'Influencers' – A study investigating the messages people receive about coercive control on social media

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Abstract

Purpose: Coercive control (which is a form of IPV) is a significant public health concern affecting millions of people throughout the world. Whilst exposure to IPV in childhood and adolescence has been shown to contribute to the intergenerational transmission of IPV, this alone does not explain IPV. A range of bio-psycho-social factors contribute to IPV which includes exposure to peer influence on social media platforms whereby research has shown this online expression of views and opinions can change offline behaviour. This has extended not only to purchasing products but also influencing attitudes in relation to illegal behaviour such as sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Methodology: According to Fazel *et al*., (2021) real-time social media data can provide important information about trends in public attitudes and attitudes towards events in the news. The current study utilised data from Twitter to explore what adolescents are being exposed to online surrounding coercive and controlling behaviour. The data was subsequently analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings: Three overarching themes were found in relation to coercive control: the Educator; Gaslighter; and the Comedian. Two of these were forms of secondary victimisation.

Originality: Previous research in this field has tended to focus on the impact of IPV and the prevalence rates of IPV in young people, but not on the different types of information young people may be exposed to surrounding relationships on social media platforms.

Implications: Social media provides a powerful platform through which people's attitudes and behaviours may be influenced both positively and negatively in relation to socio-political issues (Lozano-Blasco *et al.,* 2022). The implications of the findings in this study are discussed with recommendations for how social media platforms could be supported to act prevent them from being used as a tool to facilitate the distribution of hate speech in relation to IPV and instead be used as a platform for psycho-education.

Introduction

What is IPV?

Intimate partner violence (IPV) includes physical, sexual or emotional abuse by a current or previous intimate partner that can cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm (Stewart *et al.,* 2021). This can include coercive control which is a process to control another person's behaviour (Patterson, 2016) through degradation, intimidation and/or isolation (Stark, 2009). The Crown Prosecution Service (2017) defines coercive behaviour as an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim. Controlling behaviour is defined as a range of 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 (CPS, 2017). Coercive control is considered an offence in the UK under Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act, 2015.

IPV occurs among all socioeconomic, religious and cultural groups but the overwhelming global burden of IPV is borne by women (WHO, 2012). The World Health Organisation multi Global Database of responses of over 2 million women on the prevalence of violence found that globally, 27% of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 are estimated to have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime with 24% of these first occurring between the ages of 15-19. In the United States it is estimated that six million females are victims of IPV every year (Smith et al. 2018) of which 28.1% needed medical

care (Chrisler and Ferguson, 2006). UK Crime Survey Data (Elkin, 2022) data showed that 4.5% of the general population reported being a victim of IPV in the previous year (6.4% females and 2.5% males). In addition, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (Smith *et al.,* 2018) found that 36% of women will experience a form of IPV in their lifetime and of these 71% occurred before the age of 25 (Smith *et al.,* 2017). In addition, over 20% of adolescents have experienced violence at the hands of a current or former partner, and 50% of those who experienced IPV sustained injury (Wincentak *et al.,* 2017).

Research suggests that women who report controlling behaviours by their partners, are more likely to experience psychological and physical violence (Aizpurua *et al.,* 2017). IPV can result in homicide, homelessness and other social challenges (Arravo *et al,* 2017). Adult victims of IPV are also likely to experience mental health problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression (Arrayo *et al.,* 2017). In addition, children exposed to IPV are also known to be at an increased risk of developing internalising and externalising problems (DeJonghe *et al.,* 2011) such as mental and physical health difficulties.

Thus, it can be seen that IPV and Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a global problem. Furthermore it is also noted that 19.4% of the UK population report being a victim of IPV since the age of 16 and 7.4% of 16-19 year olds being victims of partner violence (CPS, 2017). Thus IPV is also of particular relevance to young people and the prevention of intimate partner violence (IPV) would benefit not only the individual but society generally (Smith *et al.,* 2017).

What factors contribute to IPV perpetration?

