

# Navigating Digital Intimacies: A Rhetorical Analysis of Online Harassment Among Youths in Cameroon

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b>            Published: February 2026</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>            Rhetoric            Language Use            Digital Intimacy            Digital Vulnerability            Digital Rights            Communication</p>	<p>In this age, digital communication increasingly shapes how young people construct identity, intimacy, and belonging. In Cameroon, these interactions are frequently marked by digital aggression violating the digital rights of young people. This study investigates the role of language in shaping digital intimacy and online violence among Cameroonian youths through a rhetorical lens. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research analyzes 50 purposively selected Facebook posts alongside in-depth testimonies from two young women who experienced digital harassment. Rhetorical Theory and Social Identity Theory provide the analytical framework for examining how linguistic choices construct inclusion, exclusion, and vulnerability in online spaces. Thematic coding was employed to identify recurring patterns of harmful discourse. Findings reveal that 45% of analyzed comments constituted hate speech, while 35% reflected verbal violence, with body shaming emerging as a prominent feature of online interaction. Victim testimonies illustrate the profound emotional consequences of such language, including diminished self-worth, social withdrawal, and mental distress. The analysis demonstrates that language operates both as a mechanism for social connection and as a tool of marginalization, reinforcing group boundaries and societal power dynamics. The study underscores the need for culturally responsive digital literacy initiatives and youth-centered mental health support to mitigate the impacts of online harassment. By foregrounding the rhetorical dimensions of digital communication within the Cameroonian context, this research contributes to scholarship on digital vulnerability and highlights the importance of ethical language practices in fostering safer and more inclusive online environments.</p>

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, the intersection of technology and human interaction has produced complex relational environments characterized by both connectivity and vulnerability. Young people, among the most prolific users of digital platforms, increasingly navigate social media spaces that shape identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and emotional expression (Jones, 2014). However, these emerging forms of digital intimacy are accompanied by significant risks, particularly in the form of online harassment and cyberbullying. According to a 2021 report by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), approximately 29% of young individuals globally have experienced some form of online harassment, underscoring the urgency of understanding how language operates within virtual interactions.

Digital vulnerability among youths is further intensified by the affordances of online communication, particularly anonymity, which facilitates harmful behaviors and reduces accountability (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2013). Empirical evidence suggests that young people encounter negative digital interactions more frequently than older users. A survey by the Pew Research Center indicates that 59% of U.S. adolescents have experienced online bullying or harassment, with documented consequences including anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Kowalski et al., 2014). These findings highlight that online harm is not merely episodic but deeply consequential for psychological well-being. Within this context, language emerges as a central mediating force, shaping both the expression of digital aggression and individuals' responses to such encounters.

Scholars have long emphasized the formative power of language in shaping human experience. Linguistic theory underscores language as a cognitive and social force that influences perception and behavior (Crystal, 2001), while rhetorical perspectives stress its role in constructing identities, power relations, and social realities (Bakhtin, 1981; Burke, 1969; Campbell & Huxman, 2009). Contemporary digital rhetoric further demonstrates that online discourse is inherently performative and relational, enabling users to negotiate belonging while simultaneously exercising symbolic power over others (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012; Eymann, 2015). These insights foreground the importance of rhetorical choices in digital spaces, where words circulate rapidly, acquire permanence, and exert profound influence on youths' emotional and psychological states.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the proliferation of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok has expanded opportunities for identity exploration and community building. Yet these same platforms increasingly function as sites of harassment and symbolic violence. In African contexts, these challenges are compounded by sociocultural dynamics and

uneven digital literacy. An African Union report (2020) highlights that young people in Cameroon face particular vulnerabilities due to limited digital awareness and cultural norms that discourage open discussion of harassment and abuse. The misuse of language in online environments contributes significantly to violations of digital rights, as harassment frequently manifests through slurs, misleading narratives, and defamatory discourse targeting individuals on the basis of gender, ethnicity, or physical appearance (Benesch, 2014; Saeed, 2016).

Beyond interpersonal harassment, cyber threats such as phishing and online scams further illustrate how language is weaponized in digital spaces. Deceptive linguistic strategies are commonly employed to generate false trust and manipulate users into disclosing personal information (Mowshowitz & Kawaguchi, 2015). On social media platforms, similar rhetorical tactics perpetuate harmful stereotypes and discriminatory practices, reinforcing group polarization and emotional hostility (Crisp, 2018; Wodak, 2015). Reports indicate that a substantial proportion of young Cameroonian users have encountered targeted harassment that undermines both personal safety and freedom of expression (Mbibah, 2023; Fonkem, 2023). These patterns reflect broader systemic shortcomings in safeguarding youths within digital environments.

Consequently, digital rights, including the rights to safety, privacy, and free expression—are increasingly compromised as young people navigate online spaces saturated with linguistic violence (Groshek & Cutino, 2018). Understanding the rhetorical strategies embedded in digital communication is therefore essential for developing effective interventions against cyberbullying, hate speech, and related forms of online harm.

