

# **Conformity in the Comfort of Anonymity: A Study on Derogatory Behavior in Social Media**

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**Abstract.** This research aims to explore how anonymity impacts derogatory behavior among social media users. Through a qualitative method, this study analyzes the behavior of individuals during face-to-face interactions compared to when they use anonymous accounts on social media. The findings indicate that while participants generally behave politely in face-to-face interactions, they frequently adopt and reinforce negative group behaviors on social media when using anonymous accounts. This demonstrates that anonymity strengthens group conformity, leading to negative behavior on social media. This research reveals that anonymity often serves as a shield, enabling individuals to dissociate their online actions from their real-world identities and consequences, thus exacerbating irresponsible behaviors. The study suggests the importance of netiquette and the development of strategies to reduce online anonymity, which are crucial for fostering more responsible interactions on social media.

**Keywords** – anonymity, conformity, derogatory behavior, social media

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Social media has become an important part of our lives nowadays. From the elderly to the young, people today have social media accounts and interact with friends and relatives all over the world. Sometimes, they are unaware of the dangers on social media, because too many people use anonymity when interacting with others. Half of them use anonymous identities to cheat. In the cyber world, people can become anyone without revealing their true identities. Anonymity in the cyber world is defined as the state where individuals can interact without disclosing their true identities, allowing them to express themselves freely without the fear of real-world repercussions [1]. This freedom makes them bolder in expressing aspects of their personality that they might not show in the real world [2]. This freedom allows people to speak their minds comfortably without regard for the feelings of others. If someone behaves in a way that contradicts their views, they may resort to insulting that person on social media and they use dirty and rude words to express their feelings.

According to a 2020 survey by Microsoft titled 'Digital Civility Index (DCI)', Indonesian netizens has become the most impolite country in Southeast Asia [3] and rank fourth worldwide [4]. In the article, it is stated that adults contribute the most to the level of politeness among Indonesian netizens, accounting for 68 percent, while adolescents do not contribute to reducing the level. According to another article, Indonesian netizens are associated with four risks of cybercrime, which include scams and hoaxes, hate speech, discrimination, and cyberbullying [5]. According to the articles, it is evident that Indonesian netizens greatly need to adopt netiquette. Netiquette refers to the ethics and polite behavior required for communication and interaction in the digital world [6].

The importance of netiquette in regulating interactions in the digital world becomes more critical when coupled with the factor of anonymity. Anonymity on social media, although providing a space for freer self-expression, often leads to behaviors that do not conform to prevailing social norms. Without clear identities, netizens may feel free to engage in potentially harmful actions, such as using coarse language or spreading false information. This concept is supported by research showing a correlation between anonymity and an increase in derogatory behavior [7]. Derogatory behavior in the cyber world is characterized as actions or communications that are harmful, offensive, or intended to belittle or degrade others, often exacerbated by the veil of anonymity which reduces accountability and social constraints [8]. Therefore, the effective implementation of netiquette could be key in fostering awareness of responsibility and ethics in digital communication.

In exploring the phenomenon of anonymity on social media and its relationship to derogatory behavior, it is crucial to delve deeper into how anonymity can influence an individual's online behavior. Indonesian netizens frequently utilize anonymity to engage in derogatory behavior towards their targets on the internet. Anonymity often provides a sense of freedom that is unbounded by social norms or personal consequences, as described in the concept of "the disinhibition effect." This concept illustrates how individuals feel more liberated to express themselves in ways that they do not exhibit in face-to-face interactions, including adopting more aggressive or demeaning behaviors on social media [9].

Derogatory behavior in social media encompasses a range of actions that are harmful, offensive, or intended to demean or belittle others. Examples of such behavior include trolling, where individuals post inflammatory or off-topic messages in an online community with the intent to disrupt normal conversation or provoke others into an emotional response [10]. Another form is cyberbullying, which involves sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else, often repeatedly, causing embarrassment or humiliation [11]. Hate speech, which includes communications that belittle or malign individuals based on attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender, is also prevalent [12].

