

**Social Media Engagement of Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender**

Melissa R. Olson

Marymount California University

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Dr. Emma Ogley-Oliver

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study involved understanding the use of deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender (DARVO) in online social media discussions about domestic violence (DV). One scholarly peer reviewed article that included social media comments about a DV case was qualitatively analyzed to assess the use of DARVO among social media commenters.

Specifically, a qualitative content analysis (QCA) uncovered that some social media commenters engaged in DARVO to discuss a specific DV case. These social media commenters may have used DARVO to discuss a specific DV case because they are not directly impacted. Limitations of this descriptive study included the inability to make casual claims and associative claims due to the fact that data were not collected using an experimental or correlational study, respectively.

A future direction for this line of research may include reassessing the halo effect that protects celebrities from being convicted of a crime or shamed. Another future direction is to expand the understanding of DARVO online as it relates to disinhibition. And a third future direction is to examine the social learning theory with youth and their social media usage, cyberbullying, and engagement in DARVO online.

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### **Define Domestic Violence (DV)**

Domestic violence is prevalent in today's society and has become a complex issue, as it was commonly thought to be physical abuse. This behavior is a pattern used by people who abuse their intimate partners, this includes not only physical abuse, but also sexual, and emotional abuse (Danis, 2003). In the criminal justice system, it is viewed as "any incident of threatening behavior, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been an intimate partner or family member, regardless of gender or sexuality and is one of the most common forms of inter-personal violence internationally" (Howard, M., Trevillion, K., Khalifeh, H., Woodall, A., Agnew-Davies, R., & Feder, G., 2009, p.881).

### **Theories of Domestic Violence**

There are many motives of why domestic violence occurs. "According to mainstream feminist theories, a batterers power motive and their use of corrosion and violence originates primarily from the sociocultural history of patriarchy and the use of gender power to mainstream dominance/control over their intimate partner and keep them oppressed" (Wagers, 2015, p. 234). There is a theory found in the Duluth Model that incorporates "the use of various emotional, verbal, and physical abuse tactics motivated by the need to control another person" (Wagers, 2015, p. 232). There is also the theory of socioeconomics, in particularly "the most important risk factor for domestic violence was alcoholism followed by literacy status, and majority of the abused women were dependent on their husbands for money, material assets, and expenditure" (Srivastava, K., Gour, N., Bansal, M., Mishra, A., Patne, K., & Tiwari, R., 2014, p.21).

## **Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim, and Offender**

In instances of deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender (DARVO), “women have disproportionately experienced DARVO” (Harsey, J., Zurbriggen, L., & Freyd, J., 2017).

DARVO is a tactic found in intimate partner violence. This tactic is when the perpetrator “uses to deny their harmful actions, attack the victim’s credibility, and redirect blame by assuming the role of the victim to portray the victim as the actual offender” (Harsey, S. & Freyd, J., 2020).

## **Method**

### **Sample**

One empirical scholarly peer reviewed article (SPRA) was selected to be part of this study (Whiting, Dansby Olufowote, Cravens-Pickens, & Banford Witting, 2019). The authors of the SPRA are employed at Brigham Young University, Texas Tech University, and Abilene Christian University. The authors have training in Marriage and Family Therapy and conduct research to understand the dynamics of intimate partner relationships.

### **Procedures**

One empirical SPRA about online social media comments was selected using a convenience sampling technique to conduct a qualitative content analysis (QCA). The QCA procedure proposed by Roller (2019) was used to analyze the results presented by Whiting and colleagues (2019). QCA provided a process to understand themes related to the phenomena known as Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO) that was described by Harsey, Zurbriggen, and Freyd (2017) and Harsey and Freyd (2020). Approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not needed for the study because data were not collected directly from human participants and instead the data represent archival data.

## Measures

DARVO was employed as a measure to guide the QCA. Specifically, DARVO was used to capture three unique types of response to confrontation. The first element of DARVO involves denial of any wrongdoing in a confrontation, the second element involves attacking the accuser, and the third element involves framing the offender as the victim (Harsey, Zurbriggen, & Freyd, 2017). DARVO was used to organize previously analyzed data from online social media commenter responses that were listed in the empirical SPRA written by Whiting and colleagues and published in 2019.

