

Cyberbullying in the Weibo Context: A Mixed-Methods Study of Chinese International Students' Roles and Perceptions

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Abstract

Cyberbullying has become a common phenomenon on social media, and this issue has also spread more rapidly with the proliferation of the Internet in China. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining structured questionnaires with semi-structured interviews, to explore how Chinese international students construct meaning regarding cyberbullying they encounter on Sina Weibo. The study participants were students enrolled at the University of Sheffield, aged 18 to 26, and familiar with Weibo. The results indicate that neither gender, academic level, nor frequency of Weibo use significantly predicts the roles participants play in cyberbullying incidents. However, users' underlying motivations for using Weibo are associated with their experiences of victimization, and there is a reciprocal relationship between the identities of victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, although these three roles differ in terms of exposure to cyberbullying topics and patterns of encounter, their conceptual understanding of the phenomenon converges on common underlying characteristics. Finally, the study found that, despite differences in how each group experiences the phenomenon, cyberbullying produces significant psychological and behavioral consequences for all three roles.

Keywords

Cyberbullying; Social media; Cyberbullying roles; Chinese students; Mixed methods.

1. Introduction

Social media has become a widely used tool among young people in China. Taking Sina Weibo (Weibo) as an example, which has hundreds of millions of active users and over 100 million published posts every day, it provides a fast channel for disseminating information [1]. However, this convenience also comes with drawbacks, such as spreading false information and rumors, or risks of personal data, etc. [1]. In 2019, a United Nations survey of 30 countries found that about one-third of young people have experienced cyberbullying, and one-fifth of their academic performance has been affected [2].

Although cyberbullying is a widespread phenomenon, due to various factors such as demographic backgrounds and the ecosystem of different online platforms, research on the perceptions and personal experiences of specific groups in particular regions remains relatively scarce. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on Chinese international students. Moreover, as college students (aged 18–24) tend to develop a more mature worldview during this period, they gradually form independent perspectives about social phenomena [3].

Based on that, this study focuses on three main research questions:

- (1) What is the relationship between the roles in cyberbullying (bystanders, victims, and perpetrators) and users' Weibo usage patterns?
- (2) How do participants define and perceive cyberbullying based on their own experiences?
- (3) How does cyberbullying affect the mental health of Chinese international students?

Overall, since the broad and complex nature of the definition of cyberbullying, this study defines this concept as the spreading of rumors, personal attacks and humiliation, ensuring a focused and comparable analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Features of Weibo

In China, Weibo plays an important role in people's social life, including over 550 million users each month [4,5]. The reason why Weibo attracts many people is its openness: compared to other domestic platforms, users can post short content and browse other users' profiles more quickly, and with relatively less restrictive online regulation. Previous studies point out that the result of this convenience is that these unrigorous censorship mechanisms lead to more unverified information [4,6,7], and the short-form format often condenses content into eye-catching snippets taken out of context [8]. As a result, these characteristics create conditions that facilitate the spread of offensive or disruptive content.

Furthermore, this process is exacerbated by collective psychological characteristics. Specifically, when individuals are immersed in collective discourse surrounding emotionally charged events, their independent and critical thinking ability may give way to a diffusion of responsibility, leading them to conform to the prevailing group sentiment rather than maintain clear judgment [9, 10]. Consequently, in this depersonalized state, hostile speech is more likely to be viewed as the norm, while rational interaction becomes difficult to sustain [11].

2.2. Defining Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is generally understood as the repeated and intentional harassment of an individual through electronic means [8]. However, the relationship between cyberbullying and traditional face-to-face bullying remains controversial. Although both involve repeated harm to vulnerable groups, the characteristic of cyberbullying lies in the lack of face-to-face contact, fewer restrictions imposed by physical location, and the convenience of anonymity. In previous studies, some researchers consider cyberbullying as the digital expansion of traditional bullying, while others claim it is formed by specific online platforms independently [14, 15].

The existing research has described several common forms of cyberbullying, such as online harassment (repeatedly sending malicious messages), spreading false information, and isolation behavior (intentionally excluding others from a group) [16, 17]. From a linguistic perspective, insults are typically conveyed through derogatory labels or seemingly harmless but implicitly offensive language; however, it is rather complex to identify such language due to the differences in culture and context among various places [9, 18].

2.3. Behavioral Patterns in Cyberbullying

Apart from platform characteristics, individual differences also affect users' perception of the roles of bystanders, victims or perpetrators. Due to the long-standing governance gap on Weibo, opinion leaders can largely influence public opinion, and without strict liability clauses, this is regarded as one of the main reasons for exacerbating disputes and verbal attacks [19, 20]. Furthermore, gender is also considered a contributing factor, although research findings are inconsistent: some studies indicate that women are more likely to engage in indirect, emotionally driven aggressive behaviors, such as spreading rumors [21, 22]; while other studies suggest that although men face a similarly high risk of victimization, they are more frequently identified as perpetrators [23, 24].

