Academic Journal of Education
ISSN: 3080-9940 (Print), ISSN: 3080-9959 (Online) | Vol. 3, No. 2, 2026

Behavioral Logic of Online Social Media Misconduct among University Students: An Explanation Based on Social Norm Theory

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Abstract: Online social media misconduct among university students has evolved from isolated deviant acts into a group-based and situational everyday phenomenon. Explanations relying solely on moral decline or insufficient media literacy fail to capture its generative mechanism. Taking social norm theory as the core analytical tool and integrating broken windows theory, the theory of planned behavior and value-added theory, this paper constructs a three-tier explanatory framework of "norm perception–situational triggering–behavioral escalation," and argues that the essence of misconduct is the separation of descriptive norms from injunctive norms in virtual space: students know cognitively "what should be done," yet behaviorally refer to "what others actually do." The study shows that anonymity and deindividuation weaken the identifiability of norms, circle clustering provides reference groups for deviance, and platform mechanisms amplify the visible returns of misconduct; together these constitute the behavioral logic of misconduct. Accordingly, the governance path should shift from moral discipline to the reconstruction of the normative environment, namely visibly marking proper behavior, activating injunctive norms, repairing intra-circle norms and constraining the incentive structure of platforms.

Keywords: Online Social Media Misconduct; Social Norm Theory; Descriptive Norms; Injunctive Norms; Deindividuation; University Student Management.

1. Introduction

University students' social life has largely migrated to cyberspace. Campus walls, anonymous tree holes, WeChat communities, Xiaohongshu and QQ channels together constitute an interaction structure parallel to the class-based system. With this migration, online social media misconduct has gradually changed from occasional deviance into an observable everyday phenomenon: personal attacks and regional mockery in anonymous submissions, gossip triggered by Moments posts, queued-up harassment within circles, screenshot leakage of private chats, and insulting expressions under the guise of "memeing" in public discussions. These behaviors do not necessarily constitute disciplinary or legal violations, yet they continuously erode the trust basis of campus interaction and significantly raise the cost of student management. [1-2]

Existing explanations largely follow two paths. The first is moral attribution, which regards misconduct as a lack of media literacy or a weakening of moral responsibility, with countermeasures concentrated on education and publicity. The second is technological attribution, which emphasizes the technological affordances of anonymity, virtuality and transmission speed, with countermeasures turning to platform control and public opinion monitoring. Both explanations have insights, yet share a premise: the deviant "knows it is wrong but does it anyway." This premise obscures a more critical question: in online situations, what do students actually take as the reference for "right"? When everyone around posts aggressive submissions on anonymous walls, when likes become the immediate return of expression, and when no one pays a visible price for deviance, the criterion of "right and wrong" itself has already shifted.

This paper therefore attempts to transform the question from "why do students not observe norms" to "how do online situations reconstruct norms." Using social norm theory as the analytical tool, it examines the logic of misconduct at three links—norm perception, situational triggering and behavioral escalation—and accordingly discusses the shift in governance path. It should be declared that this paper is a theoretical analysis that does not rely on questionnaire or interview data, and the validity of its conclusions is limited to the level of mechanism explanation. [3-4]

2. Theoretical Resources and Analytical Framework

2.1. Social Norm Theory: Two Kinds of Norms and Their Separation

The core proposition of social norm theory is that human behavior is guided not only by personal attitudes but also by two types of information: "how others do" and "how others think one should do." The former is called descriptive norms, namely an individual's perception of the actual prevalence of a behavior in a group; the latter is called injunctive norms, namely an individual's perception of which behaviors the group approves or opposes. Cialdini, Kallgren and Reno further pointed out in the "focus theory of normative conduct" that the directions of the two types of norms are not always consistent: in situations such as littering and stealing petrified wood, whether people deviate depends mainly on which norm is "focused," that is, which normative information enters the center of attention. When descriptive norms (everyone does so) override injunctive norms (one should not do so), deviant behavior spreads rapidly, and the actor does not feel that norms are violated. [5]

This distinction provides a key entry point for understanding online social media misconduct. Students usually have a clear cognition of injunctive norms such as "one should not doxx" and "one should not insult classmates";

but on anonymous walls and in anonymous communities, the descriptive norms they can observe are that aggressive expression exists in large quantities and is rarely stopped. The result of norm conflict is often not that students "do not know," but that they judge "knowing it makes no difference since no one follows it," thereby redefining deviance as normal.

2.2. Supplementary Theoretical Resources

Broken windows theory provides an explanation of environmental cues. Wilson and Kelling pointed out that an unrepaired broken window releases the signal that "no one is responsible here," thereby inducing more deviance. In cyberspace, an unhandled insulting submission or an unchecked spread of screenshots is precisely a digital "broken window": it signals not the existence of rules but the non-enforcement of rules. Oberwittler and Wikström's empirical study of Stockholm provides a rigorous test of this mechanism; their results show that severe disorder has a stronger effect on violent crime than accidental endogenous signs of neglect, indicating that environmental cues do indeed work by changing individuals' norm perception.