Theories explaining IPV are based on bio-psycho-social models which acknowledge the varied range of factors which may culminate into this behaviour (McLeod, 2020). Research has shown that children exposed to IPV are more likely to be a victim of IPV or a perpetrator in their intimate adult relationships (McLeod, 2020). Thus intergenerational transmission of IPV (Anda *et al.,* 2006) has been linked to social learning (Bandura, 1977) whereby a child who is exposed to attitudes and behaviours supportive of IPV perpetration and victimisation will internalise them. However, this does not apply to all children exposed to IPV with some children demonstrating resilience to IPV exposure (Hamby *et al.,* 2010) through a process of

rejecting IPV attitudes and with a heightened commitment to end this behaviour. Furthermore, not all perpetrators of IPV were victims of this behaviour in childhood which may be offset by personal characteristics such as attachment style and history of trauma (Smith *et al, 2015*).

Thus, exposure to parental IPV in childhood does not predict a pathway towards IPV. Adolescent developmental psychopathology theories note the varied range of factors which may contribute towards this behaviour. The UN Convention on the rights of a child and the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines adolescence as ranging from 10-19 but others suggest this should be end between the ages of 18-26 (Patton *et al*., 2016) due to debates around when the brain reaches maturity. During adolescence it is noted that changes to the brain occur in the frontal cortex (Blakemore, 2012) which is responsible for decision making, consequential thinking and impulsivity (Choudhury *et al*., 2008) as well changes that cause a reduced capacity for regulating emotional reactivity (Heller *et al.,* 2016). It is also noted that at the same time adolescents' capacity for social interactions develop. Thus, adolescence is a time when people may have an increased capacity for social interactions and impulsivity, but have a reduced capacity for emotional regulation and consequential thinking and a reduced capacity for coping with stress (Romeo, 2013). As a result this can leave adolescents vulnerable to adopting a negative trajectory (Best and Ban 2021) if they are not exposed to positive environmental influences during a time when they are questioning their identity and autonomy with increased independent thinking (Stefanou et al. 2004). In addition, the plasticity of the developing adolescent brain means it is shaped more by life experiences and social environments than adults (Blakemore and Mills 2014). For example, research has shown that adolescents who associated with peers who engaged in hostile talk about women (e.g. 'women are only good for being at home, barefoot and pregnant' or should be 'punched') were more likely to engage in IPV in emerging adulthood (Capaldi *et al.,* 2001). It is thought that this may be due to adolescence and early adulthood being an important period in laying the foundation for healthy and stable relationships (Stöckl *et al.,* 2014). Longitudinal studies have also found that associating with delinquent peers and spending unsupervised time with friends were significant predictors of IPV (Smith *et al*., 2015). Hence, peer relationships are thought to contribute to young people's relational development

(Connolly *et al.,* 2014) framing the way young people learn how to behave in future relationships, whether this is as a victim or perpetrator of IPV.

Peer influence on behaviour is referred to as simple contagion whereby people adopt the behaviour and attitudes of people close to them (e.g. parents or friends at school). However, it has also been postulated young people may be influenced through contact with others who are less physically close to them such as through the internet. The mechanism through which social media platforms may influence adolescents is called complex contagion which is based on what is known as the strength of weak ties hypothesis (Centola, 2010). This has found that behaviour is adopted through multiple exposures to others but importantly the ties to these others can be weak (unlike friendships with peers which may be strong) and yet they equally affirm behaviour (Centola, 2010). Examples of weak parasocial relationships on social media include followers and influencers (known as Instagrammers, YouTubers and Tweeters). Social media influencers are people who have a large number of followers on social media (Swant, 2016). Followers are people who choose to receive the social media posts of the influencer. Influencers are deemed to have expertise in an area with research showing followers hold a similar level of trust in them as they hold for their friends (Swant, 2016). Research has shown they can have considerable influence on adolescents (Lozano-Blasco *et al.,* 2022) to such an extent they are paid to advertise their opinions to influence people to buy products (Croes and Bartels, 2021).Thus, social media platforms may expose people to a multitude of weak ties (people with whom they are not in close physical proximity with such as friends and family) but this has sufficient exposure these can change their behaviour.

