Analysis of the Causes of Cyber Violence from the Perspective of Gender -- Taking the "Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident" as an Example

Xi Chen[1], Kejia Jin[2] and Zhihan Wang[3, *]

[1]Chinese Department of Manzhouli College, Inner Mongolia University, Manzhouli City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 021400, China

[2]Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China, 610064

[3]School of Journalism, Communication university of China, Beijing, 100024, China

*Corresponding author: 2020201013012@cuc.edu.cn

Abstract. In the era of the Internet, the frequent occurrence of online violence not only causes irreversible psychological and physiological harm to the parties, but also has a negative impact on the online environment and social development. In this social context, this study analyzes the causes of gender violence in the online environment and enriches the study of online violence from a gender perspective. Therefore, this study takes the "Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident" as an example, and uses text analysis research methods to analyze the relevant data of text theme keywords in Weibo platform during the two development stages of the incident. In summary, the research suggests, netizens use social events on gender issues as an outlet for their emotions, forming cyber violence in unintentional situations. Opinion leaders represented by the mainstream media have less control over public opinion, but still play a positive role in guiding the rationalization of public opinion.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Gender-based Violence; Online Public Opinion.

1. Introduction

With the development of the Internet, SNS are widely used as a convenient communication route. As the formation of Internet communities, more and more attention has been paid to the Internet as a place for the expression and exchange of opinions. Through the use of the Internet, individuals will be able to immediately exchange opinions beyond the limitations of time and space. The Internet society has become a new public sphere, where information can be produced and disseminated by everyone. Therefore, individuals have become the subjects of new power. However, in a highly anonymous online society, while individuals can freely express their opinions, it is difficult to limit the use of language and accusations when discussing social issues, especially when they are about genders. With the awakening of women's consciousness, the authors could find that when there are obvious gender elements in social news, the discussion of this type of news is often detached from the event itself and transformed into a gender confrontation between men and women. Moreover, this sort of discussion could be unlimitedly expanded and sometimes become Cyber Bullying, the embodiment of real violence. These events are characterized by the fact that discussions of social issues of female always focus on women's sexual characteristics or private lives rather than on the investigation of the case. In East Asia, issues related to women have been noted as typical expressions of hate speech. And it is a common occurrence that women are actually victimized by offensive comments such as "being sexually humiliated" or "being insulted for their appearance and appearance". The unrestricted dissemination of such content and the negative impact on mental health must be considered as a problem.

In this background, it is necessary to focus on the public agenda in the online society, analyze the characteristics of violence and damage the discussion would bring and examine the mechanisms of verbal violence, conflict and the personal insecurity they cause. This paper would take the news of "Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident" as an example to analyze the above phenomena and

try to answer these questions what drives the development of public opinion, and whether there are deeper social factors behind the development of public opinion.

An event that has occurred reflected this social background. On June 7 2023, a man on the subway in Guangzhou, was suspected of taking pictures in secret by a girl named Zhang. Although he has flipped through the albums to prove his innocence, Zhang still exposed him as a lewd man on the Internet. Initially, the post in Weibo triggered a wide social discussion, and at this stage the contents under the topic were mainly supportive of Zhang and developed into cyber violence against the man. Subsequently, on June 9, the fact that the man was innocent was clarified and reversal of opinions occurred. The matter evolved further and the discussion gradually escalated into a confrontation between men and women. The incident triggered extensive social thinking and discussion, and public opinion continued to heat up with the multiple reversals of the incident, which was no longer limited to the discussion. Besides, the discussion rose to gender antagonism and cyberbullying. At this stage the discussion on the topic focused on violence against Zhang, even became cyberbullying by other female opinion leaders and contained attacks on feminist ideology.

During the progress, there are a large number of net citizens and key opinion leaders involved. And how key opinion leaders make influences on the discussion should be considered. Therefore, this paper tries to answer these questions through the text analysis method and try to propose new preventive strategies or solutions for the frequent incidents of online gender violence.

2. Literature Review

Cyber Bullying is the embodiment of real violence in the virtual online world. Academics have two generalized definitions of cyberbullying, broad and narrow. The definition now is further refined by scholars, who define cyberbullying as "the use of information technology to injure or harass another person in a deliberate, repetitive, or hostile manner"[1].