## Results

### DENY

The theme of deny involves denial of any wrongdoing in a confrontation. There are many quotes that help represent the deny theme. The first quote is “15 years of marriage and not one record of abuse. Now all of a sudden, he beats her” (Whiting, Dansby Olufowote, Cravens-Pickens, & Banford Witting, 2019, p. 85). A second quote is “I don’t believe for one second, and domestic violence, that’s a load of crap” (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 87).

### ATTACK

The theme of attack involves attacking the accuser. One quote that spoke to attack was “...she’s spinning a story because she wants money” (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 87). Another quote that spoke to attack involved social media commenters who called Amber Heard “petty...a liar...a nut job...psychotic...controlling...cold-hearted” (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 85).

### REVERSE VICTIM OFFENDER

The theme called reverse victim offender involves framing the offender as the victim. One quote that spoke to reverse victim offender was, “He has been suffering from alcoholism

more so recently than ever ...” (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 85). Another quote that spoke to reverse victim offender was “For all anyone knows, she and one of her lovers planned this whole thing to get rich/richerquick” (Whiting et al., 2019, p. 88).

### **Discussion**

A qualitative content analysis of the results presented by Whiting, Dansby Olufowote, Cravens-Pickens, and Banford Witting (2019) revealed that some social media commenters engaged in DARVO when publicly reflecting on the domestic violence case between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. Some social media commenters engaged in DARVO as a means to relieve anxiety that they felt when reading about DV. We deny as a means to relieve anxiety which Sappenfield (1965), explains this is a result in re-repression of the impulse. Also further explained “anxiety is frequently said to be an undifferentiated tension state involving no such limited behavioral expectations, so that, under the influence of anxiety, an individual will perceive any and all behavioral possibilities as equally probable or improbable methods for tension reduction” (Sappenfield, 1956, p. 266)

### **Limitations**

There are many limitations with this descriptive study about social media commenters who engage in DARVO. Specifically, descriptive data are the most basic form of data, which limits the ability to report the exact relationship between social media commenters and DARVO. In addition, descriptive studies limit the ability to make causal claims due to the lack of experimental design (Morling, 2021).

### **Future Directions**

There are many opportunities for future research to explore DARVO, social media, and domestic violence. One example of future research could expand the understanding of DARVO online as it relates to disinhibition. Specifically, Lowry and colleagues (2016), explored

cyberbullying which speaks to phenomenon of social media commentary about domestic violence case of Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. An experiment to understand to influence of space (in-person or social media) and DARVO. Another example of future research could expand knowledge about children and their use of social media, mentioned by Barlett and colleagues (2018), the less parents are aware of their child's online activities, the more likely the child is to cyberbully others. In another study, Barlett and colleagues (2018) suggested that until individuals learn the negative consequences of using the Internet to harm others, it is likely that cyberbullying will continue to be an issue that requires empirical attention.

A third example of future research could involve reassessing the halo effect that may have once protected celebrities such Johnny Depp from being convicted of illegal activities or from being shamed about domestic violence. Johnson & Vidulich (1956), study of correlation between trait ratings is considered an error of judgment and the rater has a generally favorable or unfavorable attitude toward each individual that influences his ratings of the individual on each trait. The rater has cast a halo around his subject, he is dazzled by its radiance that he cannot differentiate the subject's separate qualities. If the rater judged the individuals on each trait separately and analytically, as requested, the traits would not be correlated.

Further research conducted may lead to better understand the relationship between the variables as this will increase the external validity to understand a larger population by further examining the social learning theory in youth and bullying, as mentioned by Lowry and colleagues (2016), in particularly kids engaging in DARVO online suggesting that we are motivated by people we look up to. In particular, research specifically into bullying as is also a learned behavior. A quote that spoke to bullying is "youths with repeated victimization who accepted the bully-victim label

and did report a power disadvantage struggled more with emotional distress and withdrawal”  
(Sharkey, et al., 2015, p. 100).



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