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The Paradox Of Flourishing And Moral Disengagement: A Study Of Religious-Identified Cyberbullying Perpetrators

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Abstract

The phenomenon of cyberbullying on social media frequently presents a paradox when perpetrated by individuals with a religious identity. Perpetrators often reduce and employ the theological principle of "Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar" (enjoining good and forbidding evil) as a shield to justify verbal aggression. This study aims to explore in-depth the meaning construction and psychological structure of consciousness among perpetrators in vindicating their actions, as well as how they define the boundary between advising and bullying. Utilizing a qualitative method with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews with five young adult participants who actively utilized religious arguments when posting aggressive comments on social media. The phenomenological analysis identified four superordinate themes: (1) the reduction of the concept of advice into verbal aggression, (2) the theological justification as a mechanism of moral disengagement, (3) the illusion of moral boundaries creating double standards through the rationalization of shock therapy, and (4) the pursuit of internal social validation that engenders a state of pseudo-flourishing. The findings conclude that religiously cloaked cyber-aggression operates primarily as a cognitive strategy to reduce internal dissonance and evade moral responsibility, rather than manifesting a genuine depth of religiosity. This study recommends the necessity of digital literacy interventions that focus on emotional regulation, cognitive empathy, and the restoration of an authentic flourishing paradigm.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Theological Justification, Moral Disengagement, Pseudo-Flourishing, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed the landscape of social interaction, shifting the conventional sphere of dialectics into a boundless cyberspace (Barlett et al., 2021). On one hand, social media offers platforms for the expansion of social capital, self-expression, and the dissemination of virtuous values. Within the perspective of positive psychology, the optimal utilization of technology should ideally align with the attainment of flourishing—a state of positive mental health characterized by optimal psychological functioning, meaningful social relationships, and a constructive contribution to the surrounding environment (Widiantoro, 2026). When this functioning operates in tandem with a robust religious identity, individuals tend to demonstrate high levels of prosocial behavior, digital empathy, and self-regulation when interacting within virtual public spaces (Hardy et al., 2019).

However, contemporary reality on social media presents a worrying paradox. Cyberspace frequently transforms into an arena for verbal aggression, hate speech, and massive cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2019). This phenomenon becomes highly complex when such cyberbullying behaviors are initiated or perpetrated by individuals who explicitly display religious attributes, symbols, or identities (Suler, 2016). Within the sociocultural context of netizen society, religious-identified cyberbullies often migrate theological concepts, such as the principle of enjoining good and forbidding evil (*Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar*), into the digital sphere in a highly reduced form. A spiritual value that is inherently noble is thus repurposed as a moral shield to justify personal attacks, mass judgment, and psychological aggression against other social media users (Pargament & Abu-Raiya, 2020).

Theoretically, an individual's capacity to engage in destructive behavior without experiencing guilt can be explained through the mechanism of moral disengagement. The social cognitive theory initiated by Bandura (2016) asserts that moral disengagement allows individuals to cognitively restructure their harmful behavior into something socially and morally acceptable. In cases of religiously cloaked cyberbullying, perpetrators engage in sanctimonious justification, wherein verbal aggression is cognized not as a form of malice, but as a spiritual obligation or a form of "shock therapy" to uphold righteousness (Runions et al., 2019). This cognitive process induces minimal cognitive dissonance because perpetrators feel their harsh actions are validated by a transcendental authority, which in turn engenders an illusion of psychological well-being or pseudo-flourishing—perceiving oneself as growing and meaningful through the oppression of others (Widiantoro, 2026).

Although studies on cyberbullying have been widely conducted, psychological literature

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exploring the intersection between digital aggression, mechanisms of moral disengagement, and the subjective meaning of religiosity among perpetrators remains highly limited. The majority of prior research tends to capture cyberbullying from the victims' perspective (victimization procedures) or quantitatively examine macro-personality variables, such as the Dark Triad (sociopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism), in relation to aggression intensity (Buckels et al., 2014; Moor & Anderson, 2019). Consequently, an empirical gap persists regarding how the internal structure of perpetrators' consciousness constructs the boundary between the acts of "advising" and "bullying," and how they manage internal conflict when their religious identity collides with the destructive impact of their typing on the screen.