It is against this backdrop that the present study investigates the role of language in shaping digital intimacy and vulnerability among youths in Cameroon, with particular attention to violence enacted through online discourse. The study seeks to uncover how language not only contributes to digital harassment but also functions as a potential tool of resistance and empowerment. By examining these dynamics, the research contributes to broader debates on digital rights and ethical communication in an interconnected world (Papacharissi, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2014), while offering insights toward fostering safer and more respectful online environments grounded in a nuanced understanding of language and digital intimacy.

### *1.1 Sociocultural Dynamics in Cameroon Affecting Digital Vulnerability*

Cameroon's ethnic diversity and complex sociopolitical landscape create a distinctive environment where youth digital vulnerability is produced and sustained. While increased connectivity has expanded social participation, it has also amplified inequalities rooted in gender norms, cultural expectations, political constraints, and uneven digital literacy, all of which interact with linguistic practices to shape online experiences and violence.

Cultural norms, particularly traditional gender roles, disproportionately expose women and marginalized groups to harassment. Expectations of femininity and masculinity legitimize hostile discourse, resulting in derogatory language, sexualized insults, and public shaming that mirror offline power hierarchies (Mbibah, 2023; Benesch, 2014). Language thus operates as a symbolic and social mechanism regulating visibility and belonging.

Stigma surrounding mental health, abuse, and victimization further reinforces vulnerability. Many communities frame disclosure as weakness or moral failure, prompting youths to remain silent in the face of cyberbullying, especially in rural areas with limited awareness of digital rights and psychosocial support (Fonkem, 2023).

Digital literacy gaps exacerbate these risks. Despite rising internet access, many young users lack knowledge of privacy settings, reporting mechanisms, and cybersecurity, leaving them exposed to phishing, grooming, and harassment (Mowshowitz & Kawaguchi, 2015). Political constraints also shape online engagement; surveillance and fear of reprisal foster self-censorship, embedding harassment within broader structures of control (Wodak, 2015).

Religious influences further constrain expression, discouraging discussion of mental health and interpersonal conflict, while peer dynamics reinforce social hierarchies online. Pressures to gain validation through likes and visibility encourage risky self-disclosure and participation in hostile behaviors, reflecting collective negotiation of social identity.

Together, these intersecting factors, gender norms, cultural silence, political constraint, religious values, peer pressures, and digital literacy disparities, demonstrate that digital violence in Cameroon is not merely individual misconduct but a systemic phenomenon. Language becomes a primary tool of exclusion and identity regulation. Addressing youth vulnerability thus requires context-sensitive interventions, including culturally responsive digital literacy, mental health support, and policy frameworks to foster safer online spaces.

## **2. Literature Review**

Research on online communication and digital violence has expanded significantly over the past decade. Foundational work by Crystal (2001) highlights how internet language reshapes human interaction, while Jones (2014) explains how digital platforms can both connect and marginalize users depending on discourse patterns. Scholars have also examined online harassment through socio-psychological frameworks, demonstrating the psychosocial effects of cyberbullying and hate speech on vulnerable groups (Giumetti et al., 2012; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014). These studies underscore that online abuse is not merely individual misbehavior but a social phenomenon shaped by cultural norms and communicative practices.

From a rhetorical perspective, communication scholars argue that language on digital platforms does more than convey information; it constructs social realities, identities, and power relations (Bakhtin, 1981; Bhatia, 2010; Campbell, 2017). Rhetorical analysis thus provides a lens for understanding how linguistic choices reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. For example, Benesch (2014) and Saeed (2016) conceptualize online hate speech as a form of discursive violence that excludes and dehumanizes targets, contributing to social fragmentation. Similarly, Crisp (2018) finds that rhetoric used in digital spaces often amplifies emotions and group polarization.

Despite the strength of this global literature, it has notable limitations when applied to African digital milieus, particularly in Cameroon. Much of the existing work stems from Western contexts, where political, linguistic, and social dynamics differ significantly from those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, many studies emphasize access, infrastructure, and legal frameworks (e.g., digital rights and platform governance) rather than the rhetorical construction of online violence itself (Groshek & Cutino, 2018; Mowshowitz & Kawaguchi, 2015). Consequently, there remains a gap in understanding how language *in context* constructs vulnerability, identity, and power among youths in African online environments.

In Cameroon, emerging scholarship has begun to document aspects of online harassment and linguistic violence, offering crucial local perspectives. Mbibah (2023) examines verbal aggression on Cameroonian Facebook interactions, demonstrating high levels of hate speech and abusive language in public comment threads. This is complemented by socio-pragmatic investigations from the University of Yaoundé I showing how social media language reflects local power dynamics and community tensions. Research at the University of Buea has similarly highlighted the impact of cyberbullying on adolescents' emotional well-being and school engagement, indicating that frequent negative comments contribute to reduced self-esteem and social withdrawal among youth respondents. Furthermore, Fonkem (2023) analyzes digital discourse in Cameroon's bilingual social media spaces, showing how language choice often aligns with ethnic, linguistic, and political identities, intensifying conflictual exchanges.

