# A Pandemic within a Pandemic: The Investigation of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Victimisation Risk Factors and Stay/Leave Decisions During the UK COVID-19 Lockdown

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**Abstract**

This study investigated IPV behaviour and decisions associated with whether to stay or leave an IPV relationship during the UK coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. The associations between gender, religion, proximity, financial strain, alcohol use, family cohesion, acceptance of partner behaviour, and emotional labour (surface acting and deep acting) were explored in relation to the presence of IPV and decisions to stay or leave IPV relationships. These variables were selected as they linked with the Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory and Ecological Theory. A total of 179 participants completed an online questionnaire. The results of the study found that unbalanced family cohesion predicted all forms of IPV, and balanced family cohesion predicted stay decisions for victims. Surface acting predicted verbal abuse and religion predicted physical abuse. Additionally, the acceptance of positive closeness behaviours significantly predicted stay decisions for victims. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords**:** IPV, COVID-19, Emotional Labour, Risk, Stay/Leave, Abusive Relationship.

## Introduction

In 2020 the World Health Organisation urged countries to implement a range of social measures to reduce the spread of coronavirus (Mawby, 2020), resulting in a stay-at-home policy being applied by the UK government which restricted individuals to their homes (Bu et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2021). Although the use of social measures was effective in controlling the virus (Rayhan & Akter, 2021), they exacerbated social and economic stressors theoretically considered to be linked with intimate partner violence (IPV) (Guarino, 2021; Moreira & Costa, 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020). This has been described as a 'shadow pandemic' (United Nations, 2020; Viero et al., 2021).

IPV is defined as the actual, attempted, or threatened physical harm of a current or former intimate partner (Kropp & Hart, 2015), causing negative health outcomes for victims (Dutton et al., 2006) and financial costs to society (Peterson et al., 2018). Understanding risk factors which contribute towards IPV is important given high recidivism rates (Travers et al.,

2021). Individual perpetrator risk factors (Moreira & Costa, 2020) are captured in the Spousal Assault Risk Assessment Guide-Version 3 (SARA-V3; Kropp & Hart, 2015) alongside victim vulnerability factors. However, it is noted that economic, structural and cultural changes as well as individual factors can increase the risk of IPV (Ramjee & Daniels, 2013).

Previous research has found that health pandemics interact and exacerbate the risk of IPV through increased proximity of living environments (Jayatilleke et al., 2010), poverty, and drug and alcohol use (Campbell et al, 2008). It has also been postulated that changes to the household routine, increased time with a partner and isolation from others during COVID-19 may contribute towards IPV (Moreira & Costa, 2020). However, this had not been empirically tested and the mechanisms underpinning this were unclear. In this study, it was postulated that the lockdown contributed towards ecological factors intersecting with individual factors to increase the risk of IPV in the UK during the pandemic (Barrios et al., 2021) and decisions on whether a person would stay or leave the relationship. How individual factors may interact with ecological factors was explored using Dutton's (1995) nested ecological theory. Beyer et al., (2016) suggested this consists of 4 layers (Table 1) which were used to inform the design of this study.

**Table 1 -** *Conceptualised model relating individual, social, and ecological factors to IPV* (Beyer et al, 2013)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Layer 1 | Individual | Attitudes, behaviours, health, social history. |
| Layer 2 | Interpersonal and Family | Family relationships, patriarchal culture, role of women, alcohol/drug use, poverty, employment. |
| Layer 3 | Neighbourhood and Community | Neighbourhood environment, culture of violence, access to services, equality of housing, drug use, social isolation. |
| Layer 4 | Policy, Systems, Society | National, state, local policy, education of women, public awareness, firearms policies, emergency systems. |

### *Level 1 – Individual Factors*

#### *Religion*

Religion is an important predictor of attitudes, which can impact everyday choices and decision-making (Yang, 2021). In addition, it has been argued that some religious groups uphold more accepting beliefs of IPV and negative attitudes surrounding divorce/separation (Akangbe, 2020) and that religious individuals are less likely to leave an abusive relationship and more likely to believe that an abusive partner will change (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Therefore, it is postulated that religious individuals may have been less likely to leave an abusive relationship during the pandemic.

*Gender*

IPV can impact men and women equally (Oliffe et al., 2014). But the reasons why people choose to stay or leave an IPV relationship have predominantly focused on females (Barnett, 2000; 2001; Barrios et al., 2020; Kim & Gray, 2008; Scheffer et al., 2008). Cravens et al., (2015) found that people stayed in IPV relationships due to self-deception; believing the partner would change; and children. Whereas they left due to clarity; child protection; and fear of abuse. However, gender was not controlled for in the analysis. Eckstein et al., (2011) found that men were more likely to report staying to protect their self-image or leaving to protect their partner from themselves. Thus, the stay/leave decisions made by men and women during the pandemic may differ.

