

The Impact of Cyberviolence on Individuals

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Abstract. With the wider network coverage and higher penetration rate, many social problems emerge, such as cyberbullying. This paper explores how cyberbullying influences the short-term and long-term development of individuals through domestic and foreign literature reviews as well as interviews. The most apparent impact is that teenagers who have suffered from cyberbullying are prone to depression, sleep deprivation, and bad behaviors. For adults, in addition to negative emotions, cyberbullying also harms their jobs and future opportunities. Meanwhile, for adults and minors, cyberbullying has an impact on their interpersonal relationships and future development. To better solve cyberbullying and protect potential victims, this paper argues that the government is responsible for subdividing the degree and types of cyberbullying from the legal perspective, and then taking different punishments. Schools can implement media building, from which teenagers can foster their media literacy, acquire media knowledge, and master the skills of media. Besides, media content can be identified to judge the consequences of media behavior and control media behavior. All major platforms are obliged to recover the comments and reports of cyberbullying in time, and popularize the basic knowledge of network usage for every user before registering media accounts, such as in the form of videos or questions and answers.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Individual Development; Impact.

1. Research Background and Raised Questions

Up against the changing times, the use of electronic products and network technology has become more extensive. According to the 52nd China Statistical Report on Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) on August 28, 2023, as of June 2023, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.079 billion, an increase of 11.09 million compared with December 2022, with 76.4% as the Internet penetration rate. [1] Although virtual cyberspace features transitivity, freedom, and openness, which has improved the social development and the convenience of human life, this threshold-free network contains people of different classes and educational backgrounds. At the same time, due to imperfect treaties and laws, cyberviolence and cyberbullying are also scattered in virtual cyberspace. Influenced by social progress, life pressure, and epidemics, many social problems have surfaced, including cyberbullying. In addition, cyberspace has evolved into a space for venting emotions, which seems to offer an opportunity for people to recklessly release negative feelings that have been sealed for a long time. This phenomenon makes cyberbullying overwhelms all major social platforms, such as *I Am What I Am* worshipping foreign things in 2021 and the suicide of Liu Xuezhou in 2022. Moreover, the magazine *Allure* once revealed that famous British actress Millie Bobby Brown had gone to therapy to handle the constant bullying she had faced online. These events at home and abroad have caused considerable social concern and sensation, thus this paper focuses on the specific impact of cyberbullying on individuals and its causes and solution.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic Research Status

Research on how bullying affects teenagers in China abounds. Students with immature values and life outlooks are easy to accept external influences, resulting in bad or extreme behavior. Combined with the relevant domestic research, it is concluded that the harm of cyberviolence mainly includes three aspects: the healthy development of individuals, the environment construction, and the construction of social rule of law. From the perspective of individual healthy development, some



scholars have proposed that cyberviolence and bullying will expose victims to serious learning weariness. In the learning ability test, victims suffering cyberbullying underperform in cognitive ability and memory compared with normal students, which has a negative impact on students' learning.[2] In daily life, victims of cyberbullying tend to lose their normal lives and rest as well as isolate themselves from the socializing zone, which triggers autism, depression, pessimism, and even self-harm or suicide, seriously destroying their life, health, and safety.[3] According to the paper by Zhang Leilei, Zhu Yunjiao, and Zhang Zhihua, Association Between Cyberbullying and Depression Among Higher Vocational Students in Anhui Province,[4] it is confirmed that "suffering from cyberbullying is a dangerous condition for depression, and students hurt by cyberbullying are 2.034 times more likely to sustain depression than students who have not experienced cyberviolence." Studies have demonstrated that teens with depressive symptoms and a history of cyberbullying show higher emotional distress than teens without such experiences. Meanwhile, most victims of cyberviolence suffer from physical torture, such as headaches, abdominal pain, and sleep problems. They also have a higher perceptual difficulty when dealing with their emotional problems, getting along with peers, and other social activities. Moreover, this group still undergoes anxiety and over-active performance. Some of them even have harmful behaviors such as smoking, excessive drinking, etc. Jiang Qianyun's research also proved that victims of cyberbullying are prone to low self-esteem, depression, and other emotions. [5] According to Wu Yuejiao, Chen Jingqi, and Ma Shuang,[6] their research confirmed that peer cyberviolence in childhood is also related to adolescent risk behaviors. It may be because teenagers will fight anxiety by smoking, drinking, and substance abuse. As the victims of cyberviolence, especially teenagers, they may have suffered serious mental injuries and distorted their personalities under psychological torture, which will damage their future careers, life development, and happiness. For example, Song, a student from Peking University who abused cats, once described his personality as "cruel and inhuman" after the continuous torture of cyberviolence. They could easily become absolute deviants under repeated stimulation.