This has also extended beyond influencing the purchasing of products to influencing attitudes. Twitter is considered to be the social networking platform which is used to debate social, political and environmental issues and thus it is deemed to be a platform which is a "thermometer of social concerns" (Lozano-Blasco *et al.,* 2022, pp74). Hence, social media platforms such as Twitter can act as places where complex contagion can occur to influence attitudes. Examples of this include the #MeToo-movement whereby research found that responses to this tweet resulted in a reduced tolerance of attitudes towards sexual harassment, a reduction of sexual harassment of women in the workplace (Johnson et al., 2019) and an increase in the reporting of sexual harassment crimes and arrests for this

behaviour (Levy and Mattsson, 2020). However, hostility towards women increased (Johnson *et al.,* 2019) in the form of gender harassment such as sexist remarks.

Thus, social media provides a powerful platform through which people's attitudes and behaviours may be influenced both positively and negatively in relation to socio-political issues. For adolescents social media is also considered a platform to engage in social comparison (Stockdale and Coyne, 2020), self-disclosure and identity construction (Davis, 2012). Social media posts have also been shown to influence off-line behaviour in terms of increasing xenophobia (Madziva *et al.,* 2022), unhealthy restriction of eating (Rounsefell *et al.,* 2019), gang related violence and self-harm/suicide (House of Commons Social Media Enquiry, 2019).

However, it has also been argued that having an awareness of the nature of social media messages could provide opportunities for these to be addressed. For example, Kim et al (2021) suggested that social media could be used to provide automated interventions (chatbots) to provide education and support to people experiencing IPV. This was also supported by Rempel et al (2019) who noted that social media provides significant social and health information for females both in terms of providing information on what constitutes IPV as well as providing safety planning tools when leaving IPV relationships. As a result machine learning tools have been developed to try and identify IPV in social media posts (Trin Ha *et al*, 2022). However, these have found identifying emotional abuse (such as coercive control) to be the most challenging (Trin Ha *et al*, 2022).

In summary, research has shown that social media has the potential to influence behaviour, including that relating to attitudes towards IPV. In addition, young people may be particularly influenced by social media content both due to changes in adolescence and social contagion. However, research in this field previously has tended to focus on the impact of IPV and the prevalence rates of IPV in young people, but not on the different types of information young people may be exposed to surrounding relationships on social media platforms and specifically coercive control. The purpose of this study was to explore the way in which social media frames coercive controlling behaviour given the potential influence this could have on young people given the potential for complex contagion

(Centola, 2010) via social media to influence attitudes and behaviour (Johnson *et al,* 2019). As noted by The House of Commons Social Media Enquiry (2019), social media platforms differ to other information sources young people may be exposed to (e.g. TV, radio or films) as they are not regulated.

Research Question

The proposed research question was:

How is coercive control framed within social media platforms such as Twitter?

What are young people being exposed to online, through social media, surrounding coercive controlling behaviour?

Method

Design

The epistemological position taken was constructivism, as a qualitative design was used for the research to explore a specific phenomenon and population. This allowed an in-depth analysis of the data, capturing expressive values that would not be retrieved from a quantitative design. The study used an inductive approach, employing reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to find themes and patterns across the dataset.

Procedure

Data Collection

Twitter was chosen for the purposes of this study because it is largely used by young people, (The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017). Twitter has 396.5 million users worldwide and 19.05 million users in the UK. In 2020, Gen-Z (those born between 1997-2012) posted 52% of all tweets and 23.7% of the global audience was aged 13-24 years old. Thus, with the age of consent to use Twitter being 13 years old, such commentary in relation to coercive control is accessible to a wide range of young people.

Twitter has also been noted as a platform which offers the sharing of sentiments, feelings and individual perspectives of users making it the 'perfect field' to conduct qualitative research (La Rosa, 2013). It is also considered to be the social networking platform which is

used to debate social, political and environmental issues and is deemed to be a platform which is a "thermometer of social concerns" (Lozano-Blasco *et al.,* 2022, pp74). Twitter has also been noted to be a platform in which complex contagion can occur to influence attitudes. Thus, Twitter was selected as the platform to explore the 'social thermometer' for coercive control.

The study analysed data in relation to a celebrity couple whereby the male was accused of engaging in coercive controlling behaviours towards the female. The celebrity couple were chosen as a specific source of interest due to their high number of social media followers (over 340 million) with nearly 30% of these being aged 14-20, thus, reaching an estimated 102 million people in the age group of interest. Research also suggests that although news coverage is primarily determined by news features, audiences appear to hold more heightened interest in well-known celebrities (Yan and Zhang, 2018). Hence, this, combination of high numbers of social media followers combined with celebrity status was deemed as a more likely relevant source of information for young people reading social media posts.

