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Conflict as Contact: Acknowledgement-Seeking as a Candidate Function of Unsolicited Online Provocation

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Abstract

Digital environments have expanded opportunities for interpersonal communication while leaving loneliness and perceived social disconnection widespread. Within these environments, a substantial share of negative interaction is unsolicited: individuals initiate derogatory or provocative communication with strangers, creators, and public figures with whom they have no prior relationship. Existing accounts explain such behaviour primarily through personality dispositions, entertainment motives, ideological commitment, and status competition, and thereby identify who provokes rather than what maintains the behaviour. This theoretical article proposes an additional and empirically distinguishable functional account, the Conflict-as-Contact Hypothesis (CCH), which holds that some unsolicited online provocation is maintained because it reliably produces interpersonal acknowledgement, and that acknowledgement may reinforce independently of its emotional valence. The article advances a specific falsifiable claim: under conditions of perceived social invisibility, an aversive interpersonal response such as anger, defensiveness, or retaliation may function as an appetitive reinforcer rather than as a punisher. This mechanism is formalised as the Conflict-Attention-Reinforcement Loop and expressed as six testable propositions with specified disconfirming outcomes. The framework is explicitly differentiated from several adjacent accounts, including rejection-induced aggression, compensatory internet use, negative social potency, and visibility enhancement through antagonism. A discriminating test is identified in the neutral acknowledging response, which the dominance interpretation predicts to be non-reinforcing and which CCH predicts to be partially reinforcing. CCH does not claim that trolling is caused by loneliness, nor that online aggression is covertly prosocial; it proposes acknowledgement-seeking as one candidate function among several nonexclusive functions.

Keywords: online provocation; trolling; acknowledgement; social reinforcement; online disinhibition; ostracism; compensatory internet use; attention economy

Introduction

The relationship between digital connectivity and psychological connectedness is not straightforward. Social media platforms permit instantaneous communication across geographical and social boundaries, yet loneliness and dissatisfaction with interpersonal relationships remain persistent concerns in digitally connected societies. Research has consistently found that the association between social media use and well-being depends less on volume of use than on its motivational structure and interactional mode (Nowland et al., 2018; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

Against this background, one category of online behaviour remains theoretically underspecified: unsolicited negative interaction initiated toward strangers. Such communication is distinguishable from substantive disagreement in that it introduces little or no examinable informational content, consisting instead of dismissal, ridicule, or provocation apparently intended to elicit an emotional response.

The dominant explanations for this behaviour are dispositional and motivational.

Trolling has been associated with Dark Tetrad traits and particularly with everyday sadism (Buckels et al., 2014), with negative social potency (Craker & March, 2016), with impulsivity (March et al., 2017), and with a heterogeneous set of self-reported motives including entertainment, boredom relief, revenge, and social influence (Cook et al., 2018).

These accounts explain why certain individuals are disposed toward provocative behaviour. They explain less well why the behaviour persists in specific interactional environments, why it is directed at particular targets rather than others, and why it escalates or extinguishes under different response conditions. A dispositional account identifies the actor; it does not identify the contingency maintaining the act.

The present article addresses that gap by asking a functional question. Setting aside what the provocative message asserts, what consequence does the behaviour reliably produce, and could that consequence be reinforcing?

The answer proposed here is that provocation is capable of producing acknowledgement, understood as evidence that one has entered the psychological field of another person, and may do so with sufficient regularity to become reinforcing. Under conditions of perceived social invisibility, acknowledgement may reinforce regardless of whether it is affectionate or hostile. This proposition is developed below, differentiated from adjacent accounts, and rendered falsifiable in the form of six numbered propositions.

Definitional Scope

Terminological inconsistency has complicated research in this area, with trolling, cyberaggression, flaming, and online harassment often used interchangeably (Hardaker, 2010). The present framework requires narrower boundaries.