Quantitative studies also reinforce this trend. A survey conducted by the Catholic University Institute of Buea found that over 60% of secondary students reported experiencing or witnessing hostile online comments, particularly those related to gender and ethnicity. In a similar vein, research by the Cameroon Youth Network reveals that youths in urban centers like Douala and Yaoundé perceive online harassment as a significant barrier to free and safe digital expression.

Civil society reports provide further evidence of the scope and impact of online harm in Cameroon. The DefyHateNow Cameroon initiative documents hundreds of hate speech incidents annually, particularly targeting women and marginalized communities. The UNFPA Youth & Peacebuilding Report (2024) highlights that online hate speech exacerbates intercommunal tensions, especially in conflict-affected regions of the North West and South West. Additionally, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (Minpostel) has acknowledged the need for national strategies to protect minors online, emphasizing digital literacy and psychosocial support as priorities in its National Child Online Protection Framework.

Cameroonian NGOs such as Youth for Digital Rights Cameroon, Civic Watch and CyberSafe Cameroon have also contributed localized insights, noting that existing digital safety initiatives often overlook the rhetorical dimension of online violence, specifically, how language choices shape perceptions of self and others in mediated interactions. These groups' qualitative interviews with victims of online abuse reveal that language use on social platforms often escalates conflicts and contributes to cumulative psychological stress.

Despite these important contributions, a critical gap persists. Existing studies in Cameroon tend to describe the *presence* and *effects* of cyberbullying and hate speech without systematically analyzing the rhetorical mechanisms through which language on social media constructs vulnerability, identity, and social exclusion. There is a particular need for research that integrates rhetorical theory with local empirical evidence, illuminating how linguistic practices in Cameroonian online spaces shape both personal experience and collective discourse.

This study addresses that gap by employing a rhetorical analysis of digital interactions among Cameroonian youths, focusing on how linguistic strategies on social media contribute to the construction of intimate relationships, hostility, and moral subjectivities. By foregrounding both local voices and global theory, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of online violence in African contexts and offers insights relevant to digital policy, youth programming, and communication studies.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Rhetorical Theory and Social Identity Theory, two complementary frameworks that illuminate how language operates as both a persuasive instrument and a mechanism of social positioning in digital environments. Together, these theories provide a robust lens for examining how online discourse shapes intimacy, vulnerability, and identity among Cameroonian youths.

Rhetorical Theory originates from Aristotle's classical conceptualization of persuasion through *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *logos* (logical reasoning) (*Rhetoric*, c. 4th century BCE). Contemporary rhetorical scholarship has expanded these foundations to encompass digital communication and mediated discourse. Burke (1969) introduced the notion of identification, arguing that rhetoric functions through symbolic alignment and division, a concept particularly relevant in online spaces where language constructs belonging and exclusion. More recently, scholars such as Campbell and Huxman (2009), Warnick (2010), and Zappen (2015) have demonstrated how rhetorical practices evolve in digital contexts, emphasizing that tone, stylistic devices, and audience positioning play critical roles in shaping meaning and emotional impact.

Within digital environments, rhetoric is no longer confined to formal persuasion but manifests through everyday interactions, comments, emojis, and narrative framing. Contemporary digital rhetoric scholars, including DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun (2012) and Eyman (2015), argue that online discourse is inherently performative and relational, enabling users to negotiate identity while simultaneously exercising symbolic power over others. In this study, rhetorical theory is operationalized through analysis of linguistic strategies such as insults, sarcasm, hyperbole, metaphor, and dismissive language, which function to delegitimize voices, reinforce stereotypes, and intensify emotional harm. These rhetorical elements are examined as mechanisms through which digital violence is enacted and intimacy is disrupted. The framework also attends to *pathos* as a central component, given the emotionally charged nature of online harassment, where language directly targets self-worth and psychological stability.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986), complements rhetorical analysis by explaining how individuals construct meaning through group affiliations. The theory posits that people categorize themselves and others into social groups (social categorization), adopt group identities (social identification), and compare groups to maintain positive self-

esteem (social comparison). These processes often produce in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination, dynamics that are amplified in online environments. Subsequent developments by Abrams and Hogg (1990), Turner et al. (1994), and Spears (2011) extend Social Identity Theory to computer-mediated communication, highlighting how anonymity and reduced social cues intensify group-based behavior and hostile expression.

