

Intellectualization and Emotional Avoidance in Online Family-of-Origin Narratives: A Study Based on the Experience–Analysis Spectrum

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Abstract

The concept of the family-of-origin has evolved from a professional psychological term into a mainstream public framework on social media for interpreting psychological distress and developmental struggles. While the widespread circulation of related psychological content facilitates public mental health literacy and helps individuals recognize childhood traumatic influences, it also raises an underexplored paradox: theoretical comprehension does not equate to authentic psychological healing. Many individuals routinely adopt standardized psychological frameworks to interpret personal developmental experiences, relying primarily on rational analysis while deliberately suppressing genuine emotional responses, thereby entering a covert state of emotional avoidance. Grounded in clinical psychology theories, including psychological defense mechanisms, Adlerian psychology, and experiential emotional healing theory, this paper dialectically examines the dual psychological impacts of family-of-origin narratives on social media. By constructing an original Experience–Analysis Spectrum evaluation framework, this study distinguishes adaptive experiential narratives from maladaptive theoretical narratives. The findings suggest that the algorithmic logic and labeling tendencies of social media encourage over-theorization and oversimplification of personal trauma, transforming therapeutic psychological knowledge into a defensive psychological armor that obstructs emotional processing. Beyond a binary positive–negative evaluation, this research offers novel insights into fostering more rational public engagement with online psychological content and improving the communication of mental health knowledge.

Keywords

family-of-origin narrative, pseudo-healing, emotional avoidance, intellectualization, social media discourse

1. Introduction

The booming development of social media has propelled the family-of-origin discourse into a dominant public mental health topic. The pervasive dissemination of relevant narratives on short-video and social platforms has significantly popularized psychological knowledge and broken down disciplinary barriers within professional psychology [1]. Such online narratives enable the public to reflect on childhood trauma and emotional struggles, distinguish external familial influences from personal defects, and alleviate irrational self-

denial, thereby delivering positive educational and psychological value [1]. Trauma recovery theories further support the view that cognitive recognition and processing of personal suffering constitute prerequisites for psychological rehabilitation [2]. Nevertheless, online psychological popularization also presents notable risks of conceptual alienation. A prevalent yet often overlooked psychological phenomenon has emerged: many individuals achieve substantial cognitive understanding of their traumatic origins through psychological frameworks but remain emotionally detached when recounting personal experiences, forming a dissociative state characterized by cognitive clarity and emotional numbness. This psychological dissonance is essentially rooted in covert emotional avoidance and intellectualization as a defense mechanism [3,4]. As a sophisticated and concealed ego defense mechanism, intellectualization refers to the over-reliance on professional theoretical frameworks to analyze trauma while intentionally suppressing genuine emotional experience, substituting affective engagement with rational cognition for temporary psychological protection [5]. The templated and algorithm-driven communication features of social media further amplify this defensive tendency. Psychological knowledge originally intended to facilitate self-healing is gradually transformed into a defensive barrier against painful emotions, fostering collective pseudo-healing and potentially impeding long-term trauma integration and psychological growth. Accordingly, this study addresses two core research questions: how family-of-origin online narratives may shift from therapeutic tools into carriers of emotional defense, and how standardized criteria can be established to distinguish healing-oriented narratives from defense-oriented narratives. Grounded in psychological defense mechanisms, Adlerian psychology, and experiential emotional healing theory, this paper constructs an original Experience–Analysis Spectrum evaluation model to systematically examine the dual effects and mechanisms of alienation in online family-of-origin narratives, with the aim of guiding more rational engagement with online psychological content and optimizing mental health communication strategies.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This study establishes a comprehensive analytical framework grounded in three complementary psychological theories. The theory of intellectualization and emotional detachment identifies covert emotional avoidance within online narratives. Adlerian psychology provides a dialectical lens for examining the motivational structures underlying these narratives. Experiential emotional healing theory clarifies the essential conditions required for authentic psychological recovery. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives constitute the core conceptual foundation of this research.

