

A Study of Deliberate Metaphors in Cyberbullying Language

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Posting and commenting on the Internet has become an important channel for individuals to express their opinions, but it has also given rise to cyberbullying language. Deliberate Metaphors (DMs) refers to the deliberate selection of specific metaphors by speakers in particular contexts to guide listeners to view the source domain from a novel perspective. Despite its deliberate and creative nature, cyberbullying language has rarely been studied in terms of the speaker's intentions. Therefore, this study adopts a cognitive perspective on DMs and employs qualitative analysis by collecting cyberbullying language on Chinese social media. This study attempts to answer two questions: (1) the classification of metaphorical vehicles in cyberbullying language; and (2) how speakers achieve their violent intentions through DMs. The results show that: (1) metaphorical vehicles in cyberbullying language fall into five main categories—animals, plants, iconic figures, diseases, and waste; and (2) when delivering hurtful posts and comments, speakers often use strategies such as combining multiple metaphors, and broadening the scope of the attack to convey their hatred. This study contributes to deconstructing the deliberate intentions behind the use of cyberbullying language and provides valuable insights for policymakers in regulating and refining strategies for regulating online language.

Keywords: metaphor, deliberate metaphor, cyberbullying language, violence

Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, offering opportunities for self-expression and connection. However, this digital landscape also has a darker side: the rise of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is commonly defined as “an aggressive and intentional act perpetrated by an individual or group, utilising electronic means of communication, repeatedly and over time, against a victim who may struggle to defend themselves” (Smith et al., 2008). The anonymity and wide reach of social media can amplify harmful behaviors like harassment and exclusion, posing risks to people's emotional and psychological well-being.

Cyberbullying is a widespread issue that affects individuals across different age groups. While children and adolescents are often considered the most vulnerable, research suggests that adults also experience cyberbullying in various online environments (Bryson & Fissel). Studies on youth cyberbullying highlight its impact on mental health, academic performance, and social relationships, with victims often experiencing anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Smith et al., 2018). Meanwhile, adult cyberbullying, particularly in professional and social settings, can lead to workplace distress, reputational damage, and emotional harm

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(Privitera & Campbell, 2009). Unlike face-to-face interactions, the online context allows cyberbullies to conceal their identities, making it easier for them to engage in repeated and targeted attacks.

Given the significant role of language in shaping online aggression, this study aims to explore the intentions behind cyberbullying language from the perspective of Deliberate Metaphor Theory. By applying this theoretical framework, the study focuses on how metaphors are deliberately employed to express hostility in the context of online bullying. This study contributes to deconstructing the deliberate intentions behind the use of cyberbullying language and provides valuable insights for policymakers and social media platforms to better detect and address cyberbullying, creating safer online environments for individuals.

Literature Review

Metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices, but fundamental to human thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Since then, Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has been influential in the field of cognitive linguistics. CMT emphasizes the unconscious role of metaphors. However, Steen (2008) argues that the power of metaphor may lie in its conscious and deliberate usage. To address this, Steen (2008) developed Deliberate Metaphors (DMs), which are constructed in such a way that “the speakers invite or sometimes even instruct the listeners to set up a cross-domain mapping in their mental representation of the discourse, in order to view one thing in terms of something else” (Steen, 2008). To simplify, DMs are perspective changers or “the intentional use of a metaphor as a metaphor” (Steen, 2015).

Studies on DMs have been conducted from various aspects, including literature, second language learning, political speech (Lu & Deignan, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022; Heyvaert et al., 2020), examining their identification, functions, effects, and underlying intentions (Steen, 2011). According to Musolff’s pilot study (2016), metaphors are used deliberately to achieve certain communicative purposes. DMs, in particular, draw most of the audience’s attention to the source domains (Wang, 2023). This implies that when people receive hurtful comments, they are likely to focus more on the source domains, which reflects the speaker’s intentions and purposes.

