

Public Opinion Misconduct and Online Gender Violence: Exploring China's Social Media Crisis Beneath the Surface

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Abstract: Due to the rapid advancement of Internet technology, cyber violence has grown to be a massive issue driven primarily by public opinion and social events. In order to investigate the potential crisis of Chinese social media below the surface of public opinion governance, this paper focuses on several archetypal examples in which women are the subject and public opinion is out of focus, leading to ethical misconduct in public opinion. This paper used three research techniques to gather information from Chinese social media users about a specific theme: a questionnaire survey, real-time hotspot data collecting, and case comparison analysis. This paper successfully obtains a large number of data points and analyzes them. Combine this with the change in the interaction mode between the media and Internet users in the “Internet+” era in recent years and the trend from one-way communication to two-way interaction, and this paper discusses the changes in the media environment and the new problems caused by them and further analyzes the practical data. Finally, it explores the problem that China's social media has been neglected in responding to online violence events: the traffic bias of the content reported by social media platforms has harmed netizens' legal consciousness in terms of online violence, and the victims do not understand the means of safeguarding their rights according to law, while the perpetrators do not know the consequences of online violence, which makes online violence events emerge endlessly.

Keywords: gender-based online violence, Chinese social media, behavior and social networks

1. Introduction

In the era of public opinion liberalization, the “empowerment” of the Internet has made all kinds of complicated voices flood the public opinion field, and the Internet has become the primary carrier of life sharing, emotional catharsis, rights and interests' protection, interests' expression, and the ideological collision of all social strata. The post-truth era has provided a new discussion environment for the people as the main body of the Internet, while at the same time, the public environment of the Internet is facing a crisis of ethical and moral concepts brought about by the loss of focus on public opinion and public opinions being out of line.

With the rapid development of Internet technology, cyber violence has become a phenomenal problem derived from social events and mainly carried by public opinion. In 2018, Natasha Israt Kabir studied that women are the most vulnerable group to online violence, and online violence

against women is increasing [1]. A 2021 Donald Flywell Malanga study found that online violence against women is widespread and rising in Malawi [2]. In Georgia, for example, the Parliament collected data on 22% of women parliamentarians and found that 40% were targets of hate speech and insulting comments by Internet users, which means that the situation is even worse. Female journalists are also recorded as cyber-violated more often than their male counterparts. Globally, 38% of women in the survey had directly experienced online abuse, and 50% of girls said they had been subjected to more cyber violence than real-life harassment. Plan International reports that cyber abusers often abuse women through name-calling, sarcasm, and mansplaining to lower their self-confidence and self-esteem, making them more afraid to speak out on the Internet. “The truth has not been tampered with or questioned; it has just become secondary.” This still works in the post-truth era. This type of vicious behavior has intensified, and many abused clients have chosen to end their lives while the violence inflicted on them has never been withdrawn.

However, by collecting and analyzing news reports on cyber violence in Chinese social media, this paper finds that the problems of social media are much more than that. Based on the above background, this paper categorizes online violence incidents triggered by public opinion out of focus, with women as the object of gendered online violence. It takes this as the object of research, adopting logical research methods and data analysis methods to study the generation mechanism of gendered online violence and the knowledge of social media users about online violence coping tools, as well as the practices of Chinese social media in online violence incidents. To address the above research directions, this paper proposes three research questions:

Q1: Why do abusers target women in online violence?

Q2: Is netizens’ generally low sense of responsibility the main reason for radicalizing online gender violence?

Q3: Is there a relationship between the continued emergence of online violence incidents and China’s social media response to online violence?

To address the above issues, in the first part of the main body of the article, based on the theories of communication and sociology, this paper deduced the general law from the iconic case of public opinion ethical misconduct triggered by public opinion out-of-focus with women as the object, analyzed the logical relationship between public opinion interventions in emerging communication modes, such as big data and self-media, which affect public opinion ethical security, and materialized the abstract process of the mechanism of public opinion. In the second part, when this paper analyzes the mechanism of emerging communication modes affecting the ethical security of public opinion through questionnaires, this paper pursues the unity of academic logic and social logic. It connects the logical relationships between different processes, such as the Internet and data production, cyber-ethics and disinformation, and personal privacy and excessive leakage of information, to embody the universality of the research phenomenon, the scientific of the research process, and the objectivity of the research conclusions. In the third part, this paper collects and analyzes a certain number of cases and data to analyze the substantive crisis of China’s social media environment from the superficial phenomenon of repeated gender-based online violence.

