Bachelor Thesis

The Role of Gender and Past Experiences in Relation to the Acceptability of Coercive and Controlling Behaviour

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Abstract

The present experimental study investigated the effect of gender on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour, while controlling for past experiences of abuse. Participants (N = 127, M_{age} = 24.13, SD_{age} = 7.82; 98 female, 29 male) were randomly allocated to either read a story of a couple in which the female is exercising controlling and coercive behaviour towards her boyfriend (n = 64, female = 48, male = 16) or a story in which a male is exercising controlling and coercive behaviour towards his girlfriend (n = 63, female = 50, male = 13). Afterwards, participants had to rate each occurring coercive and controlling behaviour on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher numbers indicating a higher acceptability towards the behaviour (N = 127, M = 13.91, SD = 11.12). Lastly, participants had to indicate whether they were exposed to any abusive behaviour from their partner in the last 12 months. Participants that indicated being exposed to abuse 12 months prior to the survey, showed significantly higher acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour [$F(1, 73) = 4.99$ p = .029, $\eta 2$ = .06]. Indicating that abusive past experiences influence the way coercive and controlling behaviour is perceived, leading to more tolerance towards it. Against prior findings and hypotheses, men accepted coercive and controlling behaviour significantly more than women, when it was directed towards men [$t(58.67) = 3.26$, p=.002]. However, given the unequal distribution of men and women participating in this study, findings related to the participant gender should be interpreted with caution. For future research, a bigger sample size and more evenly distributed groups of participant gender should be striven for.

Keywords: Acceptability, coercion, control, past experiences, gender

Introduction

Being in a relationship can be one of the most life-changing experiences in one's life. Depending on how the partners are connected and how they treat each other, this experience can have either very positive or negative effects. When the relationship has toxic components, it can turn into an exhausting, humiliating, and intimidating cohabit (Plichta, 2004). Behaviours that are expressed in such toxic relationships are quite broad, ranging from physical abuse and rape to psychological abuse, threats and controlling behaviour. In the past, laws and law enforcement have focused on domestic violence, including the occurrence of actual bodily harm (ABH) and the cases without such physical components were not punishable (Barlow, Johnson, Walklate, & Humphreys, 2019; McMahon & McGorrery, 2016). Recently, the focus of law and law enforcement is slowly shifting towards psychological abuses, with England and Wales introducing such behaviour as a punishable offence (McMahon &McGorrery, 2016).

Researchers have for some time been aware of the tremendous effects psychological abuse and coercion and control can have for victims. More than 25 years ago, in 1995, Stark wrote that "Physical violence may not be the most significant factor about most battering relationships. In all probability, the clinical profile revealed by battered women reflects the fact that they have been subjected to an ongoing strategy of intimidation, isolation, and control that extends to all areas of a woman's life, including sexuality; material necessities; relations with family, children, and friends; and work." (p.987, as cited in Dutton, Goodman, & Schmidt, 2005). This quote focuses on women only, but it still holds significance in the importance of incorporating coercion and control into the legal process.

However, only in recent years has there been a shift of focus towards criminalizing non-physical harm. An example for this is the new law that has been legally binding since 2015 in England and Wales, found in section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 for 'controlling or coercive behaviour'. For this law to be executed, certain requirements need to be met. Generally, a person commits this offence if he/she repeatedly or continuously engages in behaviour towards another

person that is controlling or coercive. However, a requirement is that the person who is controlling and the person who is controlled need to be personally connected (dating, marriage or familial). Moreover, the behaviour needs to have a serious effect on the victim (physical or mental), while the perpetrator knows or ought to know that the behaviour will have a serious effect on the victim (Barlow et al., 2019; McMahon &McGorrery, 2016). This law is especially important because it does not require the victim to be hurt or abused physically in order to allow for prosecution.

Definition of Coercion and Control

There is an ongoing debate of what exactly falls under the category of 'coercive or controlling behaviour'. Therefore, this concept cannot be represented in its entirety since at least 22 different definitions and ways of measuring the construct exist (Hamberger, Larsen, & Lehrner, 2017). The UK government guidelines of domestic violence and abuse defines *coercive behaviour* as "assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation" and includes other forms of abuse that have the intent of inducing fear, damage or serve as a form of penalization to the victim (ONS, 2019). Further, *controlling behaviour* is described as actions that "make a person subordinate and/or dependent", actions include, but are not limited to, isolating the victim from family and friends, taking advantage of their possessions out of self-interest, and controlling their actions and behaviours, ultimately leading to a strong restriction of their personal independence (ONS, 2019). These definitions will be used to identify such behaviour within this thesis.

Law Enforcement of Coercion and Control

Despite the inclusion of the new offence in 2015, Barlow et al., (2019) found that law enforcement and conviction of perpetrators linked to coercive and controlling behaviour have remained low. In the time span from the first of January 2016 to the 30th of June 2017 their study recorded crimes within one police force in the Northwest of England. In this time span, 18,978 crimes were recorded that belong to the category of 'domestic violence', thus also including crimes with actual bodily harm (Barlow et al., 2019). Out of these cases, 156 (less

than 1%) were recorded as cases of coercion and control. It was also found that even when coercion and control cases are being assessed as involving a 'high risk' for the victim, they are less likely to be examined, solved and/or result in a legal punishment for the accused, compared to other domestic abuse offences (Barlow et al., 2019).

