

How Social Media Participation Impact Identity and Civic Engagement? A Study of Intersection of School Bullying Content on Social Media, Identity and Civic Engagement

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Abstract: This study mainly investigates how social media use impact users' identity and civic engagement. In this study, we are looking into the topic of school bullying issue on social media. The popularity of social media has allowed more incidents of school bullying to come to light and generate public discussion. In order to gain a nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media, identity and civic engagement, this study collected the opinions of 197 participants through a questionnaire, resulting in 193 valid samples. The results suggest that engaging in social media content related to school bullying strengthens one's sense of identity and social responsibility, and promotes participation in anti-bullying social activities. This study used a quantitative method to collect data through an online questionnaire. The survey design was divided into two parts, with the first part containing basic information about the participants and their social media usage, and the second part exploring the participants' understanding of and reaction to a highly publicised incident of school bullying on Chinese social media as an example. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were used for data analysis. It was found that users who engaged in school bullying content were more likely to actively participate in relevant social discussions, enhance their understanding of social phenomena, and demonstrate stronger civic engagement behaviours in real life. This provides valuable insights for policymakers, educational institutions and social media platforms aimed at promoting positive interactions and civic engagement in society.

Keywords: Social Media, School Bullying, Civic Identity, Civic Engagement

1. Introduction

Social media has surpassed traditional media in less than 20 years and is now the primary news source for half of world population. Its quick development and widespread use drastically changed how people connect, communicate, and construct identities. Social media influences how individuals view themselves, the outside world, and their interaction with it, which in turn affects how society develops.

School bullying is a globally concerned phenomenon and also one of the trending topics circulating social platforms. Social media makes it possible for more school bully cases to be exposed to and

supervised by the public. Each time a high-profile case is exposed, there is a surge of related content and discussion lasting for a while, which raises awareness on such issues and promotes systemic measures to be placed. This research investigates how user participation in school bullying content on Chinese social media affects identity formation and civic engagement, offering insights into the interplay between digital interactions and real-world behaviors in a unique sociocultural context.

1.1. School Bullying and Social Media

School bullying is defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or intimidate peers. It is one of the most discussed topics as it concerns the physical and psychological health of adolescents. On Chinese social media such as WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok, school bullying cases pop on trending topics quite frequently and immediately bring about widespread discussion and sharing. Public opinion and participation demonstrate its power in pushing forward progress in adolescent protection and judicial procedures. All the comments, posts and reposts, accounts of similar sufferings are influencing people's perceptions about the phenomenon, themselves and social development. Studies show that the spreading of content often can be explained by severity of the incidents and the visibility of victims or perpetrators, with some posts attracted millions of views and comments, thereby demonstrating the high level of public interest and participation in the issue [1,2].

1.2. Identity Formation

The psychological concept of "identity" is a complex construct that refers to an individual's self-conceptualization and the ways in which they are recognized by others. It is regarded as a multidimensional, dynamic, and socially constructed aspect of a person, including their perceptions about who they are and who they aspire to be, as well as how they relate to their environment and society [3]. Identity is constructed in a dynamic mode, integrating varied experiences and social roles into a self-concept. This is particularly true to one's adolescence. Both external and internal environments impact one's identity formation. In the digital age, social media penetrates into everyday life and serves as a space where one can explore different aspects of their identity [4]. Compared with traditional media, when a social event happens, the surge of related content on social media can immerse users in the context for days or even longer. It's easy to impact one's identity in such an immersive experience, whether you are a victim, perpetrator, or observer; as revealed by research, repeated exposure to school bullying can lead to internalized victimization or the normalization of aggressive behaviors [5].

1.3. Civic Engagement

Civic engagement encompasses the activities through which individuals participate in the political and community life of their society, ranging from voting to activism [6]. Most research findings suggest a correlation between online and offline engagement [7]. As the political context and governance have their uniqueness, civic engagement is more strictly regulated under state policies and social norms; social media provides a unique platform for expressing opinions and mobilizing collective actions [1]. The way users engage with online bullying topics can influence their civic behaviors in a profound way, either fostering a sense of community and responsibility or promoting apathy and disengagement [2].

2. Literature View

2.1. Civic Engagement

Civic engagement refers to actions taken by citizens in pursuit of common concerns and solutions to the problems of the communities to which they belong [8]. According to a report by Statista [9], the number of social media users had risen to 2.46 billion by 2017, and the number of social media users is expected to reach 3.02 billion by 2021. As social media has become an important tool for entertainment and communication, it has also had a significant impact on individual civic engagement. Scholars have argued that "the characteristics of the Internet communication environment and the specific goals and needs of communicators" inform and guide the impact of digital media on civic engagement [10]. In the past, many scholars and researchers have studied the impact of digital media on civic engagement. The earliest studies have focused on the duration and frequency of Internet use [11, 12]. But with the proliferation of internet-enabled devices and the development of social platforms enabling public discussion and deliberation, and the emergence of new forms of network organization [13]. Information on the Internet not only predicts social capital but also promotes individual social participation [14].