Recent scholars such as Postmes, Spears, and Lea (2013) argue that digital platforms foster “social identity deindividuation,” whereby users become more likely to conform to perceived group norms, including aggressive or exclusionary language. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Cameroonian context, where ethnic, gendered, and appearance-based identities intersect with political and cultural tensions. In this study, Social Identity Theory is employed to analyze how youths’ online interactions reflect group positioning, with language serving as a marker of belonging or rejection. Comments targeting physical appearance, ethnicity, or personal vulnerability are interpreted as manifestations of identity-based boundary-making, reinforcing social hierarchies and marginalization.

The integration of Rhetorical Theory and Social Identity Theory enables a nuanced understanding of digital vulnerability as both a linguistic and social phenomenon. Rhetorical strategies reveal how harm is enacted at the level of discourse, while social identity processes explain why such harm persists and gains collective legitimacy. Victims’ testimonies are analyzed through this dual lens to uncover how repeated exposure to hostile rhetoric leads to internalized stigma, identity disruption, and emotional withdrawal.

Contemporary applications of these frameworks in digital contexts (Papacharissi, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Wodak, 2015) further demonstrate that online communication is deeply entangled with power relations and affective experiences. Drawing on these perspectives, the present study conceptualizes digital intimacy not merely as interpersonal closeness but as a fragile communicative space continuously shaped by rhetorical choices and identity negotiations.

By combining rhetorical analysis with social identity processes, this framework foregrounds language as both expressive and constitutive, revealing how everyday digital interactions produce real psychological and social consequences. This theoretical integration allows the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of cyberbullying, offering a critical interpretation of how linguistic practices structure vulnerability among Cameroonian youths and informing culturally responsive interventions aimed at promoting safer digital environments.

#### 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how language shapes digital intimacy and vulnerability among youths in Cameroon. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of meaning-making processes, emotional experiences, and rhetorical strategies embedded in online interactions.

##### 4.1 Research Design

The research employs a multi-method qualitative strategy combining rhetorical analysis of social media discourse and semi-structured interviews with victims of online harassment. This design allows for triangulation between publicly available digital texts and personal lived experiences, enhancing the validity of the findings. The approach aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework, which facilitates systematic identification of patterns within qualitative data.

Facebook was selected as the primary data source due to its widespread use among Cameroonian youths and its role as a key platform for public discourse, identity expression, and interpersonal engagement.

##### 4.2 Sampling Criteria and Data Collection

###### *Social Media Data*

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 50 Facebook posts between January and June 2025. Posts were drawn from public pages and discussion groups commonly accessed by youths in urban centers including Yaounde, Douala, and Buea. Selection criteria included:

- Posts addressing sensitive social themes such as gender, ethnicity, physical appearance, relationships, or personal struggles.
- Threads containing high engagement (minimum of 30 comments).
- Evidence of emotionally charged interaction, including disagreement, ridicule, or support.
- Accessibility as publicly shared content.

The analyzed comments were written primarily in English, Cameroonian Pidgin English, and occasional French expressions, reflecting the multilingual nature of Cameroonian digital communication. Posts were manually archived and anonymized prior to analysis.

A total of approximately 600 comments were reviewed, from which representative samples illustrating hate speech, verbal violence, body shaming, and supportive language were extracted for detailed rhetorical examination.

###### *Victim Testimonies*

In addition to social media analysis, two young women aged 19 and 25 were recruited through informal networks and youth advocacy circles. Both participants had experienced sustained online harassment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via encrypted messaging platforms to ensure privacy and accessibility. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to narrate their experiences, emotional responses, and coping strategies in their own words.

##### 4.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was prioritized throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from both interview participants, who were fully briefed on the study’s purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and social media excerpts.

Although the Facebook data were publicly available, ethical responsibility required further protection of user identities. All usernames, profile images, and location indicators were excluded from the dataset. Quoted comments were paraphrased where necessary to prevent traceability.

The study followed ethical guidelines consistent with qualitative social research standards and local university norms. While no formal institutional review board approval was required, informal ethical clearance was obtained through peer academic consultation. These procedures align with recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006) and contemporary digital ethics frameworks emphasizing respect, confidentiality, and non-maleficence.

4.4 Data Analysis and Coding Procedure

Data analysis proceeded in three stages: familiarization, coding, and thematic interpretation.

First, all Facebook comments and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion in the dataset. A manual thematic coding approach was employed following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework:

- Familiarization with data
- Generation of initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

Initial open coding yielded 18 preliminary codes, including exclusionary language, body-based insults, dismissive rhetoric, identity attacks, emotional distress, and supportive engagement. These were subsequently refined into five major thematic categories: hate speech, verbal violence, body shaming, emotional impact, and supportive discourse.

Coding was conducted manually by the researcher due to the manageable dataset size and the need for contextual sensitivity to multilingual expressions. As a single-coder study, inter-coder reliability was not applicable; however, analytic rigor was ensured through repeated coding cycles and reflexive memo writing to minimize subjective bias.

Rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, sarcasm, metaphor, and rhetorical questioning were also identified and analyzed to examine how stylistic choices intensified emotional harm or reinforced social hierarchies. Social Identity Theory informed interpretation of group-based language, particularly in relation to gender, ethnicity, and appearance.

