

**Societal Acceptance of Abuse Through Controlling and Coercive Behaviour in Intimate  
Partner Relationships in Male and Female Victims**

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### Abstract

This research investigates societal perceptions of controlling and coercive behaviour in heterosexual intimate partner relationships, with a focus on gender-based disparities. Homogenous peer group composition was hypothesised to predict higher acceptance of controlling and coercive behaviour. Higher ambivalent sexist beliefs toward men and women, higher perceived ambivalent sexist beliefs of participants' peers, and more personal experiences with emotional abuse and harassment were also hypothesised to predict higher acceptance of coercive control. A quantitative survey with two conditions, male-to-female perpetrated abuse, and female-to-male perpetrated abuse, was administered to 176 participants. Results showed higher acceptance rates for female-perpetrated controlling and coercive behaviour on male victims than for male-perpetrated controlling and coercive behaviour on female victims. Exploratory analyses investigated generational differences and showed generally lower acceptance rates of coercive control among older participants. There were significant correlations between higher acceptance rates, more personal experiences with abuse, higher sexism toward men and lower peer group sexism toward women, but they did not significantly predict acceptability. Peer group composition, personal and peer group sexism did not predict acceptance rates. This study highlights the gender biases in the perceptions of intimate partner violence, emphasising a normalisation of male victimisation and calling for further research and education in the domain of controlling and coercive behaviour.

*Keywords.* Controlling and coercive behaviour, Peer group influence, Ambivalent sexism

## **Societal Acceptance of Abuse Through Controlling and Coercive Behaviour in Intimate Partner Relationships in Male and Female Victims**

Abuse in intimate partner relationships can come in many forms, one of the most seldomly prosecuted forms being controlling and coercive behaviour (McGorrery & McMahon, 2021). Controlling or coercive behaviour is defined by the premise that physical violence is not a requirement for abuse in intimate partner relationships. It is often also called coercive control and highlights the emotional abuse, intimidation, and isolation, which is often accompanied by physical violence (Lehmann et al., 2012). This form of domestic abuse is meant to control, isolate, or frighten victims with an overarching theme of displaying power and dominance over the other person (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023; Kriminologische Zentralstelle e.V., 2024). Abusers often use controlling and coercive behaviour as a tool in intimate partner relationships to cause their partners to feel fear, alarm, or distress (Crown Prosecution Service, 2015).

There are many differing conceptualisations of coercive control, due to the ongoing debate about the roots of domestic abuse (Walby & Towers, 2018). The main differentiator is the gendered motivation of the perpetrators; hence this study focuses on the impact of gender on perceptions of coercive control. Walby and Towers (2018) argued that most domestic violence is committed by men toward their female partners, however, the more serious and frequent the crimes are, the stronger the gender asymmetry is. In the UK, controlling and coercive behaviour can be prosecuted and tried with a maximum penalty of imprisonment of five years since the Serious Crime Act in 2015. This act was developed with the knowledge of the asymmetrical gender distribution; however, the law itself is constructed gender neutrally (McMahon & McGorrery, 2016).

The Crown Prosecution Service (2015) defines coercive behaviour as “acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish or frighten

the victim” and characterises controlling behaviour as “acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour”. These definitions can, but do not necessarily have to, include other types of abuse, namely sexual or physical abuse. Furthermore, coercion and control are commonly manifested through economic abuse, technology-facilitated abuse, harassment, or stalking (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). Despite its detrimental effects on victims, such as sleep problems, depression, fear, anxiety, panic attacks, low self-esteem and low self-confidence, trust issues, and other lasting relationship issues, as well as isolation from friends and family (Dempsey, 2013; Powney and Graham-Kevan, 2022), controlling and coercive behaviour is not considered a legal offence in many countries, including the Netherlands and Germany.

### **Male vs. Female Victims of Controlling and Coercive Behaviour**

Reported offenders of controlling and coercive behaviour are primarily heterosexual males, which is likely nurtured by societal gender inequality structures and norms supporting male dominance (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018), making men more likely to offend. Different studies in the US and the UK found that between 87% and 97% of coercive controlling violence was male-perpetrated (Johnson, 2006; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003). However, there is also speculation that due to gender stereotypes, female perpetrators often go unrecognised and are less frequently reported, as especially male victims tend to stay silent and often face secondary victimisation (Dempsey, 2013; Bates & Taylor, 2019). Overall, finding accurate numbers on the prevalence of controlling and coercive behaviour in intimate partner relationships is difficult, as cases of domestic violence are oftentimes not identified as such and hence generally underreported (Stark & Hester, 2019). This gap is accompanied by a general lack of understanding about the societal perceptions of female-perpetrated intimate

partner violence toward male victims, which also applies to coercive control (Bates & Weare, 2020).

When comparing the societal perceptions of the victims depending on gender, it becomes apparent that the effects of intimate partner abuse on men are often trivialised and downplayed, leading to fewer resources for male victims (Powney & Graham-Kevan, 2022). This goes hand in hand with Bates and Taylor's (2019) findings, which showed that men are less likely to seek help due to stereotypes, labelling, and stigma surrounding intimate partner violence. Victims often report feeling embarrassment, self-blame, and shame: Their female partners are physically smaller and weaker, so they feel responsible for not being able to defend themselves (Bates & Taylor, 2019). On the other hand, the same societal factors that inhibit male reporting and support also support male offending.

Stark (2009) theorises that male perpetrators use coercive control as a tool to systemically oppress and control their female partners. According to this feminist theory, by coercing them to perform stereotypically female tasks and to subordinate them, male perpetrators aim to uphold patriarchal societal structures in which they possess a position of power and dominance. Stark's (2009) theory aligns with Dekeseredy and Schwartz's (2013) conceptualisation of societal structures of male dominance. According to them, men are socialised to utilise violence and abusive behaviour to "keep their female partners in place" (Dekeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). These systemic structures likely contribute to the high abuse rates of male-perpetrated abuse towards women, as well as to higher acceptability rates of violence towards women among men (Dekeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). This study will further explore some of the reasons why the crime might be perceived differently, among them are social perceptions of intimate partner abuse against men versus women.

### **Peer Group Influences and Sexism**

Social circles can have a profound impact on personal attitudes and beliefs. Especially during an individual's maturing years, peer influence is imperative for the development of sexist attitudes (Jenkins et al., 2022). Dekeseredy and Schwartz (1993) have found that especially in all-male peer groups, due to a phenomenon described as Male Peer Support, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse of dating partners are frequently normalised. In these homogeneous friendships, a narrow conception of masculinity is maintained, which is characterised by female exclusion, homophobia, conformity, group secrecy, and sexual objectification of women (Dekeseredy & Schwartz, 1993). However, they also mention in their research that it is unclear whether these attitudes are formed within the peer group or whether individuals with these beliefs seek out like-minded peers.