To be clear the authors take no position on whether the individual in the couple engaged in these behaviours. Rather, the authors were interested in the themes that related to this alleged behaviour on social media. Examples of the behaviour the individual was said to have engaged included exposing the couple's private conversations online, moving within close proximity of the ex-partner, sending unwanted gifts to the ex-partners house, and inciting hatred and violence towards the ex-partners new partner.

The posts used in the research were determined based on the standards of topicality (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2012), timeliness (Foster, 2004), focus dimension (referring to social relevance) being significant to coercive control (Curran *et al*, 2010) and the verbal presentations in relation to the topic dimension (Reinemann *et al,* 2012). As such, posts with the highest engagement were collected through a 4 month period during the height of the male's alleged behaviour. This timeframe was selected to ensure the data was relevant thus ensuring timeliness. Posts were collected in line with the recommendations of La Rosa (2013) and Kim et al (2013) using an iterative process for generating search terms based on the research question. The posts were found through searching the couple's name alongside

possible terms such as ‘divorce’, ‘relationship’, ‘feud’, ‘disagreement’ and ‘children’. As noted by Kim et al (2013) researchers cannot analyse all data retrieved through social media platforms due to the volume of data retrieved. As the couple had over 340 million followers the 50 posts with the highest number of likes were selected as the data set in order to capture the predominant themes (Lozano-Blasco, 2022) and avoid clutter (La Rosa, 2013). These 50 posts consisted of 2,000,840 likes from followers. Past research following a similar design, utilised 40 extracts, deeming the 50 in this study as a sufficient volume (Lynch, 2020).

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis and rigour

The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, where items were coded to create general themes found across the data using the six stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytic technique was used because it allowed for more clear and comprehensive findings to be drawn from the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that thematic analysis is not bound by pre-existing theoretical frameworks, which was deemed useful for the current study which was exploratory in nature and not bound by pre-existing literature or hypotheses.

An inductive analysis was carried out on the dataset, where the data was analysed through a process of coding the data, without trying to fit into a pre-existing code frame, or the researchers’ analytical preconceptions. A critical orientation was taken when analysing this data, to offer interpretations of meaning, further to those that have been explicitly communicated by individual’s opinions (Byrne, 2022), as it analyses discourse as though it were constitutive of an individual’s personal state (Braun and Clarke, 2014). Furthermore, both semantic and latent coding were utilised within the dataset. Semantic or latent codes were both produced when it was deemed more appropriate. Research suggests that any extract could be double-coded, under the premise of the semantic meaning communicated by the individual and the latent meaning then being interpreted by the researcher (Patton, 1990). This was useful when analysing extracts from the current study, as most of the extracts were short and concise because Twitter posts are limited to 280 characters.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed British Psychological Society (BPS) guidelines and subsequently received ethical approval from the University. The data was collected from public domains, which do not need an account to access the information, therefore the data is not classed as private (BPS, 2021). Thus, consent was not required for the collection of this data, from the original authors' posts. However, although the data is classed as public because an account is not required to access these, careful consideration was given as to whether the authors of the post could provide consent for these to be directly quoted in the study. For example, it is noted that even in instances where the quotation of the post is anonymised, reverse searching online could still potentially identify the author of the post. As such, in line with BPS Guidance and University ethics direct use of phrases, sentences, or uncommon terms from the data were not cited directly, to preserve anonymity and prevent reverse-searching and identification of the original author.

Results

Analysis revealed the following three main themes:

1. Educator
2. Gaslighter
3. Comedian

Theme 1 – Educator

Just under half of the data retrieved from Twitter posts demonstrated individuals trying to spread awareness of the male's controlling behaviour and how the behaviour he was performing was 'wrong' and should not be normalised. This was done through various methods such as verbal expressions of disapproval as well as sharing violent imagery of a different male strangling a female in the text data to represent a visual depiction of IPV. Others specifically cited the behaviour that they felt constituted an illegal act and labelling it as constituting 'abuse', 'stalking' or 'harassment'.