This paper finds that people are increasingly engaging in social media to participate in and discuss topical news events. The main reason for this is that the arrival of social media has changed the nature of everyday online interactions between citizens, enabling personalized public engagement that no longer requires significant organizational resources or a shared identity and ideology [15]. For example, people can create and disseminate news information and political content in the form of personal action frameworks on social platforms [15]. Citizens can express their opinions for or against news events and political campaigns. Interaction on the Internet is conducive to greater social participation and, thus, to a greater sense of personal identity.

The concept of citizenship and civic identity are central to political theory and political psychology. Citizenship plays a prominent role in the construction of citizenship. Moreover, citizenship occupies a prominent place in every debate in which proponents of different viewpoints differ in their views on the types of citizenship that are morally desirable and politically necessary [16].

Studies have shown that increased access to information on public affairs through the Internet can improve citizens' political knowledge, awareness of political opportunities and interest in community and political affairs [14, 17]. The Internet has a significant impact on citizens' social participation and identity. In a 2015 study on social media and citizen engagement: a meta-analytic review, a predominantly positive correlation was found between the use of social media and civic engagement, as well as the impact of social media on personal identity, with the use of information, expression, and relationships being particularly important.

Interaction on the Internet is conducive to greater social engagement and thus a greater sense of personal identity. In the case of bullying in schools, for example, such topics become a hot topic of discussion on social media as soon as they emerge. The intersection of bullying content, identity formation, and civic engagement is complex and multifaceted. Exposure to bullying content can affect an individual's self-concept and social identity, which in turn affects their wider social and civic behavior [18]. Some studies suggest that victimization may lead to increased empathy and activism, while others highlight the risk of social withdrawal and reduced civic engagement [19, 20]. More research is needed to understand these dynamics, particularly in China, where patterns of social media use and cultural factors may differ [21]. Therefore, this study uses school bullying as an example and aims to reveal how we perceive social participation and identity through this hotspot event.

2.2. Civic Engagement in China

Civil society is often referred to as "the intermediate public sphere between the state and the private sphere" and includes any "organized or unorganized, articulated or unarticulated activity" that takes place in this public sphere [22]. During the Maoist era, such an independent public sphere was virtually non-existent because of the dominant party-state and the severe restrictions on associational life (e.g., the lack of a public sphere) [22, 23].

However, some scholars have argued that the development of capitalism after China's reform and opening up has promoted the development of civil society [24]. In addition, the rapid development of communications and information technology over the past two decades has made the Internet and social media widely available to the general population [24]. The widespread popularity of the Internet and social media has fundamentally changed the way Chinese people communicate and brought new elements to the development of civil society. Previous studies have discussed the emergence, size, and nature of the public sphere or civil society in China [25]. However, most of these studies have focused on the political sphere, but past research has concentrated on the political participation of citizens and the impact on their capital, with less focus on the social participation part of the research, especially online participation.

Some scholars have examined the differences between online and offline engagement regarding adolescent populations [26]. However, this part of the study also lacks sample data for China. However, the relationship between exposure to bullying content and civic engagement remains underexplored. Some studies suggest that negative online experiences can either spur activism as a form of resistance or lead to disengagement due to disillusionment [27].

To fill this gap, this research aims to examine the relationship between social media and civic engagement in China, and we use school bullying as an example of public interest and ideas about public participation in youth protection incidents and how these participatory behaviors contribute to identity.

3. Research Questions

This research aims to explore the interplay of social media participation, identity and civic engagement within the context of school bullying topic. The research questions are as follows:

1. How does exposure to school bullying content on social media shape users' perceptions of this social phenomenon?
2. What impact does engaging with content about school bullying on social media have on users' development of identity?
3. How does involvement in discussions about school bullying on social media influence users' civic participation offline?

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Objective

Our research aims to examine how consumption of school bullying content on social media influences individual's perceptions of the phenomenon, themselves and their civic engagement in promoting community good in China. By examining the intersection of school bullying content, identity, and civic engagement, we wish to gain a more nuanced understanding of how social media shape our society and provide implications for policymakers, educational programs, and social media platforms to promote positive influences.

