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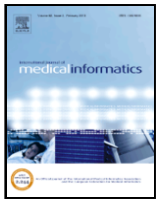

Finding safety in the mask: how platform anonymity and the COVID-19 pandemic affect domestic violence disclosures

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ABSTRACT

Background: Domestic violence (DV) can result in serious consequences for victims. Social media has emerged as an alternative venue for DV victims to share their experiences while seeking potential support, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite some studies exploring the characterization of DV disclosure on social media, a systematic investigation of the dimensions of DV characteristics remains lacking. Moreover, empirical evidence for DV disclosure on social media remains limited. In particular, the effects of platform anonymity and the COVID-19 pandemic on DV disclosure are largely overlooked.

Methods: To address the literature gaps, this study examines DV dimensions, including depth, breadth, and severity, through a detailed characterization of victimization disclosure in social media communities. More importantly, it empirically investigates the effects of platform anonymity and the pandemic on DV disclosure by analyzing data collected from different social media platforms, spanning both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic declaration periods.

Results: Our results show that the effects of anonymity are consistently strong and statistically significant across depth, breadth, and severity, whereas the effects of the pandemic on social media DV disclosures are less consistent and should be interpreted more cautiously.

Conclusions: The findings not only deepen our understanding of the factors contributing to DV disclosure on social media but also offer valuable guidance for designing platform features and developing effective online interventions to address DV.

1. Introduction

Domestic Violence (DV) refers to an act of abusing the power in which the perpetrator controls, threatens, or harms someone within the family or in an intimate relationship physically, verbally, emotionally, or sexually [1]. DV can have seriously negative effects on victims' mental welfare, resulting in depression, anxiety, hyperarousal, and emotional distress [2]. To mitigate these negative effects, a crucial step is to understand both the experiences of DV victims and the characteristics of DV itself. Social media platforms have become a viable venue for people to post their opinions and thoughts about stigmatized events like DV [3] and for DV victims to share their personal experiences and seek support [4,5]. Therefore, analyzing DV victimization through the lens of social media self-disclosures can deepen our understanding of DV and victims' experiences.

Rooted in the anonymity theory [6], prior studies have demonstrated that people's behavior is significantly shaped by the degree of anonymity afforded by social media platforms. Anonymity allows individuals to engage in online activities without revealing their identities, increasing self-disclosure across various intimacy levels [7]. However, most prior DV studies (e.g., [8–10]) have focused on single platforms, leaving the effects of different levels of anonymity on DV disclosure characteristics largely underexplored.

Self-disclosure serves diverse purposes and is instrumental in fostering relationships in online environments [11]. Some DV studies have examined hashtags that invoke users' reactions to social movements and target specific audiences [8–10]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the focal context of this study, social media functioned as a critical socio-technical infrastructure for vulnerable populations. Communities used social media to coordinate resources, mobilize mutual aid, and exchange emotional support [12], while active engagement

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helped preserve social capital and collective resilience during periods of social restriction [13].

To address the above-mentioned literature gaps, this study aims to investigate how DV disclosure characteristics vary across social media platforms with different anonymity affordances and to examine the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on disclosure dimensions.

2. Background and hypotheses development

2.1. Disclosing DV experience on social media

Social media has become a fertile ground for users to share personal stories and discuss topics, including socially taboo or stigmatized topics such as DV [3,14]. Although social media platforms can provide individuals experiencing DV with alternative avenues for support, safety, and guidance [15], survivors may still hesitate to seek help or disclose abuse online because of concerns such as embarrassment, guilt, fear of retaliation, and not being believed [16,17]. Accordingly, research is increasingly leveraging social media to better understand health-related issues such as DV [18], providing an effective means of identifying risk and preventive factors [19].