Research on the cyberbullying language involves multiple disciplines. From a linguistic perspective, studies on cyberbullying often focus on the language used in online communication. Researchers investigate how specific language features contribute to the aggression or harm associated with cyberbullying (Peter & Petermann, 2018). In this context, scholars also analyze the rhetorical strategies employed by perpetrators, examining how they manipulate language to intensify their messages, thereby enhancing the harm caused through online interactions. Cyberbullying language, as a form of intentional expression, while much research has been accomplished in understanding its nature, causes, phenomena, prevention and detection (Smith et al., 2008; Li, 2020; Van Bruwaene et al., 2020), there remains a need for deeper investigation into the intentions behind the cyberbullying language.

Analysis

The data for this study was primarily collected from Chinese social media platforms Baidu, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin—key words for data collection including ‘cyberbullying’, ‘digital abuse’, ‘online violence’, ‘digital victims’ and so on. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the main categories of metaphorical vehicles in cyberbullying language?
- (2) How do speakers achieve their violent intentions through DMs?

Classification of Metaphorical Vehicles

Based on the data collected, metaphorical vehicles used in cyberbullying language can be categorized into five main types: animals; plants; iconic figures; diseases; waste.

Animal metaphor

Animals are commonly used in cyberbullying to depict the victim as subhuman or inferior. Common animals used as metaphors for online violence include pigs, dogs, cows, wolves, turtles, mice, monkeys, cockroach, etc. and other related phrases, such as stupid pig, mad dog, perverted wolf.

Examples:

- (1) 你就是一只躲在阴暗角落等着被踩死的蟑螂。
(You're nothing but a cockroach hiding in the shadows, waiting to be squashed.)
- (2) 别跟疯狗一样满大街乱咬人。
(Do not bite people like mad dogs.)

The metaphor of a “cockroach” (1) is a deliberate choice to evoke feelings of disgust. Cockroaches are often associated with filth and pestilence. This metaphor not only dehumanizes the victim but also places them in a powerless position (“waiting to be squashed”), reinforcing a sense of inferiority.

Plant metaphor

Some plant metaphors also carry strong negative connotations. In the context of online violence, plant metaphors are often assigned new derived meanings by netizens based on certain characteristics. For example, “韭菜” (chives), which continuously regrow after being harvested, is a plant known for its ability to quickly regenerate. This characteristic is metaphorically linked to low-value groups that are easily exploited or controlled. This connection is based on the metaphorical similarity between humans and plants, and the new meaning is created through social culture and online discourse.

Examples:

- (3) 一群没价值的韭菜，资本连收割你们都看不上眼。
(A bunch of worthless chives; even the capitalists don't bother to harvest you.)
- (4) 太绿茶了。(So “green tea”.)
- (5) 她是太白莲花了。(She's such a “white lotus.”)

In China's online environment, “green tea” refers to someone who pretends to be innocent and pure, often hiding their true intentions behind a facade of sweetness or naivety. “White lotus” describes someone who acts virtuous and pure but is actually manipulative and fake. It's used to criticize people who play the role of the innocent and righteous. Both terms are gendered, often used to attack women, reinforcing societal stereotypes about female behavior.

Iconic figures

Certain iconic figures from classic works are often used as metaphors in online violence, serving to satirize and mock specific individuals or behaviors. These metaphors draw comparison between real-life people

and negative characters from well-known works, using cultural symbols and the audience's stereotypes to intensify the insult.

Examples:

(6) 像个祥林嫂一样喋喋不休诉苦。

(Like Xianglin's Wife, endlessly complaining and whining.)

(7) 学术姐己。(An academic version of Daji.)

Xianglin's Wife is a character from Lu Xun's work. This character is often criticized by readers for being perceived as excessively whiny and self-pitying. Daji, on the other hand, is considered as a notorious figure from Chinese history and literature, often depicted as a manipulative and seductive woman who causes the downfall of a kingdom.

