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## The Transformation of Criticism into a Digital Mob and the Role of the Bandwagon Effect in Cyberbullying Against the Indonesian Police on Instagram

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**Abstract:** The phenomenon of cyberbullying against members of the Indonesian National Police (Polri) on social media, especially Instagram, shows an escalation pattern from public criticism to massive collective digital attacks. This phenomenon is often triggered by a psychological effect known as the bandwagon effect, where netizens tend to join in the flow of mass insults without understanding the context of the event as a whole. This study aims to analyze how the bandwagon effect contributes to the escalation of cyberbullying against police officers and examine the legal protection available based on current laws and regulations. The method used is a normative legal approach by examining Law No. 1 of 2024 concerning the Second Amendment to the ITE Law, the New Criminal Code (Law No. 1 of 2023), and various internal police regulations, including Perpolri No. 7 of 2022 concerning the Code of Professional Ethics. The results of the analysis show that although there are legal instruments that can be used to ensnare perpetrators of cyberbullying, there are no norms that specifically regulate digital collective actions, such as the bandwagon effect. The main challenges in law enforcement include proving the perpetrator's intention, limited resources in digital investigations, and the gap between the development of communication technology and legal responses. Therefore, a more comprehensive cyber regulatory reform is needed, and an increase in the digital literacy of the community to create a healthy, fair, and civilized public space, including in the relationship between society and state institutions such as the Police.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Bandwagon Effect, Cyber Law, Instagram, Police, Legal Protection

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cyberbullying against members of the Indonesian National Police (Polri) on social media, especially Instagram, has become part of the complex digital dynamics (Putri, 2024). On the one hand, the public has the right to express opinions and criticism of public institutions (Nasution, 2020). However, when such expressions develop into collective

attacks that are insulting, degrading, and even lead to verbal violence, the line between criticism and digital psychological violence becomes blurred (Faikaroh, 2021). The National Police as a law enforcement institution faces a dilemma between public transparency and protecting the dignity of its members. When large accounts and public figures are involved in continuously forming negative opinions, social pressure on individual police officers increases drastically. Social media such as Instagram makes negative content spread quickly and massively, strengthening the domino effect on the reputation and psychological condition of officers.

Criticism is actually part of a healthy democratic system (Saparina, 2021). However, in the digital space, criticism is often wrapped in an aggressive narrative that ignores communication ethics (Gabur, 2023). The use of terms, memes, and modified videos with the aim of embarrassing or cornering officers has obscured the meaning of constructive criticism (Giumetti, 2022). When an officer's action goes viral because it is considered wrong, a wave of comments and posts from other users will flood social media spaces, giving rise to the effect of joining in the bullying. This phenomenon is known as the bandwagon effect, which is the psychological urge to participate in the majority opinion or action (Djuna, 2022). Instead of encouraging institutional reform or improvement, these actions often create disproportionate pressure on individuals.

Cyberbullying in the legal context can be explained as a form of information technology-based violence that is carried out continuously and repeatedly to hurt or humiliate others (Alhakim, 2023). Its characteristics include the intention to hurt, the use of digital means, the public and permanent nature of the posts, and the difficulty for victims to defend themselves in an uncontrolled digital space (Hariyawan, 2020). In the context of the Police, cyberbullying not only hurts personally but also weakens institutions psychologically and socially. It is not uncommon for police officers to be the target of viral content that targets personal identity, family, or past track records, even though the actions in question were carried out by institutions, not individuals. This type of content shows how digital crowds are often unable to distinguish between institutional actors and personal actors.

Law No. 1 of 2024 as the second amendment to the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) provides a more careful legal framework for digital expression (Arifin, 2025). However, articles such as Article 27 paragraph (3) concerning insults and defamation remain relevant when someone becomes the target of hate speech or personal insults on social media (Supiyati, 2020). On the other hand, the use of this article against ordinary people is often criticized for its potential to curb freedom of expression (Setiawan, 2021). When state officials become victims of disproportionate and violent speech, the law faces a serious dilemma: distinguishing between silencing criticism and enforcing the protection of individual rights. Policymakers must pay attention to the context of the relationship between the apparatus as a representative of the state and its position as a citizen has the right to legal protection.