Unsolicited online provocation is defined here as communication that meets four criteria: (a) it is initiated by the sender rather than solicited or invited by the recipient; (b) it is directed toward an individual with whom the sender has no established offline or sustained online relationship; (c) it contains minimal examinable propositional content, in the sense that it advances no claim, evidence, or reasoning that could be evaluated or contested; and (d) its form is consistent with an intention to elicit an affective rather than a cognitive response.

Three exclusions follow. Substantive critical disagreement, however forcefully expressed, falls outside the definition by criterion (c). Targeted harassment campaigns, threats, and stalking fall outside the framework's intended scope because they involve coercive and frequently criminal dynamics for which an acknowledgement-seeking account would be both inadequate and ethically inappropriate. Reciprocal escalation within an ongoing dispute falls outside by criterion (a).

Acknowledgement is defined as evidence available to the initiator that a specific other person has registered their communication and allocated attention to it. Acknowledgement is treated as valence-neutral: a hostile reply and an appreciative reply both constitute acknowledgement, though they differ on every other dimension. The distinction between acknowledgement and affiliation is the conceptual pivot of the framework developed below. **Social Disconnection and Compensatory Online Engagement** The need to form and maintain interpersonal bonds is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary,

1995). Where opportunities to satisfy this need are restricted, individuals may pursue alternative routes to social contact.

Kardefelt-Winther (2014) proposed the compensatory internet use model, arguing that problematic online engagement is more usefully understood as a coping response to unmet psychosocial needs than as a pathology of the technology itself. On this account, the relevant explanatory variable is the need the behaviour serves rather than the amount of time the behaviour consumes. Nowland et al. (2018) reached a compatible conclusion regarding loneliness specifically: internet use may reduce or reinforce loneliness depending on whether digital interaction supplements or displaces richer forms of connection. O'Day and Heimberg (2021) documented similarly conditional relationships among social media use, social anxiety, and loneliness.

The compensatory literature has, however, concentrated almost exclusively on affiliative compensation strategies: messaging, community participation, support seeking, self-disclosure, and relationship maintenance. The implicit assumption is that individuals compensating for unmet social needs pursue positive interaction.

This assumption is not obviously warranted. Social contact does not require positive valence to constitute contact. Conflict establishes an interpersonal relationship that is temporary, adversarial, and emotionally negative, but a relationship nonetheless, in which two parties attend to one another. The present framework therefore extends the compensatory model in a direction it has not yet been taken: if online behaviour can serve compensatory social functions, antagonistic online behaviour may serve them as well.

The Reduced Behavioural Cost of Provocation

Compensatory motivation alone cannot explain why provocation occurs online at rates without offline equivalent. A structural account of the medium is also required.

Suler (2004) identified six features of online communication that reduce behavioural restraint: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimisation of authority. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (Spears & Lea, 1994) offers a complementary mechanism in which reduced individuating cues do not simply release inhibition but shift the salience of identity from the personal to the group level, thereby altering which norms govern behaviour.

The practical consequence for the present framework is a differential in behavioural cost. Face-to-face provocation of a stranger carries immediate and reliable costs: physical copresence, witness effects, the visible affective response of the target, and the operation of interactional norms. Equivalent online provocation can be initiated in seconds from a position of physical and psychological distance, with the target's response arriving asynchronously and in mediated form.

This asymmetry produces a structural condition on which the remainder of the framework depends. Where provocation reliably produces acknowledgement, online environments make acknowledgement obtainable through conflict at a fraction of the behavioural cost required offline. Provocation is therefore not merely a possible route to acknowledgement online; it is a comparatively inexpensive one. Nitschinsk et al. (2023) applied a functionalist logic to a related question, examining whether individuals high in sadism and psychopathy are motivated to seek the affordances of online environments in order to express those dispositions. The present framework applies the same logic to a different candidate function, asking not which dispositions the medium permits to be expressed but which consequences the medium makes cheaply obtainable. **Social Reward Without Affiliation**

Research on trolling has established that provocative online behaviour can be intrinsically rewarding. Buckels et al. (2014) found associations with Dark Tetrad traits, with sadism showing the most robust relationship. Craker and March (2016) introduced negative social potency, defined as social reward derived from producing negative interpersonal effects, as a specific predictor of trolling behaviour. Cook et al. (2018), using qualitative methods, identified a broader motivational range including entertainment, boredom, revenge, and the pursuit of social influence.