2.2. Foreign Research Status

Studies at home and abroad have explained in detail that cyberbullying affects individuals, including the factors of cyberbullying. As early as 2008, Madden and Jones found a connection between the length of Internet use and mental symptoms. [7] Those who reported more Internet use also experienced more depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and anxiety. However, a study by Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Lattane in 2014 shows that many personal and situational factors influence and lead to cyberbullying. [8] Personal factors include gender, age, motives, personality, psychological states, socioeconomic status and technology use, values and perceptions and other maladaptive behaviors. Situational factors include promotion and perceived support, partial involvement, school climate, and perceived anonymity. All these factors trigger or promote the formation of cyberbullying. Other overseas studies have also manifested an interaction between people's experience of cyberbullying and negative psychology, such as poor academic performance, truancy, dropping out, and longer-term violence. Although Beran and Li did not find evidence that cyberbullying perpetrators missed school more or achieved worse results than those who did not participate in cyberbullying, they did find that perpetrators had inattention problems. [9] Besides, the perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying also scored higher on depression and anxiety but lower on self-esteem in psychological and personal development, which may be the reason for the poor academic performance of those involved in cyberbullying.[10] Cyberbullying also can be seen in adults and at work. For example, studies conducted by Privitera and Campbell [11] and by Kowalski, Giumetti, and colleagues[12] found respectively that 11% of Australian Accepted Manuscript 8 male workers had experienced cyberbullying and that one-third of college students had been cyberbullied at work.

2.3. Contributions and Shortcomings of Existing Research

Although the existing research elaborates on the factors of cyberbullying in detail, negative effects on individual psychology and physiology exist, including the reasons for the formation of

cyberviolence. However, detailed summaries are insufficient at present and there is also a lack of research related to its effects on the future development of individuals, such as employment, happiness, and future behavior. Most studies focus on the immediate impact of cyberbullying on people without a longer time dimension. Because teenagers don't have mature values, most studies are about the negative impact on their physical and mental development and learning. Nevertheless, it ignores that teenagers will face many choices that will change their life path, such as class performance, school application, personality change, major choice, etc. Whether cyberbullying will continue to have a certain impact on their future is of great research significance. Therefore, this study uses a literature review to summarize numerous professional literature and interviews, so as to study whether the experience of cyberbullying will affect future decisions and behaviors.

3. Research Ideas and Method

The main research subject is the deep impact of cyberbullying on individuals, considering two time dimensions of the present and future. Given that the behavior of cyberbullying is difficult to define, the connectivity of the network is more intensive, and personal mentality changes after the epidemic, cyberbullying is more common and the victims have suffered indelible harm. However, there is no perfect system, laws and regulations, or even education to correct this behavior nowadays. Hence, this paper takes an in-depth discussion on the harm of cyberbullying, and appeals to the system founders, governments, and network platforms to pay more attention to cyberbullying and the construction of a healthy network environment. The innovation of this research is to analyze the negative impacts of cyberbullying from two time dimensions and highly integrate other Chinese and foreign literature.

