

The Causes of the Cyber Violence Problem Taking Qzone as an Example

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Abstract. After entering the internet age, cyber violence has appeared as a new type of violence and has attracted the attention of many researchers because of its frequency and serious consequences. This paper takes the users of Qzone as the research subject and uses a questionnaire survey and textual analysis to investigate the causes of the formation of cyber violence. The researcher concludes that cyber violence can be attributed to the anonymity of the internet, high sensitivity and impulsiveness of users, and the inadequacy of the law. The anonymity of the internet reduces people's sense of shame and makes perpetrators feel protected while the high sensitivity of the users makes them more susceptible to verbal stimuli that can provoke a violent counterattack. Furthermore, China's laws on cyber violence are not yet complete and the division of responsibility is not yet clear. Many people believe that punishment can be avoided and they have no qualms about venting their malice online. This study will help people develop a concrete understanding of the causes of cyber violence and better countermeasures could be taken to reduce the occurrence of cyber violence in many aspects, involving government, platforms, existing users, and potential future users.

Keywords: Weak Communication, Cyber Violence, Qzone.

1. Introduction

In recent years, cyber violence has been escalating on the Chinese internet. Up to now, there are 11 incidents of cyber violence in 2022, including 5 cases that resulted in fatalities. Because the main users of online social networking are young people, the perpetrators of violence on the internet also show a youthful character compared to those in reality. Because of the timely, anonymous, and cross-regional nature of the internet, the cost of cyber violence is low and spreading power is high. In that case, it has gradually attracted people's attention and concern. In 2013, China released *the Interpretation of Certain Issues Concerning the Application of Law in Handling Criminal Cases on the Use of Information Networks to Commit Defamation*, which proposes that cyber violence perpetrators should be held criminally responsible [1].

Qzone is the main social platform used by the Chinese animation, comics, and games (ACG) community, especially the female community, and it has become a major carrier of cyber violence in recent years due to its convenient sharing and message functions. Previous studies on cyber violence have mostly explored how to solve the problem. They also proposed that platforms should launch "risk alerts" and other functions to regulate private messages and inappropriate speech and mentioned that platforms should not maliciously push and manipulate controversial events in pursuit of traffic and corporate interests. Rather, they should establish a blacklist system for social media platforms, block the accounts of net violators, and restrict the use of their social media platform accounts [2]. Future legislation could be based on the idea of "decentralizing governance", with platforms taking primary responsibility for governance. A two-tier regulatory model of "platform management for users and government management for platforms" could be established [3]. In the construction of the contemporary internet, it is important to allow internet users to express their attitudes in full and to have multiple channels to access diverse attitudes [4]. In terms of the means of governance, a bridge should be built between the "official forum" and the "private forum" for the exchange of information. The management of cyber violence should be based on "unblocking" rather than "blocking", and the free expression of people's opinions should be ensured in the management of cyber violence. The

solution to cyber violence cannot be achieved overnight. Instead, this problem can only be solved through the cooperation between government, social media platforms, and the public [5]. However, there is little research on the causes of cyber violence. Besides, previous researchers have mostly studied Weibo users [6]. This paper chooses the Qzone users, who are younger and emerging, as the main subject of study to discuss the causes of cyber violence.

The author collected data through online questionnaires and literature research summaries and used textual analysis, graphical analysis, and sample comparison to analyse the materials. Online questionnaires were distributed on Qzone and WeChat, and a total of 113 samples were collected among which 100 were valid. Respondents were differentiated according to whether they used Qzone as their main social tool or not. The questionnaire was divided into five sections, including respondents' basic information, social status, life satisfaction, mental state, and experience of cyber violence. Ultimately, it is concluded that the anonymity of the internet, the specificity of the user group and the imperfection of the law cause the occurrence of cyber violence.

2. Weak Communication

Weak communication refers to the phenomenon that weak persons in the real world have advantages on the internet. Once the underdogs in the real world are able to gain a demographic advantage in the online world, they can compete for the most discourse and win public opinion, eventually becoming the strongest in the real world. The weak communication theory of emotion holds that the world of public opinion is a world of communication where emotion prevails over reason and the real world and the world of public opinion are inverse worlds in the coordinate system of emotion and reason [7]. In the online world, people are more likely to act impulsively because they are driven by emotions. In addition, the anonymity, timeliness, and cross-regional nature of the internet provide a degree of protection for attackers, making it easier for them to act on their emotions. Usually, the attackers are those who publish the information against the victims on the online platforms before others do and then attach inflammatory words to mobilize the emotions of the viewers, so as to seize more discourse power to win the victory of cyber violence.