In Law No. 20 of 2023 concerning State Civil Apparatus, although it emphasizes the professionalism and integrity of ASN, the principles of professional protection still have implications for law enforcement officers (Paus, 2025). When cyberbullying leads to intimidation, threats, or insults against the profession of officers continuously, then the state should provide adequate protection. Officers cannot be considered to always be in a superior position in digital power relations because widespread and uncontrolled public pressure can make them easy targets for collective verbal violence. The state should formulate fair boundaries between criticism of public policy and personal attacks on individuals carrying out state duties. Otherwise, there will be an imbalance in legal protection that sacrifices the humanitarian side of the profession of officers (Anton, 2023).

The new Criminal Code which was ratified through Law No. 1 of 2023 also regulates criminal provisions relating to insults against state officials and state institutions. The articles

in the Criminal Code provide a basis for the state to take action against insults or hate speech that is destructive to institutions such as the Police (Natasha, 2023). However, the implementation of these articles must be carried out carefully so as not to kill press freedom and freedom of expression. If interpreted strictly, criminal law can be used as a tool of repression. However, if used selectively and proportionally, the law can be a protector for officers who work under heavy public pressure. In the social media, supervision and application of legal norms need to be carried out based on a dynamic digital context analysis.

The concept of the bandwagon effect shows that individuals tend to follow the flow of public opinion without making critical assessments (Zatrahadi, 2025). In social media, when most people condemn a police action, other users get involved not because they understand the context, but because of the pressure to be part of the dominant flow. This situation is exacerbated by features such as like, comment, and share which accelerate the spread of opinion and create the illusion of a majority. The psychological effects of this group pressure lead to violations of the principles of justice and objectivity (Zempi, 2023). Targeted individuals, including state officials, experience serious emotional and reputational losses. In this condition, the law not only plays a role as a regulator of sanctions but also as a protector of human values.

Social media provides a space for almost unlimited public participation but also opens up a gap for verbal violence disguised as freedom of expression (Bambang, 2025). In this reality, the National Police as an institution that has a crucial role in maintaining security and order faces double pressure: from demands for public performance and digital attacks that are often baseless. Legal protection for members of the National Police is urgent to ensure that they can work without constant digital intimidation. When the public is free to express their dissatisfaction, officers also have the right to a fair and safe working environment, including in cyberspace. The law must be present to maintain this balance, not to silence or strengthen domination.

Law No. 2 of 2002 concerning the Indonesian National Police emphasizes that members of the National Police have the right to legal protection in carrying out their duties. This right includes protection from physical and non-physical attacks, including digital attacks that damage dignity and honor. The heavy task of the police in the field requires assurance that officers do not become victims of intangible but real-impact violence. Massive attacks on social media against individual police officers who are carrying out their duties indicate that the law has not fully protected the psychological aspects of officers. The protection provided must not only be in the form of regulations but also a mechanism for monitoring and responding quickly to digital threats (Darmadi, 2024). The state cannot turn a blind eye to collective pressure that exceeds the limits of humanity.

The police code of ethics, including that regulated in the Indonesian Police Regulation, contains the principles of professionalism and social responsibility. However, this code of ethics should not only be internal but also be the basis for strengthening external protection for personnel (Daeng, 2024). If members of the National Police are required to maintain ethics and discipline, then the community also has a social responsibility to maintain digital communication norms. Public ethics on social media is an important part of the legal culture that must be developed together. When the bandwagon effect creates a climate of extreme fear and pressure, it is not only the relationship between the community and the police that is damaged but also the foundation of public trust in the law. In a healthy legal society, digital justice cannot be built solely from the voice of the majority, but from comprehensive protection for all parties, including those who are often targeted.

## METHOD

This study uses a normative legal method, namely an approach that relies on the analysis of relevant written legal norms, both in the form of laws and legal doctrines, without involving empirical field data. This approach was chosen because the main focus of the study is to examine relevant legal regulations related to the phenomenon of cyberbullying against members of the Indonesian National Police, especially in the context of the bandwagon effect on social media such as Instagram. The primary legal materials analyzed include Law No. 1 of 2024 concerning the Second Amendment to the ITE Law, the New Criminal Code (Law No. 1 of 2023), Law No. 2 of 2002 concerning the Indonesian National Police, and Perpolri No. 7 of 2022 concerning the Code of Professional Ethics and the Indonesian National Police Code of Ethics Commission. In addition, secondary legal materials such as law journals, textbooks, and scientific articles that discuss the phenomenon of digitalization of communication, the psychological effects of the bandwagon, and legal protection for state officials are also used. The reasoning used is deductive, namely drawing legal conclusions from general provisions into concrete events. The analysis is carried out systematically on the relationship between regulations, the suitability of norms with digital social reality, and the effectiveness of their implementation in responding to the escalation of hate speech against the Police. This method allows the author to assess whether the existing legal system is adequate or still leaves a legal vacuum, especially in dealing with the dynamics of public collectivity in the increasingly complex and rapidly developing digital space.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **The Phenomenon of Cyberbullying Against Members of the Republic of Indonesia National Police via the Instagram Social Media Platform**