Male Peer Support Theory is built upon social learning theory and social support theory (Sinclair, 2002). The four key elements of social learning theory are imitation, definitions, differential associations, and differential reinforcement: Behaviour is modelled by role models and observed and imitated by peers (Sellers et al., 2005). This means that certain behaviours are encouraged within the group, while other behaviours are discouraged (Sinclair, 2002). Definitions within peer groups refer to attitudes and beliefs, whereas differential associations refer to the exposure to these attitudes and the lack of exposure to counter-attitudes (Sellers et al., 2005). Especially in homogenous male peer groups, these are often motivated by patriarchal ideologies, which are found to predict higher acceptability of female-oriented abuse (Sinclair, 2002). Lastly, differential reinforcement indicates the costs and rewards of certain behaviours and states that low-cost-high-reward actions are more likely to be engaged in (Sellers et al., 2005). This could be related to a need to uphold a certain status among their peers: For example, if their female partner wants to leave them, men fear being ridiculed by their male peers because they might seem unable to control her (Dekeseredy & Schwartz, 2013).

Jenkins et al. (2023) found that the more female friendships men have, the less likely they exhibit female-oriented sexism and sexual objectification of women, whereas all-male friendships are positively correlated to higher sexism toward women and sexual objectification of them. The same study also investigated sexist beliefs toward women within female friendships, however, there were no significant effects, which might be due to the generally overall lower sexist attitudes of women (Jenkins et al., 2023). The influence of female peer groups on women's sexism toward men and how these impact acceptance rates of controlling and coercive behaviour remain unclear as of now, as research examining the spread of negative attitudes toward men in female peer groups is relatively small, compared to their male counterparts.

A theory which aims to explain the spread of negative attitudes or sexism toward men is integrated threat theory (Stephan et al., 2000). According to this, large perceived value and belief differences, negative experiences with men, and anxiety about interactions with men are predictors of women's dislike toward men. Interactional theory combines differential association theory and control theory, postulating that delinquent peers instigate others to participate in delinquent behaviour and that simultaneously, delinquency-prone individuals choose peers with similar moral convictions (Seddig, 2014). Applying this theory to sexist attitudes, it is worth investigating if women who hold negative attitudes toward men are more likely to have female peers who share those attitudes. This is reinforced by research from Lönnqvist and Itkonen (2016), who found that individuals are more likely to befriend people with similar values and traits.

Sexism is a complex issue as the lives of men and women are intertwined, especially if they are in a heterosexual intimate partner relationship (Glick & Fiske, 2011). To measure sexism toward women, Glick and Fiske (2011) differentiated between two main forms of sexism: Hostile sexism towards women is characterised by negative attitudes, objectification,

intimidation, and male dominance, and benevolent sexism, which is characterised by positive stereotypes towards women, inspired by traditional gender roles which portray women as nurturing caretakers. If women fail to fulfil the traditional gender roles, benevolent sexism may transform into hostile sexism. Even though these concepts are based on patriarchal structures within society, men and women can possess hostile and benevolent sexist attitudes toward women (Chapleau et al., 2007). Overall, sexist beliefs toward women are transmitted to men and women culturally in equal parts, with men traditionally scoring higher on attitudes indicative of hostile sexism than women, while men's and women's endorsement of benevolent sexism varies between cultures (Chapleau et al., 2007).

To measure sexist attitudes toward men, Glick and Fiske adapted their theory on ambivalent sexism toward women. Ambivalent sexism toward men is based on intergroup relations theory, whereas men are seen as the more powerful out-group by women, which leads to resentment (Glick & Fiske, 1999). Hostile sexism is exemplified by "punching up" to protest patriarchal structures that suppress women, whereas benevolent sexism strengthens women's need to take care of men by justifying their higher status in society (Chapleau et al., 2007). There is less information on the effects of ambivalent sexism toward men on acceptance of controlling and coercive behaviour, however, as sexist attitudes toward men endorse a strict, traditional image of masculinity, this will likely impact acceptance rates toward male victims.

### **Study Purpose and Hypotheses**

Controlling and coercive behaviour and other forms of non-physical abuse are often minimised and overlooked. Despite the detrimental effects and escalating dynamics, is coercive control in most countries not a criminal offence, leading to a neglect of victims. In many cases of female perpetrators and male victims, the damaging consequences are downplayed, causing fewer victims to come forward due to a fear of facing stigma and



rejection. In cases of male perpetrators and female victims, this type of behaviour is often normalised due to power imbalances stereotypically presented in traditional heteronormative intimate partner relationships (Bishop & Bettinson, 2018). Hence, this research focused on investigating the differences in societal acceptance of abuse through controlling and coercive behaviour in male victims of female perpetrators and female victims of male perpetrators. To better understand the dynamics influencing societal acceptance, it was also investigated if participants' peer group composition, their perceptions of their peers' sexist beliefs, and their personal sexist beliefs have the same effect when assessing the acceptability of controlling and coercive behaviour toward a male victim by a female perpetrator as for a female victim by a male perpetrator. The hypotheses are:

H1: *Overall acceptance of controlling and coercive behaviour will be higher if the victim is male than if the victim is female.*

H2: *Homogeneous female peer groups will show higher acceptance rates for controlling and coercive behaviour toward male victims, whereas homogeneous male peer groups will show higher acceptance rates for controlling and coercive behaviour toward female victims.*

H3: *Higher ambivalent sexism toward men and women leads to higher acceptance rates of controlling and coercive behaviour, regardless of the sex of the perpetrator and victim.*

H4: *Higher perceived ambivalent sexism of one's peer group leads to higher acceptance rates of controlling and coercive behaviour, regardless of the sex of the perpetrator and victim.*

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This experimental study used two conditions (male victim and female perpetrator vs. female victim and male perpetrator) within a between-participant design with the gender of the victim and the offender of controlling and coercive behaviour in heterosexual intimate

partner relationships as the independent variable. The dependent variable was the acceptability of abuse through controlling and coercive behaviour in intimate partner relationships. The study included three independent variables: Peer group gender composition, personal ambivalent sexist beliefs, and perceived ambivalent sexist beliefs of one's peer group. To control for potential effects of personal experiences with abuse, effects of experiences with emotional abuse and harassment were also analysed.

### **Participants**

The participants were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling methods. Students from the University of Twente could receive points in SONA, a recruitment system used by the university where students can find studies to complete their mandatory test subject hours. Twenty participants (8.51%) received credits from SONA for their participation. The other participants were recruited via the researcher's personal connections and through the social network of the student activist group 'Amnesty UTwente'.

