**Cyberbullying and Public Policy in China: A Case study of Liu Xuezhou's family search**

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**Abstract**

**In the Internet age, cyberbullying in China has posed many challenges to public policy issues. Recently, Liu Xuezhou suffered from cyberbullying and committed suicide while searching family, which has aroused widespread concern and discussion in society. Taking the case of Liu Xuezhou's family search as an example, this paper analyzes this case under the public policy domain, and finds the media authorities, netizens, the government, and social media platforms all played a part in this incident. Based on this, the study** offers public policy suggestions in terms of cyberbullying and social network governance through multi-perspectives.

**Key words: Cyberbullying, Public Policy, Internet Governance, Case study**

**Introduction**

According to political scientist David Easton, public policy refers to the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society [1]. In the Internet age, the theories and applications of Public Policy are under numerous challenges. On one part, there is an increase in public agendas regarding cyberbullying. Behind this phenomenon, anonymity and the spiral of silence along with other mechanisms are taking their toll on netizens, especially youths whose system of values is yet to form into completion and whose mentality is too vulnerable on the social network. As a result, youths are predisposed to online violence or can even become the ones who inflict violence, causing damage both psychologically and physically. Based on the statistics from China Internet Network Information Center, 19.5% of teenagers have been satirized and verbally abused [2]. Meanwhile, prominent cases including the Xuezhou Liu family search incident and the Shanghai lady committing suicide after cyberbullying generated intensified discussions. From these cases, the absence and hysteresis of public policy are evident. Without effective, scientific, and targeted public policies [3], not only will the human flesh search and verbal abuse situations worsen, but the internet service providers will also infringe on civil rights, posing a serious threat to online communities. Consequently, cyberbullying is still an issue worthy of the attention of the government, citizens, and internet service providers. In 2022, the Xuezhou Liu family search incident gave impetus to the governance of new public policies behind cyberbullying. This paper intends to analyze the causes of cyberbullying based on Xuezhou Liu incident and in turn, provides suggestions respective to public policy.

**literature review**

In recent years, public agendas on the Internet accumulates as it has been developing at an exponential rate. According to Professor Berg, cyberbullying is a topic of increasing sociological, legal, and educational focus. The Internet as an information medium not only counts as a platform for information release, dissemination, and discussion but also counts as an important channel for people to participate in state affairs and make suggestions. According to Professor Camp, the Internet can be regarded as a public electronic space in which everyone can have a unique place in it [4]. In this sense, the public nature of the Internet points to the regulations in public policy respect.

According to Professor Berg, “cyberbullying is a topic of increasing sociological, legal and educational focus” [5]. In turn, public policy study on cyberbullying is a matter of great urgency. In China, scholars Meng Wang and Hui Wang define linguistic cyberbullying as using the Internet as a form of medium to express offensive, inflammatory, discriminatory, and insulting remarks to directly or indirectly harm the dignity, spiritual world, and mental health of others [6]. Chinese scholars Dinghua Zheng and Xinghua Guo define cyberbullying as an aggressive, subjective, and intentional act repeatedly performed by an individual or a group to harm others through digital mediums [7]. According to English scholar Clarke, “cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm another person or others” [8].

In western countries, the main subject of studies on cyberbullying and social media use is focused on teenagers and children, putting more emphasis on school education and parental influence as approaches to civilizing cyberspace [3]. In addition, taking Germany as a case in point, netizens’ mental and physical health is also taken care of as a result of governmental efforts [9]. In another study, social well-being regarding universal access is brought to attention [5]. Furthermore, there are discussions over the influence of public opinion. Studies on regulating public opinions have been regarded as essential and forceful regulations on public opinions have proven effective [9]. In China, studies on public policy at a macro level can be separated into domains including the government, legislation, platforms, and society. Taking a study conducted by scholar Tianyu Wang concerning Internet opinions as an instance, people contribute public opinions to the government on the Internet, and later, the government decides whether to solve the problem by resorting to legislation [10]. These major domains constitute cyberbullying studies for the context and the study domains are the same. Moreover, public policy studies on cyberbullying in China tend to come out in the form of suggestions. For instance, scholars Dinghua Zheng and Xinghua Guo suggest that the government should foster the concepts of problem-oriented governance and youth protection and learn from western resorts on educational and parental guidance [7]. Scholars Meng Wang and Hui Wang suggest encouraging the government to purify the Internet through education to the masses, enacting regulations to thwart cyberbullying attempts, and erasing passive languages [6].