4.2. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach and uses a survey to collect public opinions about school bullying. The survey is distributed to a diverse sample of social media users in China without setting a filtering mechanism. According to literature from scholars in related fields [5, 28,29], quantitative research methods are commonly used to study public engagement on social media. These studies primarily collect data through large-scale surveys to analyze the prevalence, forms, and impacts of cyberbullying.

4.3. Research Method

To obtain extensive and representative data suitable for quantitative analysis, we adopted the survey method. Brace [30] emphasizes the importance of question coding for successful communication, especially in market research, which must accommodate respondents' diverse languages based on gender, age, education level, occupation, and income. We also drew on Lietz's [31] research into questionnaire design, which provides detailed theoretical and practical guidance for designing effective questionnaires.

Our questionnaire combines closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions facilitate quantitative analysis, while open-ended questions allow for the collection of in-depth information. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first part is general questions about demographic information and participants' social media use. The second part is questions related to a high-profile case of school bullying happening in Handan, Hebei, on March 10th, 2024 (referred as the Handan case in later text). The purpose of imparting the Handan case is to provide a more specific and visualized picture of school bullying for participants. This case, due to its severity, causes intense discussion on Chinese social media, thus the memory might still remain fresh. The questionnaire content is as follows:

Part One

1. Demographic information: Questions about age, gender, and educational background.
2. Social media use: questions about habit of social media use.
3. Exposure to school bullying content: Questions about details of school bullying and participants' familiarity with the phenomenon.
4. Participation in Bullying Content: Questions about the types of participation (e.g., viewing, commenting, sharing) in bullying content.

Part Two

5. Introduction of the Handan case on Chinese social media
 - a) Questions about Understanding of the case
6. Identity Formation: Questions assessing identity development influenced by social media interactions, adapted from validated psychological scales (e.g., Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale).
7. Civic Engagement: Questions about civic activities, online activism, and community involvement, adapted from existing civic engagement measures (e.g., Civic Engagement Scale).

4.4. Sample Selection

We employed a combination of random sampling and snowball sampling methods to invite users of various social media platforms (WeChat, Weibo, TikTok) to participate in the survey. The questionnaire will be distributed through social media, relevant forums, and groups to ensure sample diversity and representativeness in terms of age, gender and geographic location.

4.5. Data Collection

Data will be collected through an online survey hosted on a secure survey platform (e.g., Wenjuanxing). The survey link will be distributed through social media channels and other online communities. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent will be obtained before they proceed with the survey. The survey is expected to take approximately 3-5 minutes to complete.

4.6. Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis will involve several steps:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample and the distribution of responses to survey items.
2. **Reliability and Validity Checks:** The reliability of the survey scales will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Factor analysis will be conducted to confirm the construct validity of the scales used in the survey.
3. **Correlation Analysis:** Pearson correlation coefficients will be calculated to examine the relationships between exposure to bullying content, participation in bullying content, identity formation, and civic engagement.
4. **Regression Analysis:** Multiple regression analysis will be performed to determine the extent to which participation in bullying content predicts identity formation and civic engagement, controlling for demographic variables.
5. **Moderation and Mediation Analysis:** Moderation and mediation analyses will be conducted to explore the potential moderating and mediating effects of demographic variables and psychological factors on the relationship between exposure to bullying content and the outcome variables.

4.7. Significance of the Research Method

The use of a survey method in this research is significant for several reasons. It collects data from a large and diverse sample, which has its advantages in generalizing findings. The quantitative approach is superior in identifying patterns and relationships between variables, which helps to foster a comprehensive understanding of social media participation. Furthermore, the research adopts validated scales and rigorous data analysis techniques to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings and keep the robustness of the research. By employing this research method, the study aims to generate valuable insights that can offer interventions and strategies for different stakeholders.

5. Findings

5.1. Demographic

The majority of survey respondents are from the 26-35 age group, taking up 45.69% of the total participants. This indicates a high engagement from young adults in the workforce or starting families. The next significant groups are those of 19-25 years (24.37%) and 36-55 years (22.84%), highlighting a strong interest across different stages of adulthood. Females account for a larger proportion of respondents at 57.87%, suggesting a possibly higher concern or awareness about the well-being of children among women.

Education levels among participants skew towards higher education, with 70.05% holding an undergraduate degree. This suggests that the survey largely captures the perspectives of educated individuals, which might influence their engagement and understanding of the issues discussed.

The primary roles of respondents include parents/guardians (51.27%) and citizens concerned about school bullying (43.65%), pointing to a high level of personal or civic interest in the topic. Employment status indicates that 69.54% are employed full-time, which aligns with the age demographic and educational attainment, providing insight into a mostly working-class perspective.

