

Exploring the Causes of Stereotype Formation in Social Media and Possible Solutions

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Abstract:

The following research targets examining female stereotypes on the internet in the context of the Pink Hair Incident, where Zheng, a young Chinese girl, faced severe internet violence and criticism by posting dyed pink hair with her grandfather. The study delves into the underlying triggers: cultural and social factors. At the same time, the negative reactions of netizens and their linkage with gender stereotypes are analyzed. By collecting real-world evidence, such as comments and posts from Chinese social media platforms, a qualitative analysis was conducted. During the study, the researchers analyzed the events in detail in a timeline. Along with the qualitative analysis, an in-depth analysis was made on the girl's appearance and educational background responses, the correlation between appearance and social gender expectations, and the change in public opinion. The findings suggest during the initial stage, Zheng's unconventional hair color and academic achievement fueled cyber-bullying. With time, people began to reflect and form different opinions and voices on the event. The study concluded that such stereotypes greatly limit women's opportunities and courage to express themselves. The Pink Hair Incident highlights the stereotypes that still exist in Chinese society and the need to be inclusive and supportive.

Keywords: Gender stereotype; selective exposure; cyber violence; social media.

1. Introduction

The female stereotype is constructed by the psychological structure of traditional culture and influences the view of gender. The Internet, as the most pervasive factor in how people view gender, is also a me-

dium for female stereotypes. The Internet is known to transmit gender ideas, but people have no idea how these gender ideas unfold on the Internet. The "Pink Hair Incident" in 2022 years made people realize that the women stereotype on the Internet is far more serious than people believe. In this study, this

investigation focuses on this hot event to explore how the stereotype of women on the Internet is displayed in reality. Through this survey, people can deeply understand the influence of the Internet and the effect mechanism of the Internet to reduce the spread of stereotypes and weaken the negative impact of stereotypes on people. To help people rationally view the gender concept spread on the Internet. This study mainly focuses on the transmission mechanism of female stereotypes on the Internet and its practical impact. This investigation uses the literature analysis method to search and read the relevant materials and works of literature to understand the existing theoretical background. By sorting out the event timeline, investigate the logic of the event in the background to help analysis. Through classification analysis, different comments are classified and analyzed, to explore the mechanism. The goal of this study is to clearly show the influence of the Internet on people's gender concepts, and female stereotypes, and the serious consequences of showing this negative impact through this incident.

A gender stereotype is a generalized assumption about the attributes or roles that men and women are expected to possess or perform [1]. People tend to interpret new information in line with their existing beliefs and knowledge [2]. Online behaviors that cause psychological or physical harm fall under this category [3]. Social media, as a form of digital technology, enables the exchange of ideas and information—whether through text or visuals—across virtual networks and communities [4].

2. Background

On July 13, 2022, Zheng received an admission notice from East China Normal University as a graduate student. She rushed to the hospital to tell her grandfather, who was lying in hospital the good news. Soon after she posted the photo of her grandparents and herself on the XiaoHongshu platform, something unexpected happened - the photo was successively taken by a certified blogger on multiple marketing accounts and hundreds of platforms on the Douyin platform then spread on the Internet. Some netizens criticized and abused her pink hair. After the incident, Zheng tried to uninstall these social platforms and dyed her hair black, she did not give up evidence and was determined to fight back. However, the hurt of rumors and ridicule caused her to suffer from depression, and on January 23, 2023, she committed suicide due to depression.

The reason that led to her being abused on the Internet is that she dyed her pink hair. On the Internet, people have called him a “bartender,” a “nightclub dancer,” and a “red-haired monster” because of his pink hair. This is a stereotype of women.

A gender stereotype is a generalized view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women. A stereotype is harmful when it limits women's or men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives and life plans. Both hostile/negative or seemingly benign stereotypes can be harmful. It is for example based on the stereotype that women are more nurturing and that child-rearing responsibilities often fall exclusively on them. Gender stereotypes originate from local culture and traditions. Children learn what constitutes female and male behavior from their family, friends, the media, and institutions including schools and religious bodies. These socially accepted and often unconscious ideas start to form in infancy when they are constantly bombarded with messages about how they should look, behave, and play according to their gender [5]. In this event, the stereotype is embodied in the appearance of women, in Chinese traditional culture, everyone should keep a low profile, not noticeable, and women especially should be so, because they are “off the table”, their duty is only to serve the family well, they should be socialized. If such rules are broken, women often face a different sanitation and stigma. Such cultural discipline is passed down from generation to generation. It lasted for thousands of years, and the expectation for women's appearance has gradually penetrated the hearts of the people and become a collective subconscious, existing between men and women, which is manifested as stereotypes. In the case of Zheng, women were instructed not to dye their hair, let alone pink, an aggressive color that suggests defiance.

