

# *An Analysis of Cyberbullying*

## *—A Case of the Pink Hair Girl Incident*

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**Abstract:** In China's social media, Zheng Linghua suffered from negative comments and cyber violence for her pink hair colour. By basing upon this pink hair girl incident, this essay will talk about the anonymity of social media and connects this particularity of online community with misogynous comments. On social media, anonymity could diminish the emotional connection between comment recipients and comment senders and reduce the effect of taboo. As result, anonymity contributes to the raising of negative comments, enlarges the disparity between recipient and commenters and encourages the use of words relative to sexual humiliation. And the over-continuing conflict shown in this incident is also researched in this essay. It is the gift-return violence which keeps the online conflict going. This essay finds that for constituting a peaceful and friendly online community, it requires many efforts coming from different aspects. And it is important to see women's power and to let people realize the difference between real life and online life.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying, misogyny, anonymity

### 1. Introduction

Social media, as an open and accessible platform for opinion distribution, is considered to be a contributor to equality [1]. On social media, women could get help from other individuals when facing discriminatory speeches. And they feel freer to disclose the sexual harassment encountered which was shied away for fear of power [2]. These online platforms render the pave to gender equality more possible. However, the effect of social media on female individuals seems to be not so positive.

The anonymity, impersonality and egalitarianism contribute to the foundation of an equal environment in social media [3]. But in cyberspace, the attacks on female users do not show a tendency to decline. By the report of the Broadband Commission, cyber violence against Women and Girls is becoming a worldwide phenomenon, causing social and economic problems [4]. And women receive more gender-based or sexual harassment than men. In Pew Report on Online Harassment 2017, compared to men in the same age range (9%), 21% of women aged 18 to 29 reported experiencing online sexual harassment [5]. Mantilla notices that these online negative comments are the presence of misogyny, which includes large participation of people, sexual insults, vicious words using and threats [6].

The sociologist, Johnson, defined misogyny as a psychology and phenomenon of contempt, hatred and prejudice against women [7]. Xu and Gao indicate that men, as the subject of sex, try to marginalise and stigmatise women, the object of sex, to reinforce their power of words and gain solidarity between males [2]. In this process of stigmatising, women's opinions would be twisted and oppressed. The female individual suffering from misogyny experiences alienation, the siege of others and objectification. Objectification of women also extends to dimensions such as women's economic status and lifestyles.

The scholars above analyse misogyny in a dichotomy way. But the present interpretation of misogyny does not associate with social media. The particularity of online community and its effect on people's online behaviours are little deliberated. Meanwhile, many researchers regard misogyny as the critical point and main reason for gender-based online incidents. Still, they ignore an over-continuing conflict that lasts for many days after the end of the issue. This motivation causing the opponents' long-lasting fight not gets enough attention. Therefore, this essay will try to respond to two main questions. What's the particularity of social media and its influence on people's behaviour? and the possible explanation of the over-continuing conflict behind the incident in the online platform. Figuring out the repercussions of social media and the possible explanation of the over-conflict will provide a solution to reduce online conflicts and a way to constitute a sustainable online community. The long peace of the online community is necessary for realizing online equality and diminishing the disparity of different groups of online users. For conducting this research, this essay will focus on the pink hair girl incident in Chinese social media as the selected case. By analysing online users' comments about this social issue, this essay will answer the two questions mentioned.

## 2. Case Description

On 13 July 2022, Zheng Linghua, a 23 years old girl, posted a set of photos on Xiaohongshu, a popular application among young generations for posting photos, daily experiences and advertisements. In these photos, she, dressing floral dress and with pink hair, was showing her Master's admission letter to her grandfather lying on a hospital bed. Her grandfather was meaningful for her because it was her grandfather who had taken the responsibility of raising her after her mother's decease. But this family photo was used with bad intentions by an educational institution later.

Zheng's photo was interpreted maliciously as "an ill old got his master's offer and married a little girl". This fake news was read more than 3 million times. Because of this conjecture, she was considered to have an unjustifiable relationship with her grandfather and her pink hair was the evidence of this incest.

Zheng Linghua tried to explain the truth but still many negative comments showed up in the comments area of her blogs. This cyberbullying lasted for about half a year and caused her to suffer from depression. However, with friends' encouragement, Zheng took legal measures to fight back. She called the police, reported the negative comments and found a lawyer for taking legal action with 4000 yuan she earned by working after school. Meanwhile, she also wanted to use her pink hair as an anti-violence symbol.

But online rumours came into her offline life. Negative comments spread among her schoolmates and even evoked school violence against her. And her life ended on 19 February 2023.

After Zheng's decease, online attacks did not stop. There were still critiques insinuating that being an online celebrity is too hard for Zheng, a vulnerable girl, to be, trying to blame Zheng Linghua for it was her weakness that caused the tragedy.