This paper uses the literature review and interviews to study how cyberbullying influences the deep development of individuals from the aspects of reputation, psychological and physiological development, and social relations. As for the literature review, this paper retrieves the Chinese and foreign literature to summarize the impact of cyberviolence on individual development as well as the views and solutions proposed by scholars in different fields on these social problems. As for the interview, this paper conducts in-depth interviews with people who have experienced cyberbullying, and explores what changes have taken place in their psychology and life with open professional questions. The reason for choosing the interview is that the information obtained by this method is more than that by questionnaire surveys with strong flexibility. It can also go deeper into investigation without the literary limitation. Moreover, the interview can help us thoroughly understand how the behavior objects view and treat cyberbullying. Although there is no age limit for the interviewees in this paper, most of them are around 18 to 25. The interviewees are selected through the Internet and people who have been subjected to different degrees of cyberviolence. Meanwhile, the total number of interviewees is 15, including 7 males and 8 females. The interview is conducted online by video or voice phone calls, and the interview lasts about 20 to 30 minutes. According to various situations and interviewees' personalities, the interview duration varies. Interviews are recorded by machine, such as voice memos and text conversion functions on mobile phones. This research and recording have been consented to by interviewees, with their privacy and names protected, so as not to disturb and hinder their lives. In addition to integrating the events and information given by interviewees, this paper extracts valuable content for further summary.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Definition of Cyberbullying

4.1.1. Connotation and Extension of Cyberbullying

Given that cyberviolence and lingual violence are too general, the broad definition of cyberviolence refers to the network misconduct of cyber attack and assault in many forms, such as network language attack, privacy invasion, rumors and slander, network harassment, and even retaliatory pornographic

attack. Compared with cyberviolence, cyberbullying is used more in academic research. With abroad extension, cyberviolence is difficult to focus on the concept definition. For example, cyberviolence includes rumors, pornography, etc., while cyberbullying with a clearer definition mainly threatens, hurts, humiliates, or excludes others in society.[13] Cyberbullying and traditional bullying also have some similarities, but traditional bullying theory is not enough to explain cyberbullying. Particularly, the initiators of cyberbullying are usually large-scale and anonymous. However, traditional bullying tends to emphasize the relationship between poverty, low education, underprivileged status, and bullying, which is no longer the focus when it comes to the explanation of cyberbullying. Different from traditional bullying which directly infringes on the physical body, cyberbullying mainly insults and strikes verbally.

4.1.2. Characteristics and Common Forms of Cyberbullying

Early cyberviolence mainly refers to moral trial events such as human flesh search, which is fuzzy and complex with simple morality and positive elements. However, it attacks ordinary people with malicious venting. “Justice” and “attacking the weak” have also become two opposite development directions of cyberviolence. This paper holds that due to the isolation of the epidemic, human beings in a closure lose connection with society and other people, and only communicate with a single value every day, so they become more arrogant and think about what they do and firmly believe that moral concepts are right. Thus, the narrow inclusiveness and openness lead to a sense of rejection when encountering different values on the Internet. For example, Interviewee B believes that the cyberviolence he and his friends have experienced results from contradictory views. In this process, others’ views cannot be tolerated, which triggers further deterioration of the relationship. According to UNESCO, “bullying” is an act that causes harm or discomfort through long-term and intentional physical contact, verbal attack, or psychological manipulation. Meanwhile, it is characterized as bullying, direct or indirect, active, or passive, alone or collective. Participants in bullying usually include bullies, bullied people and bystanders, and cyberbullying is one of the common types of bullying. In 2011, Bauman defined “cyberbullying” as intentional, repetitive, and hostile acts by individuals or groups using information and communication technologies such as e-mail, mobile phones and pagers, instant messaging, defamatory websites, and defamatory online voting websites, aiming at harming others.[14] According to Pirjo L Lindfors’ research, cyberbullying has some unique characteristics, such as the difficulty for victims to escape bullying, the wide range of potential victims, the strong anonymity of perpetrators, and the difficulty in defining the degree of victimization.[15]

