



Alternative Framing of Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women on Weibo

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Abstract. Weibo is a very popular social media platform in China. Many people use Weibo to report social events and make their voices heard. The current study presents empirical evidence of how social media users in China frame sexual and domestic violence. Through content analysis over nearly 100 trending posts that are related to sexual violence or domestic violence, I found that those incidents were less framed directly as sexual or domestic violence case. While the explanation behind such alternative framing is unknown in the current study, future studies should investigate the motivations based on the preliminary results and discussion of this study. Other potential research directions include looking at the consequences of the alternative framing for sexual and domestic violence in the context of China.

Keywords: sexual violence · domestic violence · framing theory · social media · content analysis

1 Introduction

1.1 Violence Against Women

Violence against women is a public health and human rights issue that has been of great concern around the world. The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” The WHO classifies violence against women into two types: intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence. Intimate partner violence refers to “physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and controlling behaviors by an intimate partner” [1]. In the Chinese context, the word that people are more familiar with and often use is domestic violence rather than IPV, so in this study, domestic violence will be used to refer to IPV. Sexual violence is “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching and other non-contact forms” [2].

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Violence against women reinforces gender hierarchies and power imbalances between women and men within families and communities. On 16 February 2022, The Lancet published the largest and most comprehensive study [3] to date on the grim picture of women's exposure to intimate partner violence around the world. Data show that 27% of women aged 15–49 globally have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime, and 13% of these women (492 million) have experienced such violence once in the past year. These findings suggest that intimate partner violence against women has become a global epidemic. Specifically, males' use of violence against intimate female partners is widespread across the Asia-Pacific region. According to a multi-country quantitative study on men and violence in Asia and the Pacific, 30–57 percent of ever-partnered men reported having perpetrated physical and sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime [4].

1.2 Traditional Media and Social Media Framing

In China, violence against women has been underestimated. From the perspective of traditional Chinese society, the term “sexual assault” is considered taboo, a sensitive issue that could affect social stability [5]. In modern China, the family is regarded as the basic cell of social organization and monogamous marriage is practiced. Therefore, the government controls any sexual relations that may threaten the family, since threats to family stability can also lead to social unrest [6]. In Chinese mass media ecosystem, such as newspaper, TV, radio, etc., the content of violence usually flows from top to bottom, which means the information is filtered and modified by the heads of government agencies before it is passed on to the people, and readers can only be the receivers of information [7]. Journalists' control of content prevents readers from receiving authentic and original information at first hand. Meanwhile, Chinese mass media usually serve as a tool to build political trust of citizens [8].

As the mainstream media is usually influenced by the government, a lot of content is positive social news that glorify the political regime and the status quo, instead of sensitive social issues regarding sex that may stir up social controversies. At this point, framing analysis plays an important role in the content control of news. The frame analysis is derived from literature in sociology [9] and communication [10]. A frame is an ideological and interpretative framework that allows journalists to report on topics or allows the media to report on specific events, organizations, persons, or institutions that have positive or negative properties [11]. Framing theory explains that the way information is presented about a particular problem affects the way that problem is understood [12]. Moreover, the frame is also regarded as the basic “central idea” to understand and describe an event, which helps people better understand the meaning and purpose of news [13].

Different from traditional media, social media provides a virtual space where the public can have a free and open dialogue. More frequent social media use is also associated with more participation in a broader public discourse [14]. The #MeToo movement is a collective social movement against sexual violence that has been taking place since 2017. #MeToo is a typical movement that demonstrates the efficacy of communication of social media. The hashtag #MeToo originated in the United States and almost went viral on social media in many countries. “Sexual abuse has been traditionally buried due

to the fear of shame, retribution, and retaliation [15]. The viral spread of the #MeToo movement on Twitter has allowed more women to speak bravely about the sexual violence they have suffered. However, in China, Weibo, a social media platform similar to Twitter, is less studied on violence against women. Many people in China use Weibo to report certain social events and make their voices heard. Therefore, in the current study, I would like to explore the attitudes toward violence against women in China's social media through the frequency of using the frame of sexual violence and domestic violence on Weibo. In addition, I want to explore the specific characteristics and attributes of Weibo posts that are about the incidents of violence against women.

Based on the review, my research questions are written as follow:

RQ1a: Is “sexual and/or domestic violence” used as frame in posts that are actually related to sexual and/or domestic violence?

RQ1b: What are the common alternative frames in the posts at the absence of “sexual and/or domestic violence”?

RQ1c: Is there a difference between the frame of violence against women in hashtags and posts?

RQ2a: What are the conflicting parties' relationships?

RQ2b: Who is more likely to act as the event initiator? Man or woman?