This passage considers cyberbullying as an irresponsible act of offense that damages others’ images and mental health through abusive, insulting, and defamatory language. Regarding cyberbullying analysis in public policy respect, the focus should be put on the functions of concerned parties including the netizens, digital platform providers, and the government. Through considerations in communications, psychology, and policies along with other minor aspects, this paper analyzes the lessons behind the Xuezhou Liu family search incident and offers suggestions on the right roles each party should be playing and the measures that must be taken to the prevention of future cyberbullying accidents.

**Xuezhou Liu family search incident**

Xuezhou Liu family search incident started on December 6, 2021, when Xuezhou Liu posted his first video in search of his birth parents, claiming to be trafficked at an early age. With helps from the Internet and media, Xuezhou met his birth father and birth mother separately on December 27, 2021, and January 10, 2022.

On January 17, 2022, Xuezhou claimed to be blocked by his birth mother and on January 18, released a tape of their conversation. Within two days, Xuezhou was smeared by both of his birth parents who claimed that Xuezhou unreasonably demanded a house. On January 19, 2022, Xuezhou decided to sue his birth parents [11].

Afterward, Xuezhou was incessantly bullied on the social media Weibo, being scolded for his “outrageous” housing demand. On January 24, 2022, Xuezhou posted his inclination to commit suicide on social media Weibo. Later that day, Xuezhou died despite emergency rescue.

**Underlying Causes**

Analyzing this case under the public policy domain, the media authorities, netizens, the government, and social media platforms all played a part in this incident. This paper will thoroughly discuss the underlying mechanisms with each role played to trigger Xuezhou’s suicide.

Netizens

In this incident, given that Xuezhou approached the masses from the beginning of this family search, all netizens were permitted to participate in the process as they could both comment and lend a helping hand. However, when Xuezhou’s relationship with his birth parents broke apart, discussions and contributions of opinion became intensified especially on whether Xuezhou made the housing demand, and how it defines Xuezhou. Considering the aspect of crowd psychology and certain characteristics of Weibo, anonymity, and netizens in a group weakened netizens’ sense of responsibility when giving rational comments, and as more people participate in the group, group polarization caused public opinion to lean on the side that blamed Xuezhou for making the housing demand. At the same time, the low threshold of Internet use permitted access from everyone with a proper device, rendering great divergence in online civil quality. As the public started to treat Xuezhou as Culpable, netizens started to verbally abuse and denigrate Xuezhou, conducted human-powered searches on his past, and spread rumors to defame him. According to Huaisheng Li from the China University of Political Science and Law, netizens tend to judge others based on their own experience [12]. While abstractly treating Xuezhou as an exceedingly rational person, condemning his behaviors, netizens’ conduct is cyberbullying instead of upholding justice. From Xuezhou’s own words [13], “they said I dressed up clean, I was calculative, and I had the money to travel to Sanya. What they didn’t know was that I went to Sanya to get away from the injustice.” In this post-truth era, netizens just make claims without knowing the truth until the situation reverses. In this case, not until Xuezhou committed suicide did the netizens realize the consequence of their words.

Media

The part media played grew more significant as Xuezhou’s posts gained more attention from netizens. At first, a few media traced and reported his family search process. However, when Xuezhou’s relationship with his birth parents broke off, more media got involved, reporting each’s own stories. Without proper supervision and examination, some media negatively directed public opinion and reported content that lacked authenticity and objectiveness. One controversial example was the report from The Beijing News. Its report, *the boy being blocked after his success in search of his parents, the birth mother’s response,* which is deleted now for its repercussion but can still be seen on Xuezhou’ Weibo, claiming Xuezhou insisted on his birth parents buying him a house [14]. As a respected medium, with an obvious inclination toward Xuezhou’s birth mother, The Beijing News only reported Xuezhou’s birth mother’s side of the story without corroborating with Xuezhou, greatly damaging Xuezhou’s public image. Besides some objective media, other media wrote their report titles through calculative wordings to gain more hits for their passage, such as Paper News, choosing *demanding a house* as a part of the title in a report that has been deleted but can still be found when the title is searched in Baidu. In turn, without rational analysis and objective thinking, netizens were led by the media in terms of opinion. Consequently, media literacy of media needs to improve through necessary supervision of the content and the rethink of authoritative media’s obligation.