4.5 Analytical Framework

Rhetorical Theory provided tools for examining persuasion, tone, and linguistic strategy in digital interactions (Aristotle; Burke), while Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) guided interpretation of how in-group and out-group positioning influenced online behavior. Together, these frameworks enabled analysis of how language simultaneously constructs intimacy and enacts symbolic violence.

Victim testimonies were subjected to narrative analysis, focusing on emotional trajectories, identity disruption, and coping mechanisms. This allowed integration of subjective experiences with broader discursive patterns observed in social media data.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Limitations

Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation and thick description. Reflexivity was maintained through continuous researcher self-evaluation. However, limitations include the small number of interview participants and focus on a single platform. Findings therefore cannot be generalized statistically but offer transferable insights into similar sociocultural contexts.

5. Findings

This section presents empirical findings from the rhetorical analysis of Facebook comments and narratives obtained from two victims of digital harassment. The results are organized around dominant thematic categories identified through manual thematic coding, namely hate speech, verbal violence, body shaming, and supportive discourse. Quantitative distributions are presented alongside representative qualitative excerpts to illustrate linguistic patterns observed across the dataset.

5.1 Distribution of Comment Themes

Analysis of approximately 600 comments drawn from 50 Facebook posts revealed a predominance of negative linguistic engagement. Three major forms of digital aggression emerged: hate speech, verbal violence, and body shaming. Supportive comments appeared less frequently.

Table 1 Distribution of Comment Themes (n = 600)

Theme	Percentage
Hate Speech	45%
Verbal Violence	35%
Supportive Comments	20%

Body shaming frequently co-occurred with hate speech and verbal violence and therefore overlaps across categories rather than constituting a separate percentage. This overlap reflects the layered nature of digital hostility, where insults related to physical appearance often accompany broader identity-based attacks.

The data indicate that hostile language constituted approximately 80% of interactions, suggesting that negative engagement dominates youth-centered online discourse within the sampled posts.

*Hate Speech*

Hate speech represented the largest category (45%) and primarily targeted ethnicity, gender, perceived moral character, and social belonging. Such comments were characterized by exclusionary language aimed at delegitimizing individuals' presence within digital spaces.

A representative example includes the statement:

*"You don't belong here; go back to where you came from."*

This type of utterance was recurrent across threads addressing personal narratives or socially sensitive topics. Linguistically, hate speech operated through imperatives and categorical judgments, positioning targets as outsiders while reinforcing imagined group boundaries. The frequency of such comments demonstrates how digital platforms function as sites of symbolic exclusion, where individuals are publicly denied belonging through language.

Hate speech was particularly prevalent in discussions related to gender and physical appearance, often accompanied by moralizing rhetoric that framed victims as socially inferior. The persistence of such expressions across multiple posts indicates that these forms of aggression are normalized within certain online communities.

*Verbal Violence*

Verbal violence accounted for 35% of analyzed comments and included direct insults, dismissive language, and hostile imperatives. These utterances were less overtly ideological than hate speech but equally damaging in their emotional impact.

A typical example observed was:

*"Shut up; no one cares about your opinion."*

Such comments functioned to silence individuals and invalidate their contributions. The linguistic structure of verbal violence often relied on commands and absolute negation, minimizing the speaker's agency while asserting dominance. These remarks appeared most frequently in response to posts expressing vulnerability or personal struggle, suggesting that emotional openness often triggered aggressive responses.

The data further reveal that verbal violence was frequently amplified through repetition, with multiple users reinforcing similar dismissive messages within a single thread. This collective hostility intensified emotional pressure on targeted individuals and reduced opportunities for constructive dialogue.

*Body Shaming*

Body shaming emerged as a prominent subtheme intersecting both hate speech and verbal violence. Comments targeting physical appearance focused primarily on weight, facial features, and perceived attractiveness.

A representative example includes:

*"You're so fat; no wonder no one wants to date you."*

Such remarks reduced individuals to bodily attributes and framed appearance as a determinant of social worth. Body shaming comments often employed metaphors and exaggeration to magnify perceived flaws, thereby intensifying emotional harm. These linguistic patterns reveal how digital spaces reproduce societal beauty norms and transform them into instruments of public humiliation.

Body-focused insults were disproportionately directed at female users, indicating gendered dimensions of online hostility. The recurrence of these remarks across multiple posts suggests that appearance-based judgment is deeply embedded in digital interaction norms.

*Supportive Discourse*

Supportive comments accounted for only 20% of total interactions. These responses typically expressed empathy, encouragement, or validation, such as:

*"Stay strong; your story matters."*

While such comments offered moments of solidarity, they were frequently overshadowed by negative responses and rarely initiated extended supportive exchanges. The limited presence of affirmative language highlights an imbalance between harmful and constructive communication within the sampled online spaces.