2 Material and Methods

2.1 Sample

The data are sampled from Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website. Weibo was launched by Sina Corporation on 14 August 2009; it is one of the biggest social media platforms in China [16]. In September 2022, Weibo Corporation reported having 584 million monthly active users [17]. Many users have used Weibo as a platform to speak out and report social issues they care about, such as the amendment of rape laws and women's rights [18]. Based on preliminary research on news and posts on sexual and domestic violence, I have compiled a list of words related to violence in heterosexual intimate relations (see Table 1) and organized these terms on the Weibo search page to get the data. There are filters such as “Trending” “Nearby” “Recent” and “Entertainment”, I choose the trending filter in that I want to collect the popular posts with a high level of interaction rate, which means the trending filters helps me find influential posts that attract people's attention and potentially affect their perception. In total, 97 posts were collected as feasible sample for in-depth analysis and coding in this study. The time range of those posts is from Jan 2021 to Aug 2022.

2.2 Coding

The coding book considers two levels of information, one is text level, which focuses on the content text of the post; another level is hashtag level, which focuses on analyzing the information of the hashtag. In general, hashtag enables the user to quickly join a discussion and read posts written by other users and allows users to get their posts recognized and reach a larger audience [19]. Not every post has a hashtag. The coding book contains variables that considered the basic data of the posts, which is listed in Table 2.

Table 1. Words List for Weibo Search (Chinese & English)

Original Chinese Character (Pinyin)	English translation
<i>chongtu</i>	Conflict
<i>maodun</i>	Disagreement
<i>baoli</i>	Violence
<i>ouda</i>	Punch
<i>ruma</i>	Abuse
<i>zhengchao</i>	Quarrel
<i>tuisang</i>	Push
<i>dajia</i>	Fight
<i>baoda</i>	Beat
<i>shahai</i>	Kill
<i>qinfan</i>	Assault
<i>jiufen</i>	Dispute
<i>saorao</i>	Harass

3 Findings

Overall, at the text level, half of the original posts involving sexual violence would not adopt sexual violence framing (50%); at the hashtag level, sexual violence framing (29%) is even less prevalent. Meanwhile, among the total of 31 hashtags involving sexual violence, only nine hashtags have sexual violence framing.

In general, acquaintances are more likely to cause conflict (59%) than strangers (28%). The conflict between male and female strangers was the most frequent type of relationships that encounters conflicts (28%). Married couple is a relationship that encounters conflicts the second frequent (20%). Romantic partners (13%) and colleagues (10%) are the less frequent. Family members but not couples (3%) and acquaintances (9%) are the least frequent relationship that encounters conflicts and violence.

In all conflict events, male (76%) is more likely to take the role of initiator in the conflicts than female (8%). In other words, men are more likely to cause conflict with women. The initiator of the rest posts (16%) cannot be determined.

Among all the posts without sexual violence framing but actually involving sexual violence, “harassment” (61%) is the framing term that is most frequently used to describe the issue of violence. Other terms, for example, “assault” (3%), is much less frequently used.

Table 2. Coding Book

Text level				
Main Category	Explanation	Sub-category Label	Code	
Account type	The identity of the author of the post	Traditional News Media	1	
		Digital News Media	2	
		Self-Media	3	
		Government	4	
		Individuals	5	
		Others	6	
Verification	Weibo official verified account that has more fans and certain attributes	yes	1	
		no	0	
Relationship	The relationship between the men-women parties in the conflict	Acquaintance	Married couple (still in marriage)	1
			Family members but not couple (relatives)	2
			Divorced couple	3
			Romantic partners (not married)	4

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

			Colleagues	5
			Other Acquaintance	6
		Strangers		7
		Unknown		8
Initiator	The gender who initiates the violence	Man		1
		Woman		2
		Unknown		3
Involvement of Sexual Violence	Whether sexual violence happened in the conflict	Yes		1
		No		0
Framing as Sexual Violence	Whether the post's text frame the issue as sexual violence	Yes		1
		No		0
Progress	The progress of the conflicts mentioned in the posts	In progress		1
		Not mention		2
		Results		3
Involvement of Domestic Violence	Whether domestic violence happened in the conflict	Yes		1
		No		0
Framing as Domestic	Whether the post's text frame	Yes		1

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Violence	the issue as domestic violence	No	0
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Hashtag Level

Involvement of Sexual Violence	Whether sexual violence happened in the conflict	Yes	1
		No	0
Framing as Sexual Violence	Whether the post's hashtag frames the issue as sexual violence	Yes	1
		No	0
Involvement of Domestic Violence	Whether domestic violence happened in the conflict	Yes	1
		No	0
Framing as Domestic Violence	Whether the post's hashtag frame the issue as domestic violence	Yes	1
		No	0

Incidents of domestic violence are rarely framed as domestic violence. Statistically, only 1 out of 20 posts containing a domestic violence incident was clearly framed as domestic violence.

Among all the 18 posts that both involve domestic violence and have a hashtag, only 3 of them are clearly framed the issue as domestic violence (17%). Instead, the rest of the hashtags frequently use “punch” (72%) to replace the framing of “domestic violence” (17%).

Among all the posts that included the issue of sexual violence, strangers committed the most frequently (39%), followed by co-workers (19%), other acquaintances (17%), unknown (14%), romantic partners (6%) and married couples (6%).

4 Discussion

The present study aims to investigate the framing attributes of sexual violence and domestic violence toward women in China's social media, such as Weibo. To be more specific, I collected 97 posts involving sexual violence or domestic violence incidents and analyzed their attribution and framing regarding gender dynamics.