Of the many factors that influence how people view gender, media is one of the most pervasive and powerful. In daily lives, the media hint at their messages entering consciousness every moment. At the same time, gender stereotypes also spread on the Internet, influencing people's thoughts in the form of media. Another focus of this incident is the Internet violence: stereotypes play out online.

People have perceptions of how the mass media stereotype women already. The mind of traditional culture, the edifice of human civilization, is built based on male values at the expense of female creativity. Even though there are many voices to protect women's rights and interests, traditional values and moral theories are still difficult to overturn. Women in China have always been in a passive state, for example: “men in charge for the outside, and women for the inside”, “men should have a career, women take care of the family”, and “women are born weak, men are strong”. Traditional ideas attribute this difference to biological differences, but feminists believe that long-term historical differences in social gender and social division

of labor cause such biological differences. Through the practice of socialization expectation, gender roles have formed the stereotype of gender in traditional culture. This conventional concept is manifested in reality through various forms, and the mass media has unconsciously become a carrier to reflect this stereotype [6]. The “collective unconscious” of female culture: from childhood, men and women are guided by different norms, and feel and experience the world in very different ways [7]. The guidance of this difference has formed the role shaping of distinct gender roles. Women have unconsciously and passively accepted the defined roles for a long time and thus played such roles passively. Although many women have more independence and autonomy than before, their understanding remains on the surface, such as striving for freedom in appearance and dress, consumption and shopping, marriage and love choice, career planning, etc. Still, real independence and autonomy are more of a social subject consciousness, democratic participation consciousness, and spiritual liberation in the social public sphere. Therefore, this collective unconscious of women acquiesces in the shaping and formation of female stereotypes on the Internet. And the replicability of media culture: A study conducted by Nancy Signorielli, a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Delaware, found that the media’s impact on gender identity is that it provides an overwhelming amount of information, with women focusing more on dating and romance, and men focusing more on careers. Media can influence people’s knowledge, understanding, and memory. It can introduce audiences towards new ideas, expand horizons, and shape perceptions of reality [8]. Through the description of gender roles and social norms, people’s gender stereotypes and restrictions on women’s rights are reinforced.

Then, under the hot events, are the stereotypes of women on the Internet displayed and spread? By studying the change in Internet public opinion under the hot event of the “Pink Hair Incident”, the stereotype of women on the Internet is able to be displayed.

There are two theory frameworks that this investigation uses to conduct the analysis: gender stereotypes and selective exposure. The theory of gender stereotypes refers to the preconceived notions of men and women, focusing on their names, roles, and attributes. Such stereotypes are likely to do much harm, such as idle personal development and other life choices [9]. This theory originates from the perceived local cultural traditions, reinforced especially by the social flowers of the family or media. Gender stereotyping theories focused on the pink hair incident could suggest that the criticism and abuse Zheng received for her pink hair stemmed from deep-rooted cultural stereotypes. Specifically, cyberbullying results from

stereotypes about how women should behave and behave, which limit women’s ability to express themselves freely. Moreover, the theory of selective exposure posits that individuals tend to seek out and engage with information that aligns with their existing beliefs and attitudes while avoiding information that contradicts them [10]. This behavior reinforces their viewpoints and contributes to the polarization of opinions. This theory will be used along with the event timeline as a supporting resource for analysis. Specifically, during the initial stage of Zheng’s incident, the majority of discussions were dominated by negative comments about her appearance and behavior. As it came to 2023, Zheng committed suicide, public opinion started to shift and the role of social media came along. In other words, as the discourse evolved, some users began to critically assess these negative comments, increasingly seeking out and sharing supportive messages about Zheng. Social media platforms facilitated this transition by amplifying supportive voices and enabling users to connect with like-minded individuals.