The absence of public policy

In this incident, despite the existence of many chaotic signs on the Internet before Xuezhou committed suicide, no measures were taken in time to prevent the situation from deteriorating. Specifically, the bullies online were not dealt with until Xuezhou committed suicide; media content was not censored; no psychological help was provided to the victim. After the occurrence of the incident, no one was held accountable for Xuezhou’s death when a large number of netizens online certainly negatively affected Xuezhou’s mental state. On June 17, 2022, Xuezhou’s aunt reported Xuezhou’s birth parents online not only for their abandonment but also for the way they manipulated the media to turn public opinion against Xuezhou. The search for justice for Xuezhou is not complete, and every party in this incident should rethink their roles in cyberbullying. Because the problem with cyberbullying is so severe, this year, after the incident, authorities are putting more emphasis on cyberbullying regulations and policymaking.

To begin with, the Central Committee of the China Association for Promoting Democracy put forward *the Proposal on Strengthening the Legal and Ethical Construction of New Media* [15].

In the first part, it is to strengthen law enforcement and its adaptability of it to new situations. Secondly, traditional media’s integration into the new media should be accelerated to properly guide public opinions. The third part is establishing a new media ethics system and carrying out media literacy education. Lastly, a new media industry ethics assessment consultation mechanism should be established to form a governance structure that includes the government, the businesses, the society, and the citizens.

Additionally, during the Two Sessions, regulatory measures over cyberbullying including infringement of personal information, defamations, instigations, and other situations are written into the work report on the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate. Meanwhile, representatives also contributed their suggestions. Shizhong Wei，a member of the national committee of CPPCC, advised to include major cyberbullying cases in the public prosecution cases. Dongsheng Li suggested ensuring the primary responsibility of network platforms. With other suggestions, cyberbullying was an issue taken seriously during the Two Sessions [16].

Finally, a few actions have been made after the incident. The Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs carried out a special action against cyberbullying on 18 major Chinese online platforms, aiming to amplify regulatory effects. Moreover, *regulations on the Management of Internet User Account Information* were enacted to protect Internet users and Internet order [17].

In all, China is cracking down on cyberbullying with an unprecedented effort this year, restoring the order on the Internet policy-wise. As a result, the Internet now compared to the time during the family search incident has become more civilized to some extent.

**Suggestions**

The effort of the government is evident as more regulatory approaches are taken and more suggestions are made. Still, the incident alerts us to the deficiency in policy, and considerations in other aspects of cyberbullying should be taken in the future. For this reason, this paper offers several countermeasures to cyberbullying.

First and foremost, governmental legislation is the most straightforward and effective approach to restraining cyberbullying. Currently, the government is carrying out cyberbullying regulatory operations through the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission. While trying to enhance the ability to uncover cyberbullying events and increase the cyberbullying penalty online, the government also needs to penalize the real people behind cyberbullying, warning them that anonymity is not a shield on social networks. Bringing concrete law enforcement is also a challenge since the significant netizen population is hard to regulate. Thus, the real-name registration system and computer screening are also of significant value. What is more important is the need to establish a mechanism to enhance the foreseeability of cyberbullying ad its ability to analyze and judge public opinions in order to stop cyberbullying within a shorter period of time.

Secondly, it is essential to reinforce the ethics and media literacy of traditional media. Traditional media holding more authority should honor the objective truths of the news, publishing new information accurately to uphold their social responsibility and morality baseline instead of triggering cyberbullying. Although, without crossing the line of the law, traditional media are not restricted by specific regulations, the objectiveness of the content should be guaranteed by setting higher demands on publications.

