

Exploring the Social Media Use of Victims of Domestic Violence: A Comprehensive Study

Zixuan Tan^{1,a,*}

¹*Liaoning University of Technology, Department of Media, Jinzhou, 121000, China
a. 13236871307@163.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Domestic violence is a serious social issue that has a large number of negative impacts on individuals, families, and even society as a whole. This study investigates the basic situation of social media use by domestic violence victims, thereby providing media use experience for other vulnerable groups and contributing to the elimination of domestic violence. The issue of domestic violence has become a hot topic of social and public concern in recent years. Research on the relationship between domestic violence and the media can be divided into two categories: media reporting of domestic violence and the use of media by victims of domestic violence. This study takes victims of domestic violence as the research object and uses in-depth interview methods; and specific contents centre around their use of social media, such as seeking help and support, sharing personal experiences, raising public awareness, and finding a sense of belonging to the community. Through investigation, this article draws the following conclusions: The types of social media commonly used by victims of domestic violence can be divided into three categories: instant messaging, information acquisition, and information sharing. By studying the types of social media use for domestic violence victims, people can observe their situations and emotions and provide timely help.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Social Media, Victims of Domestic Violence, Social Issue

1. Introduction

Domestic violence has always been a serious global problem. It refers to physical, mental, and other violations committed by family members through beating, binding, mutilation, restriction of personal freedom, regular verbal abuse, and intimidation [1]. Domestic violence is a social phenomenon that involves all levels of society, but it exists in a very hidden way and is difficult for outsiders to discover. The process from discovery to assistance is also very long and complicated. Victims of domestic violence suffer physical and mental stress and devastation, which seriously affects their health and daily life and has become the focus of academic research.

Currently, in the field of communication, research on the relationship between domestic violence victims and the media mainly focuses on the image of domestic violence victims created by traditional media. This type of research usually uses content analysis to examine the media's reporting framework on victims of domestic violence through text analysis. In addition, the media use experience of domestic violence victims who have successfully improved their cognition, emotions, and real-life situations through the use of social media tools can provide a valuable reference for other domestic violence victims behind bars. At the same time, the research results can also provide

theoretical suggestions for relevant government departments to establish new media rescue channels. Given the above realistic and theoretical background, this article studies the social media use of domestic violence victims. It is hoped that the research will draw further attention from all walks of lives to the issue of domestic violence and the victims of domestic violence.

2. Literature Review

Research on the relationship between domestic violence and the media can be divided into two categories: the media's reporting of domestic violence and the use of media by domestic violence victims. The first type of research is centered on the media, and its primary purpose is to explore how the media presents domestic violence issues and its social impact. This type of research mainly focuses on content analysis. The second type of research takes victims of domestic violence as the research object. This type of research mainly studies the motivations, methods, and effects of media use on victims of domestic violence through questionnaire surveys and other methods.

2.1. Media Presentation of Domestic Violence Issues

The issue of domestic violence has always been the focus of the humanities and social sciences, such as law, sociology, and psychology. However, scholars in the field of journalism and communication are rarely involved in it, and the research results are far less wealthy than those of other disciplines. As early as the 1930s, scholars in journalism and communication have been studying the issue of violence, namely the Payne Foundation (Payne Fund Studies), which researched whether violent crimes involved in television have an impact on children's behavior [2]. However, in most cases, domestic violence is often regarded as a private matter. Therefore, until the mass media does not intervene in the issue of domestic violence, scholars of journalism and communication pay less attention to it. At the same time, the previous main research direction was the study of the presentation and social impact of media reports on domestic violence. Based on the previous research results of scholars, this study reviewed the literature on the media presentation of domestic violence issues from the following three aspects: the media's setting of domestic violence issues, the role of the media in domestic violence as a social issue.