According to findings, only half of the original posts that involve sexual violence report the sexual violence framing. The likely reason is Weibo's sensitive censorship. At any given time, there are thousands of messages spreading on Weibo. To avoid the potential threat that netizens' freedom of expression poses to the credibility of the central government, the central government controls the posts on Weibo through rigid censorship, thereby controlling the ferment of online opinion [20]. One crucial way to implement online censorship is to create a "blacklist" of words; when users post content containing these words, filtering mechanisms respond with warnings, deletions, and viewing restrictions [21]. Social media in China is mainly restricted to sensitive words, including political criticism, violence, and pornography [22].

According to the input experiments on censorship system in China conducted by Ye and Zhao [22], sensitive words include two main categories: "(1) words explicitly prohibited by the authorities, such as obscene words, names of controversial political figures, political events, etc.; and (2) words not promoted by the authorities. For example, 'democracy' and 'party congress' are common neutral words, but the use of these words may be recorded by the censorship system and handed over to human censors for a second manual check to determine if there is an offending statement." Thus, sexual violence is likely to be one of the sensitive words that Weibo has "blacklisted," as it is likely to be censored as a neutral word not promoted by authorities. In order to avoid having their posts officially suspended by Weibo, Weibo users may have actively avoided using sexual violence directly, resulting in half of the original posts that involved sexual violence reporting the sexual violence framing.

The present study found that there are some words frequently used to frame sexual violence and domestic violence, such as "harassment" and "punch." To be more specific, instead of directly framing sexual and domestic violence as they are in the text, people are more likely to use another framing. Possible explanations are that these words may be used to avoid sensitive word choices on Weibo, or they may be used to obscure and underestimate the seriousness of the incident.

On the one hand, because sexual violence and domestic violence are likely to be defined as sensitive words in Weibo's censorship system, people tend to choose other words to avoid having their posts deleted or "blacklisted" by Weibo officials. In this way, their posts will not be held accountable or deleted by Weibo officials, thus ensuring the dissemination of their content and safety of their accounts. On the other hand, using other terms related to sexual and domestic violence instead of directly using sexual and domestic violence framing is an act that obscures the seriousness of the incident and deliberately diverts the public focus.

In describing sexual violence, media reports are replete with euphemisms, sympathetic statements about the perpetrators, and confusing language [23]. Euphemisms are "expressions used in place of words or phrases that otherwise might be considered harsh or unpleasant" [24]. For example, domestic violence was almost ignored, with the fact

that “wife beating” and “husband punching” were prominent in many posts’ titles; sexual violence was replaced by “harassment” and “assault,” etc.

In addition to finding the framing pattern of sexual violence and domestic violence in Weibo, the present study also found that the probability of conflicts between men and women is associated with the intimacy of the relationship. The probability of having conflicts between acquaintances is twice that of strangers, and among all types of acquaintance relationships, the probability of having conflicts is as follows: married couple, romantic partners, colleagues, other acquaintances, and relatives. Therefore, from the point of view of the conflict alone, acquaintance’s relationship between victim and perpetrator are more likely to have discordant sounds than stranger’s relationship.

However, when analyzing the various types of relationships the victim had with the perpetrator, the category of the stranger was identified as having a greater probability of re-offending. My findings indicate that the risk of acquaintance is a substantially greater risk category than that was previously considered. According to findings, strangers were more likely to commit sexual violence, followed by acquaintances such as co-workers and students and teachers. The results show that more intimate relationships, such as married couples, romantic partners, divorced couples, and relatives, are less likely to experience sexual violence. Sexual violence from strangers is the result of an attempted sexual assault that escalates into violent battering and assault.

Weibo hashtag has two notable features: engagement and visibility of the topic. First, hashtag as an index of information increases people’s engagement with the topic. Internet users interested in a hashtag’s topic can click on the hashtag to see all the discussions by people worldwide. Putting a hashtag on their own post is also a way to actively participate in the discussion. The second feature is to increase the visibility of the topic. Weibo’s hot search page displays a list of the most popular hashtags in real time, providing the easiest way for people to access these popular discussion topics. As long as a post includes a hashtag, it increases the visibility of the topic and can be seen by more people. In the present study, sexual violence framing was found less in the hashtag compared to the text. However, domestic violence was found to have more framing at the hashtag level than that at the text level. A possible explanation is that sexual violence is a sensitive word in the Weibo censorship system, and the Weibo official limited its engagement and exposure. Domestic violence, on the other hand, and its engagement and exposure were limited by the Weibo official. Domestic violence, on the other hand, is not such a sensitive word, so it is free to be discussed and trended on the hot searched page. In general, domestic violence has more exposure in terms of hashtags, while sexual violence keeps silent.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, the current study presents empirical evidence of how social media users in China frame sexual and domestic violence. Through content analysis over nearly 100 trending posts that are related to sexual violence or domestic violence, I found that those incidents were less framed directly as sexual or domestic violence case. While the explanation behind such alternative framing is unknown in the current study, future studies should investigate the motivations based on the preliminary results and discussion

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