Initially, 235 people were recruited to take part, however, 57 dropped out from the study or declined consent (24.26%), resulting in a final sample of 178 participants. The survey was completed in German by 131 participants (73.6%), and by 47 participants in English (26.4%). Out of the 178 participants, 104 were female (58.43%), 70 were male (39.33%), two preferred not to say (1.12%) and one person was non-binary/non-conforming (0.56%). The mean age of participants was 31.75 years ( $SD = 14.34$ ), with a minimum age of 19 years and a maximum age of 74 years.

Most participants were German ( $n = 156$ ) with 87.64%. The rest of the sample was 2.81% Dutch ( $n = 5$ ), two participants were French (1.12%), two were Mexican, two Turkish, and two Romanian. Participants from other countries, namely Austria, Ireland, Lithuania, Tunisia, Ukraine, and the United States made up 3.93%. Two participants preferred not to indicate their nationality (1.12%). The highest percentage of participants, namely 34.83% ( $n$

= 62), had a high school degree, 23.6% had obtained a bachelor's degree ( $n = 42$ ), 15.17% had obtained a master's degree ( $n = 27$ ), 1.69% had obtained a doctoral degree and another 1.69% had completed a state exam ( $n = 3$ ). Other forms of higher academic education were obtained by 2.25%, such as a diploma ( $n = 3$ ) or an HBO Propedeuse ( $n = 1$ ). An apprenticeship, trade, technical, or vocational training was done by 16.85% ( $n = 30$ ). Seven participants preferred not to indicate their educational background (3.93%).

Out of the 178 participants, 85.39% were heterosexual ( $n = 152$ ), 8.99% were bisexual ( $n = 16$ ), 1.69% were homosexual ( $n = 3$ ), 1.69% identified as other, namely pansexual ( $n = 2$ ) and neptunic ( $n = 1$ ). Four participants preferred not to indicate their sexuality (2.25%). The participants were randomly distributed to the male victim and female victim conditions, resulting in an equal split, with each condition containing 89 participants (50%).

## **Materials**

The materials were provided in English and German.

### ***Peer Group Make-Up***

First, the participants received a question investigating the gender distributions in their peer group to address the potential influence of peer group makeup on acceptance rates. They were asked to indicate the composition of their friend group on a 7-point Likert scale, with the response options of 'entirely female', which was indicated by the lowest score of 1, 'mostly female with some male friends', 'mixed with a slight majority of female friends', 'mixed', 'mixed with a slight majority of male friends', 'mostly male with some female friends', and 'entirely male', which was represented by the highest score of 7.

### ***Measures of Sexism***

The participants were randomly allocated into two groups. The group that would later receive a case example with a female victim received a short form of the Ambivalent Sexism

Inventory, which measured sexist attitudes towards women along two scales, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism (Rollero et al., 2014). The original scale was developed by Glick and Fiske (1996), however, since the short version also showed good psychometric properties (Bendixen & Kennair, 2017), it was used to shorten the length and duration of the survey. The short scales were preferred because they measure the same underlying construct with fewer items, aiming to increase participant engagement and reduce attrition. To investigate participants' perceptions of their peer's sexist beliefs toward women, the short form of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory was adapted by adding prefixes such as "Most of my friends think/believe that" to the original items. This resulted in two measures of sexism, one capturing individual beliefs and the other capturing perceived beliefs about one's peers.

The Short Form Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI) and the adapted Peer Group Ambivalent Sexism Inventory each contained 12 items. The participants could respond using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 'disagree strongly', which had the lowest score of 0, to 'agree strongly' with the highest score of 5, indicating the highest endorsement of sexist beliefs. The order in which the participants received these two questionnaires was randomised, as their responses to questions concerning their own beliefs might bias participants' responses to questions about their peers' beliefs and vice versa (Wight, 1994). The Short Form Ambivalent Sexism Inventory ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and the Peer Group Ambivalent Sexism Inventory ( $\alpha = .89$ ) showed good reliability.

The group that would later receive a case with a male victim received a short form of the Ambivalence toward Men Inventory (AMI), aimed at measuring their sexist attitudes toward men (Rollero et al., 2014). The long form was developed by Glick and Fiske (1999) to investigate the agreement of hostile and benevolent attitudes toward men. The response format and scoring applied here were identical to the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. The same adaptation and scoring were applied to the AMI to come up with a Peer Group

Ambivalence toward Men Inventory. The Short Form Ambivalence toward Men Inventory ( $\alpha = .75$ ) and the Peer Group Ambivalence toward Men Inventory ( $\alpha = .72$ ) showed acceptable reliability.

### *Vignette Case*

Participants of the female victim condition and the male victim condition were presented with a fictional case example of controlling and coercive behaviour (Appendix A). In the female victim condition, the perpetrator was male, and in the male victim condition, the perpetrator was female. The behaviours included in the vignette case are taken from the example behaviours named in the statutory guidance framework provided by the UK Home Office (2023). From the subcategory of physical violence, physical intimidation through blocking the victim's exit was used. Emotional and psychological abuse was displayed by constant criticism of the victim and criticism of the victim's choice of friends.

Controlling behaviours included controlling or monitoring the victim's daily activities, for example dictating what they should wear, what they eat, and who they meet or talk to. Furthermore, control was exercised through the usage of digital systems, namely restricting, and checking the victim's phone use, accessing social media, and using location tracking devices. Other controlling behaviour was appearing unexpectedly at the victim's location.

Acts of coercion were attempted to persuade the victim to do something they did not want to do. Economic abuse was not explicitly included in this vignette case, as the described behaviours were intentionally kept more subtle to avoid potential ceiling effects in the responses. Including economic abuse through e.g. limitation of allowance could have decreased credibility, therefore, it was merely hinted at. Restrictive behaviours were shown through the prevention of normal leisure activities, such as meeting friends, and by isolating

the victim from friends by intercepting messages or phone calls. Moreover, threatening behaviour was displayed through threats to the victim that insinuated possible violence.

### ***Measure of Acceptability***

To measure the acceptance rates of the controlling and coercive behaviours, participants were administered a questionnaire directly after reading the vignette case (Appendix B). They were asked to indicate their opinion on the individual behaviours named in the example case and could give their responses on a 7-point Likert scale, consisting of the answer options 'entirely abusive', 'mostly abusive', 'somewhat abusive', 'neutral', 'somewhat appropriate', 'mostly appropriate' and 'entirely appropriate', with higher scores indicating higher acceptance of behaviours.