Investigation of Physical Abuse Cases Versus Psychological Abuse Cases

These differences in handling and solving coercive control cases versus other domestic violence cases can have different reasons. In comparison to physical assault cases, it is more difficult to find evidence of control or coercion (McMahon & McGorrery, 2016). As police officers have phrased it, finding evidence in coercive control cases is tough and leads to a 'one word against another word' issue (Barlow et al.,2019). Roughly 30% of coercive control cases are put to the files as 'no further action' against the accused, due to 'evidential difficulties' (Barlow et al., 2019). Meaning that the police will not investigate any further in relation to the allegations made against a (former) suspect (Mott, 1983). This suggests that police officers are more readily prepared to search for and find evidence in other domestic violence cases compared to coercion and control cases.

To further elaborate on this problem, it was found that evidence of coercion and control was present but simply not identified and thoroughly searched for by officers (Barlow et al., 2019). This poses the question whether psychological offences are taken as seriously as physical ones based on the readily available evidence and the visible injury. Despite a higher concern of police officers in solving domestic violence cases that involve physical abuse, research has demonstrated a need to shift attention to coercion and control years ago (Stark, 1994). It has been proposed that physical violence is acting as an amplifier to scare the victim and to maintain control rather than physical violence and coercive control occurring as two separate offences. This is also in line with findings that 87% of cases of ABH also involve coercion and control from the partner (Barlow et al., 2019).

Research Topic

This gives rise to the question, why is coercive control less likely to be reported to the police compared to physical abuse even when both behaviors have occurred? The results of a public opinion survey from Worden and Carlson (2005) have shown that approximately 33% of respondents believe that much of domestic violent behaviour is 'normal' in relationships. Indicating that for some people coercive behaviour may not be viewed as problematic. The question that remains: what influences this view? Why do some people accept controlling and coercive behaviour in intimate relationships as being 'normal'? One of the most widely discussed issues in connection to this, are the genders of perpetrator and victim as well as of the respondents in the studies conducted and their (abusive) past experiences (Allen, Swan, & Raghavan, 2009; Barlow et al., 2019; Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Robertson & Murachver, 2011; Worden & Carlson, 2005).

Therefore, this study focuses on further investigating what influence the gender of participants as well as the gender of the perpetrator and victim have on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour, while controlling for abusive past experiences. Coercion and control is a relatively new and sparsely researched concept, thus, it is important to collect more data to either support or reject recent findings. Since only a few countries have introduced a law, making coercion and control legally punishable, it is of interest to examine the perception of society towards this topic (McMahon &McGorrery, 2016). Moreover, it is of interest to examine stereotypical gender roles of victim and perpetrator to counteract false stigmata while also paying attention to male victims, who have been neglected in research thus far (Walby & Towers, 2018). Lastly, having a clear framework representing possible risk factors for acting coercive and controlling or being controlled by the partner might help to identify and support victims and perpetrators. Helping them break out of the vicious cycle of psychological abuse (Goldner, 2004).

Coercion and Control in Relation to Men

Generally, it is believed that men use more physical violence, coercion and control while making use of the social norms of masculinity and femininity, to get what they want within intimate relationships (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Barlow et al., 2019). Of those accused and prosecuted for coercion and control cases, 97% are male (Barlow et al., 2019). However, males are also victims of violence, coercion and control, but are often not taken as seriously as women when they report it (Ayala, Kotary, & Hetz, 2018). As a result of reporting or communicating about the abuse, men are commonly confronted with the stigma of being weak and/or homosexual, especially when the perpetrator is male. In case men have been abused by a woman, they are likely to be criticized for not standing up for themselves, not being able to defend themselves or being too weak (Ayala, Kotary, & Hetz, 2018). This further promotes the improbability of men reporting abuse, which in turn further supports the imbalance in reports coming from female and male victims (Walby & Towers, 2018).

Coercion and Control in relation to Women

The whole concept of 'coercive control' is gendered in itself, since it emerged as a consequence of the development of a specialized field that is focused on female victims only (Walby & Towers, 2018). Thereby, women are believed to be the victims of abuse more likely than men. This is also supported by numbers, since out of all reported cases, women report domestic violence (74%) and high-frequency abuses (98%) distinctly more often than men (Walby & Towers, 2018). They are perceived to be the 'weaker gender' with fewer opportunities to defend themselves (Ayala, Kotary, & Hetz, 2018). It was found that women receive more empathy and compassion when reporting about abuses, compared to men (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006). However, women can also act as perpetrators yet, they are often perceived as more likeable than male perpetrators (Ayala, Kotary, & Hetz, 2018). This clearly shows a gender-dependent evaluation of physical as well as psychological abuse, with female perpetrators and victims receiving more empathy compared to male perpetrators and/ or victims.

Gender and Coercion and Control

However, studies have found that there was no difference in the number of times men and women are victimized by their partners. The main difference was found in the nature of the act (Allen, Swan, & Raghavan, 2009). It is suggested that women act as a form of self-defence or as a reaction to the male's abuse and that being victimized as a woman serves as a risk factor to becoming a perpetrator and victimizing others (Allen, Swan, & Raghavan, 2009; Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). It is clear that both men and women can show domestic violence behaviour towards their partner (Robertson & Murachver, 2011). It needs to be noted, however, that overall, female violence in intimate relationships has not been studied as extensively as male violence, making it difficult to directly compare the two. Also, it was found that victims of domestic violence are less likely to report incidents when they are happening at a low-frequency. Since men may undergo such crimes in a less injurious and repeated manner, it is not surprising that more women than men report such crimes (Walby & Towers, 2018).

The acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour is proposed to be dependent on gender, with men evaluating it as less problematic than women. This is supported by findings of men evaluating violence as justified in relationships under some circumstances (infidelity, nagging) (Worden & Carlson, 2005). Moreover, about one-quarter of respondents believed that some women want to be abused while underestimating the difficulties of leaving an abusive relationship (Worden & Carlson, 2005). It was found that men are more likely to attribute the causes of domestic violence to women and relationship problems, while women attributed them to internal conflicts, anger and personality problems of men (Worden & Carlson, 2005). The overall view is that men commit domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV) more often than women, with more severe effects for the victim (Worden & Carlson, 2005). It is widely believed that men's behaviour has its origins in the desire to control the women, while the women's behaviour mainly has the intention to protect

themselves (Robertson & Murachver, 2011). Therefore, it will be tested whether the gender of the participants has an influence on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour. This will be done to either verify or reject recent findings indicating that men accept coercive and controlling behaviour more than women.

Past Experiences and Coercion and Control

Lastly, abusive past experiences of participants are supposed to influence the acceptability, too. If someone has acted or regularly acts in coercive and controlling ways, they are less likely to evaluate such behaviour as bad or negative and more likely to evaluate the victim of being at fault for the perpetrator's behaviour (Worden & Carlson, 2005). Victims of coercion and control happen to relate the perpetrators' behaviour to themselves, thinking it is their own fault and that they need to adjust their behaviour (Candela, 2016). They do not necessarily recognize that the coercive and controlling behaviour is unjustified and/or toxic, because they do not think that the one executing it is the problem but that they themselves are (Candela, 2016; Goldner, 2004). Therefore, victims of abuse might have a different relation to coercion and control, in that they might execute 'victim blaming', in relation to others and themselves. Moreover, it was found that being exposed to intimate partner violence can act as a risk factor for responding violently. This can be considered as self-defense to protect oneself or involved children and is a more common behaviour for women compared to men (Gilfus, Trabold, O'Brien, & Fleck-Henderson, 2010). Thus, abusive past experiences are expected to have an influence on the acceptability of coercion and control. Therefore, it will be controlled for this variable in the analysis to ensure that it does not affect the results.

Concluding, the current study aims at evaluating what influence the gender of the victim and perpetrator have on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour. Further, it will be studied whether the gender of the participants of the survey have an influence on the evaluation of the coercive and controlling behaviours. Lastly, it will be

researched whether past experiences of respondents in relation to domestic violence, intimate partner violence and coercion and control have an influence on acceptability.

Method

Design

This online experimental project uses a 2x2 factorial design. This means there are two groups (one with the male as perpetrator and the female as the victim, the other with the female as the perpetrator and the male as the victim) combined with the factor of participant gender (male or female) while controlling for the covariate of past experiences in relation to intimate partner violence (IPV). The goal is to gauge whether these groups or factors have an influence on the dependent variable of acceptability of coercion and control. A between-subject design is applied, with participants being randomly allocated to one of the two stories (with either the male being the perpetrator or the female). This study and its procedure as described below was accepted by the BMS ethics committee of the University of Twente.

Participants

Overall, 192 People (University students and acquaintances of the researchers) started the study, out of these, 65 responses had to be deleted. Due to failure of answering one or more individual questions, 62 responses had to be deleted. Additional three responses were deleted because the participants wanted to withdraw from the study after the debrief. Participants ($N = 127$, $M_{age} = 24.13$, $SD_{age} = 7.82$) were to 77.2% female ($n = 98$) and to 22.8% male ($n = 29$). They were recruited via SONA and by sending a survey link hosted by Qualtrics (192) directly to acquaintances and posting the link on different social media platforms, such as Whatsapp and Instagram stories. To take part in the study, potential participants had to be at least 18 years old. Out of the participants, 63 people were allocated to the female-victim group, out of which 50 were female (79.4 %) and 13 were male participants

(20.6%). The other 64 people were allocated to the male-victim group, with 48 participants being female (75%) and 16 being male (25%). One of the final 127 participants did not indicate an age.

Materials and Procedure

Demographical Data and Vignette

Before the study started, participants were presented with an introduction to the study and its procedure, a consent form and questions concerning their biographical data. Afterwards, a vignette describing an evening of a couple was presented (Appendix A). The vignette included coercive and controlling behaviours, such as ‘making unkind comments about what your partner wears’, ‘telling the partner how much they should drink’, ‘repeatedly calling the partner’, ‘logging into their social media accounts to gather information’ and ‘threatening the partner’. The perpetrators' behaviours purposely got more drastic and threatening throughout the ongoing of the evening. Two different vignettes were created, one in which the male is the perpetrator and the female is the victim and one in which the roles were swapped. Both vignettes had the same storyline and the same behaviours coming from the perpetrator and victim, solely the genders were swapped.

Instruments

Acceptability Questionnaire. After the vignette, the participants had to answer two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was about the acceptability of the behaviour shown in the vignette. Participants had to indicate how acceptable they thought the shown behaviour was. This was indicated by a scale ranging from 0 to 100, with 0 being ‘very unacceptable’, 50 was displayed as ‘neutral’ and 100 being ‘very acceptable’. Thus, the higher participants scored on this questionnaire, the more acceptable they considered the specific behaviour of the perpetrator towards the victim in the story to be. All coercive and controlling behaviours that were presented in the story were shown in the questionnaire, in total 20 behaviours were included (Appendix B). Behaviours including “*Showing up at their partner’s house*

unexpectedly", "Telling the partner how much money they can spend" and *"Insulting their partner"* were presented to the participants. The questionnaire was found to be highly reliable, based on this sample (20 items; $\alpha = .91$).