2. Methods

2.1. Canonical Analysis

This paper provides a targeted analysis of a series of gender-based online violence incidents targeting women in China in the past five years, taking Hangzhou female graduate students who suffered from depression and death due to their pink hair. Being exposed to internet violence is an example. Based on first-hand information, this paper aims to comprehensively collect information on the case events, including direct and indirect information, conduct a thorough analysis of the issue of online violence,

and conduct a comprehensive analysis of the analysis results to conclude by using the structural-functional perspective of sociological theory and the linguistic adaptation theory of systemic functional linguistics.

2.2. Questionnaire Survey

In response to the questions raised in the article, this paper first uses the questionnaire survey method. A total of 11 questions were designed in this questionnaire, 10 of which provided valid data for this paper. First, the questionnaire asked the respondents' age, gender, and whether they were active on social media as basic information. On this basis, the respondents were divided into two parts to investigate whether the active people had suffered from cyber violence and the primary forms of cyber violence they had suffered. After that, they asked what they knew about cyber violence. At the same time, the inactive people will be asked directly after answering the essential information. Then, the questionnaire investigated the respondents' understanding of cyber violence and related views. During the sample selection process, this paper attempts to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample, including respondents of different ages, genders, education levels, socio-economic backgrounds, and other factors, to obtain more comprehensive and integrated findings. The collected data is visualized to provide a more intuitive presentation of the findings so that the data can be analyzed.

2.3. Word Frequency Analysis

This paper utilizes data mining methods to extract, classify, and organize relevant data. Discovering representative keywords from text mining and combining them with social network applications in specific fields through techniques such as association rules to obtain user-focused or sensitive content in order to visualize the data related to the relationship between topic content published on social media platforms and the frequency of online violence vocabulary occurrence, and based on this, further exploring the overlooked issues of Chinese social media in responding to online violence incidents. The following is the process of this research method:

- (1) Collect text data such as news reports, social media posts, and comments related to the event.
- (2) Preprocess the collected text data, including removing stop words, punctuation marks, and special characters and performing word segmentation.
- (3) Based on the preprocessed text data, use data analysis tools to calculate the frequency of occurrence of each word and perform word frequency statistics.
- (4) According to the research question, select relevant words as keywords and analyze and derive the factors that intensify network violence.
- (5) According to the word frequency statistics, use the word cloud generation tool to generate a word cloud map. In the word cloud map, the size of words indicates their frequency in the text, and words with higher frequencies are displayed larger.
- (6) Based on the generated word cloud map, observe the distribution and size of words, and analyze the occurrence of sensitive words and responsibility awareness-related words in the text data. It is possible to infer whether sensitive words and responsibility awareness are related to the main reasons for the radicalization of online gender violence based on the high-frequency words in the word cloud diagram.

3. Experiment Results and Analysis

3.1. Results of Case Analysis

First, this paper conducted a certain amount of case analysis and selected the following cases: A total of 1389 news articles on “Cyberbully” published on the online platform from May 2022 to May 2023 were retrieved from the Refinitiv DataStream using the keyword “Cyberbully.” After data cleaning, this paper screened out 62 cases of online violence. Through the analysis of these cases, it was found that the public is more likely to become the target of criticism on the internet compared to public figures, and female and student groups are also the “hardest hit areas” where cyberbullying occurs.

(1) A Shanghai female gave the money of 200-yuan award to a delivery driver by net violence and jumped off the building on April 3, 2022 [3].

(2) A Hangzhou graduate student girl, due to pink hair caused by net violence caused by depression, eventually passed away.

(3) A bereaved mother in Wuhan was under cyber violence ten days after jumping off the building and unfortunately passed away.

(4) Netflix star Xiaoxue defended her rights after being “rumored to be pornographic” by reasonable and legal means.

In these cases, over 60% of the victims were non-public figures (excluding internet celebrities, celebrities, athletes, and actors), and many “little things” could also cause online violence. They could be emotional issues between couples, conflicts between delivery boys and merchants, or how keepers raise them. Among public figures, internet celebrities are the most vulnerable group to cyber-attacks, mainly including internet anchors and bloggers or ordinary people who have become popular due to online dissemination. This paper selected the corresponding cases specifically for this. When society pays more attention to the gender of female public figures than the incident itself, it carries out moral judgment and emotional catharsis on the women involved in the incident, thus generating the “cyber violence” that stigmatizes female parties. Internet violence stigmatizes the women involved in the incident.

The article analyzes these incidents of online gender violence based on the theory of weak communication and finds that women are often targeted from the perspective of male empowerment. The male community fantasizes about women as their appendages, believing that the source of women’s rights is not due to their natural personal identity, but the attention given to them by a patriarchal society.