Bystanders' reactions range from passive inaction to actively protecting the victim. Generally speaking, the greater the empathy, the more likely an intervention is, regardless of the severity of the incident [25, 26]. It is worth noting that individuals who have personally experienced

cyberbullying, whether as victims or perpetrators, exhibit a higher tendency toward “moral disengagement”. This is a self-regulatory mechanism that allows individuals to act contrary to their own values without feeling guilty [27, 28, 29]. Therefore, this pattern helps explain why prior involvement in cyberbullying in any role reduces the likelihood of future prosocial intervention.

In summary, this study will focus on three areas that have not yet been fully explored: how factors at the individual and platform levels jointly shape role-playing in cyberbullying; how those affected define and interpret this phenomenon; and what associations exist between these roles and mental health outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire Instrument and Sampling

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, beginning with an online questionnaire survey followed by semi-structured interviews, in order to quantitatively map the distribution of roles among the target population before conducting an in-depth exploration using qualitative methods [30].

There are nine items in the questionnaire: basic information of users (age, gender, level of education), frequency and purpose of Weibo use, roles in cyberbullying, and suggestions about cyberbullying. The participants were Chinese students from the University of Sheffield, with at least three years of experience using Weibo. They were recruited through an online survey platform using both convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods [31]. In total, there were 73 valid questionnaires that were collected, and 31 participants provided their contact information for subsequent face-to-face interviews.

3.2. Semi-Structured Interviews: Design and Sample

The interview was conducted in a semi-structured format, including 4 to 6 fixed and core questions, such as users’ experience with cyberbullying, how they define this phenomenon, and the relevant emotional influence. Further questions were flexibly changed by each answer [32]. The interview was conducted in the form of an online voice call lasting about 15-30 minutes.

Due to the limited willingness of those who considered themselves the perpetrators to participate, and the insufficient number of accessible respondents, the originally planned 12 respondents (4 of each role) were ultimately reduced. The final sample consisted of 8 participants: 4 bystanders, 3 victims, and 1 perpetrator.

3.3. Analysis process

The questionnaire data was analyzed by SPSS, mainly by frequency analysis, Spearman correlation analysis and linear regression analysis, exploring relationships between participants’ usage patterns and characteristics of Weibo [33, 34]. For the interview, the records underwent three stages of coding processing: the first stage classified the responses according to roles and core issues (causes, definitions, and affected groups); the second stage explored specific themes for each role, such as the motivations of bystander intervention or the outcomes of victims’ problem-solving; the third stage identified the emotional and psychological patterns in the narrative. Subsequently, the quantitative and qualitative research results were cross-validated to jointly answer the three research questions.

3.4. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

This study includes three main limitations. First of all, the generalizability of the research results is limited since the sample is only from one university. Secondly, the proportion of perpetrators in the interview sample was significantly low, which also restricted the scope of specific research on this role. Finally, because the interview does not include video recording,

which makes it impossible to observe non-verbal cues, and some participants may have concealed certain details of the actual situation due to the sensitive nature of the topic [35].

The ethical approval had been obtained from the university before the data collection. The questionnaire survey was conducted on a voluntary and anonymous basis, and a written informed consent form was provided to the respondents, which explained the purpose of the study, the procedures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Finally, all the recordings and documents were securely stored and not shared externally, and the identities of the participants were protected throughout the process [36].

4. Finding

This part explores three research questions by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data mainly address Research Question 1 (RQ1), focusing on collecting basic information and behavioral characteristics of the participants; Research Questions 2 (RQ2) and 3 (RQ3) are mainly analyzed based on the interview contents to understand the psychological mechanisms and perceptions of the participants.

4.1. RQ1. The Relationship Between Roles in Cyberbullying, Demographic Characteristics and Weibo Usage Patterns

In Table 1, the total sample size was 73 participants and 68% were female. The majority consisted of users who regularly use Weibo (71%), mainly browsing news and participating in discussions on this platform. In terms of role distribution, the majority considered themselves "bystanders" ($n = 47$), followed by "victims" ($n = 10$), and finally "perpetrators" ($n = 3$).