This study emerges to fill this theoretical lacuna by applying a qualitative approach through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA framework is considered the most appropriate design because it does not aim to assess the theological validity of the perpetrators' beliefs, but rather to unpack in an in-depth, emic, and interpretative manner how perpetrators construct meaning from their lived experiences in the cyber world (Smith et al., 2022). By comprehending the psychological structure of the perpetrators' consciousness, this research is expected to offer a new theoretical contribution to the realms of cyberpsychology and positive psychology of religion, while simultaneously providing practical recommendations for the development of digital literacy interventions rooted in cognitive empathy and emotional regulation to reduce behavioral radicalism on social media.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. This framework was selected due to its idiographic focus on understanding how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences, psychological transitions, or specific phenomena within a particular context (Smith et al., 2022). The core characteristic of IPA lies in its commitment to exploring the emic structure of consciousness (the participant's perspective) combined with a deep interpretative process by the researcher (the double hermeneutic process). Within the scope of this research, IPA is utilized not to objectively test theological doctrines, but rather to psychologically unpack how religious-identified cyberbullies construct meaning from the verbal aggression they perpetrate on social media, and how the internal tension between their moral-religious identity and destructive behavior is cognitively managed.

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Participants and Sampling Technique

In accordance with the guiding principles of IPA which necessitate a homogeneous sample, participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria established for this study comprise: (1) being in early adulthood (18–40 years old), as this age group exhibits the highest intensity of cyber-interactions and engagement in digital dialectics; (2) explicitly displaying religious identities, symbols, or attributes on their primary social media profiles; (3) actively utilizing theological arguments or religious tenets as a basis for confrontation when posting aggressive comments, destructive criticisms, or hate speech in virtual public spaces (such as X or Instagram); and (4) voluntarily consenting to reflect on their internal psychological dynamics during the in-depth interview process. Based on these criteria for homogeneity, 5 participants were involved in this study (3 males and 2 females). This sample size aligns with the recommendations of Smith et al. (2022), which state that a small sample size (3–6 subjects) in an IPA study is essential to preserve the depth of idiographic analysis for each individual case prior to undertaking a cross-case analysis. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, the true identities of the participants were anonymized using pseudonyms (P1 to P5).

Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The research instrument consisted of an interview guide developed flexibly to facilitate participants in narrating their lived experiences freely while remaining anchored to the psychological domains under investigation. The interview commenced with general opening questions regarding the participants' cyber activities, followed by deep exploratory questions centered upon: (1) the motives behind utilizing religious arguments in cyber-interactions, (2) the participants' perception regarding the boundary between the acts of advising (*Amar Ma'ruf*) and bullying, (3) the affection or emotions experienced immediately prior to and after posting aggressive comments, and (4) how they perceive the efficacy of the "shock therapy" they deliver to other users. The interviews were conducted via a hybrid format (direct face-to-face and encrypted video calls), with each session lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded after obtaining written informed consent from the participants. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim into raw textual data for analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis followed the systematic stages of IPA developed by Smith, Flowers, and

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Larkin (2022), moving from the idiographic level (case-by-case) toward a macro-conceptual level. The stages include:

- **Reading and Re-reading:** The researcher read the verbatim transcripts repeatedly while listening to the original audio recordings to build a profound familiarity with the participants' narratives.
- **Initial Noting:** The researcher generated exploratory marginal notes across three levels: descriptive comments (actual content), linguistic comments (language use, metaphors, and pauses), and conceptual comments (psychological interrogation of latent meanings).
- **Developing Emergent Themes:** The exploratory notes were transformed into concise yet psychologically meaningful phrases that captured the essence of specific transcript segments.
- **Mapping Interconnections Across Emergent Themes:** The emergent themes were clustered based on conceptual similarities through techniques such as polarization, contextualization, and numeration to establish Theme Clusters.
- **Moving to the Next Case:** Stages 1 through 4 were repeated independently for the next participant's transcript to preserve the idiographic uniqueness of each subject.
- **Looking for Patterns Across Cases:** The researcher conducted a comparative analysis across the theme clusters of all five participants to identify superordinate themes that represent the collective structure of consciousness regarding this phenomenon of religiously cloaked cyberbullying, without negating the distinctiveness of individual narratives.