3. Analysis of the Causes of Cyber Violence

3.1. Users' Age and Gender

According to the survey data, 94.74% of users who use Qzone as their main social networking software are women; university and high school students are the main user groups. These groups are characterised by a lack of consideration, impulsiveness, and emotional orientation when speaking on public platforms. When they encounter a conflict of opinion, the first thing they do is not to calm down and look at it critically, but to attack it with hostile language; and when other people argue or retaliate in the same way, they may attack them verbally and then develop into searching for their personal information, posting them on the internet, and calling on their friends to abuse them.

3.2. Life Satisfaction Level

According to the questionnaire, most of the users who use Qzone as their main social platform, are not satisfied with their real life, accounting for 34.79% of the total; some of the respondents' family relationships are in a very tense state, with their share reaching 25% (see Figure 1). In contrast, those who are satisfied with their online life account for 64.13% of the respondents.

Dissatisfaction with real life and tensions with their families make them devote more time and affection to the online world. Because they do not have friends who could listen to their worries and cannot vent their emotions in real life, they turn more to the internet, taking it as a place for them to relax and vent their emotions. For example, on July 7th, 2022, a Hong Kong girl, Enai, committed suicide by jumping off a building in Tin Shui Wai because she could not bear the three months of cyber violence that she had been subjected to by several internet users. The perpetrators repeatedly

abused the girl and even humiliated her by posting her photos on the Weibo platform. The perpetrator group repeatedly abetted and forced the girl to commit suicide. They further mocked her and celebrated her death in group chats after the girl committed suicide. In the published group chat logs, the perpetrators mentioned their strained family relationships, the stress of their real lives, their self-harming behavior, and their plans to commit suicide [8]. On the internet they then united to point the finger at the victim, taking out their real-life frustrations on their online friends in an aggressive manner. The Hong Kong police eventually made it a criminal case and opened an investigation. However, the investigation is still at a standstill as the perpetrators are multiple and spread across the territory. In contrast, those who do not socialize online are characterised by high levels of real-life satisfaction (60% of respondents chose "satisfied") and good relationships with their families.

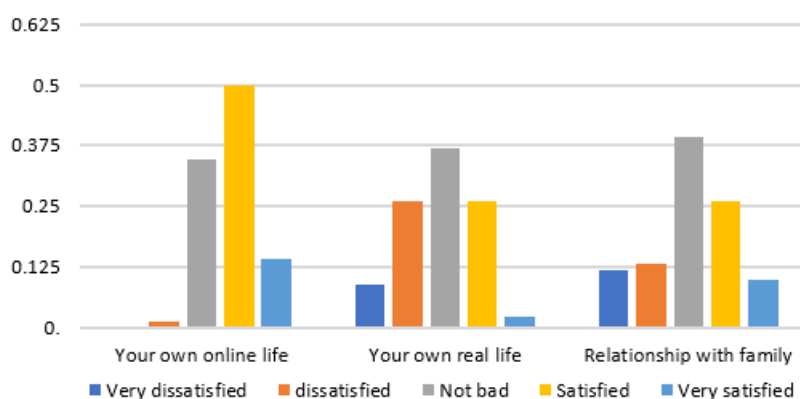


Fig 1. Respondents' satisfaction level. (Figure credit: original)

3.3. Mental State of Users

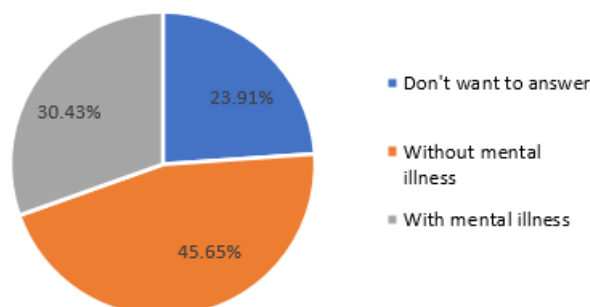


Fig 2. The situation of respondents' mental illness. (Figure credit: original)

