

Cyber gender violence: Gender inequality in a digital world

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Abstract: As an issue of great concern in today's society, online gender violence not only seriously violates the dignity and rights of individuals, but also has a serious negative impact on society as a whole. Through in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of online gender violence, this paper uses literature research method and case study method to explore the multifaceted reasons for its emergence, and puts forward strategies and suggestions to deal with online gender violence. Firstly, this paper introduces the background and current situation of cyber gender violence, and analyses its prevalence and increasing severity in cyberspace. Then, with the help of gender performance theory and gender discipline theory, this paper analyses the causes of cyber gender violence from three perspectives: institutional factors, social factors and cultural factors. Finally, this paper proposes various countermeasures, such as establishing laws and regulations, raising public awareness, and avoiding the concept of gender inferiority or superiority, in order to cope with the phenomenon of online gender violence, create a good Internet environment, and cultivate a more tolerant, democratic, and enlightened sense of gender awareness in society, so as to ultimately achieve gender equality.

1. Introduction

The new media era has facilitated people's communication and information transfer, but at the same time, cyberspace has become another hotbed of gender violence. Cyber gender violence refers to violence against individuals through online platforms based on their gender characteristics, including but not limited to gender discrimination, sexual harassment, cyberstalking, and cyber abuse. The anonymity, openness, and information explosion make the phenomenon of gender violence replicated and even amplified on online platforms, with increasing possibilities for gender violence to be perpetrated and structural inequalities in gender violence to be exacerbated.

In 2020, Plan International, an international humanitarian development organisation, surveyed 14,000 women between the ages of 15 and 25 in 22 countries and regions, including Brazil, India, Nigeria, Spain, Thailand, and the United States, and concluded that cyber-violence has led some young women to stop or reduce their use of social media, and that nearly 60% of them have experienced online harassment. Harassment. Online gender-based violence includes, but is not limited to, the sending of messages containing torture, harassment, and threats. This type of

violence not only affects the mental health of the individual, but can also have a long-term negative impact on the female population as a whole, resulting in the so-called "chilling effect". The 'mimetic environment' created by over-exaggerated media violence distorts people's perceptions of the real world, and there is a tendency to believe that media violence has the potential to trigger real-life violence.^[1]

In recent years, there has been a surge in online gender violence, and a study by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2020 showed that disinformation and defamation were the most common means of attack on women's experiences of cyberviolence, i.e., the spreading of rumours and defamatory statements that discredit a woman and undermine her character. The prevalence of disinformation and defamation is 67 per cent higher than that of online harassment, hate speech (65 percent) and impersonation. As digital technology becomes part of the fabric of everyday life, it is also being used for gender-based violence, providing perpetrators with ever-increasing ways to stalk, isolate and control their victims.^[2] For netizens who participate in cyber violence incidents, they should not simply be labeled as "cyber thugs", but must conduct a detailed analysis of the participants and investigate the status and role of different netizens in cyber violence incidents.^[3] The process of generating online violence also intertwines multifaceted forms of communication, so what are the reasons why women are more likely to be in the spotlight in cases of online violence? And what are the deeper effects on women? Analysing from the perspective of gender inequality can confront the socially constructed gender culture and promote the awakening of women's subjective consciousness.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Gender performance is a proposition of great significance in the field of gender studies put forward by Judith Butler, a famous contemporary American coolie theorist. In her view, the gender identity of the subject is not established and fixed, but uncertain and unstable, i.e., performative.

The so-called gender performance is that "I" am playing or imitating a certain gender, and through this unrepeatable playing or imitation, "I" construct myself as a subject with this gender. The subject is a performative construction, a 'subject in process' constructed through repeated acts of performance, and to avoid misunderstanding, Butler sometimes distinguishes between 'performativity' and 'performance'. "Performance always presupposes a performer, a subject as an actor, whereas performativity does not.

3. Reasons for the formation of online gender violence

Internet gender violence has a very similar generation mechanism. Based on different purposes, some hot social issues are spread to social media platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, Shake, etc. through various channels. Then, through the "information fusion" of network opinion leaders and netizens, as well as social psychological interactions such as collective unconsciousness and group polarisation, they gradually escalate and evolve into cyber violence. In the post-truth era, it seems that the public is no longer thirsty for the truth of the incident, but only focuses on the expression of opinions, and no longer attaches importance to the objective truth, and ordinary people are more willing to believe in the extremist remarks spread around. The formation of online gender violence is mainly due to the following factors.

3.1. Institutional factors: lack of effective laws and regulations and regulatory mechanisms

The anonymity of cyberspace makes the legal regulation of online gender-based violence relatively weak compared to real-life gender-based violence, and it is easier for perpetrators to hide

their identities and commit gender-based violence against their victims without being prosecuted. "Flesh searching" is a typical form of online violence. "Human flesh search" illegally collects citizens' personal information, releases it to an unspecified majority of people, and easily combines it with online rumours to create rumours and slander, invade privacy, degrade others' personalities, damage their reputation, and seriously damage the online ecological environment^[4]. Insults and defamation are a more direct form of online violence. There is a certain degree of lag in the identification of online violence, the platform needs to verify the relevant information after receiving a complaint involving online violence, and the platform's identification and handling of online violence does not necessarily agree with the user's expectations soon. In this process, the abuser fails to be punished in time, and the harm will continue.