***Layer 2 - Interpersonal and Family Factors***

*Financial Strain*

IPV has been reported to increase during periods of social and economic crisis (Sharma & Borah, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic caused large declines in employment (Cannon et al., 2021) and increased financial strain due to changes in income, and increased levels of stress in the home (Cannon et al., 2021; Fawole et al., 2021; Jetelina et al., 2020). Previous research has explored the impact of financial strain on female survivors of IPV in terms of perpetrators using finances as a form of abuse or financial strain after leaving a relationship (Lin et al, 2022). This study sought to explore the impact of a sudden reduction in finances on IPV. In the UK the Government introduced specific measures (e.g., closing businesses and venues) in March 2020, requiring people to stay at home until May 2020 which impacted financial strain.

*Emotional Labour*

Emotional labour is described as the ability to manage and regulate emotions during difficult situations to meet norms and expectations, this may explain how individuals cope interpersonally with stress (Glomb & Tews, 2004). This involves the utilisation of three strategies: (1) hiding genuine emotions (2) surface acting (displaying unfelt emotions – 'hiding what you feel and faking what you don't (Mann, 1999) and (3) deep acting (attempts at truly feeling the emotion displayed; Fouquereau et al., 2018). A fourth strategy named 'emotional termination' was suggested by Yang et al. (2019).

Research supports that these strategies are used as a coping mechanism by healthcare workers to regulate their emotional expressions in response to aggression to meet norms/expectations (Fuse et al., 2021). Additionally, surface acting has been used by teachers to deal with unpleasant emotions (Buric et al., 2018). Thus, emotional labour strategies can be used to avoid negative outcomes and allow people to remain in situations by suppressing true emotions. Therefore, it was hypothesized that emotional labour strategies could be adopted by people living together during the lockdown to avoid conflict and to protect themselves from potential aggression/violence.

*Family Cohesion*

Family cohesion refers to the balance of separateness and togetherness among family members and the emotional bonding each member feels toward one another (Olson, 2000). Unbalanced family cohesion has been associated with increased psychological distress, peer victimisation, inter-parental conflict (Brody et al., 1996; Huffman et al., 2017), stress within the family (Ugwu et al., 2019) and couple dissatisfaction (Olson, 2000).

*Alcohol use*

Alcohol is well-documented by meta-analytic research to increase the risk of IPV victimisation (Funk et al., 2019), and Schmits & Glowacz (2022) found that alcohol use increased for approximately 24.5% of individuals during the pandemic. However, whilst alcohol use has been argued to have increased the risk of IPV during the pandemic (Jarnecke & Flanagan, 2020; Sharma & Borah, 2020) this has not been tested.

***Layer 3 - Neighbourhood and Community Theoretical Framework Factors***

*Proximity*

Whilst in the IPV literature emphasis is placed on individual determination and offending, community and societal factors have been identified as playing a contributory role (Moreira & Costa, 2020). General Theories of Crime have attempted to explain increased criminal activity during periods of social change (Wilcox & Cullen, 2018). For example, the Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory considers the interaction between time and space for three factors: (1) a motivated offender, (2) a suitable victim, and (3) the absence of guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

The UK lockdown confined people to their homes and limited face-to-face contact with household members only (Miles et al., 2021) resulting in increased proximity (convergence of time and space; Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2021; Moreira & Costa, 2020) between partners in the home, potentially decreasing victim protective factors. Research shows that rates of IPV increase during times of the year when families spend more time together (e.g., summer holidays; Sharma & Borah, 2020). Additionally, the risk of IPV reduces when one or two partners are employed (Hayes, 2015), which could suggest that reduced proximity between partners due to time spent apart (e.g., when leaving the home for work) is associated with a reduced risk of IPV.

*Over-crowding*

A range of factors (e.g., working from home) that explore proximity have been researched concerning IPV during the pandemic (Jetelina et al., 2020), yet, the amount of time spent at home and housing factors have not yet been considered. Proximity may be influenced by housing factors (e.g., over-crowding) which could play an important role in the availability of safe space (Sharma & Borah, 2020). For example, limited space within the home may impact a partner's ability to decrease proximity towards their partner during problematic times. Cramped living conditions have been associated with poor psychological well-being (Hu & Coulter, 2016; Suglia et al., 2011), whereas a lack of nearby outdoor living space has been associated with mental fatigue and aggression (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). Thus, it is speculated that crowded living conditions may increase partner proximity and decrease safe space which may result in an increased risk of IPV.

