

The Effect of Cyberbullying on Suicidal Ideation The Case of Liu Xuezhou's Suicide as an Illustration

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Abstract: Cyberbullying has become a serious problem to teenager groups though the high range of internet spreading. This study explores the association between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation by examining the "Liu Xuezhou suicide case". This study complements Chinese case studies on the suicidal ideation of adolescent victims of cyberbullying, revealing that cyberbullying can promote psychological problems in adolescent victims and cause them to develop suicidal ideation. Cyberbullying led to serious psychological problems for Liu Xuezhou, which in turn led to his inability to withstand the pressure to commit suicide. The issue of cyberbullying must be emphasized by schools and parents in order to reduce the damage to teenage victims.

Keywords: Liu Xuezhou, Cyberbullying, Suicide Ideation, Public opinion, Teenager, Depression.

1. Introduction

As the digital age dawns, Internet-based lifestyles have become available to most of the world's population. The Internet has brought convenience to people in every aspect of their lives, such as electronic maps, access to information, and virtual social media. The use of the Internet is very common among Chinese teenagers. According to 2020 National Study on Internet Use among Minors in China, in 2020, China's underage Internet users will reach 183 million, with an Internet penetration rate of 94.9%, up 1.8 percentage points from 2019 and higher than the national Internet penetration rate (70.4%) [1]. In addition, more than 80% of underage Internet users have their own Internet devices, and cell phones account for about sixty percent of them, and, the usage rate of cell phones is ninety percent among minors.

The report also mentions two important functions of the Internet for teenagers, the learning function and the entertainment function. The Internet is becoming an important place of learning for adolescents. Online learning played a significant role during the new epidemic, preventing forced interruptions in adolescents' learning. The report shows that 93.6% of adolescents continued their studies through online classes during the epidemic. The percentage of underage Internet users receiving online education increased by 7% in two years. As an emerging form of entertainment, the proportion of minors watching short videos increased to 49.3% from 40.5% in 2018; the participation rate of fan support also reached 8.0%, with the main participants being junior high school students.

With the development of information and communication technology (ICT) and the popularity of social networks, the Internet has become a common way for adolescents to communicate with others. Heavy use of the Internet, such as instant messaging, text messaging, microblogging, and online chat rooms, can easily connect people and create new problems. The popularity of the Internet in China has made cyberbullying a serious public health problem [2].

Cyberbullying is a global phenomenon, and the proportion of cyberbullying victims among the youth population is increasing every year. Cyberbullying is generally defined as intentional and repeated harm caused through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" [3]. The prevalence of cyberbullying has been reported to vary globally. U.S. researchers found that approximately 9% of U.S. adolescents have been cyberbullied in their lifetime and approximately 16% have been cyberbullied [4]. However, there is a relative lack of available research data on the phenomenon of cyberbullying among adolescents in China, with the available research generally focused on Hong Kong and Taiwan [2].

Studies have demonstrated that cyberbullying has been identified as a risk factor for depression and anxiety symptoms and suicidal ideation/behavior [5-6]. Cyberbullying is positively associated with suicidal ideation in adolescents [7]. The authors concluded that there is a lack of research on adolescent cyberbullying victims' suicidal ideation in China, especially for case studies with typical characteristics. Therefore, the authors will analyze the "Liu Xuezhou suicide case" to investigate the influence of cyberbullying on the formation of suicidal ideation in adolescents.

2. Case Description

On December 6, 2021, Liu Xuezhou, a 15-year-old boy, posted a video on the Internet in search of his family, stating that he was sold when he was three months old. His family search video received a lot of retweets on the Internet, and within a short period of time, Liu Xuezhou found his biological parents.

On December 15, 2021, Liu Xuezhou said on his social media account that he had found his biological parents.

On December 27, 2021, Liu Xuezhou met with his biological father.

On January 10, 2022, Liu Xuezhou arrived at his biological mother's home. After Liu Xuezhou's mother (who had already divorced Liu Xuezhou's biological father at that time) met with him, she publicly stated that she intended to move Liu Xuezhou's household registration to her home so that the child could spend the New Year with her.

On January 17, 2022, Liu Xuezhou took a screenshot of WeChat that he had been blackballed by his biological mother.

On January 18, 2022, Liu Xuezhou posted a long article on Weibo, explaining the story. It turned out that the biological parents could not bear the condemnation of the network public opinion and put all the blame on Liu Xuezhou who "destroyed their peaceful life".

On January 19, 2022, the New Beijing News published an interview with Liu Xuezhou's birth mother. Liu Xuezhou's birth mother said she wanted to make up for the child after recognizing her parents, and also lent money to Liu Xuezhou to travel. However, Liu Xuezhou repeatedly asked them to buy a house for him, and threatened his biological parents with divorce to start a new family. In order to "regain a peaceful life", she had to blackout Liu Xuezhou. The same day, Liu Xuezhou responded in an online post that he did not force his parents to buy a house or get a divorce, and that he just wanted a home.

On January 19, 2022, Liu Xuezhou posted on his social media account that he rejected the false reports and would sue his biological parents.