Sub-theme – Bystander Effect

A sub-theme related to shock that the behaviour had taken place publicly and these behaviours were allowed to happen because no one intervened. Multiple Twitter extracts expressed surprise that people on social media were witnessing the male's controlling behaviour towards the female but not acting to stop this. They wanted more to be done to stop the abuse occurring. This included comments highlighting how people following the male on social media were reinforcing the behaviour by liking his posts and how they wanted something to be done to stop this. How they wanted others to act was not stated nor was who they thought should take action.

Sub-theme – Positive Social Contagion

A further sub-theme related to how although it was unlikely the male or female would read their media posts other people might (such as friends and peers). People expressed how they hoped this would increase victims' ability to speak out if they were suffering from coercive control. This sub-theme related to notions that it was important to outwardly express coercive control as unacceptable because this may result in exerting influence over the attitudes of others.

Summary

This primary theme was characterised by labelling the behaviour as 'wrong' and feeling a moral responsibility to communicate this to others. These 'Educators' could be considered to have similarities to Whistleblowers who are defined as *"people who report unethical behaviour occurring within their own group to an authority"* (Dungan *et al.,* 2018) and who 'speak up' against injustice. This was the most common response in the data providing a clear narrative that coercive control was 'wrong' and should not be ignored. Given the celebrity couple had over 340 million (with nearly 30% of these being aged 14-20) it can be postulated that these messages also extended to young people. These extracts could thus serve as psycho-educational in terms of exposing young people to a clear expressions of what behaviour constitutes abuse and coercive control through social media and that these are unacceptable.

In addition, a clear message emerged that bystander intervention to this behaviour was a moral responsibility, even if this did not impact on the male perpetrator and female victim

directly this could have a wider social good of supporting others to report coercive control. This study replicated other research suggesting that victims of online harassment may have social support online (Lytle, 2021). However, the findings were also compatible with Models of Bystander Intervention (Latané and Darley, 1970) which suggest people experience internal conflict witnessing 'wrong' behaviour but factors such as proximity to the victim (Palmer et al, 2018) or if the victim is unknown to the witness with a large number of bystanders this may also diffuse responsibility (Butler *et al.,* 2022) . In this study the posts indicated that something should be done to prevent the behaviour but no single post suggested how this should be achieved. This was consistent with the findings of Butler et al (2022) that respondents were significantly less likely to intervene online as the level of responsibility they placed on law enforcement and others such as the social media platform host increased.

The proactive behaviour seen in this study trying to raise awareness of coercive controlling behaviours and inciting others to do the same could have a positive impact on the way young people view IPV and subsequently, behave in future situations themselves. Research suggests that the peer context enforces social norms that provide important information on the appropriateness of perpetrating IPV (Witte and Mulla, 2013). Furthermore, social contagion is the spread of an entity or influence between individuals in a population through social networks (Rodgers and Rowe, 1993). The extracts in this dataset suggested people hoped that by openly denigrating coercive controlling behaviour, this could have a positive peer influence on victims. Rogers & Williams (1983) also referred to this as social diffusion whereby behavior change can be initiated and facilitated in a population if innovative behaviours or views are endorsed by enough people to influence change. This is positive given it has been noted that naming the abuse can have a positive impact for adolescents in IPV relationships because they may minimise physical or sexual violence (Kameg and Constantino, 2020).

Theme 2 – Gaslighter

The second theme related to blaming the victim and excusing or justifying a perpetrator's actions, often by suggesting the victim was at fault in some way. 4 sub-themes were identified under this primary theme.

Sub-theme - Blame the victim

Multiple posts suggested that the victim must have done something to provoke the male's behaviour. Extracts reference the victim's previous relationships which had ended and suggested this was evidence that she was at fault rather than the male. The posts infer the female had imperfections and faults which had caused the male to have engaged in controlling behaviours. Others suggest she was wrong to be angry at the male when he published their private messages online and hence it was her fault he had retaliated further.

Sub-theme – He's a good guy

Other extracts suggested that the male's behaviour was excusable because of the good things he had previously done for the female during the course of their relationship. This included notions that his good behaviour outweighs the bad and that the victim 'owes him' for all the good things he has done. Thus, he can behave in this manner because he has shown greater gestures towards her. The opinion in the extract suggests that because of these good behaviours the victim is wrong to want to end the relationship and is at fault for not recognising these qualities in him.