In summary, it is hypothesized that the UK lockdown increased victim vulnerability factors and barriers (SARA-V3; Kropp & Hart, 2015) and this further impacted the capacity for people to leave an abusive relationship. These factors link with Dutton's Ecological Theory (1995) which states that violence may occur due to systemic social contexts as well as individual factors and Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) which notes how environmental conditions may contribute towards offending.

The following hypotheses will be investigated:

H1) The following factors will significantly contribute towards experiencing IPV: living in close proximity, financial strain, alcohol use, unbalanced family cohesion and use of emotional labour strategies.

H2) The following factors will significantly contribute to decisions to stay/leave IPV: Gender; Religiousness; and acceptability of negative partner behaviours.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited via opportunity sampling through adverts on social media sites (e.g., LinkedIn, Survey Circle and Facebook), and billboards in shops, businesses, and charities in England. Verbal consent was received by managers to the display of the survey advertisement. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age, have a sufficient understanding of English, have resided in the UK during the coronavirus pandemic and have resided with a romantic or intimate partner during the pandemic. Following data screening for outliers, a total sample of N=179 participants was used in the analyses. Demographic information is summarised in Table 2.

### *Measures*

All participants completed the following measures:

*The Family Cohesion Scale (FCS; Gonzales et al., 2012).*

The FCS contains eight items that were derived by Gonzales et al., (2012) from The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales II (Olson et al., 1982). The FCS rates each item on a scale of one to five (from almost never or never to almost always or always) creating a total overall score of family cohesion ranging from 8-40. A high score indicates balanced family cohesion and a low score suggested unbalanced family cohesion. Example items consist of 'Family members consulted other family members on their decisions' and 'Family members shared interests and hobbies with each other'. As the current study was interested in couples instead of families, the items were reworded to reflect this. For example, the item 'Family members felt very close to each other' was altered to 'My partner and I felt very close to each other'. Research by Franko et al., (2008) obtained good reliability ($\alpha = .82$). The current study found excellent reliability for the FCS ($\alpha = .90$).

*The Emotional Labour Scale (ELS, Yang et al., 2019).*

This measure comprises 12 items and assesses emotional labour across four factors: surface acting, deep acting, expression of naturally felt emotions, and emotional termination. This

measure was selected to optimise participant completion of the survey as it comprised fewer items than other comprehensive measures. Each item is scored on a scale of one to seven (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) with a total score for surface acting, emotional termination, deep acting and natural emotions. A high score suggests greater use of the emotional labour strategy and a low score suggests low use. For each factor, the score could range from 3 to 21. Example items include, 'I put on an act to deal with customers in an appropriate way' and 'The emotions I express to customers are genuine'. This study was interested in partner-to-partner interactions, so the items were reworded. For example, 'I put on an act to deal with customers in an appropriate way' was changed to 'I put on an act to deal with my partner in an appropriate way'.

The ELS was developed and validated in China and was found to have good reliability for surface acting (α = .71), deep acting (α= .74), natural emotions (α = .85), and emotional termination (α = .76). This study found poor overall reliability (α = .53), good reliability for surface acting (α = .80) and natural emotions (α = .83), below-average reliability for deep acting (α = .66) and poor reliability for emotional termination (α = .44). This was explored using factor analysis. The scree plot revealed that the ELS measure was best measured by three factors instead of four. The component matrix showed that the items for surface acting and deep acting still reflected those factors. But the items for natural emotions and emotional termination were inconsistent. As a result, only surface acting, and deep acting were selected for use in the data analysis. The use of these two factors increased the overall reliability of the measure (α = .61).

*The Frequency and Acceptability of Partner Behaviour Inventory (FAPBI, Christensen & Jacobson, 1997).*

The FAPB has 20 items and assesses the frequency and acceptability of positive and negative partner behaviours. The frequency of the behaviour is measured within a time period. This study asked participantsto to rate how often they experienced the behaviour in a typical month. The acceptance of behaviours is assessed by four factors: affection, closeness, demand, and violation (Doss & Christensen, 2006). These factors reflect two measures each for positive and negative partner behaviour acceptance and are assessed using a scale of zero to nine (e.g., totally unacceptable and totally acceptable). The affection subscale measures the acceptance of physical and verbal affection and sexual activity. The closeness subscale measures the acceptance of housework, childcare, finances, support, discussion of problems

and confiding. The demand subscale assesses the acceptance of criticism, verbal abuse and control, and the violation subscale assesses flirtation, dishonesty, addiction, physical abuse, privacy invasion and unkept agreements. The scores for acceptability can range from 0 to 27 for affection and demand behaviours and 0 to 54 for closeness and demand behaviours. Example items of positive behaviour include, 'My partner was physically affectionate' and 'My partner confided in me' and example items of negative behaviour include, 'My partner was verbally abusive' and 'My partner was physically abusive'.