2.2. Characterization of DV self-disclosure on social media

The characterization of DV disclosure on social media is essential for structuring users' narratives and deepening our understanding of victimization experiences. Prior studies have adopted structured frameworks in analyzing DV-related discourse. For example, Aldkheel et al. [20] proposed a comprehensive framework capturing victims' and perpetrators' demographics, relationships, and abuse types. Carlyle et al. [21] employed a social-ecological model to examine IPV-related Instagram posts in terms of types, causes, and prevention strategies. Additionally, a qualitative analysis of Reddit posts reveals extensive breadth and depth in disclosing stigmatized experiences [22]. While these studies offer important insights, a systematic conceptualization and dimensional analysis of disclosure characteristics across platforms remains very limited. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the question: *What key dimensions of DV characteristics can be identified from social media self-disclosures?*

Self-disclosure can be categorized along a continuum of depth or intimacy, with communication centering on unique, central, or vulnerable aspects of individuals, such as personal deficiencies and sensitive information [23,24]. In addition, self-disclosure may be categorized along a breadth dimension with respect to how many aspects of the individual's life are revealed in communication [23]. Furthermore, the severity of DV victimization experience can vary depending on the nature of the abusive act. Increased severity indicates more invasive, frequent, or enduring acts [25].

2.3. The impact of anonymity on DV disclosure

Anonymity has been consistently shown to increase self-disclosure in both offline and online environments [26]. The "stranger on a train" phenomenon provides early evidence that anonymity facilitates intimate disclosure by reducing perceived social risk [27]. In digital contexts, perceived affordances such as anonymity, together with relational closeness to the audience, shape the depth of distress disclosure and influence disclosure satisfaction [28]. Accordingly, this study asks: *How does the anonymity afforded by social media platforms affect the dimensions of DV disclosure characteristics?*

Prior research suggests that anonymity reduces social risk and facilitates more candid self-disclosure, particularly regarding sensitive experiences [29]. Andalibi et al. [22] find that sexual abuse disclosures on anonymous platforms are often highly detailed and multifaceted. The findings suggest that anonymity lowers social barriers and encourages individuals to reveal broader, deeper, and potentially more severe experiences. Studies have shown that anonymous disclosures frequently encompass various forms of abuse, such as physical, emotional, and verbal violence [22], and that maltreatment-related outcomes are reported more extensively under anonymous conditions than in identified settings [25]. Drawing on the anonymity and online disinhibition literature, we expect anonymity to increase disclosure breadth, depth, and severity. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: A higher level of anonymity is associated with greater breadth of DV experience disclosure.
H2: A higher level of anonymity is associated with greater depth of DV experience disclosure.
H3: A higher level of anonymity is associated with increased abuse severity in DV experience disclosure.

2.4. The impact of the pandemic on DV disclosure

As COVID-19 evolved into a global pandemic, it generated widespread concern regarding the increasing incidence of maltreatment, including DV. Accordingly, this study asks: *How does the COVID-19 pandemic affect the dimensions of DV disclosure on social media?*

Prior research suggests that DV often escalates during and following major crises or disasters [22]. The rise in DV during the pandemic has been attributed to reduced social connections, heightened physical and mental health stressors, financial instability, and job loss [30]. Meanwhile, lockdown measures such as social distancing and quarantines substantially altered online behaviors. Social media platforms became more central to daily life and provided affordances that facilitated self-disclosure, helping individuals maintain a sense of control during uncertainty [31]. Increased online engagement may have encouraged greater willingness to disclose sensitive experiences, and such disclosure may have alleviated social and emotional distress during the crisis [32]. Empirical evidence further indicates that both the incidence and severity of DV increased during the pandemic [33], and multiple forms of abuse, including psychological, physical, and sexual violence, rose significantly during lockdown periods [34]. Therefore, we expect the pandemic to have heightened disclosure behaviors across various dimensions of DV disclosure characteristics, and propose the following hypotheses:

H4: The pandemic is associated with an increase in the breadth of DV experience disclosure.
H5: The pandemic is associated with an increase in the depth of DV experience disclosure.
H6: The pandemic is associated with an increase in abuse severity in DV experience disclosure.