2.1.1. Research on Domestic Violence Issue Setting in The Media

After the Simpson murder case in 1994, it caused a sensation in the United States and even the entire Western world. Scholars also turned their research attention to the field of domestic violence [3]. Maxwell et al. found that when the Simpson murder case occurred, the number of reports on domestic violence in traditional media increased significantly [4]. However, after the incident, the number of related reports returned to normal, so they believed that domestic violence incidents involving celebrities would significantly affect the number of reports on domestic violence issues in mainstream media at that time. Gillespie et al. compared 113 newspaper articles about female murders defined as domestic violence cases with a random sample of 113 articles not defined as domestic violence cases [5]. The comparison concludes that the news media plays a significant role in shaping society's perception of social issues, including domestic violence.

2.1.2. Research on the Role of Media in Domestic Violence as a Social Issue

Scholars have different views on this issue and have produced fruitful research results. One view is that the media plays an active role in the social problem of domestic violence. For example, Xu and others believed that mainstream media should play a guiding role in society and actively guide the public's understanding, discourse, and behavior of domestic violence [6]. The World Health

Organization believed that mainstream media should play a role when reporting domestic violence cases to the public and guide public awareness, thus solving the serious social issue of domestic violence [7]. Ali and Pasha believe that mainstream media should guide public opinion on sensitive issues of public concern, such as domestic violence [8]. Xue and Rose, analyzed the operation of Weibo to study how Chinese social organizations use social media to conduct public discussions on domestic violence, a social issue that is often ignored [9].

Another view is that scholars believe that the media plays a negative role in the social problem of domestic violence. For example, Sutherland and others collected and analyzed media reports on domestic violence against women in three Australian states over four months. They believed that few news media provide information about where victims of domestic violence should go to seek help [10]. Chesney-Lind and Chagnon, in their study, found that when reporting on domestic violence, the media will acquiesce in the brutal behavior of the perpetrators, use the audience's stereotypes of victims of domestic violence, blame the victims, and place the blame on the victims [11].

2.1.3. Research on the Ethics of Media Reporting on Domestic Violence Issues

Muchemi studied Kenyan media coverage of domestic violence and concluded that Kenyan media coverage of domestic violence is sexist and stereotyped [12]. Media stereotypes and bias will lead to the solidification of gender discrimination among Kenyan media consumers and an increase in the number of actual domestic violence cases. Seely and Riffe studied domestic violence in Appalachian newspaper coverage, finding that there was little media coverage of victims' opinions [13]. Bou-Franch analyzes the comments made by netizens about incidents of domestic violence. It was found that netizens hope to reduce domestic violence [14]. However, they still subconsciously believe that domestic violence is not a public problem but a private incident and blame the victims of domestic violence. Edwards and others analyzed reports on two incidents of intimate partner violence in Australia and found that the media often ignored the social background, made appalling reports, blurred the audience's understanding of the nature of domestic violence, and evaded the media's social responsibilities [15].

2.2. Research on the Media Use of Victims of Domestic Violence

As the Internet becomes an essential element of daily life, researchers have begun to explore the relationship between domestic violence victims and media use. Based on the research content, this study will conduct a literature review on the following two topics: the impact of media use on victims of domestic violence and research on media use and self-presentation.

2.2.1. The Impact of Media Use on Victims of Domestic Violence

Subramani and O'Connor believed that victims of domestic violence can seek social and emotional support by expressing their feelings through the use of social media platforms [16]. They also made a similar point in another article. They believed that social media could allow victims of domestic violence to share their experiences and moods more freely and gain social sympathy and support. Cardoso and Sorenson conducted a study in 20 countries. The results showed that the more opportunities for access to the Internet, the less favorable women were for domestic violence. They believed the Internet affected women's values by providing new information and knowledge [17]. Leggett proposed that the use of Internet technology has a positive impact on the reintegration of domestic violence victims into society and that the Internet can be used to support domestic violence victims to resist domestic violence [18]. While Chinese civil society organizations are often considered non-confrontational and, therefore, ineffective agents of change, Feminist Voices does

challenge the marginalization of domestic violence in the public sphere and promotes discussion of domestic violence.