The Megan Incident that happened in the United States in 2006 has attracted the attention of academics and relevant departments to cyberbullying. At present, foreign research on cyberbullying mainly focuses on the legal regulation of cyberbullying and youth cyberbullying in terms of content, while the research methodology mostly adopts text-based methods, using contextual and emotional features to improve the text mining system. In order to solve cyberbullying, it is necessary to recognize the indirectness and openness of cyberbullying in cyber environment, and it is also crucial to pay attention to the power imbalance phenomenon retained in cyberspace [2].

The research on cyberbullying in China has been carried out with the development of the Internet in recent years. As of August 6, 2023, a total of 3,404 articles in Chinese have been collected based on the China Knowledge Network platform with the keyword " cyberbullying ". The research perspectives of scholars can be broadly divided into three major directions: characterization of cyberbullying from the perspective of communication, analysis of the causes of cyberbullying from the perspectives of sociology and psychology, and discussion of the governance of cyberbullying from the perspective of jurisprudence. Nowadays, there is no monograph dedicated to the study of cyberbullying, and although the number of articles and academic journals related to cyberbullying is relatively large, they are fragmented and have not yet formed a systematic study. Besides, there is a lack of systematic theoretical support for the governance of cyberbullying.

“Women are not born, but rather are formed gradually" [3]. Gender-based violence is violence against individuals based on their biological sex or gender identity. Following the consensus of the international community, the concept of "gender-based violence" refers to violence based on social gender concepts and norms, unequal gender relations, and the majority of victims of gender-based violence are women [4].

Currently, foreign scholars have more monographs on gender and gender research, most of which angles lie in the protection of women's rights and interests and the causes of sexual violence. Some scholars have also explored gender-based violence in the context of online media, but more on the impact of sexual and violent content, including pornography, exposed through the media [5].

Most domestic scholars analyzed the phenomenon of gender-based violence, its specific manifestations and causes in their articles, such as Sun Jinbo and Fan Hongxia, who analyze how physical differences in the body construct the concept of gender through social analysis of the body, as well as how gender-based violence is expressed and strengthened through the media's body narratives [6]. Some scholars have also paid attention to the phenomenon of gender-based violence in the online environment, such as Dong Kuoyan, who attempts to analyze the phenomenon of gender-based violence on the Weibo from the perspective of the power structure and emphasizes the key role played by the patriarchal ideology of cyberspace in the phenomenon of gender-based violence [7]. In addition, gender violence in intimate relationships is also a vital topic of concern for scholars in China. With the continuous development of women's consciousness, Chinese academics have paid more and more attention to gender-based violence, but most of the studies still remain in the macro point of view to analyze its manifestations and causes, and lack a more profound elaboration on gender-based violence in the cyber environment, and still need more thoughts on how to better solve the countermeasures of gender violence.

In order to solve the phenomenon of cyberbullying and maintain social stability in the new media era, it is essential to deeply analyze the causes of cyberbullying. From the perspective of communication science, this paper will start with the phenomenon of gender-based violence on social media, analyze the phenomenon of it and its causes in depth, and try to enrich the research on cyberbullying from the perspective of gender.

3. Methodology

The data of this study is sourced from relevant posts and some comments on the Weibo platform of the and use an octopus collector for data collection and output. This study adopts text analysis method. The text analysis method can clearly describe the text content and characteristics of the "Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident", and reflect the specific positions and viewpoints of opinion leaders and netizens in the incident. At the same time, taking the "Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident" as an example, this study can analyze how similar events escalate into gender-based violence and online violence, in order to obtains the common characteristics and underlying reasons of similar events.

This study uses thematic analysis to analyze the two stages of public opinion changes in the "Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident". The first stage (from June 7, 2023 to June 9, 2023) was the period during which the event began to ferment. The theme of this stage mainly focused on the voice of female groups, supported Zhang Wei's rights protection, and was aimed at the stage of male Cyber bullying. The second stage (from June 11 to June 14) was a reversal of public opinion. After clarifying the facts, the theme of this stage shifted to online bullying targeting Zhang Wei and women, and escalated to gender opposition.

By searching for trending topics and popular posts on the Weibo about the " Guangzhou Metro Stealth Shooting Incident " incident, this article analyzes the content of the texts used by the parties involved, media organizations and net citizens to express their opinions.