In 2011, Jensen and Helles established a typology of communication practices of various media from aspects of transmission-reception relationship and homogeneity (heterogeneity), where the transmission-reception relationship is mainly distinguished based on interpersonal communication (one-to-one), mass communication (one-to-many), and network communication (many-to-many).[16] In the later research in 2017, it was mentioned that this division ignored the spread of “many-to-one”. Due to the development of networking and mobility, such cyberbullying structures became more common and required more attention. Referring to the typology method of communication practice, the generalized cyberviolence can be divided from the relationship between the actor and the victim. “one-to-one” cyberbullying mainly refers to insults, harassment, and stalking of individuals; “one-to-many” cyberbullying includes insults and discrimination against groups, fishing, or hacking, etc.; “many-to-man” cyberbullying mainly means opposition and mutual attacks among groups, while “many-to-one” means various cyberbullies where groups surround individuals, such as large-scale language attacks or rumors and slander.

At the same time, cyberbullying presents a variety of forms, and Willard has the highest recognition and the widest spread. According to the nature of cyberbullying, he divides cyberbullying into flaming, online harassment, cyberstalking or cyberthreat, denigration, masquerade, outing, and exclusion.

4.2. Psychological Stress and Social Impact Experienced by Victims

4.2.1. Impact of Cyberbullying on Personal Reputation

Cyberviolence against individuals on the Internet, which arbitrarily publishes information such as insults, rumors, and invasion of privacy, derogates others' personalities and damages their reputations. Some have triggered others' "social death", even serious consequences such as mental disorders and suicide. It also disturbs the network order, destroys the network ecology, causes rage in cyberspace to run rampant, and seriously affects the public sense of security. It is not difficult to find that many public figures, such as singers and actors, are very easy to receive insults, rumors, and malicious editing on the Internet. Ordinary people also suffer the same situation on the Internet, with their reputation damaged when they are charged with unwarranted crimes. Interviewee H, who has been subjected to numerous cyber-bullying, said in the interview, ***"I was rumored by a bunch of anonymous people who distorted the facts and even fabricated things that never happened out of thin air, which made me wonder how to clarify myself."*** Both H and L believe that their reputations have been destroyed not only in their workplaces and schools, but also in their entire social zone.

4.2.2. Impact of Cyberbullying on Individual Psychology

Cyberbullying can bring frustration, humiliation, and anger to victims. Many studies have shown that cyberbullying victims have a clear relationship with depression, especially among teenagers and college students.[17] Mitchell, K. J., Ybarra, M., and Finkelhor, D. reported in 2007 that teens who suffered online harassment and bullying were 2.5 times more likely to have depressive symptoms and 2.2 times more likely to commit crime.[18] Interviewee B experienced a lot of one-to-one cyberbullying in his first year of senior high school. The reason was that he was publicly abused and cyberbullied on social software QQ because he had different values towards a star from people in the same group. The whole thing lasted for one semester. According to Interviewee B, during that time, he thought he had a sense of isolation, and even people all over the world had the illusion of malice towards him. Additionally, meta-analytical findings indicate significant correlates of workplace bullying with the well-being of victims, including anxiety, depression, accepted burnout, negative emotions and frustration, and physical symptoms.[19] [20] ***"After a year-long public abuse, I seem to feel like I've lost interest in anything. Caught in an emotional whirlpool, I'm afraid to walk out of the classroom and be confronted with abuse."*** Interviewee H said that in the many-to-one anonymous cyberviolence he experienced, he felt fear and anger all the time. Any words to clarify himself were denied and ignored without knowing who the perpetrator was. "I was tried by many unknown people. The helplessness and powerlessness at that time suffocated me." Interviewee D also said that he had resisted appearing in public and deleted his information on social platforms.