Diseases metaphor

Diseases are powerful metaphors in cyberbullying because they convey the idea of contamination, sickness, and uncontrollable spread. In digital language, the term “唐” (abbreviation for “唐氏综合症” (Down Syndrome)) is often used to insult victims.

Example:

(8) 全唐 (full Down); 半唐 (half Down); 微唐 (mild Down)

People often perceive physical illnesses as abnormal manifestations of physiological or psychological. Therefore, when the discomfort caused by certain social phenomena is similar to the discomfort brought by diseases, people naturally tend to regard these social phenomena as a kind of “illness.” This “pathologization” of social phenomena is essentially a process of categorization based on human experience (Wu, 2023). Through categorization, people classify abnormal social phenomena into “syndrome, disease, disorder, cancer” categories (Wang, 2018), which leads to the creation of new terms.

An example of such a term is “厌蠢症” (Moron-Intolerance / Stupidity-Intolerance / Idiocy-Aversion). The following expressions illustrate how the metaphor works in online discourse:

Examples:

(9) 我怕蠢会传染。(I'm afraid that stupidity is contagious.)

(10) 真的很讨厌做不完工作还拖累别人的人，我真的有厌蠢症好嘛。

(I really hate people who can't get their work done and drag others down, I literally hate people being stupid.)

(11) 哪里能挂号治疗厌蠢症啊，我真的很需要。

(Where can I go to get treatment for Moron-Intolerance, I really need it.)

(12) 远离让你厌蠢症发作的人。

(Stay away from people who trigger your Stupidity-Intolerance.)

Stupidity-Intolerance refers to the emotional frustration or aversion triggered by stupid, inefficient, or boring behaviors or speech. It is not a technical term used in medicine or psychology. The use of new term Stupidity-Intolerance often collocates with negative terms such as “contagious,” “hate,” “treatment,” “drag down,” “stay away,” and “trigger.” Through deliberate metaphor, it frames stupidity as a societal disease that needs to be treated and eradicated.

Waste metaphor

Waste metaphor is also commonly used in online violence. Common waste metaphors include terms like rubbish, loser, crap, bullshit, trash, all of which carry strong connotations of disgust and dismissal.

Examples:

(13) 真是废物。(What a loser.)

(14) 你讲的什么屁话。(That's just bullshit.)

(15) 远离这些垃圾人。(Stay away from these trash.)

By labeling someone as rubbish, the metaphor effectively strips them of dignity, reinforcing negative judgments and social exclusion.

Strategies Used in Deliberate Metaphor

Beyond the basic metaphorical vehicles, cyberbullies employ a variety of linguistic and rhetorical strategies to express hatred and achieve their harmful objectives. These strategies are designed to degrade their targets. Some key strategies include below.

Combine multiple metaphors

Cyberbullies frequently combine several metaphors in a single message to strengthen their violent intentions. For example, the term “茶艺大师” (master of tea art) involves two metaphorical vehicles. The phrase “茶艺” (tea art) is commonly used to describe a person who pretends to be innocent and pure, often hiding their true intentions behind a facade of grace. When combined with “大师” (master), it implies that the person is exceptionally skilled at pretending to be pure while actually being deceitful and manipulative.

Broaden the scope of attack

Rather than focusing on a single characteristic or behavior of the victim, cyberbullies may use deliberate metaphors to attack the victim's identity, including their background, gender, appearance, or even location. For example, IP addresses are visible to everyone when a person posts or comments in digital spaces. Cyberbullies may attack someone based on their IP address or the location associated with it. An example of this would be a stereotype directed at people from Henan: “关心一下你们的井盖吧” (Maybe you should care about your manhole covers). This phrase plays on a stereotype that people from Henan are often associated with stealing manhole covers to sell them for money.