3. Method

3.1. Platform selection

According to our theoretical framing in Section 2.3, anonymity is a key affordance of social media platforms. Moreover, anonymity is a continuum rather than a dichotomous construct [35]. Facebook and Reddit are two widely used social media platforms, and they enable users to share informational and emotional content with others to seek or provide social support [36]. Facebook functions as an identity-anchored social networking site, where profiles are commonly linked to persistent personal information and offline social ties, increasing perceived identifiability and the social risk of sensitive disclosure [37]. Reddit operates as a pseudonymous, community-based discussion platform, allowing users to participate anonymously within topic-specific subcommunities [38]. Given that Facebook affords relatively low perceived anonymity and Reddit high perceived anonymity, we treated them as low-anonymity and high-anonymity platforms, respectively,

consistent with prior research on platform design and self-disclosure [7, 39,40].

3.2. Data collection

The data collection was restricted to publicly accessible online spaces to ensure full compliance with each platform's privacy policies and terms of use. The study was reviewed by the authors' Institutional Review Board and deemed not to meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research. This is consistent with established practice in social computing research [3,41].

Our data collection process involved four primary stages. First, to identify relevant posts and communities across both social media platforms, we constructed search queries using key terms, such as "domestic violence", "domestic abuse", "home violence", and "home abuse", drawing on prior literature [3]. Second, based on the search results and a systematic review of community descriptions and representative posts, three DV researchers independently evaluated and collectively selected the most active and relevant public communities. The full list of subreddits and Facebook groups can be found in Table 1. Third, we collected data from Facebook using NCapture and from the selected subreddits using a public API (i.e., PRAW[1]). Finally, we constructed a temporally bounded dataset centered on March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic [42]. The data covered the period from February 2012 to October 2020, with a one-week buffer around the focal date excluded to minimize transitional noise. To safeguard privacy, all personally identifiable metadata, such as usernames, profile links, and self-reported location data, was removed prior to analysis. The dataset was further preprocessed by removing duplicate entries and advertisements. Summary statistics of the final dataset are reported in Table 2.

3.3. Qualitative analysis

To characterize DV disclosure on social media, we employed an iterative, semi-open coding approach consisting of four stages. At each stage, an initial screening was conducted to remove posts that did not represent cases of self-disclosure [20,43]. Two coders, each with more than five years of research experience in social computing and a strong understanding of the DV literature, independently annotated the samples. They were blind to the study hypotheses during annotation, and any discrepancies or ambiguous cases were resolved through expert-led group consensus discussions.

1) Scheme creation. The initial schema was informed by prior studies (e.g., [8,20,21]) and drew on established categories of DV self-disclosure, such as abuse types, victim-perpetrator relationships, and victim demographic characteristics. In addition to these deductive categories, we randomly sampled 500 cases from the dataset for inductive analysis. Both coders participated in the initial development of the annotation schema, which provided shared grounding in the relevant constructs, and then applied those constructs while identifying emergent categories to enrich the schema.

2) Schema refinement. We conducted a second pilot with an additional 50 randomly selected cases, evenly distributed by platforms. The same two coders independently annotated these cases using the initial annotation schema while identifying any necessary new categories. The schema was further refined through a series of discussions and ultimately finalized with five categories of DV characteristics, including two newly identified categories: perpetrator demographic characteristics and types of support used.

3) Schema validation. Another set of 100 cases was randomly selected and balanced across the two platforms for manual annotation. Inter-rater reliability analysis of the independent coding by the same two coders indicated generally high agreement (i.e., 83~100%) across all DV characteristics, with Gwet's AC1 [44] values ranging from 66% to 100%. These results demonstrated sufficient reliability and thus provide support for the validity of the annotation schema.

4) Data annotation. For the formal data annotation, we randomly selected 320 self-disclosure cases balanced across platforms (Facebook vs. Reddit) and timeframes (pre- vs. post-pandemic), excluding any that had been used in earlier stages. The data sampling strategy prioritized analytical parity over proportional representation of the underlying data volume to support a robust, comparative investigation into the qualitative characteristics of DV self-disclosure.

Table 1
Publicly Accessible Facebook Groups and Subreddits Included in this Study.