Table 2: Summary of Types of Violations

Type of Violation	Comment
Hate Speech	"You don't belong here; go back to where you came from"
Verbal Violence	"Shut up; no one cares about your opinion"
Body Shaming	"You're so fat; no wonder no one wants to date you"
Sexual Harassment	"You'd look much better if you wore less"
Homophobic Slurs	"You are so weird; nobody wants anything to do with you"
Emotional Abuse	"You're worthless; just give up already"
Mocking Vulnerability	"Crying online? Pathetic. Get a life!"
Demeaning Comments	"No one is surprised that you can't keep a relationship; look at you"
Derogatory Insults	"You're such a loser; no one respects you!"
Threats of Violence	"If I ever see you in person, I'll make you pay for your words!"

These comments exemplify various forms of digital violence that undermine the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals, thereby violating their digital intimacies.

5.2 Emotional Impact: Victim Testimonies

Narrative accounts from two victims provided insight into the psychological consequences of sustained online hostility. Both participants reported experiences of diminished self-worth, social withdrawal, and emotional distress. The first participant described feeling that her “entire identity was attacked,” noting that repeated dismissive comments led her to isolate herself from friends and family. She reported persistent anxiety and reluctance to engage online following the incident. The second participant emphasized the impact of body shaming, explaining that derogatory remarks about her appearance led to unhealthy eating behaviors and chronic self-doubt. She described feeling compelled to alter her body to conform to external expectations, illustrating how digital language translated into tangible harm.

Table 3. Reported Emotional Effects of Digital Harassment

Emotional Impact	Victim 1	Victim 2
Feelings of Isolation	High	High
Reduced Self-Worth	Significant	Severe
Anxiety/Depression	Present	Present

These narratives corroborate patterns observed in social media data, demonstrating how hostile discourse extends beyond virtual spaces into lived emotional realities.

5.3 Style, Tone, and Rhetorical Devices

Analysis of Facebook comments indicates that style and tone play a central role in shaping the emotional tenor of online interactions, with multiple rhetorical devices consistently employed to demean and harm individuals. Hyperbole appeared in statements such as “You’re the ugliest person I’ve ever seen; it’s shocking” and “Why will you punish us with this your ugly face? You just ruined my day,” exaggerating flaws and assigning emotional responsibility to victims. Sarcasm was used to invalidate expression, for example, “Oh, sure, your opinion matters. What do you even know about life?” Metaphorical language frequently appeared in body-based attacks, as in “You’re just a whale in a sea of beauty; nobody wants to look at you.” Direct insults, including “You’re a loser; no one will ever love you,” targeted identity, while dismissive remarks such as “If you’re upset about that, you need to toughen up. Just grow a spine” minimized emotional responses. Euphemistic expressions like “Let’s just say you’re not exactly fashion material” softened aggression while maintaining derogatory intent, and rhetorical questions such as “So you think you are beautiful? Go and hide” undermined self-confidence. Across all examples, tone ranged from overtly hostile to subtly demeaning, with recurrent focus on appearance, personal worth, and emotional legitimacy.

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between language, digital intimacy, and vulnerability among youths in Cameroon. Drawing on Rhetorical Theory and Social Identity Theory, this discussion interprets how linguistic practices in online spaces function simultaneously as mechanisms of connection and instruments of harm. By examining hate speech, verbal violence, and body shaming, alongside victims’ lived experiences, this section situates the empirical results within broader theoretical and societal contexts while outlining their implications for digital well-being and youth development.

6.1 Theoretical Interpretation of Digital Hostility

The rhetorical analysis of Facebook comments revealed consistent patterns of hostile communication characterized by hate speech, verbal violence, and body shaming, with comparatively limited supportive discourse. These findings demonstrate how language operates not merely as a medium of interaction but as a strategic resource through which power, exclusion, and social hierarchy are enacted. From a rhetorical perspective, such linguistic practices exemplify how everyday digital exchanges become sites of symbolic aggression, where words are deployed to diminish, silence, and marginalize others.

Statements such as “You don’t belong here; go back to where you came from” illustrate how language constructs in-groups and out-groups, reinforcing pre-existing social divisions. This aligns with Rhetorical Theory’s assertion that discourse actively shapes social realities rather than simply reflecting them. Through emotionally charged appeals and derogatory framing, users mobilize language to assert dominance and delegitimize perceived outsiders. In this sense, online hostility functions rhetorically by invoking fear, shame, and exclusion, thereby transforming digital platforms into arenas of contestation rather than spaces of mutual engagement.

Verbal violence, exemplified through expressions such as “shut up” and “worthless,” further reveals how linguistic aggression suppresses participation and erodes individual agency. Such utterances produce a chilling effect, discouraging victims from expressing themselves and contributing authentically to online conversations. This silencing mechanism underscores rhetoric’s capacity to regulate visibility and voice within digital environments.