The phenomenon of cyberbullying against the Police on Instagram can be recognized from the pattern of digital attacks that occur massively and repeatedly. In many cases, insults against officers begin with the virality of a video or photo showing police actions that are considered disproportionate or deviant. This type of content then spreads quickly, accompanied by negative comments, the use of provocative hashtags, and the creation of memes that corner people. The narrative formed by netizens is often black and white: the police are always wrong, and the public is always right. In a short time, the content appears on various accounts with similar captions, as if strengthening the truth of the narrative being built. This phenomenon shows that the digital space creates an ecosystem that facilitates the collective mobilization of negative opinions.

Cases that go viral often do not get equal clarification from the authorities. When an action is recorded in a video clip, the context of the event is lost and the public immediately forms judgments that tend to be emotional. Memes and sarcastic comments create an atmosphere of hatred that spreads without limits. Netizens no longer discuss actions but attack the profession, institution, and even the personal lives of officers. Mass reposts expand the reach of the narrative and make it a kind of shared truth, even though the narrative may not be entirely accurate. This attack pattern is not just about a single piece of content, but rather a series of reactions that reinforce each other and trigger a collective psychological effect on the authorities.

The transformation from criticism to digital mob action usually begins with content that invites public emotion. The content is then processed by the Instagram algorithm as content that is “relevant” and “worthy of increasing its reach” because it gets a lot of interaction. The algorithm accelerates the spread of content without considering ethics or information accuracy, as long as the content is considered interesting. In this process, large accounts with a high number of followers play an important role as the main triggers of the domino effect. When these accounts comment on or re-upload content with negative framing, other users are dragged

into the narrative that is built. The reproduction of this kind of content becomes fuel for the escalation of increasingly wild and personal digital attacks.

The bandwagon effect is visible when users who previously did not know anything comment on and spread content just because they want to be part of the majority group. This action creates social pressure on other users not to remain silent, even if they do not have enough information. As a result, there is an uncontrolled multiplication of insults, where the content of the comments is no longer relevant to the substance of the incident, but only in the form of ridicule, insults, or even doxing. This circle exacerbates the psychological pressure on the victims, in this case, state officials. The process of forming public opinion is flawed because it is not based on objective data, but solely on the dominant current formed emotionally. Social media loses its function as a discussion space and makes a space for character slaughter.

From a legal perspective, the behavior of netizens who continuously insult or degrade state officials can fulfill the elements of a crime in Article 27 paragraph (3) of Law No. 1 of 2024 concerning the Second Amendment to the ITE Law. This article explains the prohibition on distributing or transmitting content containing insults or defamation through electronic media. If the upload in the form of comments or visual content is intended to personally undermine the dignity of an individual, not within the framework of institutional criticism, then the subjective element in the form of intent to hurt can be considered fulfilled. Content that is disseminated in the form of memes or videos with the aim of publicly embarrassing officials can also be categorized as insults. In this context, the public no longer conveys criticism but perform digital bullying against certain subjects. The law looks at motives, mediums, and impacts in assessing criminal elements. Article 28 paragraph (2) of the ITE Law can also be considered in situations where the narrative that is built triggers hatred based on profession or public office. Although this norm is often used in SARA, the discriminatory nature against certain groups, including law enforcement officers, can be the analysis subject.

When the content's spread contains elements of incitement and incitement against the Polri group as an institution or profession, this article can be used as a harmful restriction to public order. In the digital context, the impact of spreading hatred can occur widely and quickly, causing systemic psychological pressure on the target group. Social media does not recognize space and time so one content can reach millions of people in a matter of minutes. The potential for reputational damage and mental stress caused is enormous.