Therefore, cyberspace public opinion events involving female public figures often start with the female characters in the event and trigger “triggers” in the name of women.

3.2. Data Analysis and Data Mining

This paper conducted a questionnaire survey on the topic of cyber violence, and after analyzing the 357 questionnaires collected, this paper came up with the following conclusions:

(1) Most of the respondents often post their comments on social media platforms.

(2) 84.6% of female respondents have experienced cyber violence. Victims are primarily female. In the data obtained from the questionnaire survey, the proportion of female victims who have suffered from cyber violence is as high as 84.6%, which fully illustrates the severe gendered phenomenon of cyber violence. 46.1% of the respondents believe that the target group of cyber violence perpetration is women, women, and girls, and 27.6% of the respondents believe that cyber violence perpetrators choose to perpetrate violence against the target group because they are vulnerable groups.

(3) As shown in Table 1, there is little data on the scale of online violence and its prevalence among different populations and communities. However, research suggests that online victimization is more likely to involve women, girls, and sexual minorities [4]. Furthermore, in a survey involving more than 9,000 German Internet users, women were significantly more likely than men to experience online sexual harassment and cyberstalking [5].

Table 1: Cyber violence among men and women.

question	Option	Gender		Total
		female	male	
Q4: Have you ever been subjected to abuse, attacks, insults, slander and other online violence affecting your physical and mental health from others on social media	NO	35/81.4%	8/18.6%	43
	YES	22/84.6%	4/15.4%	26

(4) When the target of cyber violence is female, rumor-mongering and insults are the primary means of violence. Most of the respondents were subjected to cyber violence, mainly through trolling (47.4%), bashing (55.3%), and insulting (55.3%). According to the relevant legal provisions, she was trolling to make fun of malicious pornography, human flesh searches, and Internet rumors. They are all under the category of Internet violence. 27.8% of the respondents believe that cyber violence has fabricated false information, “yellow rumors,” and wantonly spread rumors; 25.6% of the respondents believe that cyber violence has insulted, abused, and insulted the victim; 10.6% believe that cyber violence has insulted, abused, and insulted the victim; and 10.6% believe that the cyber violence has insulted, insulted, and insulted the victim. 25.6% of the respondents believed that the cybercrimes had insulted and verbally abused the victims, and 10.2% believed that the cybercrimes had violated the right to privacy and had excessively collected and disseminated the victims’ personal information.

(5) More than 1/4 of the respondents believe that the lack of responsibility awareness and legal concepts of cyber violence perpetrators and public opinion inducement are the reasons for the emergence and development of cyber violence.

(6) Cyber violence is an emerging worldwide phenomenon with grave public health consequences. It is associated with adverse psychological, social, and reproductive health effects and offline physical and sexual violence for victims [6]. Cyber violence has a wide range of impacts on victims’ mental health, self-esteem and self-confidence, security and privacy, social psychology, and significant impacts on education and careers. The seriousness of the problem of cyber violence: 91.2% of the respondents believe that cyber violence produces psychologically significant health effects; 89.2% of the respondents believe that the victims experience a situation of damaged self-esteem and self-confidence; 84.5% of the respondents believe that cyber violence produces a threat to security and privacy issues; 78.4% of the respondents believe that the victims experience a social avoidance and social fear mentality; cyber violence has a significant impact on the educational and vocational. In addition, the impact of cyber violence on education and careers is also as high as 68.9%.

(7) 61.5% of the respondents were aware of the laws related to cyber violence but were unaware of them, and 7.7% were completely unaware of the laws related to cyber violence.

(8) Respondents do not know how to respond effectively when subjected to cyber violence, and more than half of the respondents fall into the circle of self-evidence.

3.3. Collection of Sensitive Topics

Text analysis is one of the most effective ways to obtain information from news reports and comments. By studying sensitive topics between men and women, this paper found that, in some sensitive words,

cyber violence is more frequent. In the “bride price” topic, people tend to express a stronger emotional tendency in the comments, such as anger, disappointment, support, or opposition. This paper extracted keywords from the comments and visualized them as word clouds. The keywords in the word cloud reflect people’s standard views on bride price issues, such as marriage, traditional ideas, and inequality. These views have intensified the contradiction between men and women, prompting some netizens to commit online violence against women, such as insults, rumors, and objectification.

