical thinking, and fostering responsible media citizenship. Literacy education must advance from identifying overt misinformation to interpreting nuanced malicious content, while systematically developing affective empathy and emotional regulation to translate cognitive awareness into motivated, positive bystander intervention against visual bullying. Included is to facilitate peer-led initiatives, such as 'digital ambassadors' program where the trained teenagers promote positive online norms and serve as first-point contacts for their peers. These involve stepping from basic operational competence to proactive critical curation,

and reconceptualizing from personal risk management to a responsible civic duty within digital communities (Festl, 2021; Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021).

Finally, the research outcomes validate a direct correlation between social facilitation with the technical characteristics of social media platforms and user behavior in visual communication, providing a new systematic perspective for understanding online visual bullying that involves not only individual users but also the measures taken by platform features and regulation management (Pires et al., 2021). On this basis, Machimbarrena and Garaigordobil (2018) stress that the development of intervention strategies becomes particularly important, especially social facilitation and digital media literacy. This may help potential victims enhance their self-protection awareness and improve their ability to cope with negative information.

5. LIMITATIONS

Despite its contributions, this study is constrained by the following limitations.

- Bullying constitutes a highly sensitive issue: The use of metaphorical imagery in interviews carries the risk of unintentionally reproducing bullying behaviors toward participants. To mitigate this, interview protocols were carefully designed to avoid framing that could be perceived as coercive or harmful.

- Youth participants as a vulnerable group: Because the informants were minors, the recruitment and selection process prioritized ethical safeguards. Measures were taken to prevent exploitation, ensure compliance with adolescent protection standards, and guarantee the confidentiality of participants' personal data.

- Young population as a methodological challenge: The developmental stage of participants posed potential obstacles to data collection. Interview questions were therefore crafted to be concise, explicit, and accessible, avoiding demands for abstract or deep interpretive reasoning, which may be difficult for younger respondents.

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