Sub-theme – Lover's tiff

Minimising language was evident when discussing IPV. Terms such as 'explosive feud' 'awkward' and 'chills out' were used to describe the male's behaviour and relationship with the female. The language used infers duplicity in the situation, and implies the victim to have equal involvement, when there was no evidence of such. A large proportion of the extracts report on the male's behaviour in a manner that suggested it was normal and acceptable. One article comments on the male sending the victim flowers on Valentine's Day and suggesting they will be together 'forever'.

Sub-theme – Keeping the family together

This theme related to the how the victim should excuse the male's behaviour because they had children together and how they should 'unite' for them. Extracts reference the couple's children and how the male's controlling behaviour is justified because he was framed to be 'helping' the children. For example, one Twitter post suggested that the male should remain

living with the female 'for the children's benefit' and another post condemns the public for considering the male's behaviour as controlling because he has children with the female, suggesting he therefore has a right to play a role in her life even if she does not want this. Others discuss how the male is doing the female a favour by buying a house opposite her as this will 'help' her to look after the children and that he has a 'right' to see her and the children whenever he wants to.

Summary

The Gaslighter theme related to attempts by individuals to rationalise the male's behaviour, apportion blame onto the victim and present opposing realities for how the victim and male should be seen by others. Gaslighting is different from silencing an individual. It is deemed as an active attempt to create an environment in which everyone else believes the victim is wrong (Spear, 2020). It is considered a type of abuse associated with exerting further power and control over the victim in an attempt to manipulate them to acquiesce. Thus, what can be seen in this theme is that the extracts provided evidence of an over-arching theme of Gaslighting the female in an attempt to justify the male's behaviour.

Research suggests that a reduction of IPV cannot be achieved without addressing societal attitudes that lead to the tolerance and justification of IPV against women (Gracia, 2014). Victim blaming attitudes reflect a public tolerance and acceptability of IPV that are often used to explain and justify abusive behaviours (Martin-Fernández *et al.,* 2018). Stewart & Vigod (2019) also noted that emotional responses from the victim when they are blamed for an act can lead to a feedback loop, whereby the victim's display of emotions is used to justify the undermining of the victim's credibility—which may lead to further victim blaming by reinforcing that the victim is "too emotional" or "too angry". This was replicated in the findings of this study whereby posts were used to reinforce negative attitudes towards IPV to young people.

Research has demonstrated that print media reporting of IPV is episodic, sensationalistic, and prone to perpetrator sympathizing, failing to contextualize IPV as intentionally abusive behaviour (Smith *et al.,* 2019). This was supported by the data retrieved for this study. Attitudes that tolerate IPV, particularly against women, have been linked to the

perpetration of this form of violence (Ferrer-Perez *et al.,* 2020). This is due to the acceptance of this behaviour as normative, increasing the risk of perpetration, as well as the justification by victims and society (Martin-Fernández *et al.,* 2018). Thus exposure to these social climates that condone IPV (Ferrer-Perez *et al.,* 2020) may increase the vulnerability of young people to being a victim or perpetrator of IPV themselves.

In addition, research also demonstrates abusers may use their children as a tactic to control, harm, or monitor their ex-partner for reasons including to harass them, keep track of them and to stay in their lives (Beeble *et al.,* 2007; Clements *et al.,* 2021). Furthermore, 'keeping the family together' has been identified by 1 in 5 women (Heron *et al.,* 2022) as a factor which has influenced victims of partner violence to remain with the perpetrator. This tactic was also reinforced in the social media posts in the present study.

Theme 3 – Comedian

This theme related to the use of humour when referring to coercive controlling behaviour. Two sub-themes there identified.

Sub-theme – Entertaining Gossip

Extracts showed people used humour when the male's narrative of his behaviour was publicly ridiculed. For example, when the male's protestations of being a victim himself were challenged for their accuracy, text abbreviations such as 'lol' were used in response. Others used smiley face emoji's to alert readers to how they found the behaviour or the commentary of this amusing. Others made jokes about the victim's new partner and her sexual past insinuating infidelity with others. Thus the male's behaviour was used as a source of jokes and amusement.