3. Analysis

To collect data for the gender stereotype and the reasons why actions of Zheng face criticism and discrimination, keywords like pink hair, graduate student, and grandfather were used to search on Chinese social medias: Weibo and Douyin, and gathered posts and comments about this incident. Then, the allocated the comments were divided into different categories, which are appearance and educational background.

The netizens who see women with pink hair, simply related it to indecent jobs such as bar girl, stripper, and DJ. They think that girls with dyed hair are interchangeable with people who work at nightclubs and bars. This is due to people’s stereotype of women, which is a theory called gender stereotype. Just because there are girls with colorful hair who work at night clubs, and some of the netizens have seen them, it doesn’t mean that every girl with colorful hair is a bar girl or stripper. The Chinese society and culture want people to be organized and follow rules, and the act of making oneself stand out with colorful hair is believed to be “rebellious” and “ignorant”, with these preconceived negative understandings of dyeing hair, netizens commented negative things about Zheng just by seeing her picture. Therefore, the netizens who made discriminative comments of thinking Zheng wasn’t a proper student only based on their preconceived understandings of women, which is very limited and not open-minded at all.

However, the stereotype of pink hair is not enough to create this large scale of cyber violence, the stereotype of

women's educational background is also very impactful. The netizens also made a lot of comments about what a graduate student should look like and should not look like, such as "A graduate student dyed her hair like a bar girl!" and "Even a nightclub stripper can get a graduate diploma". Deep inside those comments, is that those men don't believe that women can get such an education background or be smarter than them, especially a woman with pink hair. Therefore, those male netizens made countless negative comments about Zheng, due to gender stereotypes and jealousy.

4. Discussion

Based on the previous evidence during the initial stage. Zheng received an abundant number of harsh comments. Such negative circumstances occur for a few reasons. First, the existence of emotional engagement. Negative comments often elicit a stronger emotional response, making them more likely to be shared and having an increased exposure. Groups of users may find identification in collective anger, leading to a reinforcing cycle in which negative emotions become more pronounced. according to the theory, a critical majority is formed because users are attracted to emotionally charged content.

Second, social validation comes along with the flood of negative comments. This negative internet atmosphere creates a sense that there is consensus among people. This encourages others to join the discussion with the same point of view. Individuals prioritize personal choices to interact with popular critical narratives. This collective behavior exemplified selective exposure, where individuals chose to interact with prevailing critical narratives.

In 2023 January, as Zheng passed away by committing suicide, public opinion produced an overwhelmingly positive development. Such a situation was catalyzed by two main factors. One of the factors is the moral responsibility of individuals. The news of the tragedy catalyzes public guilt and sympathy. Therefore, many people chose to express positive emotions, and the visibility of supportive comments increased. This change in public opinion suggests that the types of information users choose to contact have changed, and now more users choose to pay attention to supportive, mourning, and other information. Another significant factor is the new forms of narrative. When the supportive comments rise in numbers, when people are actively involved, an increasing number of different forms of media are starting to speak out. Take image 03 as an example, Douyin producer "Duoduohualin" used Zheng's story to create related content, she received billions of views and over 7 million likes. Showing a huge influence on viewers. From image 02, over 3 thousand users

claimed to know this event from her video influences. Indicating the tactfulness of internet spreading. Individuals choose to focus on information that promotes compassion and challenges past prejudices.

News reports the whole event on different platforms. Most media outlets criticized the act of "Internet violence", and many people called for further strengthening of Internet police. But few of the outlets have paid attention to the issue of gender stereotypes.

Due to the time-effectiveness, most news is reported as soon as possible because they are too late for in-depth investigation.

News are relatively official media and is influenced by both the official and the government. In the case of the pink hair affair, the government will be more inclined to address the practical problem of Internet violence rather than the doubt point of view.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, "The Pink Hair Incident" shows netizens' stereotypes toward women, by commenting, spreading negative opinions, and even starting rumors about Zheng. The comments revolve around the topics of what women should look like, what graduate students should look like, and how is Zheng as a female graduate student look like "stripper" and "DJ" because of her pink hair. After investigation, it is believed that the reasons of netizens share their stereotypes include the theory of selective exposure and gender stereotypes that caused men's jealousy toward a young female graduate student, which caused countless criticism and rumors attacking to Zheng and led to her suicide.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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