The construct of negative social potency is of particular importance here because it establishes something the present framework requires: that social reward can be obtained in the absence of approval, affection, or admiration. Successfully producing anger, defensiveness, or distress in another person can itself constitute a rewarding social outcome.

A related line of work concerns how targets conceptualise those who provoke them. Maltby et al. (2016) identified attention-conflict seeking as one of five salient factors in lay conceptions of online trolls, and found that holding this conception was associated with reduced negative affect following trolling experiences. That work establishes that attentionseeking is a widely held folk explanation and that it has consequences for target resilience. It does not test whether the explanation is correct, nor does it specify a mechanism through which attention would reinforce the behaviour. The present framework takes up that unaddressed question.

The present framework accepts this finding and raises a further question about its interpretation. Negative social potency is conventionally understood in terms of power: the reward is taken to lie in the capacity to affect another person adversely. Yet the same observable outcome, a target who becomes angry, simultaneously delivers a second and analytically separable outcome, namely acknowledgement, the demonstrable fact that a specific person has registered one's existence and allocated attention accordingly. These two accounts predict identically in most naturalistic observations. They diverge sharply under specifiable conditions, and a discriminating test is set out below. The claim advanced here is not that the construct of negative social potency is mistaken, but that it is incompletely specified: to the present author's knowledge, the dominance interpretation has not been directly tested against an acknowledgement-based alternative.

The Acknowledgement Asymmetry

Research on ostracism supplies the final component of the framework. Williams (2009) proposed that ostracism threatens four fundamental needs, namely belonging, selfesteem, control, and meaningful existence, and experimental work has demonstrated that even minimal and ostensibly inconsequential exclusion produces measurable distress. Digital environments generate structurally analogous conditions: unanswered messages, exclusion from interactions, and the experience of being socially invisible within an environment saturated with visible others.

Ostracism research establishes that the absence of acknowledgement is aversive. It does not establish, and has not tested, whether individuals actively deploy strategies to avoid that absence.

The proposition advanced here follows from that gap. If the absence of acknowledgement is aversive, then acknowledgement of any valence may be preferable to its absence for individuals whose baseline condition is invisibility. A hostile reply communicates that one has been noticed; a defensive reply communicates that one has produced an effect; a sustained argument communicates that another person is allocating time and attention. The psychologically operative contrast, under these conditions, is not between positive and negative interaction but between interaction and invisibility.

This asymmetry is the foundation of the hypothesis advanced below. The intuition underlying it is not new outside psychology. Writing in media and cultural studies, Fuller et al. (2013) considered the vernacular maxim advising against feeding trolls in terms of acknowledgement and interaction functioning as a form of subsistence within an attention economy. That treatment is interpretive rather than empirical: it neither specifies a reinforcement mechanism nor provides a means of testing one. The contribution claimed here is the conversion of a widely held intuition into an operationalised and falsifiable psychological hypothesis. Accordingly, the asymmetry is stated as a hypothesis requiring direct test rather than as an established finding, and the present review identified no study directly demonstrating that individuals pursue negative acknowledgement in preference to no acknowledgement.

The Conflict-as-Contact Hypothesis Statement

Some unsolicited online provocation is initiated and maintained because it reliably produces interpersonal acknowledgement, and acknowledgement functions as a reinforcer independently of its emotional valence. This function is expected to be most influential where the initiator perceives positive routes to acknowledgement as unavailable, ineffective, or costly.

Scope Conditions

CCH is a functional hypothesis about behavioural maintenance rather than a causal claim about behavioural origin. Four boundaries follow.