2.2.2. Media Use Research

The emergence of the Internet has created a new, even earth-shaking environment for the media. Users in the new media environment have also created new needs. Raji and others discovered that data analyzed using PLS-SEM revealed that social influence and social interaction significantly contributed to the use of social media [19]. Gao and Chen believe that factors influencing users' media use include self-presentation, relaxation, self-improvement, interpersonal interaction, passing the time, staying in touch, and escaping reality [20]. Zhu and Chen believed that factors influencing media use include staying connected with friends, having fun and relaxing, and following trends [21]. Xu believed that user media use factors include self-presentation, self-improvement, killing time, entertainment and recreation, and maintaining relationships with family and friends [22].

2.3. Evaluation of Previous Research Results

By combing through the existing literature, we can find that, first of all, from a quantitative perspective, there are relatively few and scattered studies on domestic violence in the field of news communication, and the research is not comprehensive enough. Regarding research methods, the research on the relationship between domestic violence and media is characterized by the coexistence of quantitative and qualitative research, with quantitative research being the mainstay and qualitative research being insufficient. In terms of research content, existing research mainly focuses on case analysis of domestic violence and media presentation content and has not studied the relationship between domestic violence and the media from multiple perspectives. Among them, research exploring social media use from the perspective of domestic violence victims has not received enough attention. The research subjects mainly focus on female victims, ignoring the male role in the group of domestic violence victims.

3. Methodology and Basic Information About the Interview

In-depth interviews are a form of communication between the interviewer and the interviewee [23]. This study used in-depth interview methods to conduct semi-structured interviews with interviewees. In this interview, a total of 20 interviewees were selected for in-depth interviews to understand the group of domestic violence victims from different perspectives and to understand the basic situation of the media use of domestic violence victims. The respondents' gender was mainly female, accounting for 85% of the sample. In the interviews, all interviewees said that they use social media daily to complete processes such as searching for information, browsing content, communicating, and chatting. They have become accustomed to using social media to complete these behaviors. The duration of use is also roughly the same, using fragmented time to complete actions. It isn't easy to give a specific answer on the length of time people have used social media because both work and life are closely related to social media.

4. Social Media Usage of Domestic Violence Victims

4.1. Types of Social Media Used by Victims of Domestic Violence

Academics have different opinions on social media, but no unified definition exists. In China, the development of social media has gone through several generations, from chat rooms and forums to Renren and Tieba to today's QQ, WeChat, Douban, and Weibo. Users can send text, pictures, expressions, and even videos through social platforms, allowing dispersed individuals to

communicate more effectively and quickly and obtain valuable information through various social media. There are different answers to the classification of social media. Kaplan and Haenlein divided social media into six categories: blogs, collaboration plans, content communities, social networking sites, virtual social worlds, and virtual game worlds [24]. Each type of social media has its own unique functions and effects. Based on the types of social media usage mentioned by the interviewees in the interviews, the author divided the social media commonly used by the interviewees after experiencing domestic violence into three types.

4.2. Instant Messaging Type

The emergence of instant messaging social media applications has changed people's traditional communication methods. This type of social media, mainly Tencent QQ and WeChat, is a multi-functional social media that integrates text, voice, pictures, videos, and other functions. In particular, the WeChat app has become an indispensable social media tool for people's daily lives. 99% of users affirmed the positive impact of social media compared to last year. The role of social media in "relieving real-life stress" has been more recognized, rising from 45% to 57%. Social media can expand an individual's social scope, communicate with others, make friends, and self-present, and promote individual mental health to a certain extent. Victims of domestic violence can quickly find friends and pass on information through instant messaging and social media, which can significantly soothe the emotional pressure caused by domestic violence. In transmitting information, they can organize their thoughts and act as an emotional buffer. Moreover, in the process of inputting text and voice, victims of domestic violence can express their needs in a more organized way, allowing their peers to feel their inner world more intuitively, thus enhancing the quality of communication.