Table 1. Sample characteristics and Weibo usage

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	50	68.5
	Male	23	31.5
Grade	Undergraduate	37	50.7
	Postgraduate	34	46.6
	PhD	2	2.7
Daily use	Yes	52	71.2
Main purpose	Browsing/discussion	66	90.4

Table 2. Significant correlations with role occupancy (Spearman)

Variable	Role	r	p
Browsing/discussion use	Victim	.411	<.01
Personal-space use	Victim	-.308	<.01
Perpetrator role	Victim	.319	<.01

Additionally, the correlation analysis revealed that gender, educational level and the frequency of using Weibo showed no significant association with different roles (all $p > 0.05$). However, the purpose of using Weibo provided valuable insights: users who frequently browse information and participate in discussions online were more likely to become victims, showing

a positive correlation ($r = 0.411$, $p < 0.01$); while people who mainly use it for personal space illustrated a negative correlation ($r = -0.308$, $p < 0.01$).

Furthermore, a significant positive correlation was observed between the victim role and the perpetrator role ($r = .319$, $p < .01$) (Table 2).

Regression analysis confirmed two directional relationships involving the victim role: information browsing behavior explained 16.9% of the variance in victim identity ($R^2 = 0.169$, $p < 0.001$), while personal space usage behavior explained 9.5% of the variance in the opposite direction ($R^2 = 0.095$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 3). The relationship between victims and perpetrators was further confirmed to be bidirectional, with both roles significantly predicting the other ($R^2 = 0.102$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 4). However, the direction of causality cannot be determined based solely on cross-sectional data; this issue will be explored through qualitative analysis in Section 4.3.

Table 3. Regression models predicting victim role

Predictor	B	R ²	F	p
Browsing/discussion use	0.481	.169	14.473	<.001
Personal-space use	-0.242	.095	7.466	<.01

Table 4. Bidirectional regression: victim & perpetrator

Direction	B	R ²	F	p
Perpetrator → Victim	0.552	.102	8.039	<.01
Victim → Perpetrator	(same pattern, reciprocal)	.102	8.039	<.01

4.2. RQ2. How Participants in Different Roles Define and Interpret Cyberbullying

Overall, participants agreed that cyberbullying is a form of unfounded verbal attack rather than a single, fixed type of behavior. Bystanders typically attributed the perpetrators' motives to jealousy or insecurity; for example, some described perpetrators as being driven by "jealousy stemming from low self-esteem" to verbally attack others, while others believed that some individuals deliberately targeted international students due to a lack of understanding and awareness among those netizens. As for the victims, lots of participants reported that they had suffered harassment based on their appearance, especially discrimination regarding facial features, body shape, and clothing style, accompanied by rumors and insulting remarks. It is particularly important to note that a perpetrator described a common pattern of online violence: for a certain topic, the initial normal discussion gradually evolved into a quarrel full of personal subjectivity and deviating from the original topic. The participants gradually lost interest in the original topic and facts, and escalated into mutual verbal attacks.

When asked to define cyberbullying, people's responses showed similarities: such as rumors, insults and derogatory remarks, as well as judging others from a strict moral point. Several respondents also pointed out that the understanding of cyberbullying was subjective to some extent, depending on the specific context and influenced by personal emotions. This indicates that although there is a general consensus on the manifestations of cyberbullying, differences in definition still existing.

4.3. RQ3. The Impact of Being Involved in Cyberbullying on the Mental Health of Chinese International Students

When it comes to the impact of cyberbullying on people, the participants reported that they mainly felt anger, resentment and frustration. However, the severity and duration of these feelings varied significantly. Some victims described some long-lasting effects, such as lower self-esteem, persistent insomnia and eating disorders. Although these symptoms have improved over time, they have never been completely overcome. Another person deliberately avoided social activities for about a month, and then gradually integrated back into social life with the support of family members. In addition, the bystanders generally showed a strong sense of helplessness, as they were both angry about verbal bullying and felt that they were unable to intervene in conflicts effectively. It is worth noting that one perpetrator also stated that during the conflict, he had received verbal attacks from strangers online.

Unfortunately, there are almost no effective methods to completely control cyberbullying. As victims keep reporting that the related incidents have not been properly handled, although there are formal complaint channels available, the official processing speed is extremely slow, and public attention quickly fades. Therefore, most victims can only spend a long time fighting for their rights and bear the mental and physical burdens.

5. Conclusion

The research results indicate that gender, age and the frequency of using Weibo cannot predict the role affiliation directly, while the specific purpose of using Weibo shows relevance to it, especially for the victims. It is noticeable that there is an obvious relationship between the roles of the victim and the perpetrator, which indicates that these two roles are not fixed and remain unchanged. Instead, they can transform into each other during the conflict process. Moreover, different roles show consensus on the definition of cyberbullying, and admit the negative emotion caused by it. Overall, the root cause of cyberbullying on Weibo lies in the absence of platform accountability mechanisms and legal recourse channels, rather than the accidental situations faced by individuals. In the future, research can expand to larger samples with more balanced demographic characteristics, and adopt research designs that can track the process of individuals' transitions between different roles. In addition, given the diversity of cyberbullying and the differences among various platforms, other forms of online harm also deserve attention.

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