# Analysing the Social Media Momo Phenomenon:
# Causes and Effects

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The "Momo Army" is an anonymous group on social media platforms like Douban and Xiaohongshu. It uses similar avatars and nicknames to demonstrate collective identity and engage in group interactions. This group rapidly forms a strong network of interaction, establishing stable group relationships, and achieving digital invisibility. However, anonymous groups conceal anonymous violence and cyberbullying, negatively affecting individuals and society. This study will explore the reasons for the emergence of such groups, self-presented characteristics of their group members, and social impacts. It will conduct in-depth research and analysis through participant observation and interviews.

*Keywords:* social media, Internet culture, anonymity

## Digital Stealth: Who Is Momo?

"Big head, pink background, holding a small dinosaur's paw" named "momo" is a popular avatar. The nickname can be seen on social media platforms like Douban, microblogging, Xiaohongshu, etc., referring to an anonymous group of Internet users. More people are joining the "momo" army, which gives this collective action more meaning. Momo is not a person but an anonymous online group. The name and avatar "momo" are default info from new accounts, but the collective action has been given meaning as more people join.

Momo's anonymity is easy to understand as users can effectively hide their identities by changing their avatars and net names. This provides privacy and anonymity as users can express themselves without revealing sensitive details or compromising their security. Choosing Momo to change their online appearance often ensures they do not leave messages or likes, a crucial factor for maintaining anonymity online, especially on social media or dating platforms. This behavior reflects collective invisibility, where users strive to blend in and express themselves without revealing personal details or compromising their security or privacy.

Users change to Momo avatars to hide identities, revealing minimal info online. They refuse to leave messages or likes behind, a form of collective invisibility. Users demand the Internet but resist full exposure.

## Psychological Motives Behind Joining Momo

### Socialising With Strangers: From Weak Connection to Network Passers-by

Modern tech and social media connectivity make us increasingly media-immersed, while big data blurs reality-virtuality boundaries. In 1973, Granovetter coined "weak connections" concept, where social networks

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have both strong and weak connections. Weak connections reveal new social dimension. Custer cited weak Internet ties in Network Society, "Internet facilitates weak links, providing low-cost info and opportunities" (Castor, 2001, pp. 444-445). The benefits of weak links in virtual space are greater than in the real world; the Internet enables the transfer of information between young people who have never met, promoting greater communication scope and effectiveness.

Privacy is being violated in the digital age, turning the real world into a "panoramic prison". Platforms and technologies regulate us, denying privacy. The public is eroding privacy, and it's seen as a precious right. To protect feelings from public judgment, people seek suitable online relationships with strangers, forming a new dynamic interpersonal relationship to adapt to social changes (Xu & Liu, 2021).

Social networking is expanding, changing people's social forms from strong acquaintances to weak semi-anonymous and then anonymous. Interpersonal relationships and interactions expand as the network periphery expands, breaking space-time limitations and "familiar" and "unfamiliar" boundaries. Netizens can freely speak in the cyber world without real-life consequences, finding their interests in groups.

Social networks are changing people's relationships from strong to weak and anonymous. Interactions expand with network growth, breaking boundaries and freeing people online. Netizens can freely express themselves without real-life consequences. Stranger social networks create personal images quickly and anonymously. Unlimited networking can shape self-role externally through self-expression, dissolve social pressure, and exist as the user's spirit. Online relationships are cooler than real-life relationships, but self-exposure can shorten the forming stages of interpersonal relationships. The relationship between individuals can be warmed up quickly (Yu, Zhu, Zhang, & Wang, 2019). Online platforms reduce real-life social awkwardness, easing initial interaction. However, cooling down is faster due to the lower cost of ending relationships.

## Identity: Sense of Belonging in Online Communities

Users search for group identity in social networks, detaching briefly from themselves and shaping an idealized image. When their Internet behavior becomes group behavior, this identity and psychological comfort bring them closer, deepening interaction. Momo comments are seen on every platform, their interactions are fascinating, and high-frequency interactions and mutual attention form a strong sense of identity and membership in the symbol of Momo, bringing emotional energy and willingness to act together for the same goal.

Enigma explains cultural evolution based on Darwinian evolution. Dawkins introduced modus operandi, the unit of cultural transmission in *The Selfish Gene*. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines meme as the basic unit of culture transmitted through imitation (Dawkins, 1976, pp. 2-12).

Momo group users join to strengthen connections and follow the herd mentality. As the Momo group grows, more people join, even though some users create their own avatars. The Momo community allows free connections worldwide, and is highly creative and cohesive.