Extended-Hurt, Insulted, Threaten, Scream Screening Tool (E-HITS). The second questionnaire was the Extended–Hurt, Insulted, Threaten, Scream screening tool or E-HITS (Feltner et al., 2018) (Appendix C). This tool includes five questions that had to be answered on a scale from 0 (not applicable) to 5 (frequently). These questions asked about physical abuse, insults, threats, cursing and forced sexual activities that participants might have experienced from their partner in the last 12 months. Participants that scored a '0' on this questionnaire, meaning that they have not been exposed to such behaviour in the last 12 months, were excluded from any analyses that include E-HITS measures. Precisely, it is the tool's purpose to identify whether women are exposed to intimate partner violence. However, since the questions could also be applied to men, no adjustments in the formulation or wording of the tool were made. The tool has shown good internal consistency, test/re-test reliability and concurrent, as well as discriminant validity (Chan, Chan, Au, & Cheung, 2010). However, these results are based on a study conducted solely on women in Hong Kong emergency departments. In this sample E-HITS was also found to be highly reliable (5 items; $\alpha = .90$).

Debrief

Before the study ended and the data was saved, participants were shown the debrief, in which the manipulation of the study was explained and links, as well as phone numbers for help in case participants were exposed to physical or psychological threat, were displayed. Here, the subjects had another chance to decline their participation and delete their data. Overall, the study took approximately 20 to 30 minutes and participants had to be at least 18 years old.

Data Analysis

The data is checked for any floor or ceiling effects, this is the case when 15% of the sample score is either on the lowest or highest continuum of the scale. It is checked whether any outliers occur in the data set, in case they occur and distort the data, they will be removed. Lastly, the assumptions for a two-way ANCOVA were tested to ensure that the data is suited for a two-way ANCOVA analysis.

The next step is to execute a two-way ANCOVA to evaluate whether the gender of the participant and the gender of the victim and perpetrator within the vignette influence the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour, while controlling for the variable of past experiences. Afterwards, two independent Student's t-tests and two Welch's t-tests are conducted. These tests compare the acceptability scores of men between the two groups of story, as well as comparing the acceptability scores of women between the two groups of story. Further, the acceptability scores of women and men reading the male-victim story were compared as well as the acceptability scores of women and men reading the female-victim story.

Results

Before conducting the Analyses, the variable representing the acceptability scores had to be adjusted. The scores were heavily positively skewed, making the data non-normally distributed, which can cause problems decreasing the accuracy of statistical tests. Thus, the variable was log10 transformed, which causes the data to be normal or at least near-normally distributed, allowing the researcher to perform an ANCOVA while reducing or removing the skewness of the data. This adjusted variable was used for all analyses, however, mean scores, standard deviations, adjusted mean scores and standard errors, without using the adjusted log variable are presented in *Table 1* below. The table is splitted by gender and shows only the unadjusted scores, however for completeness and comparison *Table 2* shows both the unadjusted and adjusted data and can be found in the appendix (Appendix D). *Table 2* clearly

illustrates the advantages of using Students and Welch's t-test, instead of just the ANCOVA, as the t-tests heavily adjusted the male scores in the male-victim group.

Table 1

Means, adjusted Means, Standard Deviations and Standard Errors for Acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour for the four groups from the ANCOVA.

Acceptability CC	Female Victim		Male Victim	
	Male Participants	Female Participants	Male Participants	Female Participants
Mean	226.33	268.50	317.80	244.23
SD	*(83.79)*	*(203.70)*	*(93.83)*	*(140.35)*
Madj	234.17	268.87	299.99	248.21
SE	*(66.15)*	*(28.56)*	*(52.31)*	*(29.61)*

Results of ANCOVA

Participants could score each item on a scale from 0 to 100 on the questionnaire for acceptability of coercion and control, with higher scores indicating a higher acceptability of the coercive and controlling behaviour shown (N = 127, M = 13.91, SD = 11.12). Out of the 127 participants, 78 had experiences with IPV in the last 12 months (n = 78, M = 6.41, SD = 2.86). The cut-off score for IPV was set at >= 7 by the scale designers, out of all participants, 26 (20.47%) attained or exceeded this score (n = 26, M = 9.54, SD = 2.75). Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to assess the relationship between logged acceptability scores and past experience scores, indicating abuse (E-HITS). There was a significant low correlation between the two, r_s = .26, p = .023, N = 78. Meaning that when abusive past experience scores increased so did the acceptability scores for coercive and controlling

behaviour. Thus, the more abusive the past experiences of participants were, the more acceptable they evaluated the coercive and controlling behaviour to be.

Testing the main effect of past experiences related to intimate partner violence (IPV) on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour a significant main effect was found [$F(1, 73) = 4.99$ $p = .029$, $\eta 2 = .06$]. Thus, past experiences had a significant influence on the acceptability scores, with participants that indicated a higher abusive past experience score showing a higher acceptability towards coercive and controlling behaviour. The victim/perpetrator gender showed no significant main effect on acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour [$F(1, 73) = 0.39$, $p = .532$, $\eta 2 < .01$]. Concretely, this means that the overall acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour of the participants did not significantly differ between the group of the female victim story ($M = 0.99$, $SD = 0.38$) and the group of the male victim story ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.26$). Further, there was no significant main effect of gender of participants on acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour [$F(1, 73) = 1.00$, $p = .320$, $\eta 2 = .01$]. In other words, whether participants were male ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 0.15$) or female ($M = 1$, $SD = 0.35$) had no significant influence on the participants' acceptability of the behaviour presented in the vignette. Lastly, the interaction effect of the participants gender and the Victim/Perpetrator gender was not significant [$F(1, 73) = 0.07$, $p = .789$, $\eta 2 < .01$].