FINDINGS

The process of interpretative phenomenological analysis of the verbatim transcripts from the five participants yielded a complex mapping of the structure of consciousness regarding how religious-identified cyberbullying perpetrators construct meaning from their actions. Based on the cross-case analysis, four superordinate themes emerged, supported by eight primary sub-themes. Generally, the results indicate a cognitive fragmentation wherein participants utilize theological constructs as ego-defense mechanisms to reduce guilt over the digital aggression they perpetrate. The systematic summary of the thematic structure from this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is presented in Table 1.

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Table 1. Structural Map of IPA Superordinate Themes and Sub-Themes

No.	Superordinate Themes	Primary Sub-Themes	Participant Representation
1	Reduction of the Concept of Advice into Verbal Aggression	1.1. Semantic Shift from Advising to Public Judgment	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5
		1.2. Sentiments of Spiritual Superiority (*Spiritual Elitism*)	P1, P3, P5
2	Theological Justification as a Mechanism of *Moral Disengagement*	2.1. Externalization of Responsibility Through Theological Obligations	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5
		2.2. Dehumanization of Victims in the Name of Forbidding Evil	P2, P4
3	The Illusion of Moral Boundaries and Double Standards (*Shock Therapy*)	3.1. Legitimation of Verbal Violence as a Method of Awakening	P1, P2, P4, P5
		3.2. Denial of the "Bully" Label (*Denial of Cyberbullying*)	P2, P3, P4
4	The Pursuit of Internal Social Validation	4.1. Pseudo-Satisfaction of Group Connectedness (*Digital Tribalism*)	P1, P3, P4, P5
			P1, P2, P3, P5

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No.	Superordinate Themes	Primary Sub-Themes	Participant Representation
		4.2. *Pseudo-Flourishing* Through the Efficacy of Enforcing Values	

Superordinate Theme 1: Reduction of the Concept of Advice into Verbal Aggression

The first superordinate theme deconstructs how the five participants construct the meaning of "advice" within the digital sphere. The phenomenological analysis reveals a massive cognitive distortion, wherein the essence of advice—which ought to be persuasive and private—is reduced to an act of aggressive public judgment. This theme is built upon two primary sub-themes: the semantic shift of advice into public judgment, and the emergence of sentiments of spiritual superiority (*spiritual elitism*).

Sub-Theme 1.1: Semantic Shift from Advising to Public Judgment

For all participants (P1–P5), the boundary between advising and cyberbullying has become blurred, a shift triggered by the architectural features of social media platforms (such as open comment sections). They perceive that openly reprimanding others' mistakes on social media is a legitimate form of moral concern, even when the language used contains elements of insults, sarcasm, or character degradation. This blurring of meaning is vividly reflected in the narratives provided by P1 and P4:

"Leaving a harsh comment on their account isn't bullying, okay? It's advice. Learn to see the difference. If they post something wrong or immoral in a public space, they have to be ready to be criticized harshly in public too. Why should we be gentle with people who are clearly ruining morality? The sharp words I type are meant to make them realize their mistakes." (P1, Interview, lines 45-49).

"Nowadays, if you try to advise someone via DM [Direct Message], it won't be read. It has to be in the comment section so they read it and everyone else sees it too. Sure, my words might be a bit biting, like 'brainless' or 'future resident of hell,' but my intention is good—to warn them. It's just that netizens are oversensitive to call that cyberbullying." (P4, Interview, lines 112-116).

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From a psychological perspective, the excerpts above demonstrate an operational deconstruction of the concept of "advice." P1 and P4 rationalize that the intensity of verbal aggression (sharp typing, biting words) is justified by the public nature of the victim's mistake. P4 explicitly demonstrates a rejection of the cyberbullying label by shifting the blame onto the victim's sensitivity (*"netizens are oversensitive"*). Exposing the target's mistakes in a public comment section is positioned as a valid communication strategy for the sake of the "advice's" efficacy, completely ignoring the damaging psychological impact (victimization) endured by the victim.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Sentiments of Spiritual Superiority (*Spiritual Elitism*)

A deeper analysis into the structure of consciousness of P1, P3, and P5 uncovers a latent motive of egocentrism wrapped in a cloak of religiosity. They experience what is termed *spiritual elitism* or spiritual superiority—a perception of possessing a higher moral standing and theological understanding than the social media users they target. This feeling of superiority breeds an internal legitimacy to act as a "moral judge" in the cyber world, as reflected by P3 and P5 below:
"I feel I have a moral obligation because I know the religious laws. When I see deviant accounts, my heart stirs. I type those striking comments as a form of correction. Those of us who understand religion cannot stay silent watching such visual ignorance. There is a distinct satisfaction when my typing leaves them utterly speechless." (P3, Interview, lines 89-93).