Recent research highlights the impact of these behaviors, noting that the anonymity afforded by social media can exacerbate such actions, leading to more severe social and psychological consequences for victims [13]. Cyberbullying has been particularly noted for its negative effects on adolescent mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts [14]. Additionally, the spread of hate speech on social platforms has been linked to real-world violence and societal divisions, indicating the severe implications of unchecked derogatory behavior online [15].

In the context of social media, the phenomenon of conformity plays a significant role in the exacerbation of derogatory behavior, particularly when individuals operate under the guise of "anonymity." This anonymity diminishes the fear of social repercussions, thus making individuals more comfortable with adopting the behaviors of others. Conformity in the cyber world, particularly on social media platforms, refers to the adjustment of one's behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs to align with the perceived norms or behaviors of a group, often driven by the desire for social acceptance or influenced by the collective behavior visible online [16]. Social psychology research has demonstrated that when individuals cannot be personally identified, they are more likely to conform to the dominant group norms, even if these norms are negative or harmful [17]. This tendency can be attributed to the use of anonymous identities, which shield individuals from feelings of guilt and shame in the real world when they engage in actions that contravene their ethical and personal principles [18].

When possessing an anonymous account, individuals often feel detached from social and legal consequences, which encourages them to engage in behaviors they would not consider if their identities were known. The power of anonymity on social media enables people to hide their identities and, as a result, they engage in negative actions such as using coarse language or insults. However, when interactions occur face-to-face, the presence of social accountability and immediate penalties tends to prevent derogatory behavior. In face-to-face situations, individuals are more likely to consider the social and emotional impacts of their words or actions, which reduces their propensity to behave negatively. People tend to be more cautious in communicating and more often exhibit positive behavior when they are aware that their actions can be easily linked to them personally and have direct consequences [19].

Based on the aforementioned statements, the purpose of this research is to explore how individuals may refrain from engaging in derogatory behavior during face-to-face interactions, yet are likely to conform to group behavior when anonymous on social media. This research investigates how anonymity empowers individuals to engage in insulting behaviors and cyberbullying when others' actions do not align with their ethical standards. Numerous celebrities have experienced cyberbullying from netizens, illustrating that such behavior can extend from public figures to ordinary individuals, potentially impacting friends and acquaintances.

## II. METHOD

The research method employed uses a qualitative approach, which aims to understand phenomena experienced by research informants, such as perceptions, behaviors, actions, motivations, and others in a holistic manner. These are described in words and language within a natural context and through natural methods [20]. This research focuses on individual derogatory behavior on social media. The participants in this study include two women (one adolescent and one in early adulthood) and two men (one adolescent and one in early adulthood). These participants were chosen using purposive sampling, which is expected to represent Indonesian netizens. The criteria for participant selection include: 1) possessing an anonymous account on social media, 2) having experienced derogatory behavior, 3) being in the adolescent or early adulthood age phases, and 4) maintaining a real, original account that displays accurate profile data. Demographic data for this research are presented in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics

Num	Participant Name	Sex	Age	Occupation	Active Social Media
1	ACN	Female	17	High School Student	Tiktok
2	KAB	Female	32	Entrepreneur	Instagram
3	PHR	Male	17	High School Student	Tiktok, Instagram
4	DIK	Male	27	Engineer	Instagram

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol that focused on aspects of derogatory behavior in social media, based on the theoretical framework provided by Kowalski et al., [21]:

1. *Cyberbullying*: This occurs when individuals use digital platforms to send or post harmful or cruel content about another person, often repeatedly. This can include threats, insults, and the unauthorized posting of personal information.
2. *Trolling*: This involves posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments to upset others or disrupt discussions. Trolls often aim to provoke emotional reactions.
3. *Hate Speech*: This refers to the use of abusive or threatening speech that targets groups or individuals based on attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, or gender. Hate speech can incite violence, discrimination, or hostility.
4. *Spreading Misinformation*: This involves sharing false information to deceive others or harm someone's reputation, which can also exacerbate social and political conflicts.