Problems with Data Used for ANCOVA

The data used for the ANCOVA showed both unequal variances and unequal sample sizes, thus, at least two of the assumptions for the ANCOVA were violated. This massively affects the tools' ability to find effects, influencing the results. To test the key hypothesis in a more accurate way by removing any effect of a lack of independence between the two independent variables additional t-tests were conducted. Further, to adjust for unequal variances, Welch's t-tests were conducted.

Results from T-Tests

Welch's T-Test Comparing the Acceptability Scores of Male Participants Between the Two Stories

Two independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the acceptability scores of the 29 men (M = 1.13, SD = 0.24) between the two groups of stories. Since the data showed significant p-values when conducting the Levene's test, indicating a heterogeneity of variances, the results of the Welch's t-test were reported. This t-test is robust against unequal variances and unequal sample sizes. Those men that read the female victim story (n = 13, M = 1.03, SD = 0.30) showed no significantly different acceptability scores when compared to the men that read the male victim story (n = 16, M = 1.21, SD = 0.13) [t(15.83) = -2.03, p =.060]. In other words, the victim/perpetrator gender had no significant influence on the acceptability scores when looking at men.

Student's T-Test Comparing the Acceptability Scores of Female Participants Between the Two Stories

Executing a student's t-test to compare the acceptability scores of the 98 women (M = 0.99, SD = 0.39) reading the female victim story (n = 50, M = 0.95, SD = 0.44) and the male-victim story (n = 48, M = 1.02, SD = 0.32), no significant difference was found [t(96) = -0.92, p = .358]. Meaning that the victim/perpetrator gender does not have a significant influence on the acceptability scores of women in relation to coercive and controlling behaviour.

Student's T-Test Comparing the Acceptability Scores of Female and Male Participants Reading the Female Victim Story

Further, executing a student's t-test to compare the acceptability scores of men (n = 13, M = 1.03, SD = 0.30) and women (n = 50, M = 0.95, SD = 0.44) reading the female victim story no significant difference was found [t(61) = 0.59, p=.561]. The gender of the

participants had no significant influence on acceptability scores when reading the female-victim story.

Welch's T-Test Comparing the Acceptability Scores of Female and Male Participants Reading the Male Victim Story

When comparing the acceptability scores of men and women reading the male victim story the data showed significant p-values when conducting the Levene's test. This indicates a heterogeneity of variances, thus, the results of the Welch's t-test were reported. The acceptability scores of men (n = 16, M = 1.21, SD = 0.13) and women (n = 48, M = 1.02, SD = 0.32) reading the male victim story showed a significant difference [$t(58.67) = 3.26$, p=.002]. That means, the gender of the participants had a significant influence on acceptability scores when reading the male victim story.

Discussion

In this study the effect of victim/perpetrator gender and the effect of participant gender on the acceptability of coercion and control was tested, while controlling for abusive past experiences (E-HITS). This was done because coercive and controlling behaviour is recently becoming more important, with countries introducing laws that make such behaviour legally punishable (Barlow et al., 2019). Moreover, it was of interest to examine stereotypical gender roles of victim and perpetrator to counteract false stigmata while also paying attention to male victims, who are often neglected in research.

To begin with, all results should be taken with caution, even though in the data analyses additional measures were taken to ensure that the imbalance of gender groups of participants does not skew the results. To ensure this, additional Student's t-tests and Welch's t-tests were conducted to remove any effect of a lack of independence between the two independent variables and to adjust for unequal variances. Nonetheless, when comparing the

outcomes of the genders, the small number of men participating, not just compared to women but also in general, should be kept in mind.

Main Effect of Abusive Past Experiences on Acceptability of Coercion and Control

The results indicate that past experiences in relation to intimate partner violence (IPV) have an influence on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour. Participants that were exposed to IPV in the 12 months prior to the survey generally indicated a higher acceptability of coercion and control. Thus, it could be concluded that participants being exposed to IPV accept coercion and control more compared to participants who have not been exposed to IPV. This finding is also supported by the study of Johnson et al. (2015), which reported that people who have not personally experienced IPV or coercion and control evaluate such behaviour differently compared to those who have had experiences with it. Moreover, the research paper of Candela (2016), demonstrated that victims often do not relate the coercive and controlling behaviour executed by their partner to the partner, but to themselves. Victims believe that the way they have acted was wrong or inappropriate. Making them believe that they deserve the coercive and controlling behaviour from their partner, for example as an act of a punishment (Candela, 2016). Feeling guilty for behaving in such a way that the partner executes the abusive behaviour, instead of blaming the partner, might have its origins in a negative self-view of the victim. It was found that people with a lower self-esteem are more likely to stay in abusive relationships, while feeling anxious and depressed (Goldner, 2004). Thus, the coercive and controlling behaviour is not seen as bad by the victim, the negative feelings evoked are related to the self and the own behaviour prior to the coercion and control.