In the early morning of January 24, 2022, Liu Xuezhou left a suicide note on his social media titled "Born Light, Returned Pure". On the same day, the police confirmed that Liu Xuezhou committed suicide and died in the early morning.

The whole courses can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Timeline of Liu Xuezhou case.

Date	Events
December 6,2021	Liu Xuezhou, posted a video on the Internet in search of his family.
December 15, 2021	Liu Xuezhou said on his social media account that he had found his biological parents.
December 27, 2021	Liu Xuezhou met with his biological father.
January 10, 2022	Liu Xuezhou arrived at his biological mother's home.
January 17, 2022	Liu Xuezhou took a screenshot of WeChat that he had been blackballed by his biological mother.
January 18, 2022	Liu Xuezhou posted a long article on Weibo, explaining why he had been blackballed by his biological mother.
January 19, 2022	Liu Xuezhou's mother accused Liu Xuezhou of forcing his parents to divorce and buy a house for him on the New Beijing News.
January 19, 2022	Liu Xuezhou took to social media to explain that he never did the things his mother mentioned.
January 19, 2022	Liu Xuezhou said on Weibo that he would sue the biological parents for defamation.
January 24, 2022	Liu Xuezhou died by suicide.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has become one of the global public health issues that affects the mental health of adolescents worldwide. Cyberbullying is often defined as intentional and repeated attacks in electronic environments against people who cannot easily defend themselves [8]. Cyberbullying includes behaviors such as posting publicly available information on the Internet, being called on the Internet, or receiving threatening or harassing messages [9].

Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying relies on an online platform to generate and is therefore more difficult to track and control than traditional bullying. Due to the anonymity of cyberbullying, the number of perpetrators is huge and difficult to identify. Worse still, it is difficult for parents and teachers to detect if a youth is being cyberbullied, leaving the youth to face the harm caused by cyberbullying alone [10].

3.2. Effects of Cyberbullying on Adolescent Victims

Cyberbullying is anonymous in nature and victims are more likely to be bullied without being detected [10]. Therefore, teachers and parents should pay more attention to the mental health of their children. Studies have shown that cyberbullying is positively associated with suicidal tendencies in adolescents. However, because positive mental health can significantly modify the effects of cyberbullying, it may be beneficial to consider fostering well-being in clinical and prevention programs for student populations [11].

One method that has been shown to be effective in increasing students' self-esteem is for teachers to promote a positive mental attitude in the classroom [12]. Proven social relationships can also enhance adolescents' self-esteem and self-confidence, for example, understanding and support from parents and friends.

3.2.1. Negative Emotions

The psychological development of adolescents is not yet complete, and they lack the psychological adjustment ability and coping methods to face cyberbullying more than adults. Common emotions that adolescents exhibit in the face of cyberbullying include sadness, anger, and anxiety [13-15]. To make matters worse, many studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between exposure to cyberbullying and suicidal ideation [7] [10]. It is more likely for those who suffered from cyberbullying to come up with suicide ideation in their mind and directly attempt suicide plans [14-15].

3.2.2. Behavioural Manifestations

Adolescents who are victimized by cyberbullying can develop many negative behaviours. For example, physical and psychological problems such as sleep difficulties, headaches, and loss of appetite [16]. Cyberbullying has also been associated with substance use, traditional and cyberbullying behaviours, and the occurrence of crime [17]. In addition, adolescent victims have difficulty concentrating, have lower academic performance, and are more likely to engage in gambling, alcohol, and drug abuse [13-15].

3.3. Cyberbullying Endured by Liu Xuezhou

There are many reasons for Liu Xuezhou's tragedy. These include the abandonment of his biological parents, the premature death of his adoptive parents, the bullying he suffered as a child, and the cyberbullying he encountered after searching for his family. Only two months elapsed between Liu Xuezhou's release of the video and his suicide. It can be proved that cyberbullying was one of the main reasons for Liu Xuezhou's death. In his suicide note, he recorded in great length the abuses he received from some netizens, which made him despair of the darkness of human nature.

The cyberbullying suffered by Liu Xuezhou can be divided into several specific categories of behaviour.

3.3.1. Be Labelled by Netizens

Netizens "labelled" Liu Xuezhou, using generalized phrases to describe him. The words used as labels are generally negative words that precisely summarize one or more of Liu Xuezhou's flaws or tragic experiences. When netizens used these words to attack Liu Xuezhou, they also spread them, causing uninformed bystanders to join in the cyberbullying of Liu Xuezhou.

In his suicide note, Liu Xuezhou mentions a number of "labels" to describe him: "school bullying victim," "family hunter boy," "second abandonment " and "fake smile boy". He clearly mentioned the great pain he felt because of these words, "These words were written by me in many broken dark nights remembering those things over and over again".

3.4. Psychological Problems and Causes of Suicidal Tendencies in Liu Xuezhou

Since birth, Liu Xuezhou has suffered a series of superimposed psychological traumas, which can be simply divided into 3 lines: family of origin, school experience, society and the Internet.