To avoid unanimous responses, which could result in ceiling effects, and to allow participants to indicate both condemnation and approval of the behaviours, the terms 'abusive' and 'appropriate' were chosen. Furthermore, this bidirectional measure prevented priming the participants into thinking that certain behaviours were either good or bad and was used to fully capture the diversity of opinions. This measure consisted of 13 items. The acceptability scale in the female victim condition showed good reliability ( $\alpha = .88$ ) and the acceptability scale in the male victim condition had acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

### ***Composite Abuse Scale (CAS)***

Lastly, to control for the impact of personal experiences, the subscales measuring emotional abuse and harassment from the Composite Abuse Scale (Hegarty et al., 2005) were used. Firstly, participants were reminded again of their voluntary participation, since these questions pertained to personal or sensitive matters. Secondly, they were asked to indicate if they had ever been in an intimate partner relationship and were administered the questionnaire. The emotional abuse scale consisted of 11 items and the harassment scale of 4 items. The participants were asked to indicate how frequently the mentioned items occurred

in any of their previous relationships on a 6-point Likert scale, with the response options of 'Daily', indicating the highest score of 5, 'Once per week', 'Once per month', 'Several times', 'Only once', and 'Never', which represented the lowest score of 0. This scale showed good reliability ( $\alpha = .9$ ).

### **Procedure**

Before the data collection, ethical approval was granted by the BMS Ethical Committee of the University of Twente (request number: 240401). Participants received a link to the Qualtrics website, where they could start the questionnaire. In the opening statement, they were informed about the purpose of the study and the usage of the data. The participants were told that they were partaking in a study about behaviour in intimate partner relationships. The information that this behaviour was controlling and coercive was not explicitly mentioned, but it was mentioned that the research includes content that some might consider abusive intimate partner behaviour and questions that might be offensive to some people. Furthermore, they were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and could be terminated without penalty at any time during the study. They were also warned about potentially distressing content and were informed about confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw. Resources to support helplines were provided in English, Dutch, and German. Before giving their informed consent, participants were also provided with the contacts of the researcher, supervisor, and the ethics committee.

First, the participants were asked to answer demographic questions about themselves, such as gender, age, nationality, highest level of education, and sexual orientation. Second, their peer groups were investigated by asking them about the predominant genders in their friend circles. For the next part, the participants were randomly allocated into the female and male victim conditions. They then completed the two questionnaires investigating ambivalent sexism and perceived peer group ambivalent sexism that corresponded to their random

allocation. Then, the participants received a vignette case, either with a female victim or a male victim, followed by the acceptability measure. The last questionnaire consisted of the subcategories of emotional abuse and harassment of the composite abuse scale. Last, two open questions inquiring about the participants' thoughts and comments, regards, or suggestions were asked. Finally, in the debrief participants were fully informed about the research aims and were given another opportunity to withdraw their data and direction to sources of support for intimate partner violence.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analysed using RStudio 4.4.0 and the packages `ggplot2` (Wickham, 2016), `dplyr` (Wickham et al., 2023), `readxl` (Wickham & Bryan, 2023), `psych` (Revelle, 2024), and `car` (Fox & Weisberg, 2019). Firstly, descriptive statistics were done to give an overview of the sample and the variables of interest. This included descriptive statistics on the demographic variables, as well as summaries on the composition of participants' peer groups, their own and their peers' sexist beliefs, the acceptability scores, and their personal experiences with emotional abuse and harassment. Since the data was not normally distributed and ordinal Likert scale responses were utilised, Spearman's correlation analysis was done to test for correlations between the variables.

A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to test if there are significant differences in acceptability scores between the female victim and male victim conditions since the data was not normally distributed. To test the hypotheses about the relationships between acceptability and peer group influence, sexism, peer group sexism, and personal experiences with abuse, multiple regression analysis with acceptance of controlling and coercive behaviour as the dependent variable was done for the female victim condition and the male victim condition. Each variable was treated as an individual predictor. Further exploratory analyses on the



effects of age on acceptability were conducted via a Mann-Whitney U test due to the bimodal distribution of age.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

This study investigated the effects of four independent variables on the acceptability of controlling and coercive behaviour in intimate partner relationships. The descriptive statistics are described for the whole sample and split between the two conditions, since they included different constructs for ambivalent sexism and peer group sexism toward men or women, depending on the condition. As can be seen in Table 1, although they measured different constructs, the differences between the scores were minor. Acceptability, ambivalent sexism, peer group ambivalent sexism, and personal experiences show possible floor effects, with low mean scores and strong positive right skews.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Variables.*

Variable	Scale range	Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Acceptability	1 - 7	Both	176	1.94	0.62
		Female Victim	88	1.88	0.68
		Male Victim	88	2.01	0.54
Peer Group Makeup	1 - 7	Both	178	3.84	1.50
		Female Victim	89	3.82	1.57
		Male Victim	89	3.85	1.44
Ambivalent Sexism	0 - 5	Both	178	1.82	0.86
		Female Victim: ASI	86	1.73	1.00
		Male Victim: AMI	82	1.92	0.67
Peer Group Ambivalent Sexism	0 - 5	Both	171	2.00	0.90
		Female Victim: PG ASI	86	1.86	1.02
		Male Victim: PG AMI	85	2.13	0.73

Personal Experiences	0 - 5	Both	152	0.48	0.65
		Female Victim	81	0.47	0.61
		Male Victim	71	0.49	0.70

*Note.* ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory, AMI = Ambivalence toward Men Inventory, PG =

Peer Group

### Correlation Analyses

Since all variables, except for the perceived peer group ambivalence toward men inventory, were not normally distributed and showed a positive right skew, Spearman's rank-order correlations were conducted (Table 2). Acceptability was found to have a significant positive correlation with personal experiences with composite abuse ( $\rho = 0.17, p = .039$ ). Endorsement of sexist attitudes toward men and women was significantly positively related to perceived peer group sexism toward men and women ( $\rho = 0.8, p < .001$ )<sup>1</sup>. Personal experiences with composite abuse were also significantly positively correlated with sexism toward men ( $\rho = 0.36, p = .004$ ) and significantly negatively correlated with perceived peer group ambivalent sexism towards women ( $\rho = -0.25, p = .02$ ).

**Table 2**

*Spearman's Correlations among Variables.*

Variable	<i>n</i>	1	2	3	3a	3b	4	4a	4b	5
1. Acceptability	176	-								
2. PG Makeup	178	-0.05	-							
3. Sexism	168	0.02	0.1	-						
3a. ASI	86	0.15	0.21		-					
3b. AMI	82	0.21	-0.06		-0.06	-				
4. PG Sexism	171	0.04	0.08	<b>0.8</b>			-			

<sup>1</sup> Despite the high correlation between these variables, there was no multicollinearity, and the variance inflation factors were low.