The total number of FAPBI items used in this study was 18. The following two positive behaviour items were not used, 'My partner did social and recreational activities with me (e.g., went to the movies, etc)' and 'My partner socialised with my family or my friends (e.g., visited/went on outings my family and friends with me). This was because they were impacted by the UK lockdown restrictions and were perceived to be an unfair measure of positive behaviour during the pandemic. Research by Doss & Christensen (2006) reported good reliability for the scale and this study found very good reliability for acceptance of affection ($\alpha = .90$), closeness ($\alpha = .81$), demand ($\alpha = .89$), and violation ($\alpha = .91$).

***Individual Factors***

Participants were asked to provide their age, gender and religion. They were then asked the following questions and instructed to answer these referring to their experiences during the UK lockdown that began in March 2020.

1) How many people lived at your place of residence (including yourself)?
2) How many rooms were there at this place of residence (excluding any bathrooms and kitchens)?
3) Did your place of residence have a garden? (yes/no)
4) How many hours per day on average did you spend at your place of residence?
5) Did you drink alcohol during the lockdown? (yes/no)
6) Did your alcohol use: Decrease; Stay the Same; or Increase?
7) Did your employment status change?

    (1) Yes: I was previously unemployed and gained employment
    (2) Yes: I became unemployed
    (3) Yes: I worked from home instead of outside the home
    (4) No: I remained employed or unemployed
    (5) Other: please specify _____

8) Did you experience stress due to concerns regarding income/finances? (yes/no)
9) Did you stay or leave your intimate partner?

    If you stayed, why was this? _____

    If you left, why was this? _____

***Procedure***

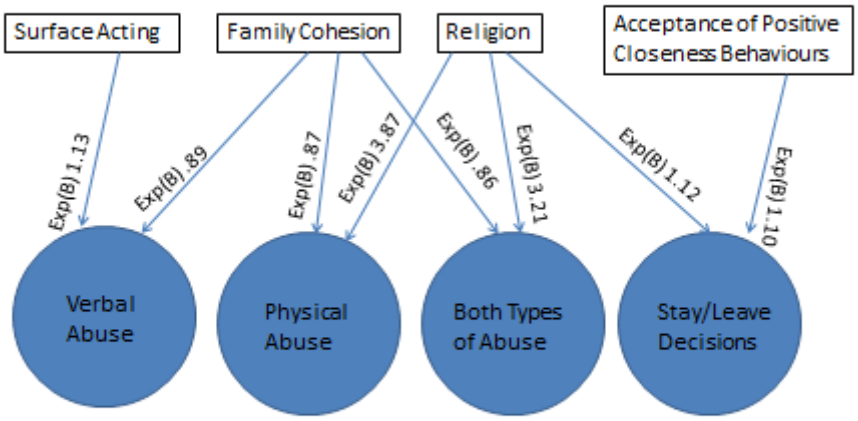
Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University Ethics Committee. The study was created and accessed electronically using a survey building tool (Qualtrics) and accessed using a QR code in the study advert which forwarded the participant to the information sheet and consent form.

## Findings

### *Hypothesis 1 - IPV Binary Logistic Regression*

Binary logistic regression analyses were used to explore the impact of gender, religion, proximity, financial strain, alcohol use, family cohesion, surface acting, and deep acting predictors on the criterions of IPV. The assumptions for multicollinearity were met and no outliers were identified (Mahalanobis distance and Cook's distance values were used). Approximately 28% of leverage values were above the expected value of .028, thus the following results must be approached with caution (Field, 2018). All of the predictors were entered into each analysis and bootstrapping methods were applied to reduce the risk of Type II error.

Figure 1. *A visual representation of the significant predictors for the criterions of IPV and stay/leave decisions*




*Verbal Abuse*

The model was statistically significant, $\chi 2$ (13, N = 179) = 54.92, $p < .001$, suggesting it could distinguish between participants that experienced and did not experience reported verbal abuse. The model explained between .27 (Cox & Snell R square) and .36 (Nagelkerke R square) of the variance in the criterion and correctly classified 72.9% of cases. As shown in Figure 1, family cohesion ($\beta$ = -.12, SE = .03, $p < .001$) and surface acting ($\beta$ = .12, SE = .001, p = .01) were the only significant contributors to the model.