5. *Doxing*: This refers to the act of publicly revealing previously private personal information about an individual or organization, usually without consent, with the intent to cause harm or humiliation.

In addition to derogatory behavior, the motivational aspects for anonymity and conformity on social media were also presented to participants based on theories from Zimbardo and Leippe [22] as follows:

1. Motivations for Anonymity:
  - a) **Privacy Protection**: Individuals may choose to remain anonymous to protect their privacy, especially when discussing sensitive or controversial topics.
  - b) **Avoidance of Stigma**: Anonymity allows individuals to avoid social stigma that could occur if their identities were disclosed, particularly when expressing unpopular or taboo opinions or behaviors.
  - c) **Identity Exploration**: Social media and anonymity provide a space for individuals to explore various aspects of their identity without being constrained by usual social expectations.
2. Motivations for Conformity:
  - a) **Desire for Acceptance**: Conformity is often driven by the desire to be accepted within a group. Social media, with its instant feedback mechanisms like likes and comments, reinforces behaviors that conform to group norms.
  - b) **Peer Pressure**: On social media, peer pressure can significantly influence an individual's behavior. Individuals often adjust their actions to match what they perceive as behaviors endorsed by their peers.
  - c) **Reduction of Uncertainty**: Following group norms on social media can reduce uncertainty about how to act or react in specific social situations.

In this study, data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The initial step involved converting the interview results into a transcript or verbatim record. Subsequently, codes were assigned to the text of the verbatim. The next step involved identifying emergent themes, followed by the organization of superordinate themes. Further analysis entailed identifying and creating patterns among the established themes. The final step was the organization of all themes and the creation of descriptive narratives for each identified theme. Data validation techniques employed in this research included triangulation and extending the duration of the study.

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **A. Results**

The results of this research, based on four participants, are as follows: (1) All participants have admitted to bullying someone on social media, specifically targeting artists and celebrities; (2) All participants admitted to engaging in trolling and hate speech on social media accounts, particularly in response to negative news about their favorite celebrities; (3) Three participants admitted to spreading misinformation and engaging in doxing on social media about a presidential candidate who was their preferred choice during the elections in the early years, aiming to attract more voters; (4) All participants reported feeling more confident in insulting someone on social media if they observe others making similar comments on a post; (5) All participants created anonymous accounts to engage in derogatory behavior on social media, preferring not to be recognized when insulting others online.

It can be understood that all participants, whether in their teenage or early adult years, have anonymous social media accounts. They created these anonymous accounts specifically for making comments on other people's posts. They avoid using their personal accounts for fear of being

recognized when making negative comments. Typically, they respond to negative comments on social media posts that disparage their idols. Among the male participants, they engage in trolling and hate speech when various social media accounts disparage their favorite football teams. The female participants engage in similar behaviors of trolling and hate speech when someone makes negative comments about their favorite idols or actors. Here is a response from an interview with one of the participants:

*"Biasanya kan ada akun-akun gosip tentang idola K-pop yang ngepost ngerendahin tentang Yoongi (idola K-Pop), wah sudah langsung aku switch ke akun aku satunya (akun anonim) trus aku bales pake komentar belain Yoongi dong. Panas hatiku, kak. Kalau misal ada komentar balas aku dengan jelekin Yoongi ya terpaksa war di kolom komentar. Jelas pakai kata-kata peperangan dong"* [Usually, there are gossip accounts about K-pop idols that post demeaning things about Yoongi (a K-pop idol). Wow, I immediately switch to my other account (an anonymous account) and then I defend Yoongi with my comments. It really gets me heated. If someone replies to my comment by disparaging Yoongi, then I feel compelled to go to war in the comment section. Of course, I use battle words.] (KAB, interview, June 3, 2024).