4a. PG ASI	86	0.1	0.25		<b>0.86</b>	0.10		-		
4b. PG AMI	85	0.12	-0.13		0.02	<b>0.69</b>		0.10		-
5. CAS	152	0.17	0.01	0.00	-0.22	<b>0.36</b>	-0.05	-0.25	0.24	-

Note:  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; PG=Peer Group, ASI=Ambivalent Sexism Inventory,

AMI=Ambivalence toward Men Inventory, CAS=Composite Abuse Scale.

### Hypothesis Testing

Except for hypothesis 1, all hypotheses and the analysis of the personal experiences with composite abuse were addressed across two separate multiple regressions. The first regression was done for the condition with the female victim and the male perpetrator, and the second regression was done for the condition with the male victim and the female perpetrator (Table 3).

#### *Acceptance of male vs. female-perpetrated coercive control*

Hypothesis 1 investigated the differences in acceptability ratings between the female victim and male victim condition, assuming a higher overall acceptance score in the male victim condition. Since the assumption of normality was violated, a non-parametric test was used. The Mann-Whitney U test showed a significantly higher acceptance rate in the male victim group than in the female victim group,  $U = 3033$ ,  $p = .013$ . The median acceptability rating in the female victim condition was 1.69 (IQR = 1.38 to 2.23) and 1.92 (IQR = 1.69 to 2.23) in the male victim condition, which leads hypothesis 1 to be retained.

#### *Effects of peer group composition, personal and sexist peer group beliefs on acceptability*

Hypothesis 2 investigated the effect of peer group influence on acceptability. It hypothesized that homogeneous peer group influence is positively related to higher acceptance rates for behaviour that victimises members of the other sex. Spearman's correlation analysis indicated non-significant correlations between peer group makeup and acceptability for female victims ( $\rho = 0.13$ ,  $p = .23$ ,  $n = 88$ ) and male victims ( $\rho = 0.16$ ,  $p =$

.13,  $n = 88$ ). In the multiple regression analyses, peer group makeup was not a significant predictor for the acceptability of controlling and coercive behaviour in the female victim condition and the male victim condition (Table 3).

Hypothesis 3 investigated the effect of ambivalent sexism on acceptance rates, predicting a positive relationship between the two variables, regardless of the victim's gender. Hypothesis 4 investigated the effect of one's peer group's perceived sexism on acceptance rates, which was again assumed to be a positive relationship. The multiple regression analyses with acceptability as the dependent variable showed that ambivalent sexism and perceived peer group ambivalent sexism toward men or women were not significant predictors of acceptability in the female victim condition and the male victim condition (Table 3).

These results lead to the rejection of hypotheses 2, 3 and 4, as homogeneity of peer groups, higher levels of ambivalent sexism and higher levels of perceived ambivalent sexism in one's peer group do not significantly predict higher acceptance rates of controlling and coercive behaviour.

### ***Effects of personal experiences on acceptance***

Personal experiences with composite abuse were introduced as a control variable to investigate potential effects on acceptance rates, as more personal experiences with emotional abuse and harassment may also increase acceptance rates toward controlling and coercive behaviour. Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis (Table 2) showed a weak but significant positive correlation between personal experiences of composite abuse and acceptance rates ( $\rho = 0.17$ ,  $p = .039$ ). However, when controlling for peer group makeup, ambivalent sexism, and perceived peer group sexism with multiple regression analyses, the statistically non-significant results from the multiple regression analyses in the female victim

condition and in the male victim condition (Table 3), suggest no effect of personal abusive experiences on acceptance rates.

**Table 3**

*Multiple Regression Analyses with Acceptability as the Dependent Variable.*

Effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		<i>p</i>
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
<i>Female Victim</i>					
Intercept	1.71	0.25	1.21	2.21	<.001
PG Makeup	0.02	0.05	-0.08	0.12	.698
Ambivalent Sexism	0.20	0.14	-0.08	0.49	.164
PG Ambivalent Sexism	-0.11	0.14	-0.39	0.17	.441
Composite Abuse	-0.12	0.13	-0.38	0.14	.357
<i>Male Victim</i>					
Intercept	1.58	0.29	1.00	2.17	<.001
PG Makeup	0.03	0.05	-0.07	0.12	.591
Ambivalence toward Men	0.12	0.14	-0.16	0.39	.400
PG Ambivalence toward Men	0.03	0.12	-0.22	0.27	.827
Composite Abuse	-0.03	0.10	-0.22	0.16	.733

*Note.*  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; PG=Peer Group.

The results suggest that peer group makeup, ambivalent sexism, perceived peer group ambivalent sexism, and personal experiences with composite abuse did not significantly influence acceptability for either female or male victims.

### Exploratory Analysis

Further exploratory analyses showed a potential relationship between age and acceptance rates. A correlation analysis showed significant results in the male victim

condition ( $\rho = -0.3, p = .004$ ), indicating lower acceptability ratings in the older generations. In the female victim condition, a correlation analysis between age and acceptability ratings yielded insignificant results ( $\rho = -0.2, p = .068$ ). Due to the bimodal distribution of the age variable, the sample was split into two age groups: Participants below the age of 40 ( $n = 133$ , median age = 23, IQR = 22 to 25) and participants aged 40 and above ( $n = 44$ , median age = 55, IQR = 51.57 to 58). The reasoning behind this split was to investigate generational differences, with Generation Z and Millennials being represented by the participants below 40 and Generation X and Baby Boomers being represented by the participants above 40. The median acceptability rating in the female victim condition was 1.77 (IQR = 1.46 to 2.38) for participants below 40 and 1.46 (IQR = 1.31 to 1.69) for participants above 40. In the male victim condition, the median acceptability rating was 2 (IQR = 1.75 to 2.46) for participants below 40 and 1.69 (IQR = 1.54 to 1.88) for participants above 40. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Tests showed significant results in the female victim condition ( $U = 978.5, p = .007$ ) and in the male victim condition ( $U = 1070, p = .001$ ) with older participants showing lower acceptance rates, regardless of the victim or perpetrator gender.

