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Exploring the Ethical Dilemmas of Generative AI in Chinese Cyberspace: A Case Study of the “Cyber 10” Online Community

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Abstract. This study examines grassroots Chinese Internet users' perspective on the ethical implications of generative AI from a sociological standpoint by analyzing opinions expressed in the “Cyber 10 Certification Station” online community on Weibo - a popular Chinese social media platform. “10” is a homophone of “corpse,” symbolic of feeding the corpse of artistic work to generative AI systems. Our thematic analysis and content analysis of the best posts of the community reveal several primary concerns surrounding generative AI, including copyright infringement, privacy issues, fake news, utilization in

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pornography, and potential threats to creatives' livelihood. This research adds valuable insights into the underrepresented viewpoints of Chinese practitioners and users regarding AI ethics within the CSCW community.

1 Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) models are now widely available to the public and completely revolutionizing the way an image is created, viewed, and shared. While generative AI makes it much quicker and more convenient for companies and individual designers to create sophisticated images, it also comes with ethical trade-offs. In the CSCW community, there has been more and more attention paid to the idea of “ethical AI” (Fleischmann et al., 2019; Robert et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2023) and the vision of “human-centered AI” (Lee et al., 2020; Oppermann et al., 2019; Xu, 2019; Xu et al., 2023). There is also an increasing number of studies that pay attention to the development of AI systems from an HCI perspective (Inkpen et al., 2019; Loi et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2023). Additionally, concerning the automation of creative work with the help of AI, HCI scholars have contributed to proposals of new AI-supported design practices and design guidelines (Gal et al., 2022; Ko et al., 2023; Liu & Chilton, 2022). In the CSCW community there are, however, still few discussions on the ethics of generative AI from a sociological standpoint. Taking a bottom-up approach, this study contributes to the discussions of the ethics of generative AI by accounting for the opinions of grassroots Chinese Internet users whose everyday life and work are drastically transformed by the new technology.

This study uses thematic analysis and content analysis to examine the “Cyber 10 Certification Station” community (赛博十块鉴定所) on Weibo, a popular Chinese social media platform. The community consists of mostly designers, as well as a small number of artists and anime lovers (see Figure 1). This analysis focuses on the collection of “featured posts” (集锦), which a carefully curated assortment of important posts related to generative AI handpicked by the “Cyber 10” account manager and pinned to the top of the community page (see Figure 2). Community members are strongly encouraged to peruse these posts prior to anonymously contributing with new content or comments.

The collection consists of a total of 56 posts, plus comments. A large portion of these posts are republished posts from the “Cyber 10” community. Additionally, there are contributions from well-known creative accounts expressing criticism towards generative AI. These posts have received a significant number of comments, ranging from dozens to hundreds, and considerable engagement in the form of thousands of likes. A few posts have over 10,000 likes. In this study, we analyze all of the 56 posts, plus their comments, which serves as a representative sample of the ideas and opinions of the “Cyber 10” members on the ethical dilemmas of generative AI. This unique dataset offers insight into Chinese



Figure 1. Screenshot of the user interface of the “Cyber 10 Certification Station” account (accessed 23 February, 2024).

practitioners and users on the ground who encounter generative AI on a daily basis but are seldom accounted for in studies of generative AI in HCI.

We ask the following research question: How do the members of the “Cyber 10” community perceive the ethics of generative AI?

2 Background

“Cyber 10” is a Weibo “toilet” (厕所) devoted to the general discussions of the ethics of generative AI. Weibo “toilets” are accounts that receive and publish posts on a certain topic or theme anonymously, but do not publish any of its own content. The account manager is in charge of receiving, anonymizing, and posting received content, but does not express opinions of its own. Against the backdrop of a highly controlled cyberspace (Han, 2018; Yang, 2016), Weibo “toilets” cleverly serve the purpose of anonymity for grassroots Internet users. Specifically, in the case of designers, their open criticism of AI could potentially result in job consequences, which is why they seek refuge and engage in discourse within the “Cyber 10” community. The first group rule of this community declares: “This anonymous group will not disclose any information of the posters, so please do not ask!”

