Linguistic analysis of online domestic violence testimonies in the context of COVID-19

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Abstract

Worldwide, an increase in cases and severity of domestic violence (DV) has been reported as a result of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As one’s language can provide insight in one’s mental health, this study analyzed word use in a DV online support group, aiming to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on DV victims. Words reflecting social support and leisure activities were investigated as protective factors against linguistic indicators of depression. 5856 posts were collected from the r/domesticviolence subreddit and two neutral comparison subreddits (r/changemyview & r/femalefashionadvice). In the DV support group, the average number of daily posts increased significantly by 22% from pre-pandemic to mid-pandemic. Confirmatory analysis was conducted following a registered pre-analysis plan. DV victims used significantly more linguistic indicators of depression than individuals in the comparison groups. These linguistic indicators did not change with the onset of COVID-19. The use of negative emotion words was negatively related to the use of social support words (Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient [rho] = -.110) and words referring to leisure activities (rho = -.137). Pre-occupation with COVID-19 was associated with the use of negative emotion words (rho = .148). We conclude that language of DV victims is characterized by indicators of depression and this characteristic is stable over time. Concerns with COVID-19 could contribute to negative emotions, whereas social support and leisure activities could function to some degree as protective factors. A potential weakness of this study could be the limited ability of word count methods to assess the impact of stressors such as COVID-19. Future studies could make use of natural language processing and other advanced methods of linguistic analysis to learn about the mental health of DV victims.

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