### **Additional qualitative analyses**

At the end of the study, participants could voluntarily give their thoughts or comments on the behaviours described in the study. While a full qualitative analysis was not conducted, due to time constraints, a pattern could be seen in more emotional responses toward the male perpetrator. When the perpetrator was female, the behaviour itself was often condemned and deemed as unacceptable, whereas in the male perpetrator condition, participants often indicated feeling negative emotions towards the perpetrator and articulated their dislike through overt statements or insults, which was not the case in the female perpetrator condition.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to test if acceptability of abuse through controlling and coercive behaviour in heteronormative intimate partner relationships differs when the victim is male or female. Potential effects of homogeneity of one's peer group, personal sexist beliefs, perceived sexist beliefs of one's peer group, as well as personal experiences with emotional abuse and harassment, and generational differences in acceptance rates were also investigated. The findings revealed that acceptance rates of female-to-male-perpetrated control and coercion were higher than male-to-female-perpetrated control and coercion. The composition of one's peer group, personal and perceived sexist beliefs did not show a significant effect on acceptance rates. The results showed a positive correlation between personal experiences with more emotional abuse and harassment and higher acceptability ratings. Personal experiences with abuse were also positively correlated with ambivalent sexism toward men and negatively correlated with perceived sexist beliefs toward women of one's peer group. However, when controlling for the other variables in the model with a multiple regression, the effects of personal experiences on acceptance rates were non-significant.

### **Male-perpetrated and female-perpetrated control and coercion**

This research showed that female-perpetrated controlling and coercive behaviour towards a male partner was deemed more acceptable than male-perpetrated controlling and coercive behaviour toward a female partner. These findings are in line with previous research showing that, generally, male-to-female perpetrated intimate partner abuse is viewed as more severe and aggressive than female-to-male perpetrated intimate partner abuse (Wilson & Smirles, 2020; Oswald & Russell, 2006; Sylaska & Walters, 2014). Studies investigating perceptions of coercive behaviour have discovered that the behaviour of male perpetrators is perceived as more coercive or aggressive, while female-perpetrated coercive behaviour is perceived as more expressive or promiscuous (Hamel et al., 2007; Oswald & Russell, 2006).

Overall, female-perpetrated coercive control is often minimised, or offenders are labelled as misunderstood, while male-perpetrated coercive control is taken more seriously and labelled as dominant and controlling (Walklate et al., 2022).

It was hypothesised that predictors for these different gendered perceptions of coercive and controlling behaviour could be related to peer group influence or ambivalent sexism, which was not proven in this study. However, since there were differences in the acceptance rates between male and female victims and perpetrators, there are likely other factors at play. Hammock et al. (2017) suggest an impact of perceived harm and gender stereotypes. Female perpetrators are perceived as less capable of inflicting harm than male perpetrators and male victims are generally perceived as experiencing less harm than female victims. Further, as Walby and Towers (2018) state, is an action perpetrated by a man toward a woman more likely to cause physical injury than the reverse case. Gender stereotypes may taint the perceptions of intimate partner abuse, as power differences exist between the genders in our society with men possessing more systemic power and physical strength, which paints women traditionally more often as victims (Hammock et al., 2017). This study aimed to test this by assessing ambivalent sexism scores toward men or women, however, gender stereotypes were not investigated explicitly, although studies highlight the importance of gaining a critical understanding of gender stereotypes on victim perceptions (Anderson, 2009; Hammock et al., 2017; Tolmie, 2018).

In the qualitative insights of this study, the responses to the male perpetrator tended to be more emotional and attacking, while the responses toward the female perpetrator tended to be more condemning of the behaviour itself, rather than the person. This is in line with research by Hammock et al. (2017) which found that in cases of a female victim, the perpetrator, regardless of his or her gender, was evaluated more negatively, and responses were more negative and emotional. The same study also found that regardless of victim



gender, male perpetrators were evaluated more negatively. As similar findings were discovered in the current study, it becomes apparent that perceptions of observers are influenced by gender. Hammock et al. (2017) also highlight the influence of gender stereotypes and the impact of the gendered lens on legal systems, stressing the importance of further research in this domain.

Another explanation for the gendered differences could be provided by Walby and Towers' (2018) dichotomous approach to domestic violence. The first type of domestic violence is serious, gender asymmetrical, and exhibits coercive control, while the other one is less serious, gender symmetrical, and does not exhibit coercive control. The current study controlled for the seriousness of the behaviours across both conditions since they were identical. However, the participants' perceptions of the seriousness of the behaviours were not investigated. Perhaps, participants recognised the case with the female victim as Walby and Towers' (2018) first type of domestic violence, and the male victim case as the second type. This could indicate that societal perceptions align with Walby and Towers' (2018) dichotomy, or that their theory is at least a potential predictor for perceptions of coercive control. Perhaps, participants recognised the female-perpetrated coercive control as situational couple violence and the male-perpetrated coercive control as intimate terrorism (Walby & Towers, 2018). However, to confirm or deny this theory, more research would have to be done, as controlling for actual behaviours might not control for the perceived seriousness of the behaviours.

Among other factors that could potentially have influenced the acceptability ratings in this study, but were not investigated, could be victim blame. A recent study on the societal perceptions of male and female rape victims showed that male victims were attributed more victim blame and the crime was considered less serious if it was perpetrated by a woman (Ostermann & Watson, 2024). Fewer research was done on the effects of victim blame on

male or female victims of controlling and coercive behaviour, however, Stark and Hester (2019) report the presence of victim blame by police officers responding to calls related to abuse through coercive control. In the qualitative insights of this study, there was not much indication of victim blame, however, some participants reported that they cannot understand why the victim did not leave their partner or why they would put up with such treatment, suggesting some presence of victim blame, which could have influenced responses.

Considering the small effect size of victim or perpetrator gender in this study, which is likely indicative of a limited practical significance of this difference, it is important to acknowledge contradicting findings. Conroy et al. (2023) found that cases of male- and female-perpetrated intimate partner violence were not perceived differently. A study by Hamel et al. (2007) has shown gender bias among domestic violence professionals who rated male-perpetrated abuse as more coercive and female-perpetrated intimate partner abuse as more expressive, however, in the same study, a student population showed no gender bias. This could suggest that there may be a link between age and acceptance of intimate partner abuse since the population of domestic violence professionals in Hamel et al.'s study (2007) was likely older than the student population, which would be in line with the findings of the current study.

In this study, higher age was found to be a significant predictor of lower acceptance rates of female- and male-perpetrated controlling and coercive behaviour. Age has been shown to predict attitudes associated with support of controlling and coercive behaviour, however, the findings have been mixed, with some studies showing more problematic attitudes among younger participants and others showing more problematic attitudes among older participants (Lawan et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2016). A potential reason for the higher acceptance rates among younger generations may be due to the incorporation of digital elements in the case study, such as tracking locations, repeated texting, and checking social

media accounts. This is confirmed in various studies, which showed that among younger populations, digital media and technologies are integrated into their lives and therefore also into their relationships, leading to a normalisation of abusive digital behaviour due to higher exposure (Schokkenbroek et al., 2021; Hellevik, 2019).