As one of the most popular AI groups on Weibo, the “Cyber 10” community first became active on February 26, 2023. As of February 17, 2024, the group has over 345,000 members, 27,263 posts, and over 1,000,000 reads (see Figure 1). When observed in June 2023, the group claimed to be a “female toilet” in its group rules but did not reject male participants. Since the new group rules published on

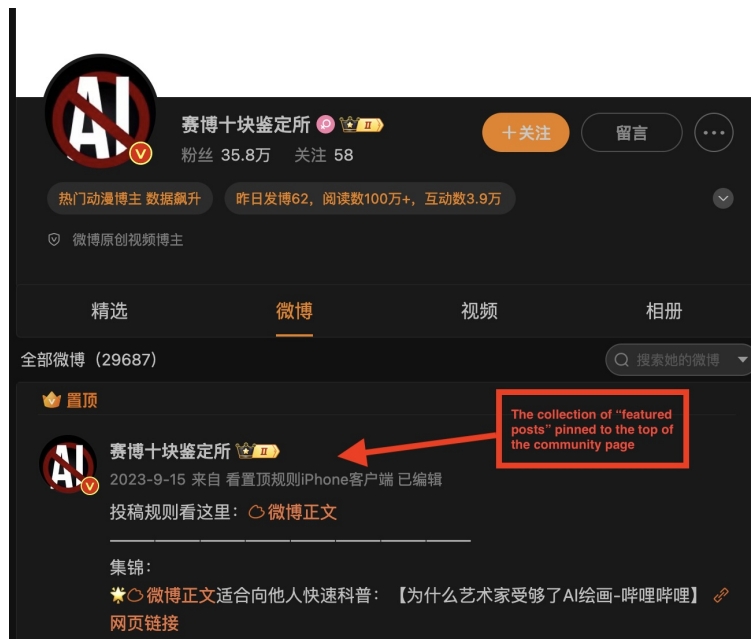


Figure 2. Screenshot of the collection of “featured posts” (集锦) (accessed 5 April, 2024).

September 12, 2023, the community became a strictly “female toilet” serving only female users.

The community not only offers a safe space for its members to discuss generative AI, but also share posts and articles that popularize generative AI knowledge, as well as offer tools to designers and creatives to “fight against” generative AI.

3 Methodology

We employ qualitative research methods, including inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and content analysis in this study. Our analysis focuses on the collection of “featured posts” which was published on September 15, 2023, prominently displayed at the top of the community page (see Figure 2). As of February 17, 2024, the post of “featured posts” has received over 1,000 reposts, 128 comments, and 5,162 likes. The collection and all the other posts of the community are accessible to both members and non-members. Our analysis covers all of the 56 “featured posts” and their corresponding comments. Researchers in our team collaboratively examine distinct portions of the collection, ensuring comprehensive analysis of all posts.

To supplement this textual data, a member of the research team has been observing the group since June 2023. Memos were written to document the observatory data and conduct preliminary thematic analysis of the collection. We went through a reiterative process of analysis until all researchers agreed upon the most popular themes of this community based on the collection of the best posts.

We present the results of this preliminary study based on the three most popular themes:

- Criticism of generative AI
- Call to action
- Gendered use of AI

4 Results

4.1 Criticism of generative AI - “Built upon the labor of countless artists, generative AI is essentially a form of exploitation and parasitism.”

Copyright infringement and privacy issues. One of the key issues of generative AI identified by the “Cyber 10” members is that the majority of the generative AI tools use artists’ work as their training data without the permission of the artists, constituting clear copyright violations. Furthermore, many posts discussed how copyright infringement was frequently accompanied by privacy issues. Numerous commenters expressed the concern that “any content posted on the internet could potentially become part of an (generative AI) database.” This raised fears among the members that their previously posted photos on the Internet could potentially lead to dangerous issues such as identity leaks due to the misuse of generative AI.

Authenticity issues such as fake news. Furthermore, we noticed that the authenticity of AI-generated work was fervently debated in the “Cyber 10” community, particularly regarding art and information. For instance, one post stated that, “AI art is not authentic art, since it is without human intention.” Many members believed that the misuse of AI in art has led to increasingly stereotyped and generic creative work on the Chinese Internet. Others were concerned that AI will blur the boundaries between real and fake news, as AI makes the creation of misinformation and disinformation increasingly easy.

The problematic use of generative AI in pornography. Another widely criticized negative effect of generative AI in the “Cyber 10” community is its role in producing pornography, leading to the exploitation of women and children. Our observation showed that a large number of the daily posts in the “Cyber 10” community were reports of AI-generated pornographic content from all over the Internet.

