Chapter 8
Cyberbullying on Chinese Social Media:
Language Features and Influence Factors in Comments on Key Opinion Leaders' Posts

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of information and communication technologies contributes to the growth of social media channels, which also bring some problems such as cyberbullying. Previous studies have analyzed the prevalence and consequences of cyberbullying and the detection and prevention of it. However, little research pays attention to cyberbullying on Chinese social media. This research uses the content analysis method to analyze cyberbullying on one of the biggest social media platforms in China, Weibo, focusing on language features and factors that influence the frequency of cyberbullying language in comments on key opinion leaders' (KOLs) posts. The findings reveal that most cyberbullying language on Weibo appears in the form of mildly offensive or ordinary words with special meanings and offensive references, rather than directly offensive words. In addition, this research found that KOL type and post content type interact to affect the frequency of cyberbullying language on Weibo. Overall, this research has made a valuable contribution to cyberbullying research.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of information and communication technologies, computer-mediated communication made a revolutionary leap in the late 20th century (Romiszowski & Mason, 1996; Steinmueller, 2000). At the same time, social media platforms have continuously emerged and developed providing more comprehensive, faster, and richer information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

However, there are pros and cons of the Internet development. There is no doubt that the emergence and development of social media has brought different kinds of benefits. But at the same time, social media also provides a platform for people to conduct challenging and negative behavior such as cyberbullying (Sari & Camadan, 2016; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Cyberbullying is aggressive, intentional, harmful behavior carried out by individuals or groups through electronic or digital media which inflict harm or discomfort on others (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). In recent years, cyberbullying occurs frequently on social media, which not only causes psychological harm to the victims but also "pollute" the network environment (Alim, 2017).

In the network era, humans have acquired an infinitely large new space — cyberspace, through the activities of text transmission. At the same time, online writing has become an important way for Chinese people to communicate or record in writing with the rapid expansion of the number of internet users (Wang, 2004). In the virtual cyberspace, communication has gained greater freedom than ever, and the mode of verbal communication has also changed. The cooperation of them results in the emergence of network language. Network language is a tool for Internet users to communicate in the virtual space, as well as a form of language to express their feelings and explain their views (Liu, 2008). This kind of language is not only the carrier of information in the network context but also the variant of social language (Li, 2020). Besides, the network language has been widely used and become popular because of its conciseness, convenience, innovation, liveliness, humor, and other advantages (Liu & Ning, 2004). However, there are no restrictions on the form and content of network language, and netizens are free to create, comment, and spread. As a result, cyberbullying language appeared at the same time with the function to insult, abuse, and slander other people on social media platforms.

Halliday (2011) argues that "it has become increasingly clear that language has the power to convince, deceive and, in fact, control." (p.141) As a result, we "must choose our words carefully, and one day we will be able to measure the power of good and evil in our words" (Angelou, 2014). In other words, cyberbullying language and the bad consequences brought by it undoubtedly fully reflect the harm of malicious words.

The widespread language of cyberbullying has gained the attention of societies and scholars around the world. As early as 2012, The People's Daily published an article, which pointed out that our spiritual world is suffering from the ravages of cyberbullying, and there is no time to set aside the governance of language cyberbullying (Xu, 2021). According to the nationwide survey in the UK, nearly 56 percent of young people had witnessed cyberbullying and 42 percent of the interviewees felt unsafe on the internet (Family lives, 2020). In China, Sina Chongqing also did a survey on cyberbullying language. From the survey data, it can be seen that about 84 percent of the interviewees have been attacked by vulgar or abusive language on the internet, and 65 percent of them admitted that they had used violent language to others online. Moreover, a survey of college students in Shanxi Province in 2014 showed that more than 50 percent of the students had engaged in language cyberbullying (Mao & Liang, 2014).

In this paper, we will take cyberbullying language as the research object and focus on the posts and comments on Weibo, one of the mainstream social media platforms in China, to study the features

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