In addition to the ITE Law, the New Criminal Code which was ratified through Law No. 1 of 2023 also provides a legal basis that can be used to assess acts of insulting state officials or institutions. Articles 437 to 440 of the New Criminal Code contain provisions regarding insults to general authorities or state institutions carried out in public spaces, including digital spaces. In this article, acts of insulting, attacking the honor, or degrading the dignity of state officials can be punished if carried out to damage the authority or public trust in the institution. Netizens who consciously spread content that insults the Polri institution or its personnel, especially if done repeatedly, may be subject to criminal sanctions. The law protects individuals and maintains the authority of institutions so that they remain trusted by the public.

When state officials such as the Indonesian National Police become targets of hate speech and collective insults, law enforcement must pay attention to the aspect of proportionality. Not all content with a harsh tone deserves to be considered a criminal offense, but when a post shows a structured and repeated pattern of bullying, a legal approach needs to be taken. Legal analysis should consider the context, consequences, and the perpetrator's intent. Content created with the intention of harassing or humiliating officials in public can no longer be considered a legitimate expression in a democratic system. The state must protect its members from unfair pressure, especially if it is carried out in a very open space such as social

media. The imbalance between the power of the digital masses and the position of individual officials must be seen as a serious issue of justice.

Digital space is not a free area without legal boundaries. Although it provides space for broad public participation, social media also brings major challenges in ensuring justice, ethics, and protection for involved individual. The Indonesian National Police, as part of a state institution that works under public pressure, needs effective legal protection from new forms of violence such as cyberbullying. When slander evolves a collective movement that destroys a person's reputation and dignity without a proper defense opportunity, the state must be present to ensure that justice is not defeated by majority opinion. In a digital democracy, the majority vote is not always the measure of truth. The law becomes a limit and a guard so that freedom does not evolve a space of violence.

### **Legal Analysis of Cyberbullying Crimes and Challenges in Law Enforcement by Law Enforcement Officers**

Law enforcement in cases of cyberbullying targeting members of the Indonesian National Police often faces unique complexities in practice. Although regulatory instruments are available through the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law) and the New Criminal Code, implementation in the field faces challenges in assessing the intent and substance of each post. Many cases of hate speech reported by officials do not proceed because investigators have difficulty proving the perpetrator's malicious intent or *mens rea*. This situation is further complicated by the position of netizens as civilians who claim to be merely expressing their opinions. In court rulings, there is no strong precedent affirming legal protection for police officers from digital mobs specifically. When offenses involve social media, the legal process becomes vulnerable to broad interpretations that can be drawn into the realm of freedom of speech.

The capacity of investigators to handle cyber cases is still uneven, especially in unraveling collective patterns such as the bandwagon effect. The National Police's cyber unit has limited resources in tracking content that is widely and simultaneously distributed. When one account is reported, hundreds of other accounts appear with similar narratives and content, making the law enforcement process seem ineffective and slow. Digital investigations require sophisticated analytical tools and significant time, while public pressure demands swift responses. This situation creates a dilemma between the need to protect law enforcement personnel and the technical realities of law enforcement. Many cases stall at the mediation or reprimand stage due to the difficulty of constructing a complete legal case.

Legal protection for police officers should be seen not only as an institutional responsibility but also as a personal right of every officer performing their national duties. In the context of cyberbullying, police officers often become personal targets through their social media accounts or while on duty in the field. Protection efforts can be made by reporting content to digital platforms, requesting takedowns, or filing official reports. The police institution has the authority to accompany and facilitate legal processes for its members who are victims. Indonesian Police Regulation No. 7 of 2022 on Professional Ethics and the Police Ethics Commission sets standards for behavior and internal protection mechanisms, including against unfair public pressure. These ethical mechanisms must be actively implemented to maintain the integrity and dignity of members from disproportionate digital attacks.

Institutional protection also requires internal policies that are responsive to psychosocial issues arising from cyberbullying. Members who are victims not only suffer reputational damage but also mental stress that can affect their performance and well-being. In this regard, it is important for the police to establish psychological support units and strengthen reporting systems and rapid response mechanisms for digital content containing defamation or insults. Slow handling will reinforce the public perception that officers are left unprotected.

Legal protection must be viewed holistically: covering criminal law, institutional administration, and mental health. Supporting the protection of officers' rights does not mean limiting criticism, but providing a fair and balanced space between public control and professional security.