Almost all participants disclosed that they engaged in spreading misinformation and doxing on social media about a presidential candidate. They disseminated positive news about their preferred presidential candidate and delved into his private life, spreading this information with the intention of garnering more votes and ensuring his victory. Here is an excerpt from an interview with one of the informants:

*"aku follow akun yang bahas tentang Pak X (presiden pilihan). Aku juga ikutan komen. Biasanya komennya juga nyebarin kebaikan-kebaikan Pak X barangkali ada orang yang mengubah pilihannya jadi lebih milih pak X gitu lho! tapi aku ikut menghujat orang-orang itu (pemilih presiden lawan), hahaha..."* [I follow accounts that talk about Mr. X (the chosen president). I also participate in commenting. Usually, the comments spread the good deeds of Mr. X, perhaps swaying others to change their choice in his favor! But I also join in ridiculing those (voters of the opposing candidate), haha...] (PHR, interview, June 7, 2024).

All participants more frequently use their personal accounts to browse their social media. When something bothers them about a celebrity's behavior that does not align with societal norms, they feel the urge to criticize. However, before engaging in such behavior, they first check if others are also criticizing the celebrity. If many others are criticizing, then they quickly switch to an anonymous account and join in the criticism. They feel comfortable commenting anything using the anonymous accounts they have created. Here is a response from one of the participants:

*"aku cek dulu nih ya. Apa ada orang lain yang ikut menghujat NM (selebriti). Jujur sih agak takut berkomentar aneh-aneh, takutnya dilaporkan ke polisi. hahahaha... kalau dicek ternyata banyak yang menghujat ya aku ikutan. Sebelumnya ganti dulu ke akunku yang satunya (akun anonim)"* [I check first, you know. To see if others are also criticizing NM (the celebrity). Honestly, I'm a bit scared to make weird comments,

afraid of being reported to the police. Hahaha... but if I see many others criticizing, then I join in. I switch to my other account (anonymous account) first.] (DIK, interview, June 13, 2024).

The findings from the study indicate that all participants feel comfortable using anonymous accounts when making negative comments or derogatory behavior, such as criticizing, insulting, and denouncing someone, especially celebrities. All participants acknowledged that they never use these anonymous accounts to cyberbully their friends. Instead, they reserve such actions for people who offend them and celebrities whose behavior deviates from societal norms. For general browsing on the internet without making comments, they prefer using their personal accounts.

## **B. Discussion**

- (1) All participants have admitted to bullying someone on social media, specifically targeting artists and celebrities.

The participants revealed that they engage in derogatory behavior towards celebrities who are considered to deviate from social norms. According to the Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner [23], individuals strive to enhance their self-image by elevating the status of the groups to which they belong. By targeting celebrities—who often represent out-group members—individuals may experience a sense of belonging and superiority within their in-groups, such as fan groups of rival celebrities or anti-fan groups. Why do they predominantly attack celebrities? Celebrities are often considered part of an out-group by fans or opposing groups, especially if those celebrities are associated with values, lifestyles, or choices that conflict with specific fan groups. Additionally, individuals within fan groups believe that by attacking or targeting celebrities from these out-groups, they can elevate their own group's status. This involves defending celebrities they support or attacking those they perceive as threats or rivals. This aligns with statements from the participants where attacks or support for celebrities on social media can also serve as a way for individuals to express solidarity with their groups. They participate in group activities to demonstrate their loyalty and strengthen bonds within the group.

