Status of Cyberbullying Among Chinese Teenagers on Social Media

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Abstract. The extent to which young people are exposed to online violence is increasing with the growth of social media. Our paper goal is to research the universality and severity of cyberbullying among Chinese teenagers then propose possible solutions. Based on previous studies, this paper can help to better understand how cyberbullying is affecting Chinese teenagers in recent years. By using the method of in-depth interview, the paper conducted an interview among 25 Chinese teenagers. According to the textual analyse, it reveals the negative influence of cyberbullying on Chinese teenager and the lack of cyberbullying education around them. This study emphasizes the danger of cyberbullying and indicates the necessity to strengthen the education and precautionary measure of cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying · Social Media · Text-analyse · Chinese Teenagers · In-depth interview

1   Introduction

With advances in Internet technology and social media, more network security risks are also gradually exposed. In China, as more teenagers are able to access to the Internet, the trend of cyber bullying increased as well [1]. According to the 49th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China: by December 2021, the number of underage Internet users in China has reached 183 million, and the Internet popularizing rate is 94.9%, much higher than that of adults. Among the underage, 27.2% of them had encountered network security incidents [2]. Cyberbullying accounts for the majority of cyber security incidents and does significantly negative impacts on teenagers. According to the previous research, cyberbullying can cause a serious of psychological trauma and mental illness to teenagers such as depression, self-esteem wound, loneliness, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance [3]. Besides, cyberbullying was found to be substantially associated to suicidal thoughts [4]. The presence of celebrities and the entertainment

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industry on social media is directly linked with the increase of cyberbullying. One of the three main topics about cyberbullying on Weibo, one of the largest social media in China, includes: rational expressions of anger and celebrity worship [5]. Social media users develop an obsession and worship emotion to the celebrities then form a fans and idol relationship. Once the object of worship is imagined to be too perfect, it will cause the irrational worship behaviour in the form of cyberbullying [6]. Though cyberbully in China is in an increasing trend, the previous study indicates the lack of cyberbullying education in the country. In the investigation of "do schools often promote lectures on network security", knot results show that 11.55% of the students choose "often", while 36.67% choose "occasionally". 51.78% of students choose "Never" [7]. Avoiding cyberbully is difficult because of its unpredictability [8], and educating teenagers with the right way to cope with cyberbullying is crucial [9]. The goal of this paper is to research the universality and severity of cyberbullying then propose possible solutions. To examine the current status of Chinese teenagers using the social media, this research paper conducted interviews with 25 Chinese teenagers who use social media and had seen or experienced cyberbullying in order to understand the experience of Chinese teenagers in contact with cyberbullying. When studying the impact of cyberbullying on teenager, most researchers have used large quantitative method to study both emotional and physical impacts and measured by scales which is lacked of analyse in specific experiences [10]. In contrast, this paper used in-depth interview methodology to conduct detailed communication among teenagers, including both victims and witnesses. To look more closely at the experiences of the victims and the different aspects of the impact on their lives, as well as the perceptions and prevention of cyberbullying by both. Based on the in-depth interview method, this research will help further understand the negative impact of cyberbullying on teenagers and effective prevention measures.

2   Method

2.1   Data Collection

Participants were randomly selected through a questionnaire with the topic of Cyberbullying and Social Media among Chinese Teenagers posted on QQ, WeChat and Weibo. The selecting criteria included: (1) teenagers aged 15 to 23 years old; (2) teenagers in China mainland.

A total of 167 questionnaires were collected. From these questionnaires, respondents who voluntarily left their contact information were interviewed one by one. Although a total of 46 people left their contact details, excluding those who did not match the age, those who did not respond and other factors, the valid number of respondents was 25. Among these, 6 participants had experienced cyberbullying, including one who had experienced it four times.