Threats to the livelihood of the creatives. Some popular posts also highlighted deeper concerns, namely that the livelihood and creative space of artists and designers are being increasingly squeezed by generative AI. One post observed that the widespread application of generative AI in China has led to the situation where “the work of the creatives is overshadowed by AI-generated content and buried in the vast ocean of content.” One commenter said solemnly, “Built upon the labor of countless artists, generative AI is essentially a form of exploitation and parasitism.” Many members agonized that if no support was given

to the creatives, the popularization of generative AI would culminate in mass unemployment of creatives and potentially the destruction of the creative industries in China.

4.2 Call to action - “I hope that AI use in our country can be regulated by the EU.”

The “Cyber 10” community urges both its members and the Chinese government to take action against the unregulated application of generative AI, especially in the creative industries. For example, one post suggested the community members to “express their hatred (towards generative AI) together” and emphasized that our society “should not try to coexist (with generative AI).” Adding a call to action, the poster proposed, “we have to express our opposition and outrage together.” While some commenters concurred with the poster’s stance, others challenged the idea that AI could be abandoned. For instance, one member commented: “Although I agree (with the poster), I don’t think we can resist AI. It is already a foregone situation. Whether we are willing or not, we can only come up with solutions to coexist with AI.”

Apart from personal actions, the “Cyber 10” community also urges the Chinese government to regulate the use of generative AI, as no clear regulations of AI are in place yet in China. Numerous posts and comments attempted to specify the negative impacts resulting from the unregulated application of AI (also see Section 4.1). One featured post informed that “The draft of the EU AI Act has passed by a high vote.” The post received 818 likes and 310 reposts. The news attracted a response expressing that “I hope that AI use in our country can be regulated by the EU.”

4.3 Gendered use of AI - “This is a crime committed against all women.”

The issue of gender has become increasingly prominent in the “Cyber 10” community. Based on our observation, while the group claimed to be a “female toilet” right from when it was launched in February 2023, it initially allowed male designers as long as they did not openly support the problematic use of AI. As the gendered use of AI became an increasingly salient topic in the community, the manager of the “Cyber 10” account responded by turning the “toilet” into a space exclusively for female users. The latest group rules published on September 12, 2023, announced, “get out of this toilet, men.”

Many comments and posts in the collection touched upon the issue of generative AI from the gender perspective. One post read,

“Cancer-brothers” (“癌哥” in Chinese, “癌” or cancer is the Chinese homonym of “AI”) always talk about AI-generated art as advancement of technology, but what they actually love to do and what they do most is to generate naked photos of women, or create fake pornographic images. This is a crime committed against all women.

“Cancer-brother” is a derogatory nickname the “Cyber 10” members give to men who embrace AI technology. This featured post and other similar ones received an overwhelming number of supportive comments. One of the commenters said sharply, “By getting rid of men, we would resolve 99% of the problems discussed in this toilet.” This comment received 12,000 likes. Another commenter stated, “If I see any pornographic photos of women from now on, I will assume it is AI.” The fervent discussion of the gendered use of AI inside the community has undoubtedly contributed to the gradual exclusion of male participants from the community, as the discourse of ethical AI and the discourse of gender gradually merged.

5 Discussion

Despite a shared position against AI, there are some noticeable divided opinions and dilemmas within the community. To start with, the community has yet to reach a consensus about whether and how humans can coexist with AI. Some believed that coexisting with AI is impossible. They argued that continuous opposition is necessary to prevent AI from replacing human in creative work. Some disagreed by suggesting that resistance to the popularization of AI is futile. They advocated for finding ways to coexist with AI. Such division highlights the dilemmas brought by the rapid advancement of AI and the ongoing process of human exploration in the face of this new technology.

Moreover, the prevalence of male pronouns in this community marks this “female toilet” with a considerable amount of hatred towards men. AI supporters were mockingly called “cancer-brothers,” which reveals the common assumption in this community that AI supporters tend to be men. Moreover, the poster and the commenters used the intimate term “husband” to call each other. This term was used when the posters called the members to action, or when the members expressed their appreciation for the posters’ efforts in creating content for the community. This unexpected contradiction reflects a complex gendered discourse surrounding the topic of AI.

These unresolved issues and debates point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of generative AI technology and its societal implications. We plan to conduct in-depth interviews in our future research to further investigate the psychological factors, social factors, and design implications behind these phenomena.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed the opinions of the members of the “Cyber 10” community on Weibo regarding the ethics of generative AI. Our findings revealed several key ethical concerns. The community urged personal actions and stronger government regulations to address these issues. Overall, our study underscores the

importance of addressing ethical concerns surrounding the use of generative AI in the CSCW community.

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