4.3. Information Acquisition Type

It is human nature to acquire information and eliminate uncertainty. An individual's brain activity triggers a need for information, which is reflected in the individual's mind's maladaptation to the environment, and the individual hopes to alleviate this confusion by finding relevant information. Compared to obtaining information and help from real life, respondents prefer to obtain relevant information from social media. The interviewees mentioned that to solve their difficulties and overcome difficulties, the most commonly used applications are Tieba, Zhihu, and Douban. As a shared Q&A community, these three applications bring together many people who have the same experience or are professional and authoritative in a particular field and can provide much information to victims of domestic violence. For most interviewees, Tieba, Douban, and Zhihu have undeniable instrumental characteristics: when encountering a problem, they need to solve it, collect relevant information to decide on countermeasures, or ask questions and wait for suggestions. In these three applications, people can often see victims of domestic violence asking questions on the platform about their own experiences, hoping to get answers from other people who have had the same experience or other professionals. When a person shares content on social media, other interested users are likely to read and comment on the content, and this discussion is conducive to creating knowledge and the mutual enrichment of related knowledge." Compared with other media, the information provided by Tieba, Douban, and Zhihu has the advantages of high credibility, low cost, and strong pertinence. It has become a tool for many victims of domestic violence to seek information consultation and find relevant information.

4.4. Information Sharing Type

Under the influence of traditional culture, many people believe that domestic violence is a family scandal that should not be made public and that it is a family matter. They even think asking for help

from the outside world will shame themselves and their families, so they choose to swallow it. The emergence of social media, especially Weibo, has given the public an unprecedented right to speak, ushering in an era where "everyone has a microphone." The public is no longer accustomed to being guided by information from traditional media. It is no longer a one-way recipient of information but has actively become a publisher of information.

Using social media to interact has a positive effect on alleviating an individual's negative emotions [25]. Individuals who actively use social media can perceive social support online, thus having a positive impact on their emotions. At the same time, due to the anonymity of the Internet, individuals unwilling to communicate with others in real life can relieve psychological pressure by confiding to strangers and seeking anonymous consultations. Because domestic violence often occurs at home, there is a level of secrecy and concealment that makes it difficult for others to detect, and no one knows the full story of the victim except the victim himself. However, the openness of social media can give some domestic violence victims who want to express themselves a space to tell their stories. Personal expression is accessible on various social media platforms, which is the perfect outlet for victims of domestic violence who find it difficult to speak about their experiences in real life. With Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Meiyou as the leading platforms, domestic violence victims boldly share their experiences on these public and anonymous social media platforms to satisfy their desire for expression. Things that cannot be said in real life become accessible online, where people cannot see each other. In addition to allowing domestic violence victims to express their life stress, social media also provides virtual emotional support. Victims of domestic violence share their experiences and privacy anonymously on social media and receive support and responses from other peers. This allows them to learn from each other's experiences and provide emotional support, which is also what domestic violence victims lack in real life.

5. Conclusion

In the process of researching this topic, the researcher came into contact with more victims of domestic violence and became deeply aware that domestic violence is a severe social problem and that there is a long way to go to solve the problem of domestic violence. Social media, with its low entry threshold, robust interactivity, and anonymity, plays a decisive role in solving problems for victims of domestic violence. This article uses in-depth interviews to examine how victims of domestic violence use social media. The study found that the types of social media commonly used by victims can be divided into three types. First, for the instant messaging type, the primary purpose is to seek comfort; second, for the information acquisition type, the main purpose is to find relevant information; third, in the information sharing type, the primary purpose is to release stress; leisure and entertainment category, the main purpose is to escape reality.

However, there are not enough types of social media investigated, and they are mainly concentrated on a few platforms with large numbers of people and high traffic. There are also many media platforms and gathering places that the author failed to discover. The number of interviewees is small. Those willing to be interviewed are more proactive in showing themselves, and many victims are hidden under the undercurrent. These shortcomings are also the direction of future research.

References

- [1] Ivone, V. and S. Negri, *DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*. 2019: CEDAM.
- [2] Gebru, A., *Children and Screen Media Effects: Theoretical Underpinnings, Empirical Observations and Policy Implications*. *East African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2021. 6(2): p. 83-100.
- [3] Neubauer, T., *The Mediatization of the OJ Simpson Case: From Reality Television to Filmic Adaptation*. 2023: transcript Verlag.