### **Connections between peers, sexism, and personal experiences**

The gendered composition of participants' peer groups did not seem to impact acceptance rates of controlling and coercive behaviour, neither did personal or perceived sexist beliefs of one's peer group. Despite this, there is some evidence for differential association which might be based on past experiences of abuse. This study revealed correlations between higher acceptance of coercive control, personal experiences with emotional abuse and harassment, higher endorsement of sexist beliefs toward men, and lower perceived sexist beliefs toward women of one's peer group. This would suggest that experiencing composite abuse may lead to negative or sexist beliefs toward men, reaffirming the integrated threat theory (Stephan et al., 2000). Further, it also suggests that these factors lead individuals to associate with peers who hold fewer sexist beliefs toward women, suggesting an effect of differential association (Cochran et al., 2011). It is important to note that these effects and differential associations are currently speculative, hence more research, which preferably investigates more aspects of peer group dynamics, would need to be done to confirm or deny this. However, despite the correlations which possibly suggest differential associations and effects in line with integrated threat theory, none of the factors mentioned predicted acceptability after controlling for other variables.

There could be various reasons for the lack of predictors of acceptability found in this study, one of them being that this study was limited in its data collection. For example, the assessment of the peer group influences was limited to the gender composition of participants' peer groups. However, as Jenkins et al. (2022) note, also assessing multiple

facets of friendships, such as closeness, quality of friendship, and the number of friends, might be imperative to gain a comprehensive overview. Assessing these factors could potentially also explain the generational differences in perceptions of coercive control found in this sample. Research has shown that as age increases, the frequency of contact in friendships decreases, however, the satisfaction with confidant friends increases, suggesting an effect of quality over quantity in friendships among older individuals (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2016), which could also explain the difference in acceptance rates between the younger and older participants. Furthermore, male peer support or other peer group factors cannot be present if not that much time is spent with friends in general. Dekeseredy and Kelly (1995) postulate that an important factor explaining the dynamic of male peer groups is the extensive amount of time that is spent together, which was not assessed in this study.

### **Limitations**

Possible limitations of this study influencing the outcomes were already discussed, namely that the investigated variables did not predict the outcomes, and variables such as perceived harm, gender stereotypes, quality and closeness of friendships, and victim blame could have been better alternative predictors. Another factor is the quantitative nature of this study, which limits the insights into the motivating factors behind participants' responses. Following up with a qualitative approach could provide further insights and potentially unveil more predicting variables.

Generally, there seemed to be little variability in this sample, and it appeared to be not that sexist, and participants also did not perceive their peers to be very sexist. These results are likely due to the western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic nature of this sample, as most of this sample was German and many had obtained some form of higher education, leading to a lack of cultural variation (Nielsen et al., 2017). Furthermore, the biggest part of the participant recruitment was done via the researcher's personal network,

which included mainly peer group members, suggesting that there is a bias in the sample, as many participants are likely part of the same peer group or endorse similar views. The recruitment was also done via the social media of ‘Amnesty UTwente’, a student activist group, which likely also led to an increase in participants who tend to endorse lower sexist beliefs and do not associate with peers who endorse sexist beliefs. This possibly led to floor effects from low sexism scores which resulted in this lack of variability. Overall, this sample was not representative of a broader population, leading to possible skewness in the results.

Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge the artificial set-up of the study. Atzmüller and Steiner (2010) highlight the importance of a careful design when using vignettes in surveys, as this can impact participant responses. Carefully designed vignettes that engage participants’ interest, are relevant to their lives and appear real can be highly effective in social science research (Hughes & Huby, 2012). However, they also mention that closed-ended questioning, which is often utilised in quantitative studies such as the present one, frequently fails to capture essential aspects caused by social influences, which could explain the lack of predicting variables.

## **Conclusion**

This study showed that there is a discrepancy between the societal perceptions of female- and male-perpetrated coercive control. Besides the detrimental effects of controlling and coercive behaviour on male and female victims (Bates & Taylor, 2019), it seems to be more accepted when the victim is male. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of societal perceptions of controlling and coercive behaviour, highlighting a gender bias. A need for advanced research in this field to fully grasp the predictors of acceptance of intimate partner abuse through coercive control is emphasised. The practical implications of this study are especially important when it comes to the acknowledgement of male victims who generally face more stigmatisation, which may also impact legal structures

and lead to fewer resources of support for them. To remedy this, it is important to focus on developing educational initiatives that highlight the severe impact that coercive control can have on its victims, regardless of their gender. In line with this, a workshop with ‘Amnesty UTwente’ was created, educating students on how to recognise first signs of coercive control. While this study has provided some insights into the differing perceptions of controlling and coercive behaviour depending on victim and perpetrator gender, future studies should investigate the underlying factors to enable more support structures and interventions.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Vignette Case**

#### **Female Victim**

On Friday night, Anna's male friend Max invited her and some other friends over to hangout. While Anna got ready, her boyfriend David suddenly showed up at her apartment. He wanted to surprise her and take her out to dinner. When Anna informed him that she already had other plans for the night, David was very frustrated and asked if she can't meet her friends later or another time, since he already made dinner reservations. Reluctantly, Anna agreed to go to dinner with her boyfriend. David was happy, however, before they left, he said, "Are you sure you don't want to change into something a bit nicer? We are going out after all". This comment left Anna feeling self-conscious, however, since they were already leaving and she liked her outfit, she brushed it off.

During the dinner at the restaurant, David noticed that Anna was receiving many text messages on her phone. He asked who was texting her. Anna answered that it was just her friends, who are upset that she cancelled their plans last minute. David told Anna "her friends just don't want to see her happy in her relationship with him" and that he doesn't understand in the first place why she is even friends with them. At one point during the dinner, David reached over the table and took her phone away from her to "stop her from constantly checking her messages".

After they had eaten, David insisted on paying for the dinner, however, when the waiter brought the bill, he was shocked at the prices. He complained to Anna, "I wish you would have ordered something less expensive. I don't understand why you got the pasta in the first place, I thought you were trying to lose weight". Anna did not really understand his comment, as she did not intentionally order something expensive, regardless she still felt bad since she knows that David does not make that much money.



During the drive home, Anna informs David that she wants to join her friends after all since she feels bad for cancelling on them. David responded, “So what, I take you out to dinner and you can’t even go home with me afterwards? That feels unfair, I think a perfect date night should end with something more”.

He tries some more to persuade her not to meet her friends, and to go home with him instead. Finally, he gives up trying to convince her, as she assured him that “she will make it up to him some other time”.

Anna meets her friends at Max’ house later that evening. They are drinking and having fun, and Anna is not paying much attention to her phone, so she did not see that David has been texting her repeatedly, asking how her night is going and what she is doing. David, became impatient by the lack of response and so he checks Anna’s location on a tracking app David convinced her to install on her phone so he could make sure he could always check where she was and if she was safe. He sees that she is at Max’ house and feels himself getting jealous.