Thirdly, the responsibility of the media platforms should also be emphasized. Major media platforms, including Weibo and Xiaohongshu, should be mandated to uphold their social responsibility by guarding, screening, examination, and surveillance. Augmenting these platforms’ reporting systems and enhancing the sensitivity as well as the accuracy of detecting ill-natured content can cut out the intensification of cyberbullying from both the source and the process of spreading.

Fourthly, citizens’ proposals should be accessible to policymakers for the Internet is a public space. Public considerations tend to offer valuable insights into different Internet problems. Consequently, with the preexisting channel of the Cyberspace Administration of China, an upward suggestion system can be improved using this channel by screening high-quality suggestions.

Lastly, besides policy-wise endeavors, the promotion of the government in educational respect can forestall cyberbullying from occurring by raising people’s awareness. Specifically, family and school education on cyberbullying nationwide can impart to teenagers the danger of cyberbullying. With a clear recognition of the harm, fewer teenagers would be likely to participate in cyberbullying activities.

Based on the above analysis, this paper makes a theoretical framework as a whole, as shown in the following figure1.

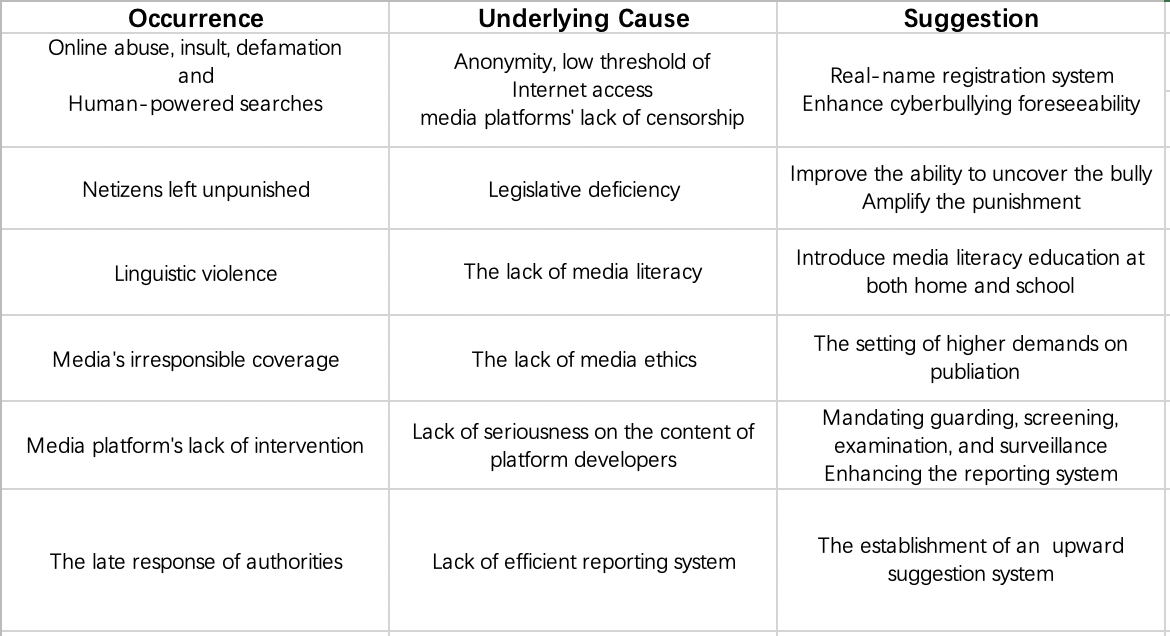


figure1 Manifestations, causes and suggestions of cyberbullying

**Conclusion**

The harm cyberbullying inflicts on society and individuals is indescribable. From the incompetence of media platforms’ supervision to the lack of updated governmental regulation, from netizens’ insensitivity to the truth to the deficiency in ethics of the media, the synergy of the major parties’ misconduct led to the suicide of Xuezhou Liu. Through the analysis of the Xuezhou Liu family search incident and the growing attention of the society and the government on cyberbullying, this paper cogitates on current cyberbullying contexts in China. This paper is instrumental in resolving current major cyberbullying issues by offering several suggestions in terms of social network governance and Internet conundrums through multi-perspectives. Developing solutions under the public policy domain, this wholistic analysis can promote wholistic actions prospectively.

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