2.1 Intellectualization and Emotional Detachment: A Sophisticated Higher-Level Psychological Defense

Compared with primitive defense mechanisms such as avoidance and denial, intellectualization represents a subtle, high-level ego defense mechanism commonly observed in cognitively competent and rational individuals [5]. Instead of directly evading psychological conflict, individuals rely excessively on logical reasoning and specialized terminology to deconstruct traumatic experiences, thereby confining self-processing to the cognitive domain while inhibiting authentic emotional engagement. This defensive pattern is frequently observed in clinical settings. Individuals with histories of childhood emotional neglect or familial conflict are often able to analyze developmental trauma through psychological frameworks with high cognitive clarity, yet fail to generate affective resonance or articulate lived emotional experience. This results in a marked disconnection between intellectual insight and emotional experience. Emotional detachment functions as a closely associated psychological state that accompanies intellectualization. It refers to the disruption of affective linkage between traumatic memories and emotional perception, thereby suppressing distressing feelings. Although this mechanism may stabilize affect and prevent psychological breakdown in the short term, sustained emotional suppression ultimately impedes trauma resolution. Empirical findings in experiential therapy indicate that unprocessed and unacknowledged emotions do not dissipate spontaneously; rather, they accumulate and perpetuate unresolved psychological conflict [6]. Consequently, excessive reliance on theoretical analysis without emotional engagement transforms psychological knowledge from an instrument of self-exploration into a structure of emotional avoidance.

2.2 Adlerian Teleology: A Critical Perspective Beyond Linear Causality

In contrast to psychoanalytic approaches that emphasize historical determinism, Adlerian teleology provides a critical interpretive lens for understanding family-of-origin narratives. Its central premise is that psychological states and behavioral patterns are not determined by past experiences themselves, but by the subjective meanings individuals assign to those experiences and the purposes they serve within present psychological functioning. This perspective challenges the deterministic assumption that childhood trauma directly shapes adulthood outcomes, suggesting instead that narrative analysis should prioritize underlying motivational structures rather than factual causality. Within online discourse, many theoretically sophisticated trauma narratives may function less as pathways to self-integration and growth, and more as rationalized explanations for current passivity, interpersonal difficulties, or perceived life stagnation. When family-of-origin trauma is universalized as an explanatory framework for all life difficulties, therapeutic reflection risks devolving into a cognitive justification system that reinforces avoidance of responsibility and change. Adlerian teleology thus offers a more dialectical interpretive stance for examining both the constructive and defensive functions of trauma narratives in digital environments.

2.3 Experiential Emotional Processing Theory: Defining the Core of Authentic Healing

Experiential psychotherapy distinguishes clearly between cognitive understanding and authentic psychological healing. Greenberg and colleagues have demonstrated through extensive clinical evidence that genuine psychological transformation and trauma resolution depend on emotional confrontation, affective activation, and experiential integration, rather than abstract reasoning or theoretical comprehension alone [7]. Pure cognitive insight without emotional processing and internal integration is insufficient for resolving underlying psychological conflict. Greenberg and Watson further delineate two distinct modes of trauma processing [8]. The first is conceptual processing, in which individuals apply psychological labels and abstract reasoning to interpret traumatic experiences from a detached, observer-like stance, achieving only cognitive attribution. The second is experiential processing, which involves re-engaging with traumatic memories in a safe therapeutic context, accessing primary emotions, and facilitating affective transformation and self-reconciliation [8]. Clinical evidence consistently indicates that only embodied emotional experience produces enduring psychological change, whereas purely rational analysis often results in stalled recovery trajectories. This theoretical distinction highlights a structural limitation of online psychological communication. The fast-paced and fragmented nature of social media favors concise conceptual summaries over sustained emotional processing. Algorithm-driven dissemination further amplifies emotion-detached rational discourse, thereby fostering widespread tendencies toward experiential avoidance.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Narrative Identity: Reconstruction and Solidification of Self-Narratives in Social Media Contexts