### 3. Online Anonymity

Anonymity contributes to the rising negative comments and enlarges the disparity between the recipient and comment senders. In real life, the distribution of opinion could be limited because of the relationship with the interlocutor, the environment of the conversation and the subject. People convert their way of expression when the topic is taboo or delete sensitive words, conveying an atmosphere of friendliness and showing proper manners. In social media, anonymity cuts the direct connection between two or more interlocutors and provides freedom of expression. Online users feel no need to moderate their words chosen because they are behind the screen and not exposed to public view. When the feeling of dislike combines with this openness, it could be malicious comments and hatred. And anonymity creates an exceptive zone without guilty. In this free-guilty place, users of social media could be barbaric. They do not get restricted by ethics. In comments below Zheng's blog, she was said to be "a nightclub escort" and someone used the decease of her grandfather to attack Zheng Linghua: "knowing you are so unreasonable, your grandfather could not get peace after death."

Meanwhile, the recipient of negative comments is placed unequally with comment senders. When Zheng received unreasonable conjecture from the comments below, she could not fight back similarly. As a blogger or online celebrity, she was the centre of public attention so she had to decent and keep her own dignity, using a "proper" way to illustrate the truth. It is not expected that a famous person, even one with a little reputation, shows a distinct hostile attitude towards comments but at the same time, the rude words from commenters are accepted. When the recipient suffers from public critique, commenters become invisible because of anonymity. This disparity between the recipient and commenters reinforces the unilateral violence towards Zheng Linghua.

#### 3.1. Sexual Humiliation and Anonymity

When anonymity loosens the emotional self-emotional connection in commenters, it also loosens the restriction of sex, the taboo in daily life, and aggravates the situation of sexual humiliation use. In his book *Erotism*, Bataille divides the living world into two parts, the world of reason and the world of violence. To continue a normal life in the ordinary world, people exclude taboos from the world of reason. Taboos make people feel anxious and stressed. They touch the nerves of human beings. One of the most evident taboos is death. Death evokes tremendous fear, which makes people can move, think and even mental collapse. For dispelling death from the world of reason, people build tombs and performed funeral ceremonies to console dead people's souls and to erase the violence of death. In Bataille's theory, sex is similar to death. They both have the climax and the long-lasting descending phrase after the highest point. For death, it gets its peak when people die and lasts as a status. For sex, it gets highest when two sides finish the reproduction and causes a long-lasting void. So, in daily life, sex is always a topic not expected to be discussed [8].

Comments sent have relatively fewer effects on commenters themselves [9]. Anonymity breaks the traditional one-to-one and face-to-face conversation styles. On social media, it is one recipient and a group of commenters who exchange information. And in this situation, the sense of individuality of the commenter is diminished. The comments that he/she sent are part of group opinions. So, for the commenter, he/she does not have much feeling about his/her own words. In this way, the violence of taboo words decreases for it is not the commenter who faces the taboo directly but a group of commenters. But for the recipient, he/she receives all the violence as a single individual. Among negative comments below Zheng Linghua's blogs, many contents involved sex humiliation and sex-based conjectures: escort, dissipated person. Sex, which is sensitive and avoided in ordinary life is used to attack and humiliate on social media. The reason why people use so widely sex humiliation in pink hair girl incidents instead of taking sex as taboo is that anonymity weakens the emotional connection with comments sent.

### 3.2. Continuing Conflict

The obligation of the gift forces two opponent sides involved in the Pink hair girl incident to evoke long-lasting conflict. Mauss defines in his book *The Gift* that everything people send out, especially the things with special value, is a gift. This kind of gift has part of the nature of its first owner and when it is handed out, this attached nature forces the receiver to give something as return [10]. If the receiver does not give a return, he would be placed under the name of the giver and become the slave of the reputation of the giver. This force of gift constitutes an obligation described as “the obligation to reciprocate worthily is imperative. One loses face forever if one does not reciprocate, or if one does not carry out the destruction of equivalent value” [10]. The give and return could be violent because both sides do not want to be inferior in their relationship. This give-and-return constantly goes on until one side chooses to give up. In the process of exchanging gifts, both sides try to kill their gift by wasting or throwing the gift to show their generosity, their higher status of wealth and superiority.

In social media, opinion distribution is the representation of the gift. The opinion is personal and it has the name of the owner on itself. When one side gives his/her opinion, the other side needs to give a return, a fight back for not showing acceptance of the opponent’s opinion. If he/she accepts it, it means that he/she loses in this exchange of opinions which is usually competitive and becomes the appendage of his/her rival. In today’s online community, people could encounter countless debates. Basically, these discussions do not have true meaning. People would not change their mode of behaviour just because of a single victory or a defeat in an online debate. However, the conflict never stops and they all want to spiritually win over the opponent side, even to spiritually kill the rival. For one social issue, when it is mentioned several months later, people could still start a new round of debate to reperform history. The violence of gift long lasts.

In the pink hair girl incident, even after Zheng’s decease, there are still comments which blame Zheng’s vulnerability for causing her suicide. Below is one comment “Why should you care about a few words spoken by others and have your life end so early? It’s not worth it, girl” published on 20 February, there are people who chose to oppose this view on 12 March. In the Zheng Linghua incident, her defenders and antis begin an over-continuing conflict which even lasts after her decease. The online debate between the two sides is not just for backing up Zheng, in fact, this debate is for distributing the opinion of the two sides. They all want to ensure their high status in this relationship or debate. The exchanges and clashes of opinions push the two sides to remove the point from Zheng to themselves. This social issue is becoming an over-continuing conflict between defenders and antis, not Zheng and her antis.