Regulatory gaps are one of the main factors causing the bandwagon effect phenomenon to remain unaddressed in Indonesian positive law. Currently, criminal law focuses more on individual perpetrators who spread hateful or defamatory content but has not addressed the collective aspect that occurs in the digital space. When content is spread collectively by thousands of accounts with similar narratives, there are no legal norms that explicitly regulate collective legal responsibility in cyberspace. This situation creates a loophole that allows netizens to hide behind the excuse of “following the crowd” without realizing their contribution to the impact that occurs. The bandwagon effect not only reinforces bullying but also creates a normalization of symbolic violence on social media. Without adequate regulation, collective perpetrators will continue to repeat patterns of attack without guilt.

This legal vacuum indicates an urgent need to reform the cyber law approach to be more responsive to today's digital dynamics. Existing regulations are still focused on linear forms of communication between individuals or between individuals and the public directly. In reality, digital communication develops non-linearly and is interconnected in complex networks. Content can be duplicated, modified, and redistributed with varying intentions. Legal reform must expand its perspective on how content lives and evolves in the digital world, including considering algorithms and virality as part of the communication ecosystem that influences legal impact. The law is insufficient to regulate only “what is said,” but also “how and to what extent it spreads.”

The urgency to expand the scope of the law also arises from the prevalence of digital vigilantism or self-proclaimed justice in the virtual world. When netizens take on the role of moral judges and publicly punish individuals through digital abuse, they have shifted the function of legitimate justice. Digital vigilantism creates a climate of fear, exacerbates polarization, and erodes the principle of due process of law. In this context, state officials who should be guaranteed legal protection have become victims of public judgment without accountability mechanisms. This phenomenon shows that the law has not been able to protect individuals from collective non-physical violence with tangible impacts. Protection for state officials is increasingly important because they are in a position that makes them easy targets in any social-political issue.

Concrete steps toward legal reform can begin with the creation of subsidiary regulations or technical guidelines that clarify the boundaries between criticism, defamation, and collective cyberbullying. New regulations must consider indicators of involvement, intensity of dissemination, and the role of accounts with large reach in influencing public opinion. Additionally, there needs to be synergy between law enforcement agencies and digital platforms to create a rapid response mechanism for content that is offensive or inciting on a massive scale. This effort is not aimed at limiting freedom of expression but at creating shared responsibility in maintaining a healthy digital ecosystem. There must be recognition that the digital space is not a lawless zone but a part of social life that must be regulated fairly and proportionally.

The paradigm of legal protection for officials in the digital age requires an approach that is repressive, preventive, and educational. Law enforcement is not the only solution to cyberbullying against the National Police; public digital awareness must also be built through legal literacy and social media ethics. The police, as an institution, can play an active role in disseminating information about the legal rights of officers, reporting procedures, and the boundaries between legitimate criticism and personal attacks. When the public understands that freedom of expression does not mean freedom to insult, the digital space will become more

conducive. The harmony between legal protection and public awareness is the key to creating justice that is not biased in cyberspace.

## CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of cyberbullying against members of the Indonesian National Police on social media, particularly through the bandwagon effect on Instagram, reveals a gap between the dynamics of digital communication in society and the available legal instruments. This study found that while Indonesia's positive law has provided instruments to address hate speech and defamation, such as in Law No. 1 of 2024 on ITE and the New Criminal Code (Law No. 1 of 2023), the existing approach is insufficient to address the complexity of collective behavior in the digital space. Criticism of state officials is indeed legitimate in a democracy, but when criticism turns into systematic and viral attacks without a clear basis, it has crossed legal and moral boundaries. Protecting police officers as state officials is essential to prevent institutional weakening due to destructive public pressure. Law enforcement also faces significant challenges, ranging from proving the intent of perpetrators, technical limitations in investigations, to regulatory gaps regarding mass behavior patterns such as the bandwagon effect.

From the discussion, it was concluded that there is a need for a paradigm shift in Indonesian cyber law to respond to the increasingly complex changes in digital interaction patterns. Existing regulations should be strengthened with norms that accommodate the collective dimension of digital communication and more explicit protection for state officials as subjects vulnerable to digital vigilantism. Besides the legislative efforts, it is crucial to take an educational approach by improving the public's digital legal literacy so that the public understands the line between constructive criticism and digital bullying. There must be synergistic collaboration between law enforcement officials, social media platform providers, and educational institutions in building an ethical and civilized digital culture. Law enforcement against cyberbullying cannot stand alone, but must be part of a national movement to create a digital space that is fair, healthy, and upholds the dignity of every individual, including state officials.

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