Sub-theme - Irony

Others used irony to defend the male. For example one pointed out that people who followed the male on social media likely drove past his infamous home and thus were no different in terms of stalking. Posts commented on how other celebrity males may live close to their ex-partners but had not been criticised. Another depicted the imagery of a different celebrity male who had threatened a male in relation to their wife but had not been deemed to be jealous or stalking. Irony was also used in relation to the female, noting how

her new partner had a tattoo of her name on his body and how if the male had done this he would be judged negatively.

Summary

The Comedian theme of joking about coercive control works to minimise the seriousness of this social issue and can have detrimental consequences. Mallett, et al. (2016) suggested that sexist humour simultaneously diminishes women and trivialises their experiences, as it communicates that the content of the joke is to be interpreted playfully, and not confronted.

Research has also shown that people use humour in relation to viewing media violence as a result of the content being deemed to be unacceptable or taboo (Allen *et al.,* 2022). This has also been referred to as Schadenfreude which means finding pleasure in another person's misfortune which fuels relational aggression (Erzi, 2020).

Mallett, et al. (2016) also suggest that confronting sexist humour is difficult because of its interpretative ambiguity, whereby the target of the joke may be accused of lacking a sense of humour or being too sensitive This type of humour creates an environment in which individuals feel comfortable expressing antagonistic attitudes, without fear of social reprisal (Romero-Sánchez *et al.,* 2021) and this is intensified due to the distance that social media provides from the object of the humour.

This study also revealed the use of irony in an attempt to justify the individual's behaviour. Research has shown that humour is a core aspect of personality (Ruch, 2008) and that irony is used with the aim of creating a sense of superiority (Heintz *et al.,* 2018) that is favoured by those with darker personality styles such as psychopathy and Machiavellianism. In this context it is considered that irony is used as an aggressive and intentional means of manipulating others (Dionigi, 2022). Thus, the use of irony in this study appeared to reflect a form of secondary victimisation which is defined as the re-victimisation of an individual through victim blaming or failing to treat a victim with respect, dignity and understanding (VanNierkerk and Coeztee, 2019).

While some research suggests that humour can be used to approach taboo subjects and open a conversation about IPV (Martin *et al.,* 2021), it is also important to note that that humour can also instigate and promote abusive behaviour. In this study people appeared to use humour in response to gaining enjoyment from the IPV stimulus, to distance themselves from the seriousness of the IPV behaviour and to assert a sense of superiority and manipulation.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which social media framed coercive control. According to Fazel et al (2021) real-time social media data can provide important information about trends in public attitudes and attitudes towards events in the news. This study evaluated what messages people were exposed to online surrounding intimate partner violence and controlling behaviour. An estimated 102 million of these people were aged 14-20 thus suggesting these messages were exposed to a significant number of young people. 50 posts with over 2,000,000 likes were used to capture these. The results of this study found the predominant theme was that coercive control was 'wrong', should not be tolerated and that people had a moral responsibility to not act as bystanders to this behaviour. Themes two and three were forms of secondary victimisation.

Social media provides a powerful platform through which people's attitudes and behaviours may be influenced both positively and negatively in relation to socio-political issues (Lozano-Blasco *et al.,* 2022). Social media posts have been shown to influence off-line behaviour in terms of increasing xenophobia (Madziva *et al.,* 2022), unhealthy restriction of eating (Rounsefell *et al.,* 2020), gang related violence and self-harm/suicide (House of Commons Social Media Enquiry, 2019).

However, social media can also have positive impacts and can be sources of learning, advice and support for young people. The House of Commons Social Media Enquiry (2019) noted that social media provided young people with positive access to information on physical and mental health. This is of particular importance as it is noted that adolescents may be a difficult to reach population for targeted interventions (Kameg and Constantino, 2020).