Deindividuation theory explains why constraints fail. Zimbardo defined deindividuation as an internal state with anonymity, diffusion of responsibility and arousal as antecedents, whose consequences include weakened self-observation and lowered self-evaluation standards, ultimately releasing behaviors normally inhibited. Postmes and Spears made an important revision in the "social identity model of deindividuation effects": anonymity does not necessarily lead to misconduct; its effect depends on how group norms are made salient—when deviant norms are salient, anonymity strengthens deviance; when prosocial norms are salient, anonymity equally strengthens conformity. This revision is highly instructive for university governance: anonymity itself is not the enemy; what matters is "what is seen" under anonymity. [6]

The theory of planned behavior supplements the link from intention to action. Ajzen pointed out that behavioral intention is jointly determined by attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. In online social interaction, perceived behavioral control rises significantly due to the extremely low technological threshold (forwarding requires only one click), while subjective norms shift because circle evaluation replaces overall evaluation. The superposition of the three greatly reduces the resistance converting deviant intention into action.

Value-added theory explains how behavior escalates. Smelser decomposed the formation of collective behavior into five links: structural conduciveness, structural strain, growth of a generalized belief, precipitating factors, and failure of social control. Group misconduct such as online siege and collective mockery often accumulates layer by layer along this chain rather than erupting at once.

2.3. Analytical Framework

Integrating the above resources, this paper constructs a three-tier framework of "norm perception–situational triggering–behavioral escalation." The norm perception tier answers what students take as reference, with the separation of descriptive and injunctive norms at its core; the situational triggering tier answers why constraints fail, with the weakening of norm identifiability by anonymity, deindividuation and environmental cues at its core; the behavioral escalation tier answers how individual deviance evolves into group misconduct, with the accumulation of circle reference, platform incentives and control failure at its core. The three tiers are not linear causation but mutually reinforcing: situations change perception, perception facilitates action, and action in turn reshapes the descriptive norms seen by others.

3. Behavioral Logic of Online Social Media Misconduct among University Students

3.1. Norm Perception Tier: Substitution of Injunctive Norms by Descriptive Norms

The most profound change brought by online social media is an unprecedented set of "samples of others' behavior" for students. On anonymous walls, users can continuously observe large numbers of similar submissions: complaints, exposés, mockery, taking sides. These samples constitute strong descriptive norm information, far stronger than the "shall not" clauses in university regulations. The reason is that descriptive norms are presented as visible behavior, countable and intuitively imitable, whereas injunctive norms are presented as abstract provisions requiring cognitive processing and value identification. When the two conflict, the former usually prevails in immediate decision-making. [7-8]

More noteworthy is the reverse operation of "pluralistic ignorance." Prentice and Miller's research shows that on issues with ambiguous norms, individuals often misjudge others' attitudes and adjust their own behavior according to the erroneous perception, thereby forming a self-maintaining normative illusion. A typical manifestation in university online social interaction is: most students privately disapprove of doxxing a certain classmate, yet because they see unanimous condemnation in the comment section, they judge that "everyone supports it" and thus choose silence or conformity. Here misconduct originates not from genuine majority opinion but from misreading majority opinion. If governance targets only "those who speak," it will neglect the complicit position of the silent majority in norm construction.

3.2. Situational Triggering Tier: Collapse of Identifiability of Anonymity, Cues and Control

Anonymity is the default setting of online social interaction, and its normative consequences are often simply attributed to "becoming bolder." Social norm theory suggests a more refined mechanism: what anonymity first changes is the availability of normative cues. In offline interaction, others' expressions, tones and identity markers continuously provide immediate feedback of injunctive norms; in anonymous environments these cues are stripped away, actors lose calibration references and can only rely on a few remaining signals in the environment—for example, "the previous similar submission got one hundred likes."

Diffusion of responsibility further weakens internal constraints. In the forwarding chain, everyone merely "forwarded it once," the harmful result is a collective product, and no one bears full responsibility. This structural sharing lowers self-evaluation standards, highly consistent with the deindividuated state described by Zimbardo. Meanwhile, platform design reinforces this process: one-click forwarding, emoji replacing argumentation, and pinned hot comments all

press expression costs to extremely low levels and place expression returns at extremely high levels.

The role of environmental cues is particularly critical at this tier. An insulting submission with no response and one pinned by administrators with the note "this content is suspected of infringement and has been deleted" convey opposite normative information. The former constitutes a broken window, the latter a repair. The reason why much misconduct in university networks persists is not the lack of rules but the publicly visible display of non-enforcement of rules.

3.3. Behavioral Escalation Tier: From Individual Deviance to Group Misconduct

Individual deviance evolving into group misconduct usually goes through three stages. The first stage is the switching of reference groups. Students originally took classes and dormitories as reference; online social interaction turns them toward interest circles and anonymous communities; norms within circles may differ markedly from mainstream campus norms—for example, in certain circles, exposing others' shortcomings is regarded as "candor" and siege as "defending community boundaries." When circle identification strengthens, individuals actively adjust behavior to meet in-circle expectations, and the mechanism revealed by Postmes and Spears—"anonymity strengthens salient norms"—is thereby activated.