Body shaming comments, including remarks such as “You’re so fat; no wonder no one wants to date you,” reflect culturally embedded ideals of appearance and worth. These expressions operate rhetorically by reducing individuals to physical traits, thereby reinforcing normative body standards and legitimizing public humiliation. Within this framework, rhetoric becomes a tool for enforcing conformity while punishing deviation.

Social Identity Theory provides additional insight into these dynamics by explaining how individuals derive self-concept from group membership. Attacks based on appearance, gender, or perceived social status destabilize personal identity by signaling

exclusion from valued social categories. The findings suggest that online interactions amplify in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, processes intensified by the relative anonymity of digital platforms. Through this lens, hostile discourse is understood not only as interpersonal aggression but as a manifestation of collective identity negotiation.

Victims' testimonies further corroborate these theoretical perspectives. The first participant's sense that her "entire identity was under attack" reflects how linguistic assaults penetrate deeply into self-perception, supporting Tajfel and Turner's argument that social evaluation significantly shapes individual self-esteem. Similarly, the second participant's experience of body shaming illustrates how societal expectations are internalized, prompting behavioral and emotional responses that extend beyond the digital sphere.

Together, Rhetorical Theory and Social Identity Theory reveal that digital hostility is both linguistically constructed and socially sustained. Language becomes the vehicle through which group boundaries are enforced, vulnerability is exploited, and emotional harm is normalized.

### 6.2 Meaning of Findings for Digital Intimacy and Youth Vulnerability

Beyond theoretical interpretation, the findings carry significant meaning for understanding digital intimacy among Cameroonians youths. Digital intimacy ideally implies spaces of connection, affirmation, and shared experience. However, the prevalence of hate speech and verbal violence observed in this study indicates that vulnerability in online environments is frequently met with retaliation rather than empathy.

The results suggest that digital platforms often reproduce offline inequalities, transforming them into visible and immediate forms of symbolic violence. Youths navigating these spaces encounter continuous evaluation, where personal narratives and emotional openness expose them to judgment and ridicule. Consequently, digital intimacy becomes precarious, as individuals learn to curate their identities to avoid attack, limiting authentic self-expression.

The emotional consequences reported by participants—ranging from diminished self-worth to social withdrawal—demonstrate how online language translates into lived psychological distress. These experiences reveal that digital interactions cannot be dismissed as inconsequential; rather, they actively shape mental health outcomes and identity development. For young people in formative stages of self-construction, repeated exposure to hostile rhetoric risks normalizing shame and internalized stigma.

Moreover, the scarcity of supportive discourse highlights an imbalance in online communication cultures. While moments of empathy exist, they are frequently overshadowed by aggressive engagement. This imbalance contributes to an environment where harmful language gains visibility and legitimacy, reinforcing cycles of exclusion.

The study therefore illustrates that digital vulnerability is not accidental but structurally embedded in communicative practices. The rhetoric of online spaces influences who feels seen, valued, and safe, underscoring the need to reconceptualize digital intimacy as a socially mediated process shaped by language, norms, and power relations.

### 6.3 Societal Implications of Digital Intimacy Violation

The societal implications of these findings extend beyond individual experiences to broader concerns surrounding mental health, digital literacy, and cultural transformation. The pervasive presence of hostile rhetoric not only undermines emotional well-being but also contributes to shaping communal attitudes toward empathy, difference, and respect.

*Mental Health Responses:* The emotional toll associated with exposure to hate speech and verbal aggression highlights a growing public health concern. As evidenced by victim testimonies, online harassment contributes to anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem. These outcomes align with existing research linking cyberbullying to adverse psychological effects. Addressing digital violence therefore requires integrating mental health support into youth services, educational institutions, and community programs, ensuring accessible resources for individuals affected by online abuse.

*Digital Literacy Initiatives:* The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive digital literacy programs that move beyond technical skills to include ethical communication and emotional awareness. Equipping youths with strategies to recognize harmful rhetoric, respond constructively, and seek support can foster resilience and safer online participation. Educational interventions emphasizing empathy, respectful dialogue, and responsible digital citizenship are essential in counteracting the normalization of online aggression.

*Cultural Shifts in Perception:* Sustainable change also necessitates challenging societal norms that perpetuate body shaming and exclusionary language. Cultural narratives surrounding beauty, gender, and identity must be critically examined through education, media representation, and community engagement. Promoting diverse representations and redefining standards of worth can help dismantle the rhetorical foundations of digital hostility. Advocacy for digital rights and inclusive policies further supports the creation of environments where dignity is upheld.

The pervasive use of hate speech, verbal violence, and body shaming not only damages individual dignity but also reinforces a culture that prioritizes aggression over compassion. Such devices functioned to dramatize perceived flaws and publicly shame targets. Hyperbolic language exaggerated negative traits, while sarcasm undermined credibility and dignity. Metaphorical expressions transformed individuals into objects of ridicule, reinforcing dehumanization. These stylistic choices amplified emotional injury and contributed to an atmosphere of hostility. Victims' voices emphasize the need for systemic responses that address the linguistic dimensions of digital harm. Moving forward, coordinated efforts involving educators, policymakers, mental health professionals, and community leaders are essential for fostering healthier digital ecosystems.