In addition, we can also refer to Philip Zimbardo's theory of Deindividuation [24], which explains how individuals in groups may lose their sense of self-awareness. As a result, the restraint they might normally exercise in social interactions can diminish, leading to impulsive and deviant acts. This study emphasizes how the anonymity provided by social media can contribute to deindividuation. This effect is magnified in digital environments where physical cues and face-to-face accountability are absent. When targeting celebrities—who are often perceived more as symbols than real people—this absence of personal accountability can prompt individuals to engage in more severe forms of bullying and harassment. Deindividuation theory complements Social Identity Theory by not only explaining the group dynamics that encourage such behavior, but also the psychological state that facilitates the execution of these actions without the normal constraints of conscience or social norms. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding the harshness and sometimes extreme aggression directed at public figures on platforms where users feel disconnected from the real-world consequences of their actions.

- (2) All participants admitted to engaging in trolling and hate speech on social media accounts, particularly in response to negative news about their favorite celebrities

The participants disclosed that they intentionally engage in trolling and hate speech on social media accounts that post negative news or responses about their favorite celebrities. They are even willing to engage in comment wars with individuals who insult their favored celebrities. This behavior is elucidated within the framework of Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals identify with a group (such as fans of a particular celebrity) and may act aggressively to defend this group against perceived threats or criticism [25]. The SIDE model (Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects) further explains how group identities are enacted in electronic communications and can lead to behaviors such as trolling and hate speech in defense of a group. The SIDE model extends Social Identity Theory by addressing how anonymity and the prominence of group identity in online environments can alter self-presentation and intergroup dynamics. Additionally, individuals may become more aggressive in digital settings. John Suler's [9] Online Disinhibition Effect describes how the conditions of online communication can lead to more outspoken, rude, or even threatening behavior, which individuals would not typically exhibit offline. The conditions of anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and the minimization of authority are components of this effect. Specifically, it discusses how individuals may engage in trolling and hate speech as they feel less restrained by social norms due to the anonymity and the absence of immediate consequences online.

- (3) Three participants admitted to spreading misinformation and engaging in doxing on social media about a presidential candidate who was their preferred choice during the elections in the early years, aiming to attract more voters

Similar to point number two, the occurrence of derogatory behavior can be explained using Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a compelling explanation for why individuals might spread misinformation and engage in doxing to support a preferred political candidate, as evidenced by the actions of the three participants [26]. According to SIT, people's identities are significantly shaped by the groups to which they belong, and their behaviors are often efforts to enhance their group's status. In the scenario described, the participants identify strongly with a political faction that supports a specific presidential candidate. This identification isn't just a passive affiliation; it actively influences their behavior, motivating them to act in ways that they believe will benefit their group.

The drive to promote their in-group manifests as in-group favoritism, where the participants engage in aggressive tactics like misinformation and doxing to favor their political ally and disadvantage the opposition. This behavior is typical in inter-group conflicts, where rivalry between groups can escalate to unethical actions if members believe such actions will lead to group success. Within the political context of their group, there may be norms or a perceived endorsement of such aggressive tactics, especially if these actions are viewed as effective strategies for winning elections or undermining adversaries [27]. Consequently, the participants might view their actions as not only justified but necessary to achieve the collective goals of their group. Thus, SIT elucidates how strong group identification and the dynamics of inter-group competition can drive individuals to engage in morally questionable behaviors to support their political preferences and influence electoral outcomes.

- (4) All participants reported feeling more confident in insulting someone on social media if they observe others making similar comments on a post

When individuals perceive that many others share their sentiments, they are more motivated to engage in behaviors that align with the majority. All participants readily engaged in derogatory behavior on social media when they observed that the majority were behaving similarly on someone else's social media account. The statement that all participants reported feeling more confident in insulting someone on social media if they observe others making similar comments on a post aligns closely with the theory of Normative Social Influence. This theory suggests that individuals conform to the behavior they perceive to be the norm within their social context, particularly when such behavior is publicly visible [28]. When participants see that insulting comments are common and seemingly accepted among others on a social media post, they may feel a social validation that diminishes their personal reservations about engaging in similar behavior. This sense of increased confidence comes from the perception that their actions are part of a group norm, which reduces the fear of social repercussions and emboldens them to participate in the derogatory behavior.