"There's a sense of spiritual responsibility. I mean, I am active in study circles, so I know what is falsehood. When I attack their arguments or personhood when they deviate on X [Twitter], I feel I am fulfilling my role as a defender of truth. If people like us don't speak out harshly, this digital world will only get more corrupted." (P5, Interview, lines 154-158).

The narratives from P3 and P5 confirm that the digital aggression they perpetrate does not stem from a mature spiritual depth, but rather from the fulfillment of the ego's need for power and moral status recognition. P3's statement that *"there is a distinct satisfaction when my typing leaves them utterly speechless"* indicates that this bullying behavior triggers positive reinforcement in the form of a sense of empowerment and dominance over others. The religious attributes and theological knowledge claimed by P5 (*"active in study circles"*) function as a baseline justification to bifurcate the digital world into a black-and-white dichotomy: their group who is "knowledgeable and righteous" versus the cyber targets who are "ignorant and deviant."

Superordinate Theme 2: Theological Justification as a Mechanism of *Moral Disengagement*

The second superordinate theme investigates the internal cognitive processes that allow

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participants to engage in cyber-aggression without experiencing emotional distress or guilt. The phenomenological analysis shows that religious doctrines undergo externalization and cognitive restructuring. Theological values are not internalized to regulate personal emotions, but are instead utilized as instruments of moral disengagement. This theme is supported by two sub-themes: the externalization of responsibility through the tenets of religious obligation, and the dehumanization of victims in the name of forbidding evil.

Sub-Theme 2.1: Externalization of Responsibility Through Theological Obligations

All participants (P1–P5) display a strong tendency to shift their personal agency onto religious mandates that they interpret rigidly. When uttering destructive remarks, they construct themselves not as active agents attacking a fellow human being, but merely as "tools" or an "extension of the hand" of a sacred duty (*sanctimonious justification*). This construction of consciousness is clearly observable in the accounts of P2 and P3:

"I don't hold any personal grudge against that person. I don't even know them. My harsh comments on their account are purely driven by the religious command to forbid evil. There is a scriptural basis for it—if you see evil, you must change it with your hand, and my typing is my hand. So this is not the desire of my ego; this is an obligation of faith." (P2, Interview, lines 71-75).

"If you ask me whether I feel guilty, well, no. Because I position myself as His soldier on social media. When our group swarms an account that defiles religious values, we move to defend the honor of our faith. That guilt disappears because our focus is on executing His command, not on dwelling over the feelings of that individual." (P3, Interview, lines 104-108).

The narratives above provide a binary illustration of how the mechanism of moral disengagement operates through sanctimonious justification. P2 minimizes personal aggression by shifting the ownership of the action to doctrinal texts (*"this is not the desire of my ego; this is an obligation of faith"*). Meanwhile, P3's use of the *"His soldier"* metaphor demonstrates an extreme diffusion of responsibility. By identifying oneself as part of a transcendental entity, the boundaries of interpersonal empathy dissolve. Consequently, the psychological suffering or harassment experienced by the victim is deemed a legitimate side effect that requires no regret for the sake of achieving an ostensibly sacred objective.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Dehumanization of Victims in the Name of Forbidding Evil

At a more intense level of cyber-aggression, the analysis of P2 and P4 uncovers a process of empathy erosion leading to digital dehumanization. Participants no longer view their bullying

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targets as whole human beings possessing feelings, dignity, and the right to be respected. Instead, the victim's identity is entirely reduced to a mere "symbol of evil" or a "representation of sin" whose virtual character deserves to be obliterated. This psychological phenomenon is captured in the following verbatim quotes:

"People who proudly promote immorality on Instagram have stripped themselves of their honor. They are a social disease. So, if my friends and I hurl insults at them with harsh words in their comment section, it's only fitting. They don't deserve to be treated with gentleness. A disease must be amputated." (P4, Interview, lines 141-145).

"When someone dares to defy moral rules, they automatically forfeit their right to be respected. I no longer see them as individuals, but as a virus that can infect other netizens. Attacking a virus is an act of salvation, so it's natural if the methods used on social media are brutal." (P2, Interview, lines 192-195).