Narrative psychology posits that identity is not a fixed intrinsic entity but a continuously constructed process shaped through ongoing self-narration and meaning-making [9]. The selection of lived experiences, organization of narrative coherence, and assignment of emotional valence collectively shape self-continuity and psychological stability. Integrated and flexible self-narratives are therefore fundamental to adaptive psychological functioning. In contrast to private self-reflection, which is typically characterized by authenticity and emotional depth, social media fundamentally transforms the function of self-narration [10]. Public expression shifts from introspective meaning-making to performative self-presentation. Platform mechanisms such as likes, shares, and algorithmic recommendation systems privilege standardized and easily recognizable trauma narratives, thereby reducing complex individual experiences into simplified psychological labels and fixed interpretive templates. Prolonged exposure to such homogenized narrative structures may contribute to the consolidation of a family-of-origin victim self-schema [11]. Individuals increasingly attribute diverse present-day emotional and life difficulties to childhood familial experiences, thereby narrowing self-understanding and diminishing recognition of personal agency and developmental plasticity. Existing research has largely emphasized cognitive effects of narrative content, while insufficient attention has been paid to the emotional alienation embedded within narrative forms, an issue directly addressed in this study.

3.2 Empirical Research on Defense Mechanisms: Functional Value and Psychological Costs of Intellectualization

Moderate rational reflection and cognitive analysis can support adaptive coping and psychological adjustment. However, excessive reliance on intellectualization may gradually impair emotional awareness and reduce affective responsiveness, thereby undermining interpersonal communication and psychological flexibility [5]. Recent empirical findings further indicate that individuals who habitually regulate emotions through cognitive abstraction exhibit reduced emotional perception and expression capacities. Although they may accurately identify psychological issues at a conceptual level, they often display emotional numbing and expressive inhibition in lived experience [12]. Existing literature has primarily examined defense mechanisms at the individual level, while insufficiently addressing the collective amplification of emotional avoidance through online psychological discourse. The interaction between digital narrative environments and defense mechanism activation remains underexplored, constituting a significant research gap.

3.3 Therapeutic Research: Experiential Avoidance as a Barrier to Psychological Change

A broad clinical consensus holds that therapeutic outcomes depend more on the depth of emotional engagement than on analytical sophistication. Individuals who are willing to confront and integrate negative emotions tend to achieve more stable and sustained psychological recovery [13]. Trauma processing is commonly distinguished into two modes: external attribution analysis and experiential emotional reconstruction [14]. The former involves detached, observer-like interpretation of trauma through abstract reasoning, while the latter entails direct emotional engagement and integration within a secure relational context. Clinical practice consistently demonstrates that only experiential processing produces fundamental psychological transformation, whereas purely cognitive approaches often result in stagnation. Social media environments, however, lack the affective containment conditions required for deep emotional processing. As a result, they tend to privilege detached analytical discourse. The widespread circulation of such content may subtly reinforce reliance on intellectualization and emotional avoidance, offering a novel angle for understanding contemporary psychological communication dynamics.

3.4 Research Review

Existing studies have established substantial theoretical foundations in social media narrative identity, psychological defense mechanisms, and experiential psychotherapy. Narrative psychology has demonstrated the role of social media in reshaping identity construction and reinforcing cognitive stabilization through homogenized narratives [9–11]. Research on defense mechanisms has clarified both adaptive and maladaptive functions of intellectualization and its detrimental effects on emotional development [5,12]. Experiential therapy studies have further challenged the equivalence between cognitive insight and psychological healing, emphasizing emotional engagement as a prerequisite for trauma resolution [13,14]. Despite these contributions, several limitations remain. First, narrative studies tend to prioritize cognitive outcomes while neglecting emotional alienation and collective pseudo-healing effects. Second, defense mechanism research largely focuses on individual psychology without adequately addressing how digital infrastructures amplify intellectualization into collective patterns. Third, experiential therapy research is primarily grounded in offline clinical contexts, offering limited explanation for the online phenomenon of cognitive clarity without emotional integration. To address these gaps, this study integrates narrative communication theory, defense mechanism theory, and experiential psychotherapy to examine intellectualization and emotional avoidance in online family-of-origin discourse. The proposed Experience–Analysis Spectrum framework bridges three key limitations in existing literature: the overemphasis on cognition over emotion, individual psychology over socio-digital context, and theoretical interpretation over operational differentiation.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Online family-of-origin narratives exhibit a dual function: they may facilitate psychological insight and growth, while simultaneously enabling emotional avoidance. Although such narratives support public understanding of trauma and self-reflection, templated theorization may convert rational analysis into a defensive structure that suppresses emotional engagement. To address this complexity, this study proposes the

Experience–Analysis Spectrum framework to distinguish adaptive and maladaptive narrative forms beyond simplistic binary classifications.