First, CCH does not claim that loneliness causes trolling. It claims that acknowledgement may reinforce provocation, which is a different proposition operating at a different level of analysis.

Second, CCH is non-exclusive. A single provocative act may simultaneously express hostility, communicate disagreement, generate entertainment, assert status, and produce acknowledgement. These functions are not competitors.

Third, CCH is a hypothesis about a subset. It predicts that acknowledgement-seeking will account for meaningful variance in some provocative behaviour, not that it characterises all of it or even most of it.

Fourth, CCH is not a diagnostic instrument. It generates population-level predictions about behavioural function. It does not license inferences about the psychological state of any individual from their online communication, and using it for that purpose would be both invalid and ethically objectionable.

The Recognition Asymmetry

Unsolicited provocation contains a structural contradiction that motivates the framework. At the semantic level, the message communicates rejection: the target's work is worthless, their reasoning is faulty, their contribution is negligible. At the behavioural level, the sender has selected this target from among an effectively unlimited number of alternatives, allocated time to composing a response, and in many cases returned subsequently to check whether a reply was received. The stated content communicates dismissal; the behavioural sequence communicates a request for interaction.

This need not be a conscious contradiction. Behaviour can be reinforced without the actor's awareness of the contingency maintaining it, and an individual may accurately report an ideological motive while the behaviour is simultaneously maintained by consequences they have not identified.

The Conflict-Attention-Reinforcement Loop The Central Claim

That behaviour producing reward is repeated is not a novel proposition. The novel and falsifiable component of the present framework is narrower and should be stated precisely: under conditions of perceived social invisibility, an aversive interpersonal response may function as an appetitive reinforcer.

This inverts the conventional expectation. Anger, hostility, defensiveness, and retaliation are ordinarily modelled as punishers that suppress the behaviour preceding them. CCH proposes that when the alternative to an aversive response is no response at all, the aversive response acquires reinforcing properties by virtue of the acknowledgement it carries, and that this reinforcing property may exceed the punishing property of its emotional content.

This is the claim on which the framework should be evaluated, and it is directly testable.

The Proposed Sequence

The Conflict-Attention-Reinforcement Loop (CARL) formalises the proposed sequence as follows: perceived social invisibility or insufficient acknowledgement leads to low-cost provocation directed at an accessible target; this produces an interpersonal reaction from the target or the surrounding audience; the reaction delivers acknowledgement; acknowledgement reinforces the behaviour; and the probability of subsequent provocation increases.

Three features of the loop warrant emphasis. The loop is valence-indifferent at the reinforcement stage, which is what distinguishes it from ordinary models of attention-seeking that typically assume the sought attention is positive. The loop does not require conscious intent at the initiating stage; the initiator's subjective account may be sincere and simultaneously incomplete as a description of what maintains the behaviour. Finally, the loop predicts specific observable signatures: repeated return to monitor for responses, escalation contingent on engagement rather than on the content of the response, and preferential selection of targets whose response probability is high.

The Platform Layer

A second reinforcement process may operate in parallel. Where platform ranking systems reward interaction volume without adequately distinguishing constructive engagement from antagonistic engagement, algorithmic amplification may constitute a second reinforcement layer. Under such conditions the architecture of distribution would amplify precisely the behaviour that the psychological loop already reinforces: provocation produces interpersonal reaction, reaction produces amplification, amplification produces increased visibility, and visibility produces further reaction. Psychological and technological reinforcement would then compound. Ranking systems are proprietary and subject to continuous revision, so this is offered as a conditional structural observation about incentive design rather than a claim about the operation of any specific platform, and it requires platform-level data to evaluate.

Distinguishing the Framework From Adjacent Accounts

CCH occupies conceptual territory adjacent to several existing literatures, and its value depends on being genuinely distinguishable from the closest competing accounts. This section states the differences and the discriminating tests.