Secondly, the victims of online exposure in the protection of rights is also difficult, due to the rapid dissemination of information on online violence, and may be a large number of cross-platform, especially when encountered in malicious marketing, network "water army" fuelling, the surging momentum of online violence is difficult to resist. For the victims, it is impossible to confirm the information of the aggressor one by one, and there is great difficulty in collecting and fixing evidence. Since 2022, Internet platforms have been launching all kinds of one-click cyber violence protection functions under the advocacy of national policies. However, up to now, the primary way for women to cope with online violence is to report it to the platform. More than 70% of the victims will be deleted in the form of hacking to deal with the abuser, less than half of the victims will be through the law to protect their rights, and 1/5 of the women chose to avoid and forget. We can easily imagine that the "silent majority" who choose to forget are more than that.

3.2. Cultural factors: entrenched gender inequality

Women's online violence is not an isolated result of the role of the Internet in society, but a common phenomenon in the context of a gender-inequitable society. It is both an extension of gender violence in the real world and a manifestation of the old system of gender domination and violence that is self-replicating in the Internet. The otherization and formalization of female roles, the stereotype of female roles presented by media constructs and influences the gender model of society^[5]. The content of media propaganda and reporting has imperceptibly affected women's aesthetics and values, resulting in an invisible disciplined violence to a certain extent^[6]. Online social media, as an extension of human social relations in the real world, behind is more hidden body aesthetic culture suppression^[7], naturally cannot escape the influence of power regulation.

There is a structural gender power inequality behind online violence against women, and it is the male's monstrous gaze on women and the regulation that is at work. In the traditional gender model of male superiority and female inferiority, women are in an absolutely disadvantaged position, and men "gaze" at women from a top-down perspective and hold the right to judge women through various media channels. Men are the first sex and the subject of "seeing", while women are the second sex and the object of "being seen". Men's "controlling hierarchical surveillance" creates a "great moral imprisonment", and when women's bodies and behaviours go against men's aesthetic standards or moral requirements, the power of discipline comes into play, seeking to turn women into objects of male domination through normative judgement. The power of discipline operates when women's bodies and behaviours violate male aesthetic standards or moral requirements. Through hierarchical surveillance and normative judgement, censorship merges the two into one, and women are thus differentiated. This process of disciplining occurs in online social media, which breeds online gender violence.

4. Countermeasures to Prevent Gender Violence on the Internet

4.1. Improve laws and regulations and create a good online environment

Cyber public sphere is the development direction of public sphere, and it is also the inevitable path to promote political democracy, cultivate civil society, and promote the transformation and upgrading of social structure. The Internet has become a shared space for hundreds of millions of users, and it is difficult to achieve perfect governance in cyberspace with only the regulatory power of government departments. It is necessary for multiple forces to coordinate and cooperate. First of all, the legislative department should further refine the definition of cyber sexual harassment and legal responsibility, so as to enhance the operability. Internet regulators should step up their supervision efforts, implement the responsibilities of online platforms, pressurise the responsibilities of platforms, and strengthen prior censorship. This includes establishing a sound early-warning model for online violence information, and identifying and dealing with potential online violence in a timely manner. Law enforcement authorities should also rely on the existing legal framework, such as the Criminal Law, Criminal Procedure Law, Civil Code, Civil Procedure Law, Personal Information Protection Law, and Law on Public Security Administration Penalties, to impose severe penalties for cyber violence. In particular, cyber violence against minors and persons with disabilities should be punished more severely in accordance with the law. Relevant departments should also provide victims with timely and effective legal remedies, reduce the cost of defending their rights, and ensure that victims can obtain timely legal support and protection. This includes simplifying the procedures for evidence collection and identification of aggressors, and reducing the difficulties victims face in defending their rights.

4.2. Avoiding the concept of gender superiority or inferiority and supporting gender equality

The concept of gender inferiority and superiority has come a long way, and the pursuit of gender equality is actually a process of co-development between men and women. Gender difference determines gender power, and this power exists in another, more subtle way in the change of social structure, and gradually transforms into constructive power^[8]. In cyber violence, the gender inequality embodied in the reproduction of gender sex, especially the reproduction of the image of women, is highly problematic, causing the image of women to be repeatedly stereotyped and marginalised in the media^[9]. At the same time, the stereotypical positioning of the male image is also the root of the problem. It is important to avoid the concept of gender inferiority or superiority in the online environment, as well as the polarisation that ignores gender theory, and to look at each individual equally, without presenting or even expanding the traditional impression of gender positioning on the Internet, resulting in personal attacks on individuals. Gender equality is not gender egalitarianism or absolute equality in form, nor is it that equal standards for men and women are completely consistent. It is recognizing the differences between men and women and setting scientific and reasonable standards that meet the real needs of different genders, thus being called true equality. Times change, the status of the two sexes change, but as the Declaration of Independence says: "All men are created equal", we should always insist on equal rights for all, and the reasonable feminism seeks the same thing: both men and women can obtain their deserved social status and rights.

5. Conclusion

Cyber gender violence not only causes serious psychological harm to the victims themselves, but also creates panic and uneasiness in the entire female community, hindering their free expression

and development in cyberspace. In addition, this kind of violence will also have a negative impact on the process of gender equality in society and delay the realisation of gender equality. Cyber gender violence is a complex social problem, the causes of which involve multiple institutional, social and cultural dimensions. Only through multifaceted efforts can this phenomenon be effectively curbed and the process of gender equality in cyberspace promoted. By improving laws and regulations, raising public awareness and supporting both genders, we can build a safe and harmonious cyberspace and safeguard everyone's dignity and rights. At the same time, as individuals, we should take the initiative to establish a correct sense of gender equality and civic awareness, respect women on the Internet, be cautious in our words and actions, and work with the government and all sectors of society to build a healthy and harmonious cyber-order, so that all groups, including women and girls, can speak out and communicate freely; at the same time, we can create a safe and realistic environment for women and girls, with the support of the Internet tool. At the same time, we can also create a safe and realistic environment for women and girls with the support of Internet tools, so that they can grow up healthily and live equally in this society.

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