Platform	Community Name
Facebook	Break The Silence Against Domestic Violence, National Domestic Violence Hotline, Stop DV, Stand Up Survivor, Domestic Violence Awareness, Domestic Violence Angels, and Domestic Violence Statistics.
Reddit	Domesticviolence, AbuseInterrupted, MMFB, traumatoolbox, feelgood, hardshipmates, and SuicideWatch.

Table 2
Summary Statistics of the Datasets.

Platform	Before	After	Total
Facebook	1,334	1,977	3,311
Reddit	45,124	63,909	109,033

3.4. Quantitative analysis

To examine the effects of anonymity and the pandemic on DV characteristics dimensions, we analyzed the annotated dataset by treating disclosure depth, breadth, and severity as dependent variables, and anonymity (high vs. low) and pandemic declaration (before vs. after) as independent variables.

- Depth was operationalized as the number of disclosed characteristics in the victim demographic category (i.e., gender, age, and group size; range: 0–3).
- Breadth was defined as the number of disclosed DV categories (i.e., victim demographic characteristics, perpetrator demographic characteristics, victim-perpetrator relationships, abuse types, and types of support used; range: 0–5).
- Severity was measured as the number of disclosed abuse types (e.g., threat, emotional/verbal abuse, physical assault; range: 0–10).

Additionally, we incorporated Google Trends search popularity as a covariate to analyze the effects of anonymity and pandemic on the three DV self-disclosure variables. Google Trends search popularity served as a surrogate of temporal variation in broader public attention to DV, following previous studies on intimate partner violence dynamics and abuse-related concern [45,46]. We used the same search terms as our primary social media data collection (see Section 3.2), aligned the search duration and granularity accordingly, and set the geographical parameter to 'worldwide'.

4. Results

The descriptive statistics for the DV dimensions are reported in Table 3, and the ANCOVA results are in Table 4. The test results for homogeneity of regression slopes (see Appendix A) show that all covariate-by-variable interactions were non-significant ($p > .05$) across the three dependent variables, indicating that the assumption was met.

[1] https://praw.readthedocs.io/en/stable/

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics (mean(std)) of DV Characteristics Dimensions.

Anonymity	Pandemic	Depth	Breadth	Severity
Low	Before	2.01 (0.83)	3.95 (0.74)	1.29 (0.90)
	After	2.20 (0.66)	3.85 (0.71)	1.45 (1.04)
	Overall	2.11 (0.76)	3.90 (0.73)	1.37 (0.98)
High	Before	2.33 (0.76)	4.41 (0.63)	1.53 (1.18)
	After	2.46 (0.65)	4.61 (0.65)	2.05 (1.22)
	Overall	2.39 (0.71)	4.51 (0.64)	1.79 (1.23)

Table 4
ANCOVA Results on DV Characteristics Dimensions.

Independent Variables	Depth		Breadth		Severity	
	F-value	Sig.	F-value	Sig.	F-value	Sig.
Anonymity	11.784	0.001**	61.502	0.000***	10.946	0.001**
Pandemic	3.126	0.078†	0.812	0.368	5.412	0.021*
Anonymity*Pandemic	0.018	0.893	2.471	0.117	3.214	0.074†
Search popularity (Covariate)	6.902	0.009**	5.338	0.022*	7.845	0.006**

[a]:mean difference; ***: $p < 0.001$; **: $p < 0.01$; *: $p < 0.05$; †: $p < 0.1$

The results show significant effects of anonymity on disclosure depth, breadth, and severity after controlling for search popularity. Specifically, anonymity positively affects depth ($p < .01$), breadth ($p < .001$), and severity ($p < .01$). As shown in Table 3, the disclosure depth for high-anonymity (mean = 2.39, std = 0.71) is greater than that for the low-anonymity counterpart (mean = 2.11, std = 0.76), indicating that more demographic categories of DV victims are disclosed on the high-anonymity platform. In addition, self-disclosure breadth for high-anonymity (mean = 4.51, std = 0.64) significantly exceeds that for the low-anonymity counterpart (mean = 3.90, std = 0.73), suggesting that users disclose a wider range of abusive experiences when the anonymity level is higher. Furthermore, high-anonymity (mean = 1.79, std = 1.23) exhibits greater severity than low-anonymity (mean = 1.37, std = 0.98), indicating that levels of anonymity are associated with the disclosure of more severe DV experience. Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 are supported.