4. Results

The first stage of this event is that the post used by female party to defense rights became the main place of public opinion. On June 7, the woman involved (hereinafter referred to as "Zhang") posted her experience of being secretly photographed on the subway on the same day with a video, and by 4:00 p.m. on June 8, the post had gained a total of 12,000 likes, 1,037 comments, and 527 retweets.

Zhang referred to the male involved as "a lewd old man" and used non-neutral words such as "crime", "skillful in filming" and "shameless" to describe the man in her text, and ended with the extreme opinion that " lewd men will die if they go out". She also posted a video of the scene with the text "line 8 lewd man".

Zhang also repeatedly emphasized that her behavior was based on "defending her own rights" as the starting point: "If my rights and interests are not infringed upon, I don't have to defend my rights and interests?". Zhang also commented, "If he really didn't take the photos, then why didn't he speak up for himself?".

Before the male party and Guangzhou Metro officials appeared on the Internet and spoke out, the main public opinion on the incident was focused on Zhang's post, and there were no trending hashtags or other phenomena.

In the second stage, the public opinion broke out. After the Guangzhou Metro officials clarified the truth of the incident, trending hashtags such as # Middle-aged man suspected of taking pictures of himself after proving his innocence was still exposed by the woman # became popular on Weibo one after another, public opinion erupted massively, lasting a month of heat. This paper selects representative contents including original texts under the trending topics, texts in the sharing area of Zhang's apology posts and texts in the comment area of the popular posts of mainstream media for text analysis, and summarize the public's three main types of opinions.

Result 1: Discussions around gender topics

Texts containing keywords such as "gender", "female" and "male" can be broadly categorized into two types according to their main ideas.

The first type of viewpoint was more objective and rational, mainly focusing on the phenomenon of " Stealth Shooting " in society and the difficulties faced by female/male groups, and believed that Zhang should pay for her behavior, which has made the road of women's rights protection even more difficult. Many of the users with this view have Weibo credentials, and their posts have gained hundreds of views. There were some women who have experienced being secretly photographed included.

The second type of comment had an extreme tendency towards gender antagonism and even cyber-violence: Zhang's apology post was retweeted with a lot of insulting words, including "domestic animal" and "maggot". Texts referring to Zhang with terms such as "fairy", "female boxer", and "bitch" were not uncommon. There were a few texts that referred to Zhang with terms such as "fairy", "female 'boxer'", "bitch", etc., accompanied by malicious speculations about Zhang's appearance and private life. Extreme comments targeting men also appeared, such as "Go to hell, all middle-aged men" and "Men attack women regardless of the reason, only the gender". In the text of the forwarding area, there was even the phenomenon of extreme speech holders of both genders mocking and abusing each other.

Result 2: Escalate the incident to other social topics according to the increment of information

With the fermentation of the incident and Zhang's disclosure of information, the incident was classified by many netizens into related social topics for discussion, among which the most heated topics include "graduate students", "disadvantaged groups", "media responsibility", "cyberbullying", and so on.

Zhang's status as a graduate student in journalism and communication was frequently mentioned, and public used it to express their different views on fairness and education, arguing that Zhang's false accusations against the male client "betrayed the working class" and "exposed the current state of journalism education". The Beijing Daily's comment, "Be wary of ulterior motives inciting gender confrontation," was supported by many netizens. However, some people condemned the mainstream media, arguing that some media and opinion leaders used inappropriate words to blur the truth, and "attempted to use the Internet to polarize men and women and cyberbullying against migrant workers". The keyword "cyberbullying" also appeared frequently, and The People's Daily published the viewpoint of "refusing to fight violence with violence" in response to this incident.

About half of the texts only discussed the relevant details, but they didn't make statements of a distinctive nature, and at the same time said that they would continue to follow up on the case and waited for the Sichuan University, where Zhang studied, to formally announce the results of its handling.

5. Discussion

According to result one, in the text discussing gender issues, the blog content of opinion leaders and some female netizens who had similar experiences were more rational and objective, only discussing around the event itself. Most netizens' comments in the comment section reflected a tendency towards gender opposition and online violence, only using this event to vent their emotions.