Rejection-Induced Aggression

Twenge et al. (2001) demonstrated experimentally that social exclusion increases aggression, including

aggression toward individuals uninvolved in the exclusion. This is the closest existing account and must be addressed directly.

The rejection-aggression model is a theory of antecedents: exclusion produces a state that increases aggressive output. CCH is a theory of consequences: acknowledgement following provocation increases the probability of subsequent provocation. The two are compatible and may operate sequentially, in that exclusion could initiate a behaviour that acknowledgement then maintains, but they are not the same claim and they generate different predictions.

The discriminating test is as follows. The rejection-aggression model predicts that aggressive output following exclusion is largely insensitive to the target's response, since the proposed function is affect regulation. CCH predicts that subsequent provocative behaviour is strongly sensitive to whether the target responded, since the proposed function is acknowledgement acquisition. Manipulating target response while holding exclusion constant separates the accounts.

Compensatory Internet Use

The compensatory internet use model (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014) holds that problematic internet use is a coping response to unmet psychosocial needs. CCH is a specific extension of this model into a domain it has not addressed, namely antagonistic rather than affiliative compensation.

The discriminating contribution is as follows. Compensatory internet use theory predicts that unmet social needs increase online engagement generally. CCH predicts something the parent model does not, namely that unmet needs increase specifically antagonistic engagement, and do so preferentially where affiliative routes are perceived as unavailable or as having failed.

Negative Social Potency

As set out above, negative social potency (Craker & March, 2016) and CCH predict identically in most observational contexts, since both anticipate that hostile responses reward the initiator.

The accounts diverge on the effect of a neutral acknowledging response, defined as a reply that registers the communication without conceding distress, defensiveness, or emotional impact. The dominance account predicts that such a response is non-reinforcing, because no adverse effect was produced. CCH predicts that it is partially reinforcing, because acknowledgement was nonetheless delivered. This single manipulation constitutes the sharpest available test of the framework and is proposed here as the priority study.

Visibility Enhancement Through Antagonism

Felmlee et al. (2024) provide the closest empirical precedent. Analysing large samples of tweets containing sexist and racist slurs, they argued that perpetrators disseminate such messages in order to enhance their own online visibility, and found network patterns consistent with that interpretation. This finding converges with the account developed here and should be treated as partial empirical support rather than as a competing explanation.

Two differences nonetheless remain. First, their analysis concerns visibility obtained from a wider audience, whereas CCH concerns acknowledgement obtained from a specific addressed target; these are separable outcomes, and a message may deliver one without the other. Second, and more importantly, their account does not address valence-indifference.

Visibility enhancement is compatible with an initiator who is indifferent to the target's response provided the audience observes the exchange, whereas CCH predicts that the target's response itself carries reinforcing value. The neutral acknowledgement manipulation described below separates these predictions, because a neutral private reply delivers acknowledgement without delivering audience visibility.

Summary of Competing Predictions

Table 1 sets out the predictions each account generates under three target-response conditions. The neutral acknowledging condition is the only one on which all four accounts do not converge, which is why it carries the discriminating weight.

Table 1

Predicted Reinforcement Outcomes Under Three Target-Response Conditions

Account	Proposed function of the behaviour	Hostile response	Neutral acknowledgement	No response
Negative social potency	Adverse impact on the target; dominance	Reinforcing	Weak or nonreinforcing	Non-reinforcing
Rejection-induced aggression	Affect regulation following exclusion	Output insensitive to response type	Output insensitive to response type	Output insensitive to response type
Compensatory internet use	Compensation for unmet psychosocial needs	No differential prediction	No differential prediction	No differential prediction
Conflict-as-Contact Hypothesis	Acquisition of acknowledgement	Reinforcing	Partially reinforcing	Non-reinforcing

Note. Predictions concern the probability of subsequent provocation directed at the same target. The neutral acknowledgement column distinguishes the Conflict-as-Contact Hypothesis from the dominance interpretation of negative social potency.