Neutralization techniques

In cyberbullying, some people try to justify their hurtful actions using different excuses. One common excuse is called *denial of injury*. This means the person admits they said or did something wrong but insists that it didn't really hurt anyone (Zhang & Leidner, 2018). They might say that their words or actions had little effect or that the victim should be strong enough to handle it. In other words, they refuse to see how their behavior could seriously harm someone.

In July 2022, Zheng Linghua, a young woman from Zhejiang, China, shared photos on social media of herself with pink-dyed hair, holding her admission letter while visiting her ill grandfather. Some netizens attacked her appearance, calling pink hair “improper” and comparing her to a hostess. Others maliciously misinterpreted her photos with her grandfather as an “age-gap romance” and even cursed her dying grandfather. After enduring months of relentless cyberbullying, Zheng took her own life. A year after the tragedy, Wang,

one of the netizens who had participated in the online attacks, was interviewed. He denied any responsibility for her death.

Wang: *“It’s a shame she passed away—life should always come first. But I don’t think **her death has anything to do with me**. I was **just leaving comments**. Cyberbullying is **pretty normal**. If you don’t look at it, **doesn’t it stop bothering you?** Maybe young girls these days haven’t been through enough hardships. Feeling upset for a day or two is **normal**, but **you have to learn to adjust**. I think **any normal person would be able to handle it**.”*

Wang’s statement reflects *denial of injury*, as he minimizes the harm of cyberbullying and shifts responsibility away from himself. He reduces the impact of cyberbullying by calling it “pretty normal” and suggesting that feeling upset for “a day or two” is not serious. By saying, “I was just leaving comments,” he distances himself from the tragic outcome, refusing to acknowledge any connection between his words and Zheng’s death. Additionally, he shifts blame onto the victim, implying that Zheng should have been able to “adjust” and that “any normal person” would have handled it. Through these justifications, Wang avoids taking responsibility for his actions and denies the real consequences of cyberbullying.

Conclusion

This study has examined the deliberate use of metaphors in cyberbullying language on Chinese social media, applying DMT as a framework for analysis. By categorizing metaphorical vehicles into five main types—animals, plants, iconic figures, diseases, and waste—this research has highlighted how cyberbullies employ metaphorical expressions to dehumanize and attack their victims. Furthermore, the study has explored various rhetorical strategies used in cyberbullying, including the combination of multiple metaphors, broadening the scope of attacks, and neutralization techniques. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how language is strategically manipulated to inflict psychological harm in digital spaces.

The findings of this research have significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to the expanding body of research on deliberate metaphor use. It also highlights the importance of examining cyberbullying from a linguistic perspective, offering insights into the cognitive and communicative mechanisms underlying online aggression. Practically, the study emphasizes the need for social media platforms and policymakers to develop more sophisticated strategies for detecting and addressing metaphor-based cyberbullying. Understanding the specific metaphorical patterns and rhetorical strategies employed in online harassment can aid in the development of more effective moderation tools and intervention programs, ultimately fostering a safer online environment.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the data is sourced exclusively from Chinese social media platforms, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other linguistic and cultural contexts. Different cultural and linguistic backgrounds may produce variations in metaphor usage and cyberbullying strategies. Future studies could carry out comparative studies across different languages and digital environments. Second, the study primarily focuses on text-based cyberbullying, overlooking multimodal elements such as images, videos, and voice messages. Future research could explore how these non-textual elements interact with metaphorical language to enhance the impact of cyberbullying. Finally, while this study categorizes and analyzes metaphorical strategies, it does not quantitatively assess the frequency. Future studies

could incorporate corpus-based methodologies to measure the effects of different metaphorical expressions on victims' emotional and cognitive responses.

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the deliberate and strategic use of metaphors in cyberbullying discourse. While addressing metaphor-based cyberbullying remains a challenge, greater awareness of these linguistic mechanisms can inform more effective interventions and preventive measures. Future research should continue exploring the interplay between language, technology, and online behavior to develop more comprehensive strategies for combating cyberbullying in digital spaces.

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