As its influence rises, Momo begins to exist not only as scattered individuals on the Internet, but also forms more new communities belonging to Momo, such as "Mo City Residents" and "Mo Sanctuary", which give more Momo a sense of belonging on the Internet. Having a common identity—"Momo"—is like having an emotional connection and belonging to a group. It's like wearing the same masks and mass-copied waistcoats in a public space, having a collective digital carnival to satisfy young people's sense of group identity and cyberpunk-style entertainment.

**Communication as a Game: Free Surfing After Social Media Burnout**

After the emergence of the Internet, the emergence of software such as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, and WeChat accelerated the arrival of the era of entertaining social media, which has become an important platform for users to share their opinions, experiences, and viewpoints in the media ecosystem. However, with the frequent emergence of information overload and privacy leakage problems in various platforms, social media users have gradually become tired, anxious, bored, and other negative emotions in the face of the complexity of social networking and information, and even engage in social media activities.

Facebook causes boredom and other negative emotions and active boycotts of social media behaviour (Zhang, 2022). The academic community defines it as exhaustion due to overload of technology and information on different platforms (Dhir, Yossatorn, Kaur, & Chen, 2018). This burnout includes not only fatigue with technology, but also various stresses brought about by social relationships, such as privacy issues, over-socialisation, and self-perception misunderstandings.

Social media burnout is essentially due to the fact that social media can amplify the cognitive conflict between the "subjective self" and the "object self", as we rely excessively on the evaluations of others on the platforms (Hong & Duan, 2020), and we also use social comparisons to reduce uncertainty about our self-assessment by obtaining information through social comparisons with others, but because most users present a more positive side, it is easier to develop a fear of missing out on being dominated by the experiences of others (Huang, 2020).

Social media impacts negatively due to identity and relationship blurring, encouraging building stronger relationships, presenting oneself, and enhancing self-perceptions. People feel trapped by real-world pressures and baggage, making Internet use restricted. However, Momo's free and joyful style has gained popularity, with many netizens interested in joining and giving positive feedback.

Stephenson in The Game Theory of Mass Communication says that "the best thing about mass communication is that it allows readers to immerse themselves in a subjective game" (Yu & Yang, 2018, p. 16). Mass communication should be for self-pleasing and enjoyment. Momo's co-creation behavior illustrates this. They treat communication as a game, creating various derivatives through subjectivity. This leads to a distinct tribal culture. The Momo community also fosters positive emotional relationships. This relationship not only helps members find their identity, but also brings joy and satisfaction. In addition, it strengthens a community of "strong weak link" relationships, facilitating collaboration and communication between members.

Stephenson's game theory and Momo's practice show that immersion, creativity, and sociality can foster a sense of freedom and belonging. Douban's "Momo Group" forums show high trust and friendliness, while Xiaohongshu's "MoMen Help" posts show Momos creating their own free, united, and friendly community on the Internet. This utopia allows Momos to be free, united, and happy.

## Impacts Behind Collective Digital Invisibility

**Self-protection or Anonymity Orgy**

Behind Momo shows the importance of privacy and security for netizens. With the Internet, sharing information on social media requires caution. The Internet is like a "memory", with information available for years. Seeking anonymity in social media allows for a brief detaching from the self, forming an idealized image, free of true self-discipline, and offering a virtual anonymous self. This anonymity not only allows for an alternate persona online, but also provides a sense of security for expression and communication. It allows for more free

expression and provides self-protection under various displays.

Anonymous social networking increases the depth of interaction, before Momo, "jianghu liar", and "logged out" became popular on Douban, a Douban protection mechanism. "Administrator" became "jianghu liar" to prevent impersonation. Douban's nickname "Cancelled" represents a black and white portrait. Users can avoid attacks and "human flesh search" by pretending to be "jianghu liar" or "logged out", protecting netizens' surfing.

Foucault proposed the society of discipline, and Deleuze further proposed the society of control due to the rise of consumerism and electronic technology. Power has permeated life more freely, turning everyone into a controlled object. Momo's trappings offer a psychologically safe space. Momo's helmet shields people from recognizing and discovering their online history, avoiding social pressure and the risk of "social death". As a way to protect from big data and algorithmic technology, Momo helps people navigate the internet, creating a life they do not want. This creates a "crossover" of boundaries. However, Momo's collective identity allows users to reduce social pressure and socialize online with confidence.

Despite their anonymity, Momo groups face the risk of disorientation, with groups losing rationality and appearing collectively blind, stupid, or fanatical. Group polarisation is particularly notable, with members more prone to extreme views before consultation. Individuals susceptible to group pressure and influence lose independent thinking, leading to deviating behaviour. Carnival theory by Bakhtin in 1960s sees formal life full of rules as the opposite of "revelry" life (Hu, 2006).