Nearly 30% of the interviewed Qzone users indicated that they had suffered from mental illness (see Figure 2). In comparison, only one of the respondents who was not a Qzone user indicated that he or she had suffered from mental illness. Mental instability makes this group more sensitive and susceptible to verbal and behavioural stimuli from others, which can provoke strong verbal attacks. Furthermore, as the percentage of Qzone users who are suffering from mental illness is much higher than the people who do not socialize much online, respect for patients with mental illness has become a tacit rule for all in the Qzone social network. However, in recent years, this group has appeared more sensitive than before. Jokes about mental illness are not tolerated. For example, a blogger posted that he hoped people would never know what kind of medicine it was. The accompanying picture is a candy with a black and white filter. This blogger would be attacked by some of the netizens on Qzone because the blogger did not respect people with mental illness. If a blogger makes a comment from a healthy person's perspective, which is not meant to be antagonistic, then the blogger will be attacked by netizens. They will pick out all the points in it that could create an argument and that person could be accused of disrespecting people with mental illness. Some of the bloggers make bigoted statements, for example, "all able-bodied people and those who are better off than the persons who are suffering from mental illness should die". They can avoid any questions by simply stating that they have a history of mental illness. When someone objects, they say "The bitch is there again"

(in Chinese, "bitch" has the same pronunciation as "health") [9]. On Qzone nowadays, it has become a new form of "political correctness" to defend all the views and opinions of people with mental illness, and if someone does not do so, he will be called a bitch by some of the netizens. This has led to a deterioration of the online environment and an escalation of verbal attacks. A history of mental illness is like a death warrant for speech. As long as one has suffered from mental illness, any kind of speech is acceptable, while those who have not experienced mental illness are not qualified to question any opinion.

3.4. The Anonymity of the Internet

The survey results show that anonymity is one of the most important factors in respondents' choice of online social networking (see Figure 3).

Anonymity helps to reduce the shame of online users by making people feel that no one knows who they really are and they are protected. As a result, they are less likely to think ahead about the rightness of their actions when they act to harm others. Unlike physical fights in the real world, verbal shaming on the internet requires very little cost and consideration of the difference in status and ability between perpetrators and the targets of violence in the real world. Just through some words, people's negative emotions could be incited. The consequences of cyber violence are often considered to be indirect, as the perpetrators do not directly inflict physical harm on the victims in real life, and the final act of suicide is basically carried out by the victims themselves. The perpetrators can then say, "it's because he had a low mental capacity and he killed himself after someone said a word or two". Such similar excuses can be used to justify themselves.

3.5. The Imperfections of the Law

Chinese law does not have clear legal provisions and sentences for cyber violence but only for insult and defamation. Lawyer Zong Hui replied, "Cyber violence generally does not violate the law. Cyber violence is more of a violation of civil law, so most cyber violence will not be sentenced to jail but more of a liability for compensation. However, if the circumstance is serious enough to constitute a crime, it is against the law" [10]. According to *Article 246 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China*, the crimes of insult and defamation are committed by using violence or other methods to openly insult other persons or fabricate facts to defame others, and if the circumstances are serious, the person shall be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of up to three years, detention, control or deprivation of political rights [10]. This means that only victims who take their cases to court will be dealt with and, only in cases of serious harm to the social order and national interest, cyber violence will be prosecuted by the public prosecutor's office. As a result, many people believe that cyber violence is nothing more than making a few comments online without the intention of causing the death of other persons, and they are not legally liable. As a result, the psychological threshold for cyber violence is lowered and people realize that they will not be punished by the law even if they make random comments online and, the lack of punishment makes it easier for people to act violently on the internet.

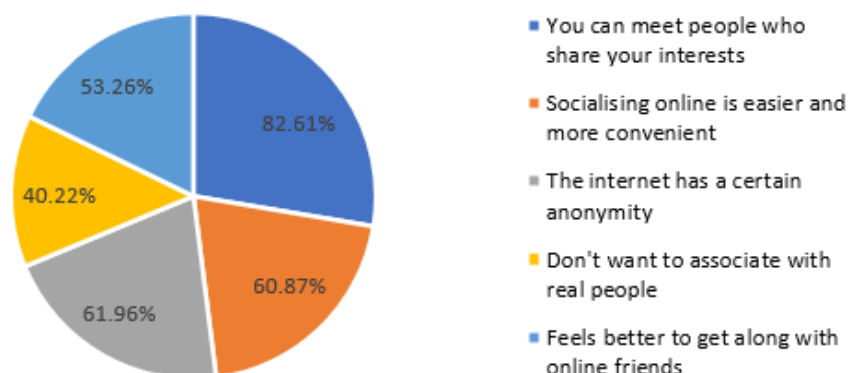


Fig 3. Reasons for respondents' preference for online social interaction. (Figure credit: original)

3.6. Today's Online Culture and the Cost of Cyber Violence

The incidence of cyber violence has increased in recent years. 30.53% of respondents in this questionnaire said they had been subjected to cyber violence. Because of the significant emotional stress and intimidating effect that cyber violence can have on the victims, people fear that their personal information will be published online and they will be subjected to verbal abuse on the internet and physical violence in reality. Some users are using 'open box', an act of posting personal information about other, including home addresses, jobs, and even ID numbers, on the internet, as a way of dealing with others.