Main Effects of Participant Gender and Victim/Perpetrator Gender on Acceptability

Acceptability of Men Towards Coercive and Controlling Behaviour

A gender difference in evaluating coercive and controlling behaviour that is directed towards male victims, was observed. Men evaluated such behaviour as significantly more acceptable than women. However, no significant difference was found in the way men evaluate coercive and controlling behaviour when comparing the two groups of male victim story and female victim story. But this finding was close to being significant (p = .060), thus, there was a difference observed, yet it was only close to the threshold of being significant. Since only a few men participated in this study, it would be interesting to repeat such a measure with a larger more equally gender distributed sample size to see how or if this would affect the results. If men accept coercion and control significantly more when it is against men compared to women, this would further support the research paper of Ayala, Kotary and Hetz (2018), in which they stated that men who are abused by women, are often criticized for not standing up for themselves. Thus, not the toxic behaviour of the woman is judged negatively but the reaction, or missing reaction, of the man. Making them believe that they should withstand abuse or react differently to it, instead of reporting it, to not seem weak (Ayala, Kotary & Hertz, 2018). This finding, even though not significant, is important as it implies that men perceive women and abusive behaviour coming from them as less harmful compared to similar behaviour being executed by men. Making it less likely that they will report such crimes coming from their female partners/family. As already mentioned in the introduction, this likely contributes to the imbalance of women and men reporting IPV and/ or coercion and control.

Moreover, men evaluated coercive and controlling behaviour as less acceptable when it was directed against women. This finding is not supported by the study of Worden and Carlson (2005), who found that men thought some violence is justified in relationships and that some women want to be abused by their partner. The differences could stem from a combination of the way the research was conducted and the societal stigma towards men and women. Worden and Carlson executed an opinion survey, in which no story was presented. In

this study, however, a clear narrative was given, possibly eliciting a feeling of compassion for the female victim. This might have been supported by the stigma of women being the weaker gender, with fewer opportunities to defend themselves, compared to men (Ayala, Kotary, Hertz, 2018). Some male participants might have been able to feel more sympathy for the female victim, as the story enables them to feel more empathy. In contrast to this, men might have felt less empathy for the abused man, because they could more easily imagine themselves in his position, eliciting the stigma that the man should stand up for himself and fight back (Ayala, Kotary & Hertz, 2018). Lastly, the relatively small sample size of men in both groups of victim/perpetrator gender needs to be taken into account. In the study of Worden and Carlson 1200 respondents were questioned with half being female and half being male, representing better comparable groups of gender with more participants to balance possible outliers.

No significant difference was found in the way men evaluate coercive and controlling behaviour when comparing the two groups of male victim story and female victim story. However, this finding was close to being significant ($p = .060$), thus, there was a difference observed, yet it was only close to the threshold of being significant. Since only a few men participated in this study, it would be interesting to repeat such a measure with a larger more equally gender distributed sample size to see how or if this would affect the results. If men accept coercion and control significantly more when it is against men compared to women, this would further support the research paper of Ayala, Kotary and Hetz (2018), in which they stated that men who are abused by women, are often criticized for not standing up for themselves. Thus, not the toxic behaviour of the woman is judged negatively but the reaction, or missing reaction, of the man. Making them believe that they should withstand abuse or react differently to it, instead of reporting it, to not seem weak (Ayala, Kotary & Hertz, 2018). This finding, even though not significant, is important as it implies that men perceive women and abusive behaviour coming from them as less harmful compared to similar behaviour

being executed by men. Making it less likely that they will report such crimes coming from their female partners/family. As already mentioned in the introduction, this likely contributes to the imbalance of women and men reporting IPV and/ or coercion and control.

Acceptability of Women Towards Coercive and Controlling Behaviour

Interestingly, women evaluated coercion and control not significantly different, regardless of the gender of the victim and perpetrator. However, when looking at the raw data, it can be seen that women also evaluate coercion and control towards their own gender as more acceptable, however not significantly more. This raises the question why both genders might perceive coercion and control as being more acceptable when it is aimed at someone with the same gender as themselves, compared to the opposite gender. This finding could indicate that participants tolerate coercion and control more when it is aimed at someone they can identify with more easily, while accepting it less when they see themselves in the position of executing it. Thus, they might be more tolerant to accept such behaviour from their partner than to execute it themselves. Conducting a study with more participants and more equally balanced groups of gender could help to find out whether these results are reliable. However, it seems as if women do not have internalized the stigma of weak and homosexual men in case of reporting abuse or not defending oneself against it, as implied by Ayala, Kotary and Hetz (2018). Also, their finding that female perpetrators are perceived as more likeable compared to male perpetrators seems to be rejected by the results, at least when looking at women. Since women do not significantly differentiate between genders of perpetrators when evaluating how acceptable they assess their behaviour to be. However, since likeability of perpetrators was not measured within this study, this conclusion can only be derived somewhat from the results.

The study also implies that there is no stigma against women that are exposed to abuse and report it, since both men and women generally evaluated coercive and controlling

behaviour against women as not acceptable with no significant difference between the genders. This finding is not in line with the implications of Walby and Towers (2018) research paper. Their study implies that abusive behaviours are more accepted by society when they are coming from perpetrators that fulfil stereotypical gender roles, with men as being the perpetrator and women as being the weaker gender and the victim. This implies that the participants of this study might not have stereotypical gender roles of the victim and perpetrator, or at least that these stereotypes do not justify abusive behaviour against women. With women often being viewed as the weaker gender, abusive behaviour against them could also be evaluated as less acceptable, due to the believed helplessness of women (Ayala, Kotary & Hertz, 2018). Thus, abusive behaviour is judged more negatively, because it is believed that women do not have as much capacity as men to stand up for themselves and fight back (Ayala, Kotary & Hertz, 2018). Again, the differences in sample sizes and group variances need to be considered here, as they could easily cause the differences in results.