The use of medical metaphors such as *"social disease," "amputated,"* and *"virus"* by P4 and P2 confirms the occurrence of a systematic cognitive process of dehumanization. In social psychology, dehumanization serves to disengage the self-censure mechanism. When a cyber target is successfully conceptualized as a dangerous, non-human entity (*a virus*), even brutal acts of cyberbullying will be perceived by the perpetrator as an act of noble and heroic moral self-defense.

Superordinate Theme 3: The Illusion of Moral Boundaries and Double Standards (*Shock Therapy*)

The third superordinate theme highlights how participants establish biased and flexible moral boundaries to preserve their self-image as righteous individuals. The phenomenological analysis reveals a cognitive double standard: participants condemn cyberbullying in general, yet exempt their own aggressive actions by labeling them as an educational method or "shock therapy." This theme is underpinned by two sub-themes: the legitimation of verbal violence as a method of awakening, and the denial of the "bully" label (*denial of cyberbullying*).

Sub-Theme 3.1: Legitimation of Verbal Violence as a Method of Awakening

The majority of the participants (P1, P2, P4, P5) position their harsh typing on social media as a deliberately designed corrective instrument. They hold the cognitive assumption that persuasive approaches or polite language are ineffective in altering the behavior of social media users deemed deviant. Therefore, verbal aggression is conceptualized as a form of care packaged

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in sternness. This mindset is reflected in the accounts of P1 and P5:

"Netizens nowadays just take advantage of you if you tell them nicely. So, the insults or striking comments from me are actually shock therapy. It's to make them shocked, ashamed, and ultimately think. It may seem cruel, but if we don't do that, they will never realize they are on the wrong path. This is like a bitter medicine for the sake of healing." (P1, Interview, lines 62-66).

"I intentionally use words that slap their ego. What is the goal? To create a deterrent effect. If we just say 'please change it, sis,' it's brushed off like the wind. But if we attack them with harsh scriptural proofs and sharp criticism until it goes viral, they will definitely feel pressured and quit. Verbal violence here is a digital moral education tool." (P5, Interview, lines 178-182).

The utilization of metaphors like *"bitter medicine"* by P1 and *"digital moral education tool"* by P5 indicates a cognitive restructuring of the harmful impacts of their behavior. The participants alter the meaning of the victim's psychological suffering (shame, distress, cyber-induced anxiety) into a logical, positive consequence intended for the victim's own good. By framing aggression as an instructional strategy (*shock therapy*), perpetrators successfully neutralize their cognitive empathy and justify acts of cyber-intimidation as a valid form of moral intervention.

Sub-Theme 3.2: Denial of the "Bully" Label (*Denial of Cyberbullying*)

An equally intriguing dynamic surfaces when P2, P3, and P4 adamantly refuse to be categorized as cyberbullying perpetrators. They maintain a rigid personal definition of what constitutes cyberbullying and cognitively disconnect their own actions from that definition. To them, cyberbullying only occurs when driven by malicious intent or personal animosity, whereas their actions are claimed to be rooted in holy motives and love for religious values. This is explicitly stated by P2 and P3:

"Cyberbullying is when you terrorize someone out of hatred, or because you want to bring them down for no reason. In my case, the motivation is clear—to correct wrong behavior for the sake of religion. Thus, my moral position is far different from those cyber-oppressors. I am correcting, not bullying. Please do not equate the two." (P2, Interview, lines 95-99).

"I absolutely detest cyberbullying; it's cowardly behavior. But what our group does in the comment section is a moral movement, not bullying. We do not attack innocent people. We respond to those who challenge the values of goodness. So if our words are harsh, it is a just response, not baseless aggression." (P3, Interview, lines 121-125).

The statements above expose a very thick illusion of moral boundaries within the architectural framework of the perpetrators' consciousness. P2 and P3 experience cognitive

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dissonance when confronted with the fact that their typing objectively meets the criteria for cyber-aggression. To mitigate this dissonance, they construct psychological defenses through the *distortion of consequences* and *advantageous comparison*. By comparing themselves to "pure bullies" who are assumed to act out of personal malice, they can condemn cyberbullying on one hand while continuously engaging in actions that are objectively cyberbullying on the other, all without damaging their self-concept as religious individuals.