In addition, there is an operating account on Qzone called "Spaced Out", where users can contribute information about others to the account, and it can be tweets or chat logs. People can also invite other users to comment on the victims in the comments section. They use this approach to carry out anonymous cyber violence. These avid readers of various platforms have formed their own circles and cultures and can socialise with each other.

On September 8, 2022, netizen Mo committed cyber violence against netizen QiYin because the content of the portrait posted by QiYin included the works Mo did not like. Six minutes after a photo shoot was posted, at 8:35 a.m., QiYin's mobile phone number, social account, and address were published on Qzone. Immediately afterwards Mo sent a message containing abusive language to other persons and published details of QiYin's residential address. After being alerted by several users, Mo did not delete the content or apologize but instead went on a rampage to promote the rightness of his actions. Because of the low cost, the abuser made the personal information of the user public and posted abusive comments simply because there were parts of the content that he did not like. By searching for relevant keywords on China's largest e-commerce platform, Taobao, the researcher found that services to check IP addresses are available for sale at very low prices, ranging from 5.9 RMB to 15 RMB. Through IP addresses, people can easily access other people's information at a very low price and exposure them on the internet which is a form of cyber violence.

The specificity of the internet environment and the characteristics of the user group both lead to the occurrence of cyber violence. The entire user group is young people, most of whom are dissatisfied with real life and family tensions, and the mental situation of the whole group is more fragile and sensitive than others. This realistic trait makes them more willing to seek spiritual solace online, and the internet has become their main form of social interaction. Most of them are at a disadvantaged status in the real world, but on Qzone they are the main active users and naturally the group that holds the most power of speech. Their values become the 'correct' values on the platform, and when someone's views or behaviour do not meet their expectations, the extremists will attack him from verbal shaming to personal attacks. If there is condemnation, the attackers will use the argument of "freedom of expression on the internet" as a shield, but in essence, they are claiming to be tolerant of ideas while strongly attacking all views that differ from their own. Because of the anonymity of the internet and its ability to span time and space, it is easier to consider the user on the other side of the screen as a block of data rather than a real person. This perception allows net perpetrators to feel comfortable by attacking any viewpoints that do not match their own and any logical gaps in the speech of others. When people interact with each other face to face, both parties are restrained and 'perform' properly according to Goffman's theory of Dramaturgy. In that case, aggression is greatly reduced. When socialising online, however, the lack of authenticity makes it more likely that people will unleash aggression and malice under the protection of anonymity. In China, there are no clear rules on the criminalisation and enforcement of cyber violence, which is only defined in terms of insult and defamation, and the anonymity of the internet makes it difficult to enforce the law. In particular, there is no clear delineation of responsibility in the law for cyber violence which has several perpetrators rather than one, making it difficult to provide justice for victims. As a result, cyber violence incidents occur repeatedly.

4. Conclusion

The entire user group is characterised by immaturity, sensitivity, and impulsiveness. In the anonymous environment of the internet, people feel protected and more aggressive. Besides, people are more eager to impose their views on others and attack views that do not meet their expectations. This legal imperfection makes it impossible to clearly delineate responsibility for cyber violence and makes it difficult to enforce. As a result, cyber violence is difficult to curb. The law could be improved by clarifying the criteria for cyber violence and the division of responsibility to ensure that it is effectively enforced. At the same time, education on the concept of "harmony and difference" needs to be strengthened in basic education. Platforms also need to strengthen their supervision, especially for some platform accounts, so as not to ignore the moral bottom line for the sake of traffic.

This study also has certain shortcomings. For example, the questionnaire sample size is not large enough, making the argument less convincing. Moreover, the respondents were mostly university students and there were fewer other age groups, making it difficult rise the conclusion to a general level. It is hoped that later researchers will make the sample more representative, so that the findings can be generalized. It is also hoped that other researchers will refine the questionnaire to obtain more detailed and professional data in order to deepen the understanding of the respondents.

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