## 4. Suggestions

### 4.1. Moderation and Female Power

Anonymity has already become one of the major characteristics of online media. The effort trying to deprive online anonymity is going to deny the existence of social media. But there is still a need to regulate this anonymity. In today’s online community, the private information exposed to the public of celebrities and that of comment senders are not comparable. Companies of communication applications should endeavour to find an equilibrium of information showing on the web between the recipient and commenters, making it possible for people to recover the feeling of talking with a real and living person online. It is urgent to make commenters feel that they are talking with others as an individual, like in offline life. By setting lists of limited words, ensuring the power of restriction of taboos and keeping every online user using proper words for suppressing online damages. Meanwhile, the government should be involved in constructing a peaceful online community. Improving the

cyber-court and making it practicable for people to seek online justice. Protecting people's legal rights in the online community, cancelling the existence of the free-guilty zone.

And it is necessary to see women's power. Around some feminist bloggers, such as Liang Yu, female individuals gather together and discuss the gender-based social issue. They back up disadvantaged women online, reinforce the female voice, try to challenge the traditional patriarchy and assist women. This female assembly around female celebrities has the potential to develop into a prominent women's community. In this community, female individuals could share similar values and be spiritually free from male power. This kind of female autonomous community could also provide power to women, breaking the actual situation that female bloggers face alone in the critiques online. Women do not need to keep their dignity in front of negative comments desperately and they could seek help from other individuals in the community. The one recipient to many commenters pattern made by anonymity will be changed by the female community.

In designing, evaluating, promoting policy and implementing social responsibility in science and technology, women who specialize in organizing social movements and intervening in the world have considerable influence [11]. Believing female power, providing them with access to the leading position. Women could set suitable rules, bring positive changes and contribute a lot to nowadays' social media and to constituting a female community. With moderation and female power, the adverse effects of online anonymity on female individuals could be reduced. Women could and should have dignity in online life.

#### **4.2. Online Life and Real Life**

The violence of gift-return exchange has rooted in human nature. There is no literally effective way to erase this violence. There is a potential conflict as long as there is the possibility of opinion expression in social media. Therefore, the essential thing is to make every user realize online life is far from being real life. In length, the time spent on social media is just a part of my whole life. In-depth, the gain and loss of online community are little relative to people's true happiness. When two sides confront each other, it is hard but crucial to remember that we can have conflicts but not at the price of war [10]. When the conflict is too violent, people should have an awareness of getting away in time. In this way, people could control the violence of gift-and-return instead of suppressing it completely.

The importance of controlling gift-return violence is beyond the online community and it touches on the reality and nature of human beings. Giving the freedom of opposition and considering the maximum limit of conflict. Never go beyond the limit, avoid the over-conflict and always with moderation.

#### **5. Conclusion**

By analysing the Pink hair girl incident, this essay finds that anonymity on social media contributes to rising of negative comments, enlarges the disparity between comments recipient and comment senders and weakens the effect of taboo. This essay also illustrates the gift-return violence behind the over-continuing conflict. The results of anonymity could be explained by the following reasons. Firstly, anonymity creates a zone of free-guilty for distributing opinions without limit. Commenters do not restrict by manners which modify people's words chosen in real-life communication. When people try to express dislike, this freedom of expression develops negative emotions into vicious attacks. This number of negative comments raises. Secondly, anonymity reduces the private information exposed in online communication. This reduction weakens the feeling of a real conversation for comment senders. This lack of feeling diminished the emotional connection between the recipient and comment senders. Commenters feel like being in a group more than a single

individual to communicate with the recipient. They experience fewer taboo restrictions and as result, they feel fewer boundaries to use sexual, misogynous words as online attacks and increase negative comments. Meanwhile, when the commenter has a feeling of a group, the recipient rests alone facing online attacks. His/her personal information is well known by others online, therefore he/she is forced to act properly to deal with online opposition. This kind of disparity of status of recipient and commenter is partly due to anonymity. Thirdly, the over-continuing conflict shown in the Zheng Linghua incident could be explained by gift-return violence. This exchange pressure pushes two sides to win over the other one and causes an endless circle.

This essay talks about the particularity of social media, anonymity, which influences people's online behaviour. It also reveals the motivation behind over-conflict on social media. This essay raises practicable solutions to reduce online negative comments and a possible way to contain online conflict. It is beneficial for people who want to create an online peaceful community and try to find a way to achieve online harmony.

This essay just focuses on a single case in Chinese social media. It still requires more evidence from others cases on other online platforms. Meanwhile, many things about the female community need to be explored but are not mentioned in this article. For future studies about online cyberviolence, the role of the female community needs to be researched to achieve a better understanding of online gender-based conflict and to create a harmonious online environment.

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