The results also show that the pandemic has a significant main effect on severity ($p < .05$), a marginally significant effect on disclosure depth ($p < .10$), and no significant effect on disclosure breadth ($p > .10$) after controlling for search popularity. The severity of disclosed victimization experiences is increased after declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic (mean = 1.75, std = 1.17) compared to the pre-pandemic period (mean = 1.41, std = 1.05). Similarly, disclosure depth is slightly greater for the after-pandemic declaration (mean = 2.33, std = 0.67) than the pre-pandemic period (mean = 2 .17, std = 0.81), indicating that more victim demographic categories are disclosed following the pandemic declaration. However, disclosure breadth does not differ meaningfully between the two periods. These findings suggest that the pandemic is associated with a significant increase in abuse severity and a marginal increase in the depth of DV experience disclosed on social media, yet it has no influence on the breadth of disclosed abusive experiences. Accordingly, H6 is supported, H5 receives weak support, and H4 is not supported.

5. Discussion

5.1. Research contributions

Research on DV through social media contributes to medical informatics by transforming survivors' online disclosures into valuable information for DV understanding, risk identification, surveillance, and intervention design. It also helps uncover meaningful abuse-related signals that might otherwise remain hidden in unstructured data. This research contributes to the DV literature by developing a structured characterization of disclosure content along three high-level dimensions: depth, breadth, and severity. We further operationalize these dimensions and examine how platform anonymity and the pandemic are associated with the DV dimensions via the lens of social media disclosures. The findings suggest that higher levels of platform anonymity are consistently associated with greater depth, breadth, and severity of disclosure, whereas the effects of the pandemic are less consistent across these dimensions. The findings indicate that the platform anonymity reduces users' concerns about the social stigma associated with DV victimization, thereby encouraging them to share their DV experiences, consistent with prior work on identity construction on social media [47]. In addition, the pandemic is positively associated with the severity and depth of DV disclosure, a pattern that may reflect broader shifts in negative online expressions during the COVID-19 period [48]. These insights into the pandemic's effects on the dimensions of social media DV disclosure contribute to our understanding of how disclosure behavior changes over time.

5.2. Research and practical implications

This study has implications for DV research, professionals, social media communities, and victims. For DV research, this study demonstrates that social media is a promising ground for understanding DV victimization experience. Education is essential for DV prevention, particularly in helping policymakers, healthcare providers, and counselors understand how DV discourse on social media evolves over time [49]. Our findings further suggest that training these professionals to engage with social media may help them connect more effectively with victims and provide timely emotional and informational support. By fostering greater awareness of the diverse ways victimization is experienced, social media communities may be better positioned to facilitate members in providing targeted support to DV victims and create a safer and more responsive online environment for disclosure and help-seeking.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study is subject to several limitations, which suggest avenues for future research. First, while social media disclosures are rich in detail, their veracity and reliability cannot be independently verified. Future research could address this limitation by triangulating social media data with other sources, such as interviews and institutional records. Second, although this study examines the three key dimensions of DV disclosures, future research may develop more theoretically grounded measures to better represent the complexity across these dimensions. Third, due to the unavailability of user location data, our pandemic measures do not capture regional nuances in timing and responses. Similarly, differences attributed to anonymity may also reflect broader platform-specific variables, including their varying social norms and moderation practices. To address these limitations, future research may leverage geolocation inference and external data sources to more accurately control for these confounding influences. Finally, future studies may use large language models to scale DV data annotation with proper validation and human oversight.

6. Research data for this article

The raw data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to their sensitive nature. The data are available upon reasonable request, subject to proper approval and compliance with ethical and privacy restrictions.

Ethics statement

In this study, data scraping was limited to public user accounts and groups to comply with the platform's privacy policy. The study procedure was deemed not to meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kanlun Wang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Abdulrahman Aldkheel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Lina Zhou:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Homogeneity of Regression Slopes Test Results for the ANCOVA Model

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijmedinf.2026.106508.

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