Ultimately, reclaiming language as a tool for connection rather than division represents a critical step toward building inclusive online spaces. By cultivating empathy-driven communication and strengthening support structures, society can work toward a digital future in which young individuals are empowered to express their authentic selves without fear of ridicule or harm.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the profound role of language in shaping digital intimacy and vulnerability among youths in Cameroon. Through rhetorical analysis of Facebook interactions and personal testimonies, the findings demonstrate that hate speech, verbal violence, and body shaming constitute pervasive threats that undermine emotional well-being and inhibit authentic self-expression. Grounded in Rhetorical Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study reveals how language operates not merely as a medium of communication but as a powerful mechanism of marginalization, identity regulation, and social control.

The societal implications of these findings are particularly concerning given youths' heightened susceptibility to the emotional consequences of online harassment. Exposure to hostile digital environments contributes to psychological distress, social withdrawal, and diminished self-worth, underscoring the urgent need for multidimensional interventions that address the linguistic, cultural, and social foundations of digital violence.

To mitigate these harms, comprehensive digital literacy programs should be implemented in schools and communities to educate young people about online safety, the impact of digital language, and healthy communication practices grounded in empathy and respect. Equally important is the expansion of accessible, youth-centered mental health services that provide coping strategies and foster resilience among those affected by cyberbullying. Cultural awareness initiatives are also essential for challenging harmful norms surrounding body image and violations of digital intimacy, while promoting inclusive representations across media and online platforms. In parallel, policy advocacy remains critical, including strengthening anti-cyberbullying regulations and encouraging technology companies to adopt more effective content moderation mechanisms.

Looking forward, fostering safer digital environments requires coordinated efforts among educators, policymakers, families, and digital platforms. By promoting open dialogue on language ethics and prioritizing youth mental health, society can cultivate online spaces where connection replaces exclusion. Ultimately, creating respectful and inclusive digital communities is a shared responsibility, one that enables young people to engage authentically, build empowering relationships, and experience digital intimacy without fear of harassment or harm.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

#### Statement of informed consent:

All participants involved in this study were fully informed about the procedure and the scope of the study.

#### Appendix: Victim Testimonies Script

##### Victim 1 Testimony (Young Woman aged 25)

Researcher: Thank you for agreeing to share your story. Can you describe your experience with online bullying?

Victim 1: Of course. I remember a specific incident that really shook me. It started when I posted about some personal struggles I was facing—things like anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. I thought sharing my experience would resonate with others, but instead, I was met with harsh comments.

Researcher: What kind of comments did you receive?

Victim 1: There were so many hurtful things. People were telling me to “shut up” and that “no one cares about my problems.” One comment said, “You are just looking for attention.” It made me feel like my whole identity was attacked. The words they used weren’t just hurtful; they made me question my existence and worth.

Researcher: How did this experience affect you personally?

Victim 1: It was devastating. I started to isolate myself from friends and family because I felt ashamed. I didn’t want to open up to anyone for fear of being ridiculed again. It created this cycle where I felt trapped in my emotions, further deepening my anxiety and depression.

Researcher: Have you found ways to cope since then?

Victim 1: I’m still navigating it, honestly. Talking to my friends about it helped a bit, and I’ve started engaging in activities that lift my spirits. But I still have those moments of doubt when I think back to the comments.

##### Victim 2 Testimony (Young Woman aged 19)

Researcher: Thank you for sharing your story with us. Can you begin by telling us what you experienced regarding body shaming online?

Victim 2: Yes, I can. My experience has been tough. I used to share pictures on social media, but after a while, I started getting negative comments about my body. It was always the same thing—people calling me “fat” and “ugly.” One comment said, “You’re so big; no wonder no one wants to date you.”

Researcher: How did these comments affect you?

Victim 2: I felt worthless. It wasn’t just the bullying; it impacted my whole mindset. I started to think I needed to change everything about myself, which led me to unhealthy habits. I tried diets that weren’t suitable for me and even skipped meals at times just to fit this ideal that people created.

Researcher: That sounds really difficult. What was your emotional response during this time?

Victim 2: I felt like I was constantly battling with my self-esteem. I wanted to be confident and love myself, but those comments echoed in my mind. They made me ashamed of who I was and created this overwhelming sense of depression.

Researcher: Have you sought support or found ways to deal with these feelings?

Victim 2: I’ve started talking to a therapist, and it’s helping me unpack those emotions. I’m learning to focus on my health rather than just my appearance. It’s a journey, but I want to reclaim my self-worth.

Researcher: Thank you both for sharing your stories. Your experiences shed light on the critical issues of hurtful language and its impact on mental health and identity.