Superordinate Theme 4: The Pursuit of Internal Social Validation

The final superordinate theme dissects how the external virtual environment—manifested through interactions with fellow netizens—provides psychological reinforcement for the participants' aggressive behavior. The phenomenological analysis reveals that religiously cloaked cyberbullying rarely occurs in absolute social isolation. Instead, it is fueled and maintained by the pursuit of group validation, which subsequently fosters a state of pseudo-well-being (*pseudo-flourishing*). This theme is sustained by two sub-themes: the pseudo-satisfaction of group connectedness (*digital tribalism*), and *pseudo-flourishing* through the efficacy of enforcing values.

Sub-Theme 4.1: Pseudo-Satisfaction of Group Connectedness (*Digital Tribalism*)

For P1, P3, P4, and P5, social media interactions frequently culminate in the formation of group polarization (*in-group vs out-group*). When they launch verbal aggression wrapped in religious arguments, they receive reinforcement in the form of likes, retweets, or validating comments from like-minded netizens. This phenomenon of *digital tribalism* provides a false sense of belonging and ego-gratification, as narrated by P3 and P4:

"There's a unique satisfaction when my harsh words are liked by hundreds of people or reposted by other hijrah accounts. I feel like I'm not fighting alone. Supporting comments from netizens like 'Awesome bro, straighten them out!' make me feel that my actions are right and backed by the group. There's a sense of digital brotherhood there." (P3, Interview, lines 132-136).
"When I attack a deviant public account and other netizens join in to support my theological arguments, it feels as though we are winning a moral battle together. Group validation is incredibly important on social media. That's what keeps us motivated to keep speaking out harshly." (P4, Interview, lines 165-169).

Psychologically, the narratives of P3 and P4 prove that social media architecture reinforces the mechanism of moral disengagement through collective social reinforcement. Digital support from the in-group (*in-group validation*) acts as a moral filter that distorts negative feedback.

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Perpetrators no longer experience moral anxiety because their aggressive actions yield social incentives such as digital popularity and group acceptance, which obscures the real victimization experienced by the target.

Sub-Theme 4.2: *Pseudo-Flourishing* Through the Efficacy of Enforcing Values

A deep analysis of the structure of consciousness in P1, P2, P3, and P5 uncovers the most subtle form of psychological distortion: they feel that their lives are meaningful, empowered, and achieving a high level of positive functionality precisely through acts of cyber-oppression. In reference to parameters of psychological functioning, they experience an illusion of genuine happiness, or *pseudo-flourishing*. They mistake the ego gratification felt after successfully bullying a victim using religious arguments as a sign of positive mental health. This reflection is evident in the statements of P1 and P5:

"Strangely, after I type a harsh comment or successfully shut down the argument of that deviant person, I feel completely relieved and deeply satisfied inside. I feel that on that day my life was meaningful because I contributed to upholding the values of goodness on Allah's earth. There is a sense of peace and a full sense of functioning." (P1, Interview, lines 78-82).

"For me, being able to actively voice the truth and rectify deviance on X [Twitter] is part of my self-actualization as a devout believer. I feel that my mind is healthy and growing positively precisely when I have the courage to confront those misguided accounts without fear." (P5, Interview, lines 201-205).

P1's expression of feeling *"completely relieved"* and living a *"meaningful life,"* along with P5's claims of *"self-actualization"* and a *"healthy mind,"* confirm a cognitive misattribution regarding the concept of psychological well-being. The sense of agency and meaning in life they experience mimics the indicators of flourishing. However, because this condition is derived from degrading the human dignity of others (*cyberbullying*), this psychological state is not authentic flourishing, but rather *pseudo-flourishing*—a fragile state of false well-being that depends heavily on the existence of an oppressed object.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study unveil a paradoxical cognitive architecture within religious-identified cyberbullying perpetrators. A fundamental psychological tension arises when destructive digital aggressive impulses collide with the individual's need to maintain a righteous self-image that aligns with religious moral doctrines. Through interpretative phenomenological

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analysis, it is revealed that this tension is resolved not through self-correction, but through a process of cognitive restructuring that triggers a state of pseudo-well-being (*pseudo-flourishing*) sustained by mechanisms of moral disengagement.