Figure 1 show that the words “confrontation” and “fistfight” frequently appear on whether sanitary napkins should be sold on high-speed railways. Gender dichotomy divides men and women into two opposing and mutually exclusive gender groups at social and cultural levels. The concept of gender dichotomy often leads to gender inequality and gender discrimination. It emphasizes the traditional division of gender roles, which gives men and women different power, resources, and opportunities in society and culture. The notion of gender dichotomy, which assumes inherent differences between males and females, can lead to issues of sexism, gender violence, and gender inequality. Punching in Chinese means combating feminism, and combating feminism refers to behaviors or ideas that attack, demean, or impede the development of feminist movements and ideas. It includes denying and questioning women’s equal rights and interests, gender equality, and women’s autonomy. The high frequency of these controversial words about the genders of men and women and the near absence of discussion about how the incident should be resolved are not only a phenomenon of out-of-focus public opinion but also a form of malpractice in the form of cyber-violence against women.

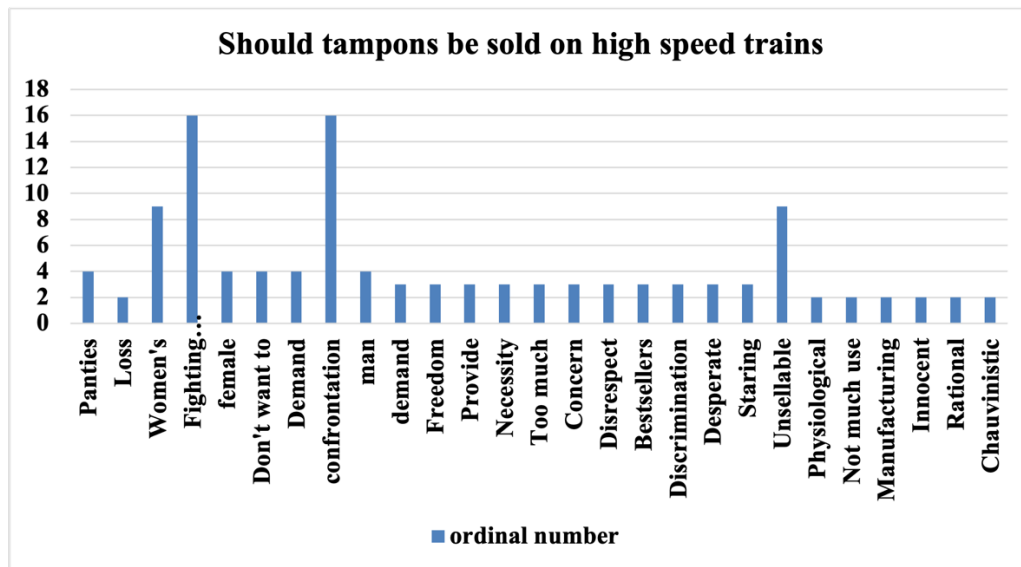


Figure 1: Should tampons be sold on high-speed trains.

In “workplace discrimination,” some high-frequency words include women, discrimination, and pregnancy (Figure 2). Reflect people’s prejudice against women in the workplace, which is a stereotype of women and infringes on women’s rights and interests. Moreover, the prejudice against women in the workplace has led to cyber-violence, such as insults and rumors, against women.

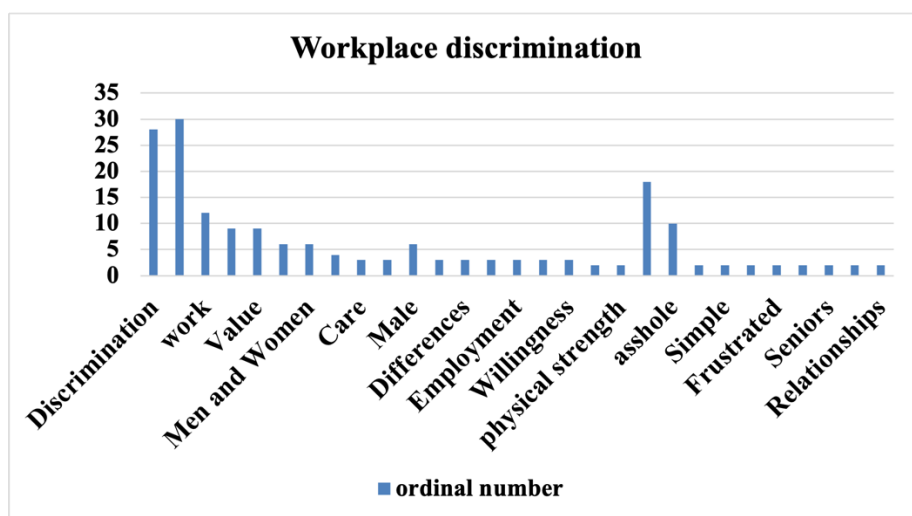


Figure 2: Workplace discrimination.