5.2. Social Media Use

WeChat is the most widely used social media platform reported in the survey, with 94.92% of participants using this application. Tiktok comes next with 85.28% usage, which shows frequent engagement among users with videos. Daily social media usage is high, with most respondents spending 1-3 hours online, which provides ample opportunity for encountering and engaging with content related to school bullying. As for the questions we designed for the specific case of “13-year-old boy murdered by classmates”, 90.86% of respondents reported knowing this case and acquiring related information through social media (82.12%).

The correlation analysis shed light on the interplay between demographic information and users' engagement with the issue. The findings show that most demographic factors have no or weak correlation with the people's understanding of the Handan case and their engagement with the online content. However, residential location is moderately positively related to the school bullying phenomenon ($R=0.258$), the Handan case ($R=0.300$) and online engagement ($r=0.256$). The difference is statistically significant ($*p<0.05$).

5.3. Social Media Participation and Identity

The cross-analysis of social roles and feelings about the Handan case reveals that different social groups generally share common emotions. Sympathy, anger, and shock rank at a high position among all social groups. This suggests a widespread recognition of the severity of the issue and calling for systemic change. Yet slight difference should be noted that parents and concerned citizens display a high level of motivation to express opinions and a desire for more effective prevention measures. For students, feeling powerless and less motivated rank next to the top three emotions. Educators, besides the common emotions, also show a tendency to reflect on the systemic problems behind the phenomenon.

In regard to online participation in the case related content, online and offline discussion and posting or reposting information on social media are the most frequent ways to get engaged. Moreover, most students (62.5%) and educators (69.7%) also endeavor to study about more school bullying information while parents (28.8%) and concerned citizens (23.1%) choose to review current prevention policies and procedures to ensure adequacy.

5.4. Social Media Participation and Civic Engagement

From the cross-analyzed data, there is a clear correlation between the extent of participation in the Handan case discussion and public reactions or actions. Respondents who were actively involved in social media discussions, sharing and commenting are more likely to discuss the case with family or friends (70.37%), post or repost about it on social media (59.26%), research about bullying in schools (62.96%), participate in online discussions (70.37%), and talk about bullying with their children or young relatives (55.56%). Those who reported a medium level of online interaction maintained a relatively high percentage of each action. This group show a slightly lower percentage than the former, especially in participating in online discussions (63.38%). In contrast, those who briefly viewed and occasionally encountered social media content were less likely to respond or take action in a positive way. A significant portion of these viewers (17.65%) claim that they did not take a specific action. Moreover, the survey also shows a positive association between social media participation with

respondents' perceptions about the social phenomenon, with participants reporting to become more informed of its prevalence (66.48%) and complexity (63.69%). Watching videos showing victims being bullied and families' accounts (68.16%) is deemed as the most effective way to arouse sympathy among users.

6. Discussions

6.1. Profile of Participants

The findings suggest that the survey primarily draw attention from educated, working-age adults, predominantly female. And a fairly large percentage of respondents are parents or guardians. Given their education levels and profession, this demographic is likely to be influential in shaping public narratives and policy regarding school bullying.

Interestingly, while using social media seems a habitual part of most participants, it is also deemed to be a source of harmful information. It is recognized that social media plays a dual role, as it can exert both positive and negative impacts among users. This implies the need for platforms and policy makers to work on a healthier online community.

These demographic pictures a contextual backdrop for interpreting the survey results. The findings reflect opinions of a mature and educated group of people in society and a nuanced understanding of the issue. Given the high percentage of parents and concerned citizens in the survey, this could provide a more informed and proactive approach to addressing school bullying. Findings show that participants are dispersing around, which also suggests that public concerns are not limited to any particular urban area. This is a widespread societal awareness and interest in the topic across different regions.

Demographic factors such as age, gender, employment status, and marital status do not have a significant impact on either understanding or participation in social media content related to the general topic of school bullying or the specific Handan case. This indicates that these variables are not keys determinants of people's perceptions and engagement. However, residential location and education background tend to be more influential than the other factors. Higher-educated individuals tend to be more informed of the complexity and details of school bullying and the case. In contrast, people living in more economically developed areas tend to more actively engage with online discussion. The study highlights the importance of education and urban living environments in shaping public perception and engagement with school bullying issues. Further research could explore the reasons behind these correlations and investigate strategies to improve awareness and engagement among all demographic groups.

6.2. Identity Formation

The differences in responses and emotional reactions among various groups might reveal insights into their self-reflection and identity formation. Participants' reactions to school bullying cases on social media, such as feelings of sympathy, anger, and concern, are expressions of their identities and values. Prior research has shown that social media platforms serve as spaces for individuals to construct, express, and experiment with their identities [32]. The survey findings align with earlier studies.