The interview asked participants to complete four open-ended questions that asked for descriptions of cases when cyberbullying was experienced or witnessed; types of topics of cyberbullying and the impact on individuals' emotions and lives; defining cyberbullying and radical speech; and ways to prevent cyberbullying, including specifics and the ways to know. These basic questions in the interview were designed in advance in order to allow analysis in the same context. More detailed questions were also added

as well as explored in depth depending on the different interviews as appropriate. All interviews were conducted online throughout and ranged in length from 10–20 min.

2.2   Data Analysis

This study used content analysis as a method. All interview transcripts were collated by hand. From these, different answers were extracted from the same questions and grouped together into sperate categories. Likewise, the authors divided different grades on the life impacts of cyberbullying on the respondents. We separated out four levels, ABCD, and the higher the level, the greater the impact of cyberbullying to respondents' daily life. Then to study the severity of the extent to which cyberbullying affects the general population based in this.

3   Results

In the first survey, 24% said they had personally experienced cyberbullying, and 76% said they had cyberbullying around them. In this group of cyberbullying, 100% said that they had been verbally abused and physically assaulted by others, 4% said they had received horrible photos and been frightened, and 8% said that others would bring their emotions to real life and physically attack them on campus (see Fig. 1). This shows that cyberbullying is very common for teenagers in the current Internet era, and it is also extensible, and is likely to receive certain threats in real life. Moreover, all the witnesses interviewed claimed that cyberbullying of friends or people they care about will affect them. Therefore, the impact of cyberbullying on people and society is very extensive (see Fig. 1).

In the second survey, the topics of cyberbullying are mainly in 3 areas: celebrities, life, and games. The topic of celebrity has the highest proportion among all the topics, which is 60%. This proves that statements made in relation to celebrities are the most controversial. Followed by life category, including relationship sharing, photo sharing (sexy), conflicts between classmates, with 32%. The last category is games, with 8% (see Fig. 2). This shows that cyberbullying has a far-reaching impact on victims and witnesses, and this impact can also affect all aspects of victims, which is very detrimental to the growth of adolescents. The consequences of cyberbullying can even change their character and affect their lives. Therefore, the consequences of cyberbullying are irreversible.

In the third survey, the topic of the study was the impact of cyberbullying on life. In the survey, 100% said that they would cause bad mood because of cyberbullying. Among them, 16% said that they would relieve the pressure of cyberbullying through overeating after experiencing cyberbullying, 12% said that cyberbullying would cause insomnia, and 20% said that they were because cyberbullying has suffered from depression (see Fig. 3). This shows that cyberbullying can have many negative effects on adolescents, which will not only affect the lives of teenagers, but also endanger their physical health.

In the fourth survey, the topic of the study is about their understanding of measures to prevent cyberbullying. In the survey, 60% said that they had seen the corresponding measures on the Internet. Among them, 32% said that cyberbullying can be reduced or

exempted through laws (including calling the police, reporting, and protecting personal privacy), 28% said that they could effectively avoid online violence by changing their behavior (including correcting their mindset, communicating effectively, and not participating in excessive speech), and 40% said that they had no idea on how to prevent the cyberbullying (see Fig. 4). From this set of data, we can conclude that there is very little education about cyberbullying. Although nowadays the Internet is so developed, many people still lack knowledge in this regard. Therefore, this also makes it easy for teenagers to be affected by cyberbullying.

One of the interviewees shared her experience of being cyberbullied. She mentioned that she adored an idol on Weibo for a long time. However, once there was a rumor posted on Weibo which slandered that idol and rose the public attention. More and more people started to curse the idol on social media in the forms of personal attacks, attacking the idol's looking and cursing his family. Those fans who clarified for that idol were also cyberbullied, including the interviewee. According to her memory, about ten people kept harass her on social media through private message, including the ways of verbal abuse and sending her horror pictures. The persistent cyberbullying seriously endangered the interviewee's mental health and daily life which led to physical discomfort and insomnia. In addition, the interviewee mentioned that when she was arguing with another person on the social media, that person told her that he cursed the idol just because he disliked him for no reason. This indicates the severely negative influence of cyberbullying on teenagers. Furthermore, this interview reveals a randomness of cyberbullying and any online comments or behaviour may cause cyberbully.