- [4] Maxwell, K.A., et al., *Covering domestic violence: How the OJ Simpson case shaped reporting of domestic violence in the news media*. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 2000. 77(2): p. 258-272.
- [5] Gillespie, L.K., et al., *Framing deadly domestic violence: Why the media 's spin matters in newspaper coverage of femicide*. *Violence against women*, 2013. 19(2): p. 222-245.
- [6] Xu, H., et al. *Public attention and sentiment toward intimate partner violence based on Weibo in China: A text mining approach*. in *Healthcare*. 2022. MDPI.
- [7] Organization, W.H., *Understanding and addressing violence against women: Intimate partner violence*. 2012, World Health Organization.
- [8] Ali, S. and S. Pasha, *News Media Representations of Domestic Violence Against Women in Pakistan*. *Media and Communication Review*, 2022. 2(2): p. 1-22.
- [9] Xue, A. and K. Rose, *Weibo feminism: Expression, activism, and social media in China*. 2022: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [10] Sutherland, G., et al., *Mediated representations of violence against women in the mainstream news in Australia*. *BMC public health*, 2019. 19: p. 1-8.
- [11] Chesney-Lind, M. and N. Chagnon, *Media representations of domestic violence*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. 2017.
- [12] Muchemi, L.W., *Mass media coverage of domestic violence in Kenya: a perpetuation of gender stereotypes*. 2015.
- [13] Seely, N. and D. Riffe, *Domestic violence in Appalachian newspaper coverage: minimizing a problem or mobilizing for a solution? Feminist Media Studies*, 2021. 21(1): p. 66-81.
- [14] Bou-Franch, P., *Domestic violence and public participation in the media: the case of citizen journalism*. *Gender and Language*, 2013. 7(3): p. 275-302.
- [15] Edwards, K.M., et al., *Popular Opinion Leaders ' Perspectives on Preventing Gender-Based Violence and Problem Drinking Among Kenyan College Students: A Brief Report*. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 2021. 36(19-20): p. 9838-9849.
- [16] Subramani, S. and M. O'Connor, *Extracting actionable knowledge from domestic violence discourses on social media*. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1807.02391*, 2018.
- [17] Cardoso, L.F. and S.B. Sorenson, *Violence against women and household ownership of radios, computers, and phones in 20 countries*. *American journal of public health*, 2017. 107(7): p. 1175-1181.
- [18] Leggett, A., *Online civic engagement and the anti-domestic violence movement in China: Shifting norms and influencing law*. *VOLUNTAS: international journal of voluntary and nonprofit organizations*, 2017. 28: p. 2251-2277.
- [19] Raji, R.A., et al., *Unveiling social gratifications sought and obtained from social media utilization*. *Jurnal The Messenger*, 2020. 12: p. 168.
- [20] Gao, Q. and Y. Chen, *Human factors in social media*. *Handbook of Human Factors and Ergonomics*, 2021: p. 1143-1186.
- [21] Zhu, Y.-Q. and H.-G. Chen, *Social media and human need satisfaction: Implications for social media marketing*. *Business horizons*, 2015. 58(3): p. 335-345.
- [22] Xu, J. *Motivations for Social Media Use*. in *2022 3rd International Conference on Mental Health, Education and Human Development (MHEHD 2022)*. 2022. Atlantis Press.
- [23] Osborne, N. and D. Grant-Smith, *In-depth interviewing*, in *Methods in Urban Analysis*. 2021, Springer. p. 105-125.
- [24] Kaplan, A.M. and M. Haenlein, *Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media*. *Business horizons*, 2010. 53(1): p. 59-68.
- [25] Chen, S., et al., *The relationship between social media use and negative emotions among Chinese medical college students: the mediating role of fear of missing out and the moderating role of resilience*. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 2023: p. 2755-2766.