Deconstructing *Pseudo-Flourishing* vs. Authentic Flourishing

An intriguing phenomenon identified in this study is the affective acknowledgment from participants who reported feeling "relieved," "satisfied," and experiencing a meaningful sense of "self-actualization" immediately following their verbal aggression on social media (Theme 4.2). In conventional positive psychology, feelings of meaningfulness and agency are frequently mistaken for indicators of optimal mental health. However, a theoretical deconstruction relying on the concepts formulated by Widiantoro (2026) asserts that this condition constitutes an extreme form of psychological distortion, termed *pseudo-flourishing*.

According to the text *Psikologi Flourishing: Dinamika kesehatan mental positif*, authentic flourishing never exists within a social vacuum, let alone stands upon the psychological suffering of another individual. Genuine psychological well-being demands healthy mental functioning characterized by mature self-acceptance, deep empathy, and the capacity to build positive relationships with the surrounding environment. When a cyberbullying perpetrator derives a sense of meaning in life solely from successfully silencing, humiliating, or intimidating another user in the digital space—even when such actions are cloaked under the theological mandate of commanding right and forbidding wrong (*Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar*)—the structural meaning of that life remains hollow and fragile.

The inner satisfaction experienced by the perpetrators (as seen in the narratives of P1 and P5) is not a manifestation of healthy positive emotional growth, but rather a cathartic outburst of the ego's fulfillment for dominance (*need for power*) and moral superiority. Widiantoro (2026) reminds us that one of the core pillars of positive mental health is constructive social contribution. Consequently, constructing a sense of personal well-being or health through virtual actions that objectively damage the mental well-being of others (the victimization of cyber targets) is an inherent psychological contradiction. This behavior reflects a failure in emotion regulation, wherein religious attributions fail to transform into mature spirituality and instead degenerate into a mere instrument for satisfying digital narcissistic needs.

Synthesis of Moral Disengagement within the Religious Cyber Sphere

How does this illusion of *pseudo-flourishing* persist within the perpetrators' cognition

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without causing agonizing moral dissonance? The answer lies in their rigid attachment to the mechanisms of moral disengagement architected by Albert Bandura. Based on the empirical data, participants deactivate their internal self-censure functions through multiple pathways of moral disengagement simultaneously, with sanctimonious justification serving as the primary pillar.

When participants (such as P2 and P3) identify themselves as "God's soldiers" or "instruments for enforcing faith" (Theme 2.1), they are engaging in personal de-agency. Bandura (2016) posits in his theory that through moral and social justifications, pernicious conduct can be cognitively transformed into honorable deeds. In this case, theological doctrines are adopted reductively to perform a cognitive reframing: cyberbullying, which is universally evaluated as harmful, undergoes an epistemic status shift within the perpetrator's mind to become a sacred, spiritual obligation.

This process is finalized by the mechanism of digital dehumanization (Theme 2.2). The perpetrators' use of pathological metaphors toward the victims—such as labeling targets as a "virus" or a "social disease"—effectively bypasses cognitive empathy pathways. When a cyber target is no longer viewed as a human being with emotional dignity, all ethical boundaries of digital interaction dissolve. Perpetrators feel exonerated from moral responsibility because they perceive themselves to be performing a "moral amputation" to save other netizens.

Addressing the Research Gap: The Digital Sphere Paradox

The integration of Bandura's moral disengagement theory and Widiantoro's (2026) flourishing paradigm successfully addresses the academic void (*research gap*) that has eluded previous studies. Mainstream cyberpsychology research generally treats cyberbullying as a linear expression of pure personality pathology or as a compensation for low self-esteem. However, the IPA results in this study demonstrate an entirely different pathway: religious-identified cyberbullying perpetrators actually possess highly elevated collective self-esteem and are driven by a pursuit of internal social validation (Theme 4.1).

The polarized social media ecosystem provides a fertile echo chamber for the convergence of like-minded perpetrators (the phenomenon of *digital tribalism*). When acts of scripturally cloaked verbal aggression receive a constant supply of confirmation via digital community support, personal moral disengagement scales up to a collective level. Consequently, the cognitive dissonance that should naturally surface from the clash between a religious identity (which teaches peace) and bullying behavior (which creates destruction) is completely stifled. Perpetrators become trapped in a vicious cycle of *pseudo-flourishing*: they feel increasingly

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religious, increasingly meaningful, and increasingly psychologically healthy precisely when they intensify their digital intimidation against those outside their moral circle.