Additionally, the referenced article by Chaudhry and Gruzd [29] provides empirical support for this phenomenon, illustrating that when individuals perceive aggressive or negative commenting as normative and supported by community feedback, they are more likely to partake in such behavior themselves. The study underscores the impact of perceived social norms on online behavior, suggesting that seeing others engage in derogatory behavior can effectively lower the psychological barriers (such as guilt or fear of ostracism) that might normally prevent such actions. This dynamic is further reinforced in digital environments where anonymity and the absence of face-to-face interaction can amplify the disinhibiting effects of social conformity.

Expanding on the discussion of social influence in digital environments, further research highlights how the dynamics of online interactions can significantly amplify behaviors that are typically constrained in face-to-face contexts. This is particularly evident in the realm of social media, where the rapid dissemination of feedback can accelerate the normalization of aggressive behaviors, including derogatory speech [30]. Studies suggest that the immediate and often voluminous positive reinforcement (likes, shares, supportive comments) that can follow a derogatory post serves to reinforce and escalate such behavior.

- (5) All participants created anonymous accounts to engage in derogatory behavior on social media, preferring not to be recognized when insulting others online.

The decision by all participants to create anonymous accounts for engaging in derogatory behavior on social media is a significant illustration of the Online Disinhibition Effect. This psychological phenomenon, explored in the works of Lapidot-Lefler and Barak [31], describes how the anonymity afforded by the internet fosters a sense of security that encourages individuals to express themselves in ways they normally wouldn't in face-to-face interactions. The removal of physical presence and the immediate social cues normally regulating behavior allows for the emergence of a less inhibited persona, which feels free to violate social norms and engage in aggressive or negative behavior without the usual fear of reprisal or disapproval from their social circle.

This inclination towards anonymity-driven boldness is not just about hiding one's identity but is also linked to the perceived absence of consequences. When individuals perceive that they cannot be easily identified, their sense of personal accountability diminishes. This perceived anonymity significantly impacts social behavior online, leading individuals to make more extreme comments or engage in cyberbullying [32]. The rationale is that anonymous users believe they will not face any direct backlash or damage to their social



reputation, as their real-world identity is detached from their online actions. This disconnection from personal accountability encourages behaviors that they would consider inappropriate or unacceptable in a non-anonymous setting.

Moreover, the use of anonymous accounts to target others with derogatory remarks can be understood within a broader socio-psychological context. The act of hiding behind a pseudonym can empower individuals to join larger groups of similar anonymous entities, creating a crowd mentality [33]. Within such groups, the diffusion of personal responsibility leads to an escalation of aggressive behavior, as each member feels even less accountable, emboldened by the collective action. This group dynamic can amplify negative behaviors, making the social media environment a fertile ground for spreading toxicity, as individuals reinforce each other's actions, pushing boundaries further than any of them might alone.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This freedom is not available when using personal accounts or in face-to-face interactions. The findings indicate that participants tend not to engage in derogatory actions in face-to-face situations, but they are likely to follow and reinforce negative group behaviors when using anonymous accounts on social media. This underscores the strong influence of group conformity in social media environments, enhanced by anonymity, where participants feel more liberated to express views or behaviors that they do not display in social situations using their real identities.

Observations of group behavior play a crucial role in enhancing participants' willingness to partake in negative interactions on social media. When participants see that derogatory behavior is normalized within a discussion or thread on social media, they not only feel emboldened to join in such behavior but also perceive a social validation for these actions. This demonstrates that group norms established on social media can significantly influence individual behavior, even if it contradicts broader social norms.

As a next step in this research, it is suggested to explore strategies that can be used to educate netizens about the importance of netiquette and the consequences of derogatory behavior, and to develop mechanisms that can reduce anonymity online without sacrificing privacy. The aim is to create a more responsible social media environment and reduce negative behaviors that can adversely affect individuals' psychological well-being.

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