4.2.3. Impact of Cyberbullying on Individual Physiology

Physiologically, cyberbullying victims show more physical symptoms. Sampasa et al. took Canadian teenagers in grades 7-12 as a survey population to explore the relationship between skipping breakfast and cyberbullying. According to the results, victims of cyberbullying often or frequently skip breakfast, which leads to malnutrition and affects growth and cognitive ability.[21] [22] Cyberbullying not only affects teenagers' eating habits, but also has an apparent influence on their bad habits. Goebert et al. found that cyberbullying significantly increased the incidence of teenagers drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana.[23] [24] In addition, cyberbullying is intertwined with many negative behaviors, such as physical abuse or sexual abuse of victims.[25] Other studies proved that teenagers are more likely to feel out of control after suffering from cyberbullying, such as improving the sensitivity of stress response, which seriously harms the healthy growth of victims.[26] As for physical and mental health, existing research shows that cyberviolence can affect sleep and psychological adjustment ability. Once they suffer from cyberviolence and cyberbullying, their sleep disorder will become more prominent, because frequent bullying from the Internet takes up abundant rest time, especially for students whose minds are not yet mature or adults whose psychological construction is not perfect. Thus, their emotions are also affected, which makes them excited for a long time and produces a series of sleep problems, leading to a series of health problems, such as the

decline of memory and concentration, and emotional instability. As a result, it hurts personal life, studies, and even career. Interviewee A, a high school student younger than 18 years old, thinks that her sleep quality has been greatly weakened during the period of cyberbullying. “Whenever I lie in bed, the voices and words with attacks, threats, and insults always occupy my thoughts, and even my sleep becomes very shallow. I always wake up in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, the lack of sleep and the stress during that time made me relapse into acute gastroenteritis.”

4.2.4. Impact of Cyberviolence on Individual Social Life

Cyberbullying has a certain impact on an individual social life, such as interpersonal relationships, work, and studies. According to the study by Hoff, D.L. and Mitchell, S.N. in 2009, people who experienced cyberbullying thought the experience made them more timid.[27] Because of this trauma, the victim is resistant and afraid of social interaction, and even isolated from social interaction. The interviewee B described above said “When I was abused by my classmates, I felt isolated from society and fell into a corner with only myself. I am unwilling to communicate and have relationships with others.” Then, during this period or in the future, the emotions and resistance produced by the victims will make them lose the social capital they should have at that time, which will destroy the shaping of character and future development. Teenagers also suffer from school weariness, truancy, and other bad behaviors due to cyberbullying.

In addition, cyberbullying also has a certain impact on personal work. “During the period of cyberbullying, some of my friends chose to leave because they were afraid of being dragged down or influenced. Even my lover broke up with me indirectly because of this matter.” Interviewee D revealed that he was rumored because of the contradiction between his colleagues. When the victim fails to clarify himself, or when no one trusts him, his job position and promotion will also be blocked by cyberbullying. In reality, companies do not want managers or executives to have a negative reputation when they want to preserve their reputation, so victims of large-scale cyberbullying often lose equal opportunities. In the famous incident about Liu Xuezhou, his aunt was attacked by netizens’ verbal insults in defending her rights, which led to depression and dismissal. A study of adult victims in workplace bullying found that their job satisfaction decreased as a result of such experience,[28] and their absenteeism and turnover rates increased,[29] [30] with increments in counter-productive work behaviors.[31] Interviewee G said “Those rumors on the Internet made me lose the promotion opportunity. Because I cannot clarify myself in the short term, my boss is afraid of affecting the reputation of the company, so he gives the promotion opportunity to others.”

4.3. Suggestions for Solving and Preventing Cyberbullying

4.3.1. Governance Methods from the Perspective of Macro Legalization

From the macro perspective, cyberviolence is closely related to the overall environment of social development, which is also the reason why its governance has been arduous for a long time. First of all, economic prosperity, social fairness, and justice are the bases of social psychology, which lays the foundation for the healthy atmosphere of online discussion. Secondly, the modernization of state governance is conducive to reducing the emotional polarization, and the publicity of online discussion helps restrain the excessive attention to private life. The tendency to attack ordinary people’s private lives bonds with the lack of openness and publicity in online discussions. Thirdly, it is necessary to bring about the overall improvement of citizens’ quality through education. Finally, it is imperative to improve the rule of law, bring the governance of cyberviolence into the system of laws and regulations, and provide a basis for long-term governance.

Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention of the United States stipulates that anyone who intentionally harasses others or causes mental pain to others on the Internet can be sentenced to guilt.[32] According to the British Malicious Communications Act, “anyone who sends indecent, offensive, threatening, deceptive and other bad information, causing trouble and anxiety to others, should also be convicted. After conviction by public prosecution, he may be sentenced to no more than 2 years’ imprisonment or fine, or both; convicted by summary trial, he may be sentenced to no more than 12

months' imprisonment or fine, or both".[33] At the same time, 45 countries have joined forces to establish global Internet organizations, such as Internet Society, which can investigate the reported illegal content on the Internet internationally, and require relevant law enforcement agencies or information service providers to quickly remove illegal materials, so as to create a safe network environment for the healthy growth of minors.[34]

However, it is difficult to determine the scope of cyberbullying, the law should subdivide the degree and types of cyberbullying, and let major network platforms strengthen supervision and real-name system processing, so as to quickly respond and point out cyberbullying behaviors. It should be noted that the platform's responsibilities should not be too generalized. When it comes to the handling of cyberviolence incidents, it is not appropriate to focus on results. It is necessary to comprehensively investigate whether the platform has taken reasonable measures, establish an effective prevention, governance and interception protection mechanism, and evaluate whether the platform has fulfilled its main responsibilities. What's more, the media is indispensable to the governance of cyberviolence. Media reports and social media communication play a vital role in the spread and intensity of cyberviolence. Mainstream media and "We Media" should follow media ethics, assume media responsibilities, and avoid cyberbullying to characterize events at will as the driving force of cyberbullying. Meanwhile, they need to avoid the expansion of cyberbullying and the intensification of social contradictions caused by the bad introduction of the "traffic-only theory".

4.3.2. Prevention and Construction from Micro-Individual Perspective

In addition to clarifying their responsibilities and obligations as netizens in the new era, abiding by laws and regulations, platform rules, etc., network users should actively participate in the maintenance of cyberspace ecological order, struggle against cyberviolence, and constantly improve their civic quality and network literacy.

As for each subject of reporting cyberbullying, it is divided into students, parents/guardians, and faculty members. When the three parties witness or involve cyberbullying, they can report it orally and in writing. In terms of school response measures, first of all, when the school receives the report, it will investigate and protect the bullying object and the reporter. Secondly, after confirming that bullying or retaliation does occur, the school will immediately notify the bully's parents or guardians premised on the compliance with state and federal laws and take measures to prevent further bullying or retaliation. Thirdly, after judging the results, the school should inform the bully's parents or guardians of the results. If bullying involves criminal offenses, local departments of law enforcement should be informed.

Cyberbullying is an education-related problem. At present, many countries are trying to improve the network literacy of teenagers and children, and relevant courses have been developed for bullying prevention. Germany has put forward Medienbuilding to prevent cyberbullying. Media literacy includes media cognition, media reflection, media utilization, and media creation. Media cognition and reflection are the premises of proper media utilization and creation. When teenagers have the ability of cognition and reflection, they can not only acquire media knowledge and master the skills of media use, but also identify media content, judge the consequences of media behavior, and control their media behavior. In addition, on Bilibili, a platform in China, users are forced to watch a simple video of network behavior norms and answer questions before the speech. The answers include judging what kind of language is offensive in different situations and how to express their feelings reasonably. These methods can put an end to some unconscious cyberbullying.

5. Conclusion

Through literature review and interview, this paper discusses in detail the negative effects of cyberbullying on individuals, including reputation damage, psychological hurt that can not be ignored, insomnia, and other physiological harms devastating blow to individual social relations. For example, victims lose trust with others and fall out of touch with society. After realizing the harm caused by

these negative influences, although the government, judicial departments, and network platforms have made corresponding interventions and norms for cyberbullying, the network environment is still full of uncivilized behaviors. In the future, scholars can further study the solution of cyberbullying and how to balance anonymity and speech freedom from the aspects of policy science, law, or psychology.

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