4.1 The Five-Dimensional Experience–Analysis Spectrum Evaluation Framework

This framework comprises five dimensions: cognitive processing, emotional engagement, linguistic characteristics, psychological function, and temporal orientation. It is designed to differentiate experiential healing narratives from analytically defensive narratives. As summarized in Table 1, the two narrative types differ fundamentally in psychological mechanism and functional outcome.

Table 1: Comparative Characteristics of Two Types of Family-of-Origin Narratives Under the Experience–Analysis Spectrum [15,16].

Dimensions	Experience-Oriented Healing Narratives	Analysis-Oriented Defensive Narratives
Cognitive Processing	Specific contextual recollection based on exclusive childhood memories and vivid details to evoke authentic emotions	Abstract conceptual generalization with fixed psychological labels to simplify complex developmental experiences
Emotional Engagement	Genuine emotional expression with appropriate affective fluctuation and empathic resonance	Deliberate emotional detachment with rational restraint and elimination of personal affective responses
Linguistic Features	Individualized and authentic expression based on unique personal experiences and irreducible inner feelings	Formulaic professional jargon replacing individualized experiential descriptions with standardized conclusions
Psychological Function	Trauma integration and self-healing through emotional acceptance and reconciliation of cognitive-affective dissonance	Intentional emotional avoidance; theoretical pretense of psychological insight to evade in-depth trauma processing
Temporal Orientation	Temporal integration of past and present selves to accomplish comprehensive trauma reconciliation	Mental sealing-off of past trauma; limited cognitive summarization without affective reconciliation

Cognitive psychological research indicates that abstract overgeneral memory retrieval serves as a critical cognitive mechanism maintaining depressive and post-traumatic stress symptoms [15]. Authentic trauma rehabilitation requires emotional confrontation and reconciliation. Pure rational analysis accompanied by persistent emotional avoidance leads to accumulated traumatic stress and long-term psychological internal friction [16].

4.2 Spectral Identification of Three Typical Online Narrative Patterns

Based on the Experience–Analysis Spectrum framework, online family-of-origin narratives can be categorized into three distinct forms with divergent therapeutic value and psychological functions. The first category comprises pure experiential narratives, which demonstrate the highest therapeutic value yet account for the lowest proportion of online content. Free from professional labeling and theoretical attribution, these narratives focus primarily on specific autobiographical memories and authentic affective responses. A typical example includes the recollection of childhood diaries accompanied by spontaneous emotional resonance with past vulnerability. Such vivid and individualized accounts facilitate emotional release and trauma integration, representing a form of authentic healing grounded in experiential engagement without intellectualization-based defense. The second category refers to defensive analytical narratives, which constitute the most prevalent form on social media. Characterized by rigorous logical reasoning and frequent use of professional terminology, these narratives emphasize causal explanation of trauma while minimizing contextual detail and emotional involvement. For instance, individuals may attribute interpersonal or relational difficulties to parental attachment patterns through psychologically framed analysis. Although such narratives appear insightful and self-reflective, they primarily reflect intellectualization as a defense mechanism, substituting theoretical cognition for emotional processing, constructing an illusion of psychological mastery, and ultimately obstructing genuine trauma integration. The third category consists of integrated narratives, representing the most adaptive and psychologically optimal form. This pattern achieves a balanced integration of cognitive analysis and emotional experience. Individuals may cognitively recognize familial developmental constraints and traumatic origins while simultaneously acknowledging and validating residual emotional pain. In this mode, cognitive understanding functions as a facilitator rather than a substitute for emotional reconciliation,

thereby avoiding both excessive intellectualization and emotional avoidance and supporting sustainable psychological growth.