As noted in the enquiry there are a broad spectrum of benefits, risks and harms that children and young people may encounter via social media. The findings from the current study reveal that this extends to IPV. Social media cannot be said to cause IPV but exposure to negative attitudes in relation to IPV may contribute to a person's vulnerability. Therefore it is possible that a 'Principles-Based' approach to social media could assist to tackle the risk of children and young people being exposed to negative attitudes in relation to IPV. Whilst Freedom of Speech is respected it is also important to balance this against the protection of individuals or groups (Enarsson and Lindgren, 2019). There is much debate as to where this responsibility may lie in terms of whether this should be regulated through legislation or whether social media platforms should take responsibility for regulating their content. To be clear, none of the posted content in this study pertained to data that would be deemed illegal, however, posts indicated they found the content offensive and expressed surprise that this had been allowed. Thus, the question remains as to how young people could be safeguarded from hate speech in relation to IPV. The House of Commons Social Media Enquiry (2019) suggests that this could be achieved through a 'duty of care' to ensure social media platforms are not used as a tool to facilitate the distribution of hate speech in relation to IPV.

Strengths and Limitations of the study

The use of a qualitative approach allowed for in-depth information to be retrieved from the extracts, as well as informed interpretations to be made from the dataset. The use of online data also prevented participant bias, as the social media posts already existed and thus were not influenced by the nature of the study. However, it should be noted that although 23% of people aged 13-24 use Twitter (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017), 67% do not. In addition, not all of the 23% of people aged 13-24 may have been followers of the content analysed. This poses the question as to how other young people receive information on IPV and what is an acceptable way to behave within a relationship. Future research could focus on other platforms young people may access as well as other aspects of a young person's life that could influence their attitudes on IPV. For example, research suggests that little knowledge of, or negative attitudes to IPV (particularly against women), were more common among males in lower income areas (Gracia and Lila, 2015), highlighting other possible areas for future research.

A further limitation of the current study is that the data centres around one male perpetrator and one female victim. This means that the findings of the study only relate to one example of what young people may be exposed to online and may not be generalisable across all social media platforms and IPV situations (such as among other partner variations or other platforms such as Facebook) and therefore may not be entirely representative of how the media frames coercive control towards young people. It is important to note, however, that IPV against women is the most prolific form of IPV, making it a more researched topic and also more reported on in the media. Thus, although this research focussed solely on male violence against women, it is representative of the information young people are being exposed to online.

It should also be noted that the nature of data collection (Twitter posts) which have a maximum limit for characters per post may have limited the amount of data that could be extrapolated. Furthermore, the way in which Twitter posts are open with less privacy settings than other platforms such as Facebook may have also influenced the nature and content of the posts. Future research could build on the findings of the current study by gathering data from a wider range of social media platforms as well as interviewing young people to obtain a more rich and detailed understanding of their views on IPV.

Recommendations

- The denigration of victims of IPV could be more formally identified as a form of 'hate speech' by social media platforms. This could facilitate more effective reporting of content by users.
- It would be useful for social media platforms to provide clearer mechanisms on how people could report content they felt required intervention. For example, where users may be unsure if behaviour constitutes an offence but where this may be deemed harmful.
- Technology could also be used to identify potentially harmful content. For example, computational methods have been used to identify hate speech towards women on

social media (Garain and Basu, 2019) and these could be used to identify hate speech in relation to IPV.

- Social media platforms could generate campaigns to raise awareness of the bystander effect and how everyone has a responsibility to report online hate of any type and how they might do this.
- Whilst 'bots' are associated with negative effects on social media such as spreading misinformation, or manipulating online rating and review systems, there is new evidence these can be used positively. For example, altruistic bots have been used to enhance empathic behaviour in humanitarian crises, supporting people to switch to greener fuels to fight pollution and to encourage health behaviours such as stopping smoking (Zhou, 2017). These are known as positive bots and could be used positively to share accurate information in relation to IPV and to direct users to resources which are helpful. They could also be used to place targeted adverts for IPV helplines and community services to support young people.
- Social media platforms could signpost users to educational and useful information in relation to IPV. For example, this could include signposting to where victims of IPV may access help and support and psycho-educational resources for perpetrators of IPV on how to access help but also practical skills for regulating emotions and communication.
- Offline interventions to support adolescents at risk of IPV should incorporate information about online social media platforms to assist young people in target hardening and how to strengthen their resiliency.
- Social Media Influencers should be encouraged to attend psycho-educational training on IPV and the impact their influence could have on offline behaviour for young people at risk.
- Future research could focus on other aspects of a young person's life that could have an influence on their attitudes on IPV, for example their parents or exposure to education. Research could also explore social media narratives of male victims of IPV as well as same sex and transgender victimisation.

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