Rationalizing "Shock Therapy" and the Double Standard Framework

Another cognitive dynamic requiring critical scrutiny is how perpetrators construct their actions as "shock therapy" (Theme 3.1). Borrowing this clinical-psychological jargon demonstrates an effort toward intellectualization by the perpetrators to shift the destructive nature of bullying into a utilitarian intervention (*utilitarian moralism*). Perpetrators (such as P1 and P5) believe that by exerting intense psychological pressure through insults and public exposure, the cyber target will experience a moment of moral awakening.

However, from the standpoint of cognitive and cyberpsychology, this shock therapy argument is a biased form of advantageous comparison (Bandura, 2016). Perpetrators compare their verbal violence with other extreme scenarios—such as the passive tolerance of vice, which is viewed as massively destroying the social order. Through this lopsided comparison, their digital intimidation is appraised as a "necessary evil" required to prevent far worse consequences.

This rationalization gives rise to an acute double standard (Theme 3.2). When confronted with the objective definition of cyberbullying, participants engage in a categorical denial (*denial of cyberbullying*). They claim that bullying only occurs if the perpetrator is driven by profane motives such as revenge, malice, or personal hatred. This conceptual separation is a fragile illusion of moral boundaries. Empirical facts in cyberpsychology confirm that the impact of victimization on the target—such as anxiety, depression, and social alienation—is determined not by the holy motives claimed by the actor, but by the aggressive and repetitive nature of the cyber stimulation itself (Kowalski et al., 2019). Thus, the claim that verbal aggression can function as a tool for digital moral education is a cognitive fallacy utilized solely to protect the integrity of the perpetrator's self-concept, ensuring they continue to view themselves as religious and flourishing individuals.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has successfully deconstructed the structure of consciousness and the construction of meaning behind the behavioral paradox of religious-identified cyberbullying perpetrators using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. The results conclude that the hate speech and verbal aggression perpetrated by religious netizens on social media do not reflect the depth or maturity of subjective religiosity; rather, they represent a

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distorted cognitive strategy utilized to reduce internal dissonance. Perpetrators reductively employ theological doctrines, specifically the principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong (*Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar*), as instruments of moral disengagement.

Through mechanisms of sanctimonious justification and digital dehumanization of the victims, perpetrators successfully deactivate their internal self-censure functions. This cognitive process, in turn, breeds a state of *pseudo-flourishing*, wherein perpetrators experience ego gratification, a sense of agency, and a false illusion of meaning in life derived from oppressing and degrading human dignity within the virtual sphere. The internal social validation gained from echo-chamber ecosystems (one-way digital brotherhood) further reinforces this structural moral disengagement, thereby perpetuating a cycle of cyber-aggression cloaked in righteousness.

Recommendations for Psychological-Digital Interventions

Based on these findings, conventional approaches that merely emphasize digital literacy from technical-legal perspectives (such as understanding statutory regulations or cyber laws) are considered no longer adequate to break the cycle of this phenomenon. This study recommends a necessary reconstruction of digital literacy intervention models that address the deepest psychological dimensions of users, which encompass:

- **Mindful Digital Regulation (Mindfulness-Based Emotion Regulation):** Developing digital educational programs that train social media users to recognize their affective impulses immediately prior to typing comments. Users must be trained to critically assess whether the internal turmoil experienced upon witnessing perceived "deviance" on social media is genuinely rooted in pure spiritual motives or is merely a surge of latent aggression seeking a theological loophole for justification.
- **Digital Cognitive Empathy Education:** Interventions must focus on restoring the capacity for de-dehumanization. Social media users need to be cognitively stimulated to look beyond the digital screen and recognize that behind every targeted virtual account is a whole human being possessing psychological vulnerabilities. Consequently, the boundary between advising (which preserves dignity) and bullying (which degrades character) can be clearly discerned.
- **Restoration of the Authentic Flourishing Paradigm:** Religious educational institutions and digital communities need to shift religious orientations away from formalistic-confrontational expressions toward the internalization of positive psychology values. Grounded in the true essence of positive mental health, the cyber community must be

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made aware that personal growth and authentic meaning in life can only be achieved through constructive social relations, mature self-acceptance, and the dissemination of universal benefits, rather than through the character assassination of fellow human beings in cyberspace.

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