He then logs on to Anna’s instagram account. David has Anna share all her passwords with him because he thinks people in relationships should not have secrets from each other. He reads through her chats with Max to look for evidence of her cheating.

Even though he could not find any proof in the messages, he decides to confront his girlfriend about his suspicions. He texts her a long message, accusing her of cheating and that she better leave Max’ place right now, since she “really does not want to see him mad”, which causes a big fight between them over text messages.

The next day, Anna goes over to David’s place to talk about the situation last night. They get into an argument. Anna wants to leave, but David blocks her way to the door, locks it and claims that she needs to hear him out first, “I’m just trying to get you to listen to me and if you leave now, we will never talk again”.

## Male Victim

On Friday night, David's female friend Maria invited him and some other friends over to hangout. While David got ready, his girlfriend Anna suddenly showed up at his apartment. She wanted to surprise him and take him out to dinner. When David informed her that he already had other plans for the night, Anna was very frustrated and asked if he can't meet his friends later or another time, since she already made dinner reservations. Reluctantly, David agreed to go to dinner with his girlfriend. Anna was happy, however, before they left, she said, "Are you sure you don't want to change into something a bit nicer? We are going out after all". This comment left David feeling self-conscious, however, since they were already leaving and he liked his outfit, he brushed it off.

During the dinner at the restaurant, Anna noticed that David was receiving many text messages on his phone. She asked who was texting him. David answered that it was just his friends, who are upset that he cancelled their plans last minute. Anna told David "his friends just don't want to see him happy in his relationship with her" and that she doesn't understand in the first place why he is even friends with them. At one point during the dinner, Anna reached over the table and took his phone away from him to "stop him from constantly checking his messages".

After they had eaten, Anna insisted on paying for the dinner, however, when the waiter brought the bill, she was shocked at the prices. She complained to David, "I wish you would have ordered something less expensive. I don't understand why you got the pasta in the first place, I thought you were trying to lose weight". David did not really understand his comment, as he did not intentionally order something expensive, regardless he still felt bad since he knows that Anna does not make that much money.

During the drive home, David informs Anna that he wants to join his friends after all since he feels bad for cancelling on them. Anna responded, "So what, I take you out to dinner

and you can't even go home with me afterwards? That feels unfair, I think a perfect date night should end with something more".

She tries some more to persuade him not to meet his friends, and to go home with her instead. Finally, she gives up trying to convince him, as he assured her that "he will make it up to her some other time".

David meets his friends at Maria's house later that evening. They are drinking and having fun, and David is not paying much attention to his phone, so he did not see that Anna has been texting him repeatedly, asking how his night is going and what he is doing. Anna, became impatient by the lack of response and so she checks David's location on a tracking app Anna convinced him to install on his phone so she could make sure she could always check where he was and if he was safe. She sees that he is at Maria's house and feels herself getting jealous.

She then logs on to David's instagram account. Anna has David share all his passwords with her because she thinks people in relationships should not have secrets from each other. She reads through his chats with Maria to look for evidence of him cheating.

Even though she could not find any proof in the messages, she decides to confront her boyfriend about her suspicions. She texts him a long message, accusing him of cheating and that he better leave Maria's place right now, since he "really does not want to see her mad", which causes a big fight between them over text messages.

The next day, David goes over to Anna's place to talk about the situation last night. They get into an argument. David wants to leave, but Anna blocks his way to the door, locks it and claims that he needs to hear her out first, "I'm just trying to get you to listen to me and if you leave now, we will never talk again".

## Appendix B

### Acceptability Scale Instructions

#### Female Victim

Please indicate your opinion on the individual behaviours named in the example case you just read.

Scale: 7 - Entirely abusive

6 - Mostly abusive

5 - Somewhat abusive

4 - Neutral

3 - Somewhat appropriate

2 - Mostly appropriate

1 - Entirely appropriate

1. David showing up to Anna's apartment unannounced.
2. David commenting "Are you sure you don't want to change into something a bit nicer? We are going out after all".
3. David telling Anna not to feel bad as "her friends just don't want to see her happy in her relationship with him" and that he doesn't understand in the first place why she is even friends with them.
4. David reaching over the table and taking Anna's phone away from her to "stop her from constantly checking her messages".
5. David complaining to Anna, "I wish you would have ordered something less expensive. I don't understand why you got the pasta in the first place, I thought you were trying to lose weight".
6. David's response to Anna not wanting to go home with him, "So what, I take you out to dinner and you can't even go home with me afterwards? That feels unfair, I think a perfect date night should end with something more".
7. David texting Anna repeatedly, inquiring how her night is going and what she is doing.
8. David checking Anna's location on a tracking app he convinced her to install.
9. David logging on to Anna's instagram account.
10. David reading through Anna's chats with Max.
11. David telling Anna to leave Max' place right now, since she "really does not want to see him mad".

12. David blocking Anna's way to the door, locking it and claiming that she needs to hear him out first.
13. David claiming "I'm just trying to get you to listen to me and if you leave now we will never talk again".

### **Male Victim**

Please indicate your opinion on the individual behaviours named in the example case you just read.

Scale: 7 - Entirely abusive

6 - Mostly abusive

5 - Somewhat abusive

4 - Neutral

3 - Somewhat appropriate

2 - Mostly appropriate

1 - Entirely appropriate

1. Anna showing up to David's apartment unannounced.
2. Anna commenting "Are you sure you don't want to change into something a bit nicer? We are going out after all".
3. Anna telling David not to feel bad as "his friends just don't want to see him happy in his relationship with her" and that she doesn't understand in the first place why he is even friends with them.
4. Anna reaching over the table and taking David's phone away from him to "stop him from constantly checking his messages".
5. Anna complaining to David, "I wish you would have ordered something less expensive. I don't understand why you got the pasta in the first place, I thought you were trying to lose weight".
6. Anna's response to David not wanting to go home with her, "So what, I take you out to dinner and you can't even go home with me afterwards? That feels unfair, I think a perfect date night should end with something more".
7. Anna texting David repeatedly, inquiring how his night is going and what he is doing.
8. Anna checking David's location on a tracking app she convinced him to install.
9. Anna logging on to David's instagram account.
10. Anna reading through David's chats with Maria.
11. Anna telling David to leave Maria's place right now, since he "really does not want to see her mad".

12. Anna blocking David's way to the door, locking it and claiming that he needs to hear her out first.
13. Anna claiming "I'm just trying to get you to listen to me and if you leave now we will never talk again".