"At that time, there was a private message to me. I chose to communicate with him, but the communication failed. He just left me a sentence, "I Don't care if It's true or not, I just want to scold him."

I feel sick when seeing vulgar words and those horrible pictures. Also, I could not fall asleep for a period of time.

From the interview, another interviewee had experienced cyberbullying four times on different social media platforms which affect her daily life severely. She said she was subjected to three instances of online violence on Weibo. The first time was when she was harassed by a male netizen via private message after posting a photo of her personal life. The interviewee said she ignored him, but eventually the male netizen got more people to join him in the Weibo comment section to slur her. The second time was a fan incident where the interviewee said she simply posted her dislike for an idol without insult or curse, but ended up being mobbed by his fans. The third time was also a fan incident, in which she, as an original online novel writer, expressed her incomprehension after the platform where she published her article, AO3, was reported by an idol's fans and she was unable to continue writing. She was eventually verbally abused by that idol's fans. These experiences have caused the interviewees to suffer from insomnia until now and require medication to sleep and underwent depression. These examples reveal that any speech can be subjected to cyber violence. In addition, the interviewee mentioned that the cyberbullying she suffered on WeChat even affected her school life. She started to be verbally and physically abused at school. She was scolded and endured vicious comments from others. Simply because she did not tell her seniors her real name

and used a nickname instead. Therefore, this indicates that small disputes can turn into bullying in general.

She added to us, *"If you suffer from cyberbullying, you must not keep it to yourself, it is best to find parents or friends to communicate. The first time I was subjected to cyberbullying, I didn't talk to others and had psychological problems. Then the second time I had a friend who took the initiative to guide me, I felt better. So I suggest that we must not keep the bad mood to ourselves, but to communicate in time and to solve our psychological problems."*

4   Conclusion

Cyberbullying is extremely common and has a profound impact on teenage victims. As the data from our research, 42.3% of the teenagers under eighteen witnessed or experienced cyberbully. Moreover, cyberbully has serious harm to the victims. All of these adolescents were affected by mood, and other more serious results were also present. The entertainment industry is the most important cause of cyberbully. In our data, because of celebrities and games, this kind of entertainment industry subjected to cyberbully accounted for 68%, is the highest percentage. Worst of all, China lacks measures on cyberbully, including how to respond and avoid it. The number of people who totally unknown how to cope with cyberbully reached 40% of all our interviewees, and those who had their own ways of coping had never received systematic learning, often from the Internet, their own thinking, or peers. This reflects a serious lack of education about cyberbully in China.

And the actual severity of cyberbullying may exceed the public perception.

To start with, the consequences of being cyberbully have been classified into four levels according to the severity.

A-The emergence of psychological problems, such as depression and insomnia, which require professional treatments and medication.

B-Severe distress in life, such as family and friends receiving abusive phone calls, home address and ID number being leaked and published.

C-Some impact on life, such as loss of appetite, self-doubt and inability to concentrate mentally.

D-Mood is affected. All the interviewees, both victims and witnesses, were affected by the mood in different degrees, as described earlier.

From our research results, the interviewees were cyberbullied for very different reasons, from life sharing, blessing to arguing. Likewise, the controversial degree of reason they were cyberbullied was totally unrelated to the severity of the consequences they received.

To be specific, those very common incidents can also cause widespread cyberbully with A or B-level consequences – for example, a female got a management position in a fan group chat, causing resentment among other men in the group, and being massively abused, as well as be found out home addresses and phone numbers. A blessing comment to wish the favourite singer is also subject to unwarranted verbal abuse, leading the victim to prolonged medical treatment to fight depression. However, the more controversial ones like arguing with others, refuting comments may also cause only C or D level effects.