Non-Response as Contingency Removal

If interpersonal reaction reinforces some provocative behaviour, withholding reaction removes one maintaining contingency. This implication requires careful qualification.

It is not a general recommendation to ignore criticism. Substantive disagreement, factual correction, and public accountability depend on dialogue, and silence carries no inherent epistemic virtue. The distinction concerns informational content as specified in the definitional section. A message advancing a claim, an alternative interpretation, or contradicting evidence introduces material that can be examined. A message consisting of dismissal introduces none.

Where a message contains no examinable content and its form suggests an affective target, sustained engagement may convert the recipient's attention into the reinforcer maintaining the behaviour. Within CARL, two alternative sequences are possible:

provocation followed by response, acknowledgement, reinforcement, and repetition; or provocation followed by no acknowledgement and extinction of the contingency.

The second sequence is a prediction of the model and has not been experimentally established. Withdrawal of reinforcement may in some circumstances produce temporary escalation before reduction, but such an extinction burst is not required by CCH. Immediate reduction is equally compatible with removal of the proposed reinforcing contingency, and the pattern should be measured rather than assumed.

For individuals with large audiences the implication is structural rather than merely tactical. Public visibility generates an effectively unlimited supply of unsolicited interaction, and a norm of responding to all of it transfers control over one's attention to whoever succeeds in provoking a response. Selective non-participation is, on this analysis, a form of contingency management rather than avoidance. This aligns with the argument of Kozyreva et al. (2023) that deliberate, selective ignoring should be understood as a competence in its own right rather than as a failure of engagement, and that attention invested in low-quality provocation has already been expropriated regardless of how well the eventual response is reasoned.

Testable Propositions

CCH is stated as six falsifiable propositions, each with a specified disconfirming outcome.

Proposition 1. Subjective social disconnection predicts frequency of initiated unsolicited provocation after controlling for Dark Tetrad traits, impulsivity, and total social media use.

Disconfirmed if the association is fully accounted for by dispositional covariates. Proposition 2. Provocative behaviour is more likely to be repeated following any response than following no response, with hostile and neutral acknowledging responses both exceeding the no-response condition. Disconfirmed if repetition rates following neutral acknowledgement do not differ from the no-response condition.

Proposition 3. A neutral acknowledging response, defined as one registering the communication without expressing distress, defensiveness, or concession, produces partial reinforcement relative to no response. Disconfirmed if only responses conveying distress or defensiveness are reinforcing, which would support the dominance interpretation of negative social potency over CCH. This is the priority discriminating test.

Proposition 4. Target selection is predicted by perceived response probability and by target visibility, independently of the target's ideological position or content domain. Disconfirmed if selection is predicted by content or ideological variables alone.

Proposition 5. Individuals who engage in repeated provocation report stronger expectations of receiving a response and exhibit measurable monitoring behaviour, operationalised as repeated return to the interaction, relative to individuals who provoke once. Disconfirmed if monitoring behaviour does not differentiate repeat from single-instance initiators. Proposition 6. Withdrawal of acknowledgement reduces subsequent provocative behaviour toward the same target relative to continued acknowledgement. Temporary escalation following withdrawal, consistent with an extinction burst, may occur but is not required by the model; immediate reduction is equally compatible with removal of a reinforcing contingency. Disconfirmed if withdrawal produces sustained escalation with no subsequent reduction, or if withdrawal and continued acknowledgement produce equivalent rates of subsequent provocation.

Longitudinal designs are additionally required to establish temporal ordering, since antagonistic behaviour may itself damage relationships and increase isolation, producing a reciprocal rather than unidirectional relationship. Cross-cultural replication is necessary before any claim to generality can be sustained.

Implications Individuals With Public Audiences

A functional taxonomy is more useful than a valence-based one. Substantive disagreement, legitimate criticism, misinformation requiring correction, harassment or threats, and low-information provocation call for materially different responses, and the operative question is what consequence each response produces rather than how the message made the recipient feel.