Conclusion of Findings

Finally, it can be said that, despite significant results of men evaluating coercive and controlling behaviour as being more acceptable when it is directed at men compared to women, most participants did not accept any of the named behaviours. With raw mean scores ranging from 226 to 318 on a scale from 0-2000, acceptability scores are low. Thus, the finding of Worden and Carlson (2005) that one third of respondents evaluate violent behaviour as being normal cannot be transferred to coercive and controlling behaviour, at least not with the results of this study. However, due to the low number of men participating in this study, not only compared to women but generally, the statistical power of the current study is smaller than the one of Worden and Carlson (2005). In their study, men and women were nearly equally distributed and approximately 1200 people participated.

Limitations

Sampling

Several limitations that influence the study's results need to be considered further. The study was conducted via the Sona system of the University of Twente as well as through a Qualtrics link that was posted via social media stories (Instagram, Whatsapp). Therefore, mainly people between the age of 18 and 29 participated (113), with only few being older than 29 (14). Thus, the results of the study are mainly applicable to people within the age-range of 18 to 29. However, this limitation is two-sided, as it also serves as an advantage. The story was more easily applicable to adolescents. The partners were referred to as a 'couple' rather than 'spouses', they were not living together but each had an apartment of their own. Lastly, the coercive and controlling behaviour displayed might also be more applicable to younger people. Coercive and controlling behaviour happening at an older age could for example involve children, finances, and the dependency of one partner towards the other (financially, economically).

Procedure

Another limitation is that a hypothetical story was used. Participants might not feel as emotionally connected to fictional victims and perpetrators as they would feel towards their real family, friends, or acquaintances in a similar situation. However, researching how people perceive coercion and control when they have experienced it themself or when people close to them have experienced it, is putting more difficulty on finding a big enough sampling population.

The fact that the study is based solely on self-reports of participants is limiting the trustworthiness of the answers. Participants sometimes feel the need to answer 'morally correct' instead of answering honestly. Counteracting this limitation would also require the researcher to put more time and effort into observing participants to confirm or deny the correctness of their answers given.

Data

Also, the noticeable imbalance as well as the small raw number of men (29) and women (98) participating in the study might have had an influence on the results, especially because the study is gender focused. When working with ANCOVA such significant differences in groups can skew the results. The statistical power of a test comparing groups is highest with sample sizes being equal or close to equal. The power always depends on the smaller sample size, nullifying the advantage of having generally a lot of participants in case they are unequally balanced into one group. Additionally, no measures were taken to counteract fraudulent behaviour, for example by including social desirability scales.

Implications for Future Research

In the future more research needs to be conducted to verify or refute the results of this study, this should especially be done with larger and more equally distributed genders sample sizes. More studies focusing on violence and coercion and control against men need to be conducted to outbalance the research papers and experiments predominantly focusing on abused women. In that way, the variables of gender can be more accurately integrated into the picture of physical and psychological abuse.

Additionally, it would be interesting to compare the acceptability scores of people living in England, where there is a law against coercive and controlling behaviour integrated, to those living in areas without such a law. The results of such a study would demonstrate whether such a law has an influence on the perception of residents towards coercion and control. Do they think that it is less acceptable because it is illegal? Also, research has pointed out that perpetrators executing coercion and control need to be held accountable for their actions to allow victims to heal from the abuse (Goldner, 2004). The victim needs to be able to fully ascribe the abusive behaviour towards the perpetrator without wondering whether the victim him/herself was also blameworthy for their behaviour. The Perpetrator also needs to realize that their abusive behaviour is harmful for the victim, to allow them to improve their behaviour, ideally breaking the vicious cycle of abuse (Goldner, 2004). Thus, researching

whether victims and perpetrators experience advantages from the introduction of a law making coercion and control punishable could help introducing laws against coercion and control in more countries.

Generally, the topic of coercion and control is relatively new and unexplored, but with increasing interest in these topics hopefully more findings are about to come in the near future.

Conclusion

Concluding, the study has demonstrated some interesting findings, with both men and women accepting coercion and control more when it is aimed at the own sex (based on raw scores, not significant scores). Further, past experiences of intimate partner violence amplify the condemnation of both sexes towards coercion and control. Thus, the gender of both participants and victim/perpetrator as well as past experiences seem to have an influence on the acceptability of coercive and controlling behaviour. With past experiences acting as a risk factor to accept coercive and controlling behaviour more, it is of high relevance for more countries to introduce a law making coercion and control legally punishable. Only in that way, both victims and perpetrators can be helped to accurately process the incident(s), to avoid a repetition of the behaviour of the perpetrator and its harmful consequences for the victim. Lastly, by ensuring a complete processing of the incident, it is less likely that victims reciprocate the toxic behaviour of the perpetrator.

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Appendix A

Vignette representing the female as the victim and male as the perpetrator

Emma was about to leave the house to meet with some friends from high school. They wanted to head to a party together. While she was looking for her favourite lipstick Mark, her boyfriend of one year, showed up unexpectedly at her door. “I’d rather you wore another outfit. The dress is really short. Don’t want any guys to think they might want to try it on with you.” “I am already late.” Emma responded and continued getting ready. Mark was right behind her and asked if she would not rather stay with him tonight instead. “Honey, I haven’t seen them in a while. Please don’t start this discussion again.” Mark sighs and says, “don’t spend too much money on alcohol. I don’t like my girl being drunk.” Emma gave him a kiss and left for the party.