In the digital age, the carnival is a kind of group behaviour that spreads virally through the Internet, where the homogenised identity of Momo enhances the protection of personal information of netizens, but also makes the online speeches of users in the Momo group more "emotional" and bolder. Emotionality is manifested in Momo's more direct and generous expression of their likes and dislikes in their users' comment sections, while boldness exists in their critique of relevant social events, with the Momo identity becoming an umbrella for their information protection.

One user said they started making reckless statements in the Momo comments section because other users would take the blame. Many people join the Momo community and make reckless statements because they think others will take the blame, giving an impression of keyboard warriors. However, it can give a bad name to the entire group, like "swindlers". Anonymity gives freedom and pleasure but can lead to offensive words and behaviour, pretending to be someone else.

## Freedom of Expression or Cyber Violence

Cyberspace offers a safe space for expression and communication, and Momo offers a new anonymous social model with stronger trust. Momo's voices can be disclosed anonymously, creating a strong sense of trust within the community. Anonymity and self-media have weakened the role of opinion climates, representing a new evolution of tree holes (Ma, 2023). Momo avoids acquaintances and social norms, disguises himself, and interacts with others on the Internet. The expression of different opinions with others becomes easier and freer, and they will no longer be silenced because they are "spirals" with different voices, which greatly reduces people's social pressure and brings more security (Dong & Ding, 2019).

However, this situation also loosens norms in the real world to some extent. Anonymity gives Internet spammers and veteran fans an opportunity to express their opinions more easily. It's as if you can pretend to be a Momo user, smear, expose, or even spread rumors, and become emotionally driven in an atmosphere of "group blind obedience" and lawlessness.

For example, a Momo user wrote: "Since joining the Momo army, I've started posting comments in the comment section without fear, and other Momo users will take the consequences for me anyway". Many people even use Momo in order to be able to vent their negative feelings more legitimately, facilitating their own violence under the pseudonym of anti-violence.

However, it should be noted that a homogeneous identity is not the same as complete invisibility. On anonymous social platforms, individual users may abuse their right to free expression and act recklessly, posting inappropriate remarks, maliciously attacking others, or inciting hatred, etc. These behaviors not only undermine the authenticity of the platform's users, but also lead to the deterioration of the community environment. The emergence of Momo can avoid all kinds of verbal assaults and group violence that have occurred in the current online environment, but if it is not used properly, it still has the may intensify the current communication conflicts in social media, making it a shroud that condones malicious behaviours, and allowing the situation of online violence to intensify.

## Exploring the Boundaries Between Public and Private

Individuality and uniqueness were highly valued in the past, with people using nicknames and avatars to express their unique positions. With the rise of the Internet, everyone can express their opinions and uniqueness through personal web pages, blogs, etc. At that time, web nicknames reflected personalities and signature changes demonstrated distinctive sides. As social media rose, people began to disclose personal information on the Internet, turning private lives public. On one hand, digital footprints allow others to track and analyze behavior, habits, interests, etc., and on the other, data sharing and security breaches can result in personal information leakage, making private lives even more public.

The privacy-free nature of the Internet also provides the ground for the frequent occurrence of cyberviolence. The anonymity and wide dissemination of information on the Internet make it easier for people to engage in acts of maligning, mansplaining, and harassment, which can lead to the occurrence of cyberviolence. Information on the Internet can be easily disseminated and maliciously distorted, causing damage to an individual's reputation as well as psychological trauma.

It is for these reasons that Momos have willingly sacrificed their individuality, choosing to present themselves as "electronic cockroaches" in order to protect their privacy (Wang, 2023). From this point of view, there is nothing to blame for their starting point. However, we must also recognise that as long as there is a contradiction between freedom and security, not only Momo, but also other anonymous groups such as nono and yoyo may emerge. We cannot simply assume that such online collectives are effective in preventing privacy leakage and private domain encroachment. Even if they are effective to a certain extent, having the same avatar and nickname should not be seen as a cover for keyboard warriors, let alone an amulet for their recklessness. Pink dinosaur avatars may look cute, but when they go beyond the boundaries of the law, they can easily turn into symbols of violence and hatred.

Members of the Momo Army are not withdrawing from the Internet altogether; they have chosen to become Momo mainly to protest against the current widespread and unpunishable acts of cyber violence and privacy breaches. As citizens, people have the right to freedom of expression, and at the same time, surfing on the Internet requires privacy protection. The conflict between the two is no longer just a problem for young people, but a crisis for society as a whole: Where are the boundaries between the public and private spheres? What are the limits of freedom and norms?

At a time when the boundaries between the public and private spheres are becoming increasingly blurred, and freedoms and norms have yet to be clarified, actively choosing to be invisible does not seem to address the key points of the problem, nor does it change the smoothness of communication and respect for dialogue. However, in the absence of a better alternative at the moment, we should at least stick to the bottom line: The Internet is not an extraterritorial place, and there are no privileges to which the law does not apply to the general public.

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