Organisations

The relevant risk is misclassification in both directions. Genuine complaints misread as bad-faith engagement destroy customer relationships and discard useful information, whereas bad-faith engagement misread as genuine complaint draws staff into interactions that no resolution can terminate. Moderation protocols benefit from explicit criteria distinguishing the two, and from removing the individual employee's discretion, and consequent exposure, from repeated escalating exchanges.

Platforms

If engagement-based ranking amplifies conflict indiscriminately, the distribution architecture may operate as a second reinforcement layer. This is an empirical question about ranking-system behaviour that platform-internal data could resolve and that external researchers currently cannot.

Boundary Conditions and Limitations

A conceptual framework must specify what it does not explain. Trolling has been associated with sadism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, narcissism, impulsivity, entertainment motives, ideological commitment, and status competition. CCH does not supersede these findings and would be refuted by any interpretation claiming that it does.

Several distinct functions should be kept separate: enjoyment of others' distress; status acquisition within an ideological in-group; sincere belief in the moral justification of confrontation; commercial visibility seeking; conflict as recreation; and acknowledgement acquisition. These are non-exclusive, and a single act may serve several simultaneously. The inference that people troll because they are lonely does not follow from CCH and is inconsistent with it.

A further class of account should also be distinguished. Trolling has been analysed as a social practice constituted within particular online communities rather than as an expression of individual disposition; Graham (2019), for example, treats trolling as a mechanism of community boundary maintenance. Where provocation is governed primarily by community norms and functions to define or police group membership, CCH is unlikely to add explanatory value, and the framework should not be applied to such cases.

Three further limits apply. CCH is untested, and every proposition stated above remains open. Its cultural generality is unknown, since norms governing confrontation, public disagreement, and emotional expression vary substantially across societies. And it should not be extended to targeted harassment, threats, or coordinated abuse, where the operative dynamics are coercive and where a compensatory framing would be both explanatorily inadequate and ethically objectionable.

Discussion and Conclusion

Digital environments combine unprecedented interpersonal access with persistent loneliness and intensified competition for attention. Within such an environment, conflict possesses a distinctive property

it is exceptionally reliable at producing a reaction.

The existing literature establishes separately that online environments reduce behavioural inhibition; that belonging is a fundamental need; that online behaviour can serve compensatory social functions; that social reward can be derived from negative interpersonal effects; and that social invisibility threatens fundamental psychological needs. The present article integrates these findings into a single functional account.

The framework is compatible with broader accounts of behavioural persistence. The Internal Autobiographical Map conceptualises recurrent behaviour in relation to organised autobiographical structures through which prior experience, expectation, and learned response influence present action (Natseva, 2026b, 2026c), and the Direct Change Solution framework approaches behavioural change by identifying the sequence maintaining a response rather than its surface content (Natseva, 2026a). Neither has yet been applied empirically to online provocation, and no claim of empirical extension is made here. What the connection contributes is an analytic orientation: where the same interactional strategy recurs across unrelated targets and topics, the invariant element is the functional structure rather than the content, and it is the functional structure that requires explanation.

CCH proposes that some unsolicited online provocation is maintained by the acknowledgement it produces, and that acknowledgement may reinforce independently of valence. Its central and testable claim is that under conditions of perceived invisibility an aversive response may function as an appetitive reinforcer, a proposition that inverts the conventional treatment of hostile reactions as behavioural punishers and that a single welldesigned manipulation can support or refute.

The framework does not reduce trolling to loneliness, does not deny dispositional contributions, and does not claim that online aggression is covertly prosocial. It adds one question to the existing set: in some cases, is the function served by conflict the establishment of contact itself?

If it is, then the significant opposite of connection is not conflict but being ignored. The behavioural implication is that in an environment where anyone can demand attention through provocation, psychological autonomy depends increasingly on the capacity to determine which interactions warrant participation.

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