The word frequency statistics of these three sensitive topics show that when people discuss gender-related sensitive topics, they always deviate from the incident itself and focus on the conflicts between men and women. This behavior is a kind of public opinion out of focus, which cannot solve the problem substantially but further intensifies the conflicts between men and women. These conflicts are often caused by prejudice, malice, and other reasons. There are also insults, attacks, abuse, and other undesirable behaviors towards women and other vulnerable groups, leading to the deterioration of the public opinion environment on the Internet, and some groups are subjected to cyber-violence.

4. Discussion

According to the theory of the spiral of silence, demographic dominance is crucial in online public opinion, and only by competing for the voice of the majority can this paper succeed in the storm of public opinion. Although the behaviors of “breaking news” and “human flesh search” are against ethical norms in online public opinion, the audience is happy to do so.

(1) Looking at online gender violence from the perspective of weak communication theory, male groups often see women as objects to be gazed at and fantasize about them as possessions, believing that women’s rights are not based on their status as natural persons, but are determined by the attention they receive from a patriarchal society. When the women who receive attention do not meet the expectations of the social group, society withdraws the rights granted to women and subjects them to severe moral judgment. As a result, public opinion events involving female public figures in cyberspace often trigger “trigger points” centered on the role of women. When society pays more attention to the gender of a female public figure than the incident itself, it imposes moral judgments and emotional catharsis on women, triggering cyber violence and stigmatizing the women involved in the incident.

(2) According to the data from the questionnaire, this paper analyzes the events of the pink-haired girl and Xiaoxue in more detail. By comparing the events, this paper found that both chose to accept the evidence to fight back after suffering from cyber violence, and the pink-haired girl tried to take the legal weapon to defend her rights and interests but failed to prevent the tragedy from happening. After learning of this situation, Xiaoxue did not rush to prove her innocence but calmly collected evidence and contacted a team of professional lawyers. She found and extracted evidence against the rumor-monger through screenshots, screen videos, blockchain evidence preservation technology, and notarization by a notary public. This paper finds that online rumor mongers have a lapse in public

opinion and morality, lack moral boundaries and legal awareness, and are not hesitant to fabricate, tamper with, and disseminate inaccurate information to achieve a specific goal or satisfy a certain mentality and cause harm to others [7,8]. In 2001, Levrant Miceli S, Santana S A, and Fisher B S found that many countries have enacted anti-internet trespassing laws. However, these legal efforts have not stopped those who harass and stalk women online [9]. The results of a survey conducted by Rebollo-Catalan A, Mayor-Buzon V in 2020 also highlighted how little is known about institutional resources for victims [10]. China has also introduced relevant laws and regulations for a long time. However, online platforms and netizens suffer from poor supervision and discrimination, failing to promptly detect and deal with inaccurate information, leading to its spread and deterioration. Those who have been falsified face tremendous pressure and difficulties and need to spend a lot of time, energy, and money to defend their rights, and the process of defending their rights may be long and arduous.

(3) In the course of the study, this paper collected a total of 242 related reports and found that the content of media reports on cybercrime incidents would not only be “suggestive” and “sensitive words” but also have a severe traffic bias; that is, in order to catch up with the trend of high traffic, media coverage is heavily biased towards the online violence incident itself, but apart from the truth, how to deal with online violence is equally important to netizens. In the case of the rumor about Xiaoxue, the person’s response to cyber violence is of textbook significance. However, except for the title, this paper still cannot see any specific report on the response method in the article, which is usually carried over by keywords such as “legal weapon” and “blockchain.” This shows that social media and public opinion regulation have failed to remedy the situation, focusing only on cyber violence incidents but not reporting on cyber violence response methods. Victims do not know how to defend their rights, and abusers do not know the laws and regulations, which makes cyber violence still possible in the hotbed of liberalization of public opinion.

5. Conclusion

This paper summarized the features of social media coverage of online gender violence in the previous two years to focus this paper on social media coverage of online gender violence and uncover potential crises that have been overlooked in Chinese social media beyond suggestive media coverage and public opinion misinformation. Data on public opinion can only be collected in a limited number of cases because the time element significantly impacts how many cases are collected, and some cases are remote from the time of occurrence. To better understand the issues Chinese social media users are having with dealing with online violence, the paper is still distributing questionnaires. It also suggests what areas of Chinese social media should be highlighted and where improvements can be made.

Authors Contribution

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

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