4.3 Structural Causes of Analytical Bias in Digital Narratives

The dominance of analytical bias and emotional attenuation in online family-of-origin narratives is not the result of individual preference alone, but rather emerges from the interaction of platform architecture, sociocultural norms, and public psychological misconceptions. First, platform structural constraints significantly shape narrative form. Short-form digital media prioritizes efficiency, brevity, and communicability, thereby favoring labeled theoretical summaries over nuanced emotional narration. Content that is concise, logically structured, and terminologically precise tends to receive greater algorithmic visibility and engagement, reinforcing analytical discourse as the dominant narrative mode. Second, mainstream sociocultural values further reinforce this tendency. Rational analysis and emotional restraint are often socially constructed as indicators of maturity and insight, whereas emotional vulnerability may be stigmatized as irrational or performative. This cultural framing encourages individuals to adopt emotionally neutral analytical styles to maintain socially desirable self-presentation. Third, structural biases in psychological popularization contribute to conceptual misunderstanding. Contemporary mental health communication frequently emphasizes symptom labeling and causal attribution while underrepresenting core mechanisms of psychological healing, such as emotional acceptance, affective expression, and experiential integration. This imbalance promotes the misconception that cognitive insight is equivalent to psychological healing, thereby reinforcing emotion-detached analytical engagement.

4.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study is primarily based on theoretical analysis and literature synthesis, which entails several limitations. First, the proposed Experience–Analysis Spectrum remains a conceptual framework and has not yet been empirically validated for reliability or practical application. Second, the analysis focuses mainly on content producers and does not incorporate the psychological effects experienced by content consumers, thereby limiting a full understanding of bidirectional communication dynamics in digital environments. Future research may proceed in three directions. First, the framework should be operationalized and empirically validated to enhance measurement reliability and practical applicability. Second, qualitative and quantitative methods such as interviews and questionnaires could be employed to examine the long-term psychological effects of both producing and consuming family-of-origin narratives online. Third, future studies may develop integrated mental health communication models that balance cognitive dissemination with experiential emotional processing, thereby improving public psychological literacy in a more holistic manner.

5. Conclusion

Integrating psychological defense mechanism theory, Adlerian psychology, and experiential emotional processing theory, this study systematically examines emotional alienation and pseudo-healing phenomena in social media-based family-of-origin narratives, moving beyond simplistic evaluative dichotomies. Online family-of-origin narratives exhibit a dual psychosocial function. While contributing to the dissemination of mental health knowledge, platform-driven labeling mechanisms, culturally reinforced rationalism, and imbalanced psychological popularization collectively foster narrative alienation. Excessive reliance on theoretical labeling and cognitive attribution enables individuals to bypass authentic emotional processing and affective integration, resulting in a state of cognitive insight accompanied by emotional stagnation. In this context, psychological discourse may gradually transform into a defensive structure against emotional pain, producing collective pseudo-healing and persistent internal psychological tension. Addressing the dual gaps of cognition–emotion imbalance and individual–context disconnection in existing literature, this study proposes an original five-dimensional Experience–Analysis Spectrum framework to differentiate healing-oriented and defense-oriented narrative mechanisms. The tripartite classification of pure experiential, defensive analytical, and integrated narratives enables systematic identification of covert intellectualization and emotional avoidance, thereby contributing to research on psychological alienation in digital trauma discourse.

This study extends theories of experiential emotional healing and psychological defense mechanisms from offline clinical contexts to digitally mediated collective psychological environments. It clarifies the formation mechanisms of narrative alienation in social media settings and enriches theoretical discussions in online mental health communication. The findings provide guidance for helping the public, particularly adolescents, recognize pseudo-healing patterns and avoid over-reliance on cognitively driven emotional avoidance. Furthermore, the study offers implications for optimizing mental health communication strategies, promoting a shift from unilateral theoretical dissemination toward integrated cognitive–emotional engagement, and ultimately enhancing public psychological literacy.

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Conflicts of Interest

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