3.4.1. Family of Origin

It can be affirmed that the trafficking of Liu Xuezhou by his biological parents was the origin of Liu Xuezhou's series of life tragedies. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that Liu Xuezhou still has the psychological trauma of being left out and abandoned by his biological parents in his deep memory.

After arriving at his new family, his adoptive parents treated him well, but soon passed away due to an accidental explosion. This process may have also caused a great psychological trauma to him.

3.4.2. School Experience

Because Liu Xuezhou had no foster parents and was rumoured to be a "wild child," he was often bullied by his classmates, subjected to repeated school bullying, and even forced to change schools several times. This undoubtedly caused a lot of superimposed psychological trauma, making him more inferior, introverted and sensitive.

Fortunately, when he arrived at his new school, his new teachers treated him well and his social support system was strengthened, helping him to counteract the negative emotions and distorted perceptions caused by the superimposed trauma. Originally, if this path had been followed, Liu Xuezhou's depression would likely have become milder and milder.

3.4.3. Society and the Internet

Although Liu Xuezhou's personality still has low self-esteem and introversion, many psychological traumas are still there, and he can be very lost and discouraged when encountering setbacks, and somewhat prone to catastrophic thinking.

But he has good friends who understand and support him, a positive heart, and a kind and friendly personality. As he grows up and after his ability is improved, it is not a problem for him to lead a normal life.

Most of the netizens' accusations against Liu Xuezhou focus on the fact that he forced his biological parents to buy a house for him, and they use this incident to prove that Liu Xuezhou is a person with bad intentions. To make matters worse, the rumour was spread by Liu Xuezhou's biological mother herself, in the form of an interview with a well-known media outlet.

For 17-year-old Liu Xuezhou, the education he received as a child told him that "your parents definitely love you." When he was disinformed by his mother, he was probably very surprised and angry, and then his massive superimposed psychological trauma was activated, and he became very emotional and said some overreaching remarks.

This, however, was later over-amplified by his biological parents and some media, as the biological parents tried to set aside their own responsibility. This was the main cause of cyberbullying against him by many netizens, leading to the increasing trauma he suffered.

Another consequence of the cyberbullying was Liu Xuezhou's diagnosis of depression. His mental state was chronically negative with anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. The depression led to his suicidal ideation being much higher than others [7] and eventually choosing to abandon his life.

4. Recommendation

The formation of cyber violence has both personal and social causes. In today's digital age, the media is already a necessary communication tool for people. The media is the carrier of online opinion, so the media's strengthening of its own regulation is an important means to prevent online violence. In addition, parents and schools should also take the right measures when teenagers are

exposed to online violence in order to eliminate as much as possible the psychological damage caused by online violence to teenagers.

4.1. Stricter Regulation

The rise of new media has given everyone the ability to disseminate information, but it has also led to chaos and disorder in the dissemination of information. Therefore, media practitioners should improve their quality and strictly abide by ethics and laws. When publishing information, they must confirm the source and accuracy of the information.

In addition, regulators should heavily punished rumour-mongers by imposing prison sentences on those who commit serious crimes or cause serious consequences, in addition to banning their social media accounts.

4.2. Responsibility of Teachers and Parents

Cyberbullying is anonymous in nature and victims are more likely to be bullied without being detected [18]. Therefore, teachers and parents should pay more attention to the mental health of their children. Studies have shown that cyberbullying is positively associated with suicidal tendencies in adolescents. However, because positive mental health can significantly modify the effects of cyberbullying, it may be beneficial to consider fostering well-being in clinical and prevention programs for student populations [11].

For example, it would be helpful if teachers promoted a positive spiritual ethos in the classroom to increase students' self-esteem [12]. If family, friends, and teachers expressed more concern, adolescents would increase their self-esteem and self-confidence, which would better arm them to protect themselves from cyberbullying.

5. Conclusion

Compared to the audiences of traditional media, online audiences are a very special group. In the process of information transmission, audiences are not passive information receivers; they have different degrees of influence on media information through active and positive feedback participation, or out of some meaningful interpretation. Therefore, the formation of online public opinion depends on the sum of Internet users' opinion expressions and on which kind of self-integration of Internet users into public opinion in online opinion expressions. And the part of self that Internet users choose to integrate into public opinion depends on their self-role and psychological characteristics when they access the Internet.

It is important to admit that Internet opinion is not entirely negative. The development of the Internet has made the supervision of public opinion more direct and effective. Network public opinion spreads on the Internet and can form a powerful force of social opinion. Therefore, Internet public opinion gradually becomes an important channel for the government to understand public opinion.

However, when this powerful force of online public opinion is exerted on a person, it may lead to cyberbullying, which in turn may lead to more serious social incidents. In the case of Liu Xuezhou's suicide, the influence of online public opinion on Liu Xuezhou was obviously negative. He exhibited common symptoms of cyberbullying victims, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and decreased self-esteem, which led to suicidal ideation.

The case of Liu Xuezhou warrants reflection by the whole society. Freedom of expression on the Internet must be regulated and controlled to avoid cyberbullying. In addition, schools and parents should also make more efforts to prevent teenagers from being victimized by cyberbullying.

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