Some time passed and as Mark hasn’t heard anything from Emma, he started texting her. He asked how her night was going and when she will be home again. He did not receive an answer and started thinking about how good she looked. He tried to video call her, but she did not respond. He texted her several times and got very upset that she did not answer at all. He started sending messages demanding that she contact him so he could be sure she was okay, and then to demand to know what she was doing and who she was with. He started checking her Instagram feed to see if he could see what she was doing. He made sure she told him her social media passwords, so he logged in her account, so he was also able to see the stories of her friends. He was furious when he did not find any information. And still, Emma did not reply.

He was so annoyed by her behaviour that he opened the tracking app he had installed on Emma’s phone that she didn't know about. She was at a club in town not far away and so he decided to jump on his bike to get to her. Arriving at the club, he sees Emma sitting at the bar next to a guy. He started screaming “How dare you! I knew you’d be chatting to some guy

when you weren't talking to me. You will go home with me now." Emma tried to say something, but Mark was faster "you bloody cheat. I knew it. I knew it all along. We go home now. No discussion or else you'll see what will happen to you."

Vignette representing the male as the victim and female as the perpetrator

Mark was about to leave the house to meet with some friends from high school. They wanted to head to a party together. While he was looking for his favourite aftershave Emma, his girlfriend of one year, showed up unexpectedly at his door. "I'd rather you wore another outfit. That shirt is really tight. Don't want any girls to think they might want to try it on with you." "I am already late." Mark responded and continued getting ready. Emma was right behind him and asked if he would not rather stay with her tonight instead. "Honey, I haven't seen them in a while. Please don't start this discussion again." Emma sighs and says, "don't spend too much money on alcohol. I don't like my man being drunk." Mark gave her a kiss and left for the party.

Some time passed and as Emma hasn't heard anything from Mark, she started texting him. She asked how his night was going and when he will be home again. She did not receive an answer and started thinking about how good he looked. She tried to video call him, but he did not respond. She texted him several times and got very upset that he did not answer at all. She started sending messages demanding that he contact her so she could be sure he was okay, and then to demand to know what he was doing and who he was with. She started checking his Instagram feed to see if she could see what he was doing. She made sure he told her his social media passwords, so she logged in his account, so she was also able to see the stories of his friends. She was furious when she did not find any information. And still, Mark did not reply.

She was so annoyed by his behaviour that she opened the tracking app she had installed on Mark's phone that he didn't know about. He was at a club in town not far away

and so she decided to jump on her bike to get to him. Arriving at the club, she sees Mark sitting at the bar next to a girl. She started screaming “How dare you! I know you’d be chatting to some girl when you weren’t talking to me. You will go home with me now.” Mark tried to say something, but Emma was faster “you bloody cheat. I knew it. I knew it all along. We go home now. No discussion or else you’ll see what will happen to you.”

Appendix B

Behaviour included in the Vignettes and the Acceptability Questionnaire

1. Showing up at their partners house unexpectedly
2. Telling their partner what they should wear
3. Making their partner feel guilty about their choice of clothes
4. Not being comfortable with their partner going out with friends.
5. Telling their partner how much alcohol they can drink
6. Telling their partner how much money they can spend
7. Video-calling or texting their partner multiple times a day without prior agreement.
8. Getting angry with their partner if they don't respond to your calls and/or messages within 30 minutes.
9. Demanding the passwords to their partner's social media accounts.
10. Monitoring their partner's activity on social media.
11. Covertly checking their partner's social media interactions on their phone.
12. Monitoring their partner's whereabouts using tracking apps WITH their consent (e.g. with Find My Friends or Snap Maps.)
13. Placing a tracking app on the partners phone to monitor the partner’s whereabouts WITHOUT their consent e.g. Find My Friends, Snap Maps.
14. Pursuing their partner to check their whereabouts.
15. Pursuing their partner specifically to make sure they are not cheating.
16. Getting angry if their partner talks to others of the sex they are physically attracted to.
17. Insulting their partner
18. Accusing their partner of cheating with no reasonable evidence.
19. Demanding their partner leave their friends and go home with them.
20. Threatening physical violence against their partner.

Appendix C

E-HITS Screening tool

Over the last 12 months, how often did your partner (If applicable)

	Not applicable	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Fairly often (4)	Frequently (5)
Physically hurt you?						
Insult you or talk you down?						
Threaten you with harm?						
Scream or curse at you?						
Force you to have sexual activities?						

Cut-off score for IPV >=7

Appendix D

Table 2

Means, adjusted Means, Standard Deviations and Standard Errors for logged and unlogged Acceptability scores of coercive and controlling behaviour for the four groups.

Acceptability CC	Female Victim		Male Victim	
	Male Participants	Female Participants	Male Participants	Female Participants
Mean	226.33	268.50	317.80	244.23
SD	(83.79)	(203.70)	(93.83)	(140.35)
Madj	234.17	268.87	299.99	248.21
SE	(66.15)	(28.56)	(52.31)	(29.61)
LogMean	1.03	.99	1.19	1.01
LogSD	(.15)	(.41)	(.12)	(.28)
LogMadj	1.05	.99	1.14	1.02
LogSE	(.13)	(.06)	(.10)	(.06)