From the above analysis, we draw three conclusions. First, there is no correlation between the reasons for being cyberbully. The degree of controversy over behaviour on the Internet is irrelevant to the severity of the outcome after being cyberbully.

Secondly, any online comments or behaviour may cause cyberbully. And the prevalence of cyberbully is always overlooked. Finally, due to different degree of psychological tolerance, which is hard to measure and may change over time, the severity of cyberbully does not correlate with the severity of the outcomes it leads to.

Overall, on Chinese social media, any behaviour can lead to cyberbully with immeasurable consequences.

As a result, avoiding cyberbully is difficult because of its unpredictability. However, after experiencing cyberbully, the following ways be can effectively protection. First, keep evidence of the cyberbully, such as photos or chat logs. Then turn it in to the police, the cyber police specialize in managing cyberbully related incidents. Finally, finding a psychologist is an effective way to healing wounds.

Appendix
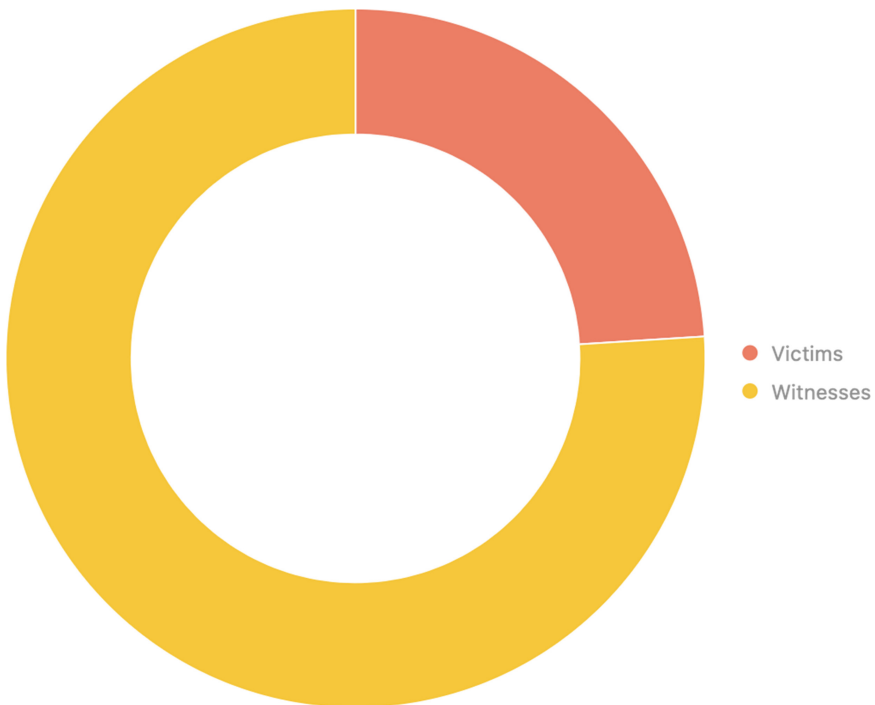
Fig. 1. Proportion of people been cyberbullied in the interview
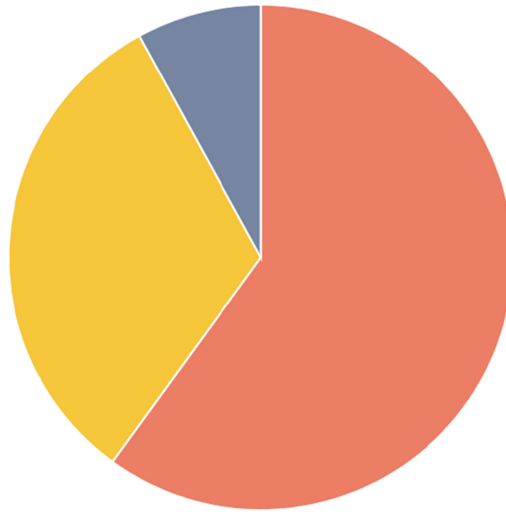
● Celebrity
● Life (Relationship sharing, photo sharing(sexy), conflicts between classmates)
● Game