Students' reactions, labelled by sympathy, anger, and shock, reveal an emotional empathy for victims and a developing sense of justice. Their powerlessness and lack of motivation to take action might stem from a sense of vulnerability and a perceived lack of agency in their environment. This reflects an evolving identity that is sensitive to social dynamics and the need for support structures that empower them [3, 33]. The collective emotion of anger and sympathy can foster a sense of solidarity among students, contributing to a cohesive group identity that is aware of injustice and seeks to address it collectively.

Parents show a high level of concern and motivation, which suggests their protective and nurturing identity. The reactions stem from their parental role in safeguarding children and the community's welfare. The worry for their children's safety in school reinforces a parental identity centered around security and well-being.

Educators reveal anger and concern towards the incident, showing their professional identity committed to student welfare and safety. Their reflection on the roots of bullying points to a reflective practitioner identity, one that seeks to understand complex social phenomena to improve educational practices.

The emotions and responsive actions of concerned citizens, as they way they refer to themselves, reveal a socially engaged identity that extends beyond immediate family or professional roles. Their emotional responses indicate a commitment to societal issues and a desire to contribute to the common good and policy changes.

6.3. Civic Engagement

The survey findings about social media participation to school bullying content basically align with former studies. According to findings, exposure to social media content about bullying in schools may cause reflection on former personal experiences or perceptions of bullying and violence. This process of reflection and comparison contributes to identity construction [34, 35], especially in the sense of civic responsibility and engagement. For example, data suggests that social media use is associated with increased awareness of bullying, which may prompt users to reassess their role in the community and their responsibility to respond to social issues.

The findings suggest that social media acts as a platform where individuals connect by school bullying, which fosters a sense of community and a sense of common purpose. This echoes with previous literature that suggests social media can strengthen group cohesion and promote collective action [36, 37]. Participants' motivation to engage with the Handan case on social media was driven by a sense of social responsibility, empathy with the victim, and a desire to make a difference. This exemplifies that social media is shaping collective identity and mobilizing communities around social causes.

Previous research examines how exposure to diverse perspectives on social media may lead to cognitive dissonance and subsequent shifts in identity or belief systems [38]. Findings suggest that social media participation has increased awareness of the prevalence and complexity of school bullying. This challenges people's beliefs and prompt individuals to reconsider their attitudes towards bullying in schools and their roles in addressing the issue. This process of reassessment might change their self-perceptions while integrating new information and perspectives into their self-concept. Overall, the findings accord with previous research on the relationship between social media use and identity formation.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the role of social media in shaping user identity and civic engagement in the context of school bullying in China. Our findings confirm the dual nature of social media. Social media not only enhances public awareness and changes public discourse, but it also exposes users to content that causes psychological distress. In this way, social media influences individual perceptions of and responses to social issues such as school bullying.

The increased exposure to school bullying on WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin not only encourages widespread social engagement but also causes collective reflection and shared action. This study underlines the role of social media in fostering a sense of community belonging and shared purpose.

Social media users are connected by a shared concern about the issue, and their participation are determining social change.

Furthermore, the correlation between social media engagement and enhanced civic awareness suggests that platforms can significantly improve public understanding of the complexities surrounding school bullying. This is particularly evident in how users reassess their roles in the community. Their responsibility for social issues helps build a more informed and proactive citizenry.

7.1. Limitations

Despite the insights provided by this study, there are several limitations about the research, which could be considered by later studies.

One of the major limitations is a lack of representativeness of age groups which could cause sampling bias. The survey primarily captured the perspectives of the young to middle-aged educated cohort. However, the other demographic groups, such as the elderly or the less educated are left with not enough representativeness. Secondly, the survey is incapable of cover a larger area in China due to limited resources. Thus, the results may not fully capture regional differences in social media use and civic engagement across China.

Moreover, data collection was based on self-report measures. It is difficult to avoid inaccurate self-assessment when answering the questions. It is suggested that data could be acquired by triangulated research method to maintain its objectiveness. The study adopts a quantitative approach and could lack in-depth data of personal experiences and the qualitative dimensions of identity development and civic engagement. Lastly, the study only takes a snapshot of the social phenomena without considering long-term changes in behaviors or attitudes as a result of prolonged exposure to bullying content on social media.

7.2. Directions for Future Research

It is suggested that longitudinal studies be taken to track change over time and incorporate qualitative methods to collect deeper insights. Demographics should also be expanded to include more types of participants. Further exploration should be conducted in terms of more detailed and specific participation on social media and how it influences identity formation and mechanisms behind the surface.

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