The second stage is the formation of generalized beliefs. Scattered dissatisfaction is integrated in circle interaction into explanatory frameworks such as "we are all treated this way" and "the university has always been like this," whereby deviance obtains a legitimacy narrative. Structural strain in Smelser's sense is transformed at this step into a mobilizable belief; individual deviance no longer requires personal motive but only "standing on the right side."

The third stage is control failure and escalation. When early deviance receives no timely response, participants infer that the behavioral cost is extremely low and then adopt more intense forms: from comment attacks to doxxing exposure, from online siege to offline avoidance and isolation. Control failure here has a double meaning—formal control (university regulations, platform disposal) is absent, and informal control (classmate dissuasion, public opinion correction) equally fails, with the latter's decline in online situations often more thorough. [9]

3.4. An Integrated Explanation

The causal relationship of the three tiers can be briefly summarized as: online situations weaken the identifiability of injunctive norms while amplifying the visibility and return rate of descriptive norms; students adjust behavior according to misread majority opinion amid norm conflict; individual deviance obtains group legitimacy through circle reference and generalized beliefs and escalates level by level amid control failure. It is worth noting that the key variable of this logic is not students' moral level but the presentation of normative information. This explains why merely strengthening moral education often has limited effect: education reinforces injunctive norms, whereas the driving force of misconduct comes from descriptive norms.

4. Governance Path: From Moral Discipline to Reconstruction of the Normative Environment

Based on the above logic, the focus of governance should shift from "changing students" to "changing what students see." The following four paths all point to the reconstruction of the normative environment rather than the intensification of individual morality.

First, visibly mark proper behavior and reverse the information structure of descriptive norms. Since students decide according to "how others do," governance should make norm-observing behavior visible: publicly commend specific cases of rational expression, regularly display screened constructive remarks on campus walls, and publish the handling results and bases of anonymous submissions. Its function is not publicity but the provision of imitable real samples. The research line of Cialdini et al. suggests that correcting misjudgments of majority behavior is usually more effective than emphasizing moral requirements.

Second, activate injunctive norms and bring them into the center of attention. If university regulations remain dormant in student handbooks for long, they possess no situational efficacy. A feasible approach is to embed norms into the interface where behavior occurs: prompt community convention points on the submission page, display a lightweight consequence reminder before forwarding, and simultaneously show the rules relied upon when non-compliant content is handled. Such "nudges" do not change freedom of choice but can push injunctive norms into focus at the moment of decision. [10]

Third, repair intra-circle norms rather than bypass circles. Circles are amplifiers of misconduct and the only place that can effectively constrain their members. Universities may jointly formulate community conventions with student communities, with influential students within circles assuming demonstrative and dissuasive roles; handling of deviance should preferably be explained and repaired within the circle rather than uniformly elevated to administrative sanctions. This conforms to procedural justice and avoids pushing circles to the opposite side.

Fourth, constrain the incentive structure of platforms and shorten control response time. The returns of misconduct come from likes, hot comments and spread volume; governance needs to intervene in this reward mechanism: restrict recommendation of suspected infringing content rather than only deleting afterwards, set gradient disposal for repeatedly deviant accounts, and establish an initial response process measured in hours. Meanwhile, the boundaries of social data collection by student affairs systems should be clarified to avoid sliding toward generalized surveillance in the name of governance—over-governance itself also conveys the signal that "rules are untrustworthy," constituting a new broken window. [11-12]

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Taking social norm theory as the core, this paper explains the behavioral logic of online social media misconduct among university students: misconduct is not simple moral deficiency but the result of the separation of descriptive and injunctive norms in virtual space; anonymity and environmental cues weaken the visibility of norms, circles and platform mechanisms amplify the reference value and

immediate returns of deviance, and individual deviance thereby escalates into group misconduct amid control failure. The key to governance therefore lies not in increasing the intensity of punishment but in reshaping the normative information environment students are exposed to.

The limitations of this paper are twofold. First, as a theoretical analysis, the mechanism inferences herein still lack direct testing with local data, especially the specific strength of "pluralistic ignorance" in online social interaction, which awaits subsequent empirical measurement. Second, the rapid iteration of platform mechanisms may change the presentation of normative cues, and the explanatory power of the framework needs continuous revision with technological change. Future research may, under the experimental paradigm of the focus theory of normative conduct, test the immediate effects of different prompting methods on university students' online expression, so as to remedy the deficiency of this paper in causal identification.

Table 1. Three-Tier Mechanism and Intervention Focus

Tier	Core Mechanism	Intervention Focus	Expected Effect
Norm perception	Descriptive norms override injunctive norms; pluralistic ignorance	Reshape visible behavioral samples	Rebalance the two norm types
Situational triggering	Anonymity, diffusion of responsibility, broken-window environmental cues	Restore identifiability of normative cues	Re-activate internal constraints
Behavioral escalation	Circle reference, generalized beliefs, dual control failure	Repair circle norms and response timeliness	Curb group escalation

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