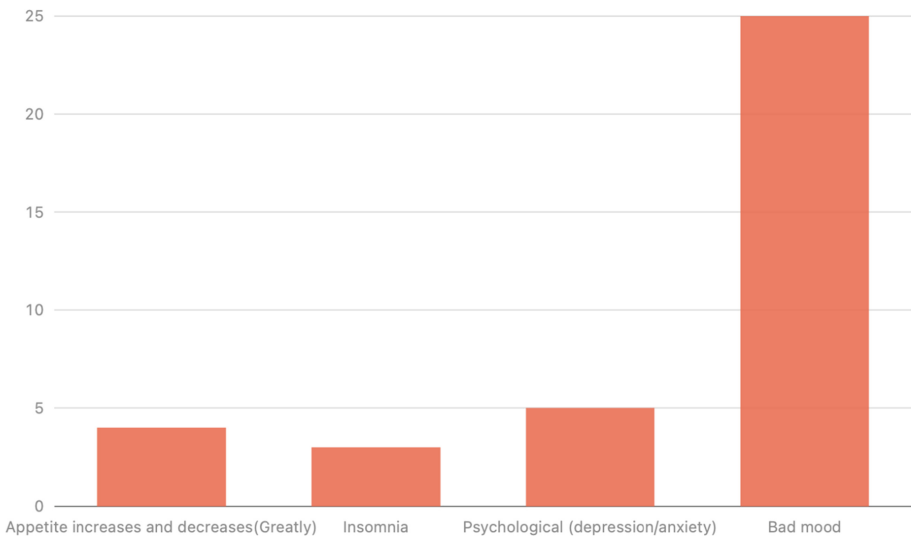**Fig. 2.** Percentage of cyberbullying topics by category in the interview

Fig. 3. The impact of cyberbullying on different aspects of life
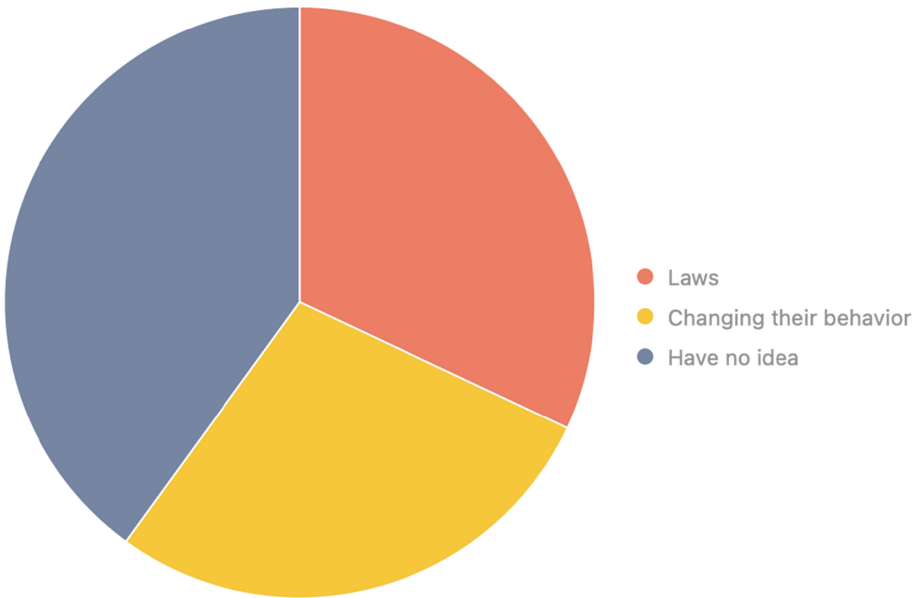
Fig. 4. Percentage of prevention methods about cyberbullying

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