There may be three reasons for the above result in this study. Firstly, the continuous development of media technology and platforms has enabled a large number of netizens to enter the online society, allowing more netizens to participate in discussions on public opinion events. Managers and opinion leaders of online media no longer have the same strong appeal as before, and the public opinion of hot events is more influenced by netizens. Secondly, the impact of traditional gender concepts on the vast number of netizens is directly reflected in the open online environment, where gender opposition is more likely to occur between different gender groups, and women are often the main victims of online violence. Thirdly, the awareness of feminism is constantly developing, and female groups actively participate in speaking out, which is different from the one-sided disadvantaged position reflected in traditional society. Therefore, gender confrontation on the internet is more evident. However, many female netizens have not realized the issue of online gender violence at all, and even use the same methods to commit violence themselves [8]. Several female netizens are pursuing gender equality for women while also creating violence in the same way, fiercely attacking male groups. The lack and error of gender awareness among netizens has led to the rise and intensification of public opinion into gender violence and online violence.

In such a situation, although the development of online platforms is conducive to the rapid exposure of public hot events and giving the public more voice, it is also more likely to create an environment of online violence, causing harm to parties and gender groups.

Based on Result 2 and analyzing the examples above, it was found that the discussions often deviated from the subject matter of the incident and focused on the persons involved, such as evaluating and discussing the gender or education degree of the persons involved. These discussions often include emotional outbursts, or deliberately lead to confrontation between groups or online violence for the purpose of gaining attention in the Internet and making financial profits.

This paper will explore the reasons for these results from the following two aspects. One is the way the news or posts are narrated. When the news narrates sensitive topics related to gender, it deliberately utilizes words which could easily cause confrontation. For example, terms such as female driver emphasizes the gender of the person involved in the incident. Moreover, in this case, "a female graduate student from a top university" was used to describe the person involved. This kind of narrative, which have nothing to do with the content and development of the incident, are in themselves a kind of deliberate guidance of public opinion, causing it to spiral out of control and sometimes developed into cyber violence.

Secondly, public opinion is becoming more and more polarized through continuous development, constantly squeezing the living space of different opinions, thus controlling public opinion and developing into unilateral cyber violence. In the incident, both the cyber violence against the man and the accusation against the woman show that when a mainstream public opinion is recognized by the public, other public opinions will not be able to fight against the mainstream public opinion and be forced to disappear. After a point of factual changes, especially when the "mainstream opinion" is no longer correct, the mainstream opinion in the past will be criticized and be blamed more fiercely. This process makes the development of public opinion even more polarized.

Therefore, news publishers and opinion leaders need to be as objective as possible in their news and blog narratives, and also minimize the aggressiveness of opinion. There is a need to ensure the survival of diverse opinions in the development of public opinion.

Opinion leaders should be utilized to guide the development of public opinion, especially to reduce the aggressiveness of dissenting opinions. When publishing blog posts or comments, attention should be paid to the presentation of the text to avoid the problems of invisible discrimination. Re-establish a standardized media reporting system, so that the mainstream media can truly assume the value

structure of social conscience, which has been trusted and relied upon in the past [9]. On the other hand, when the public participates in broader discussions about social events, they should pay attention to screening information and avoid being deliberately guided under the information cocoon. As a result, the users of the social media should maintain a tolerant attitude and treat every opinion equally, refusing to fight violence with violence.

Besides, social media need to strengthen the review of accounts and posts of online violators and handle them in a timely manner, while the government needs to develop legal enforcement measures against cyberbullying. The society needs to encourage and promote a harmonious and equal gender perspective. In the overall social environment, promote gender role education, increase social role expectations, weaken traditional role concepts, establish new role concepts, and optimize the online environment [10].

6. Conclusion

The rapid development of new media has constructed a public sphere for the exchange and communication of public opinions, and the control of traditional media over public opinion has been weakened at the same time as the discourse power of netizens has increased. The nature of cyberbullying is a kind of emotional public opinion, and the topic of "gender" with a high degree of antagonism becomes a concentrated outlet for emotions, leading to the formation of gender-based cyberbullying. In modern society, the media literacy of netizens lags behind the development of the media, which leads to irrationality and extremism when netizens express their opinions, and further gives rise to cyber violence. The control of opinion leaders such as the media has declined, but their function of guiding public opinion remains. In the face of aggravated public opinion, opinion leaders represented by mainstream media should play an active role in guiding rational and objective public opinion and maintaining the online public opinion environment.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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