The odds ratio for family cohesion (Exp(B) = .89) suggested that for every one-unit increase in family cohesion, participants were 12% less likely to report verbal abuse. Whereas the surface acting odds ratio (Exp(B) = 1.13) suggested that for every one-unit increase in surface acting, participants were 13% more likely to report experiencing verbal abuse.

*Physical Abuse*

The model was statistically significant, $\chi 2$ (13, N = 179) = 58.87, $p < .001$, suggesting it could differentiate between participants that experienced and did not report experiencing physical abuse. The model explained between .28 (Cox & Snell R square) and .47 (Nagelkerke R square) of the variance in the criterion and correctly classified 87% of cases. As shown in Figure 1, religion ($\beta$ = 1.35, SE = 37.98, $p < .01$) and family cohesion ($\beta$ = -.14, SE = .14, $p < .004$) were the only significant contributors to the model. Deep acting was approaching significance ($\beta$ = .17, SE = 4.15, p = .07).

The odds ratios revealed that the religious sample was 3.87 times more likely to report experiencing physical abuse. Also, the family cohesion odds ratio (Exp(B) = .87) suggested that for every one-unit increase in family cohesion, participants were 15% less likely to report experiencing physical abuse.

*Both Types of Abuse*

The model was statistically significant, $\chi 2$ (13, N = 179) = 58.94, $p < .001$, suggesting it could discriminate between participants that reported experiencing and not experiencing both verbal and physical abuse. The model explained between .28 (Cox & Snell R square) and .48 (Nagelkerke R square) of the variance in the criterion and correctly classified 87.6% of cases. As shown in Figure 1, religion ($\beta$ = 1.17, SE = 8.02, $p < .05$) and family cohesion ($\beta$ = -.16, SE = .40, $p < .001$) were the only significant contributors to the model. Financial Strain ($\beta$ =

1.05, SE = 1.11, p = .06) and deep acting were almost significance (β = .16, SE = .81, p = .06).

The odds ratios revealed that the religious sample was 3.21 times more likely to report experiencing both verbal and physical abuse. Also, the family cohesion odds ratio (Exp(B) = .86) suggested that for every one-unit increase in family cohesion, participants were 16% less likely to report experiencing verbal and physical abuse.

### *Hypothesis 2 - Stay/Leave Binary Logistic Regression*

A binary logistic regression was performed to explore if gender, religion, proximity, financial strain, alcohol use, family cohesion, surface acting, deep acting, IPV and partner behaviour acceptance predicted stay/leave decisions. The predictors for physical abuse and both types of abuse, acceptance of positive affection and closeness behaviours, and acceptance of negative demand and violation behaviours were too highly correlated with each other. Thus, both types of abuse, acceptance of affection and acceptance of violation were not included in the regression to avoid jeopardising the assumptions of the test. No outliers were identified.

The model was statistically significant, $\chi 2$ (17, N = 179) = 63.34, p < .001, suggesting it could discriminate between participants that stayed and left the relationship. The model explained between .30 (Cox & Snell R square) and .45 (Nagelkerke R square) of the variance in the criterion and correctly classified 83.6% of cases. Family cohesion (β = .12, SE = .48, p = .04) and acceptance of positive closeness behaviours (β = .10, SE = .21, p = .01) were the only significant contributors to the model (see Figure 1).

The odds ratios revealed that for every one-unit increase in family cohesion, participants were 1.12 times more likely to remain in the relationship. Also, the odds of remaining in the relationship were 1.10 times more likely when there was higher acceptance of positive closeness behaviours.

### *Exploratory Analysis of Stay/Leave Decisions*

Qualitative analysis was also used to allow 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 across the dataset 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 of why people chose to stay or leave the relationship (see Table 2).

**Table 2** - *Qualitative Themes on Decisions to Stay or Leave an IPV relationship*

| Decision | Themes | Description | Supporting Quotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Reasons to Stay** | | | |
| | Love outweighs the bad | The most popular theme related to the participant feeling that they loved their partner and this outweighed the costs of IPV. | ➢ *Love, what else?*<br>➢ *I love him*<br>➢ *The love outweighs the small negatives*<br>➢ *Love helps to ride the storm* |
| | It was just lockdown | This theme related to people being forgiving of the behaviour because they felt it was due to the constraints of the situation in which they were in due to pandemic restrictions | ➢ *Our issues came from living in a one bedroom in a house share so some of our issues came from this environment*<br>➢ *No matter the arguments we always make sure we speak*<br>➢ *We worked things out*<br>➢ *It was hard at times but we got through the period by supporting and loving each other*<br>➢ *Despite issues, we work really well together and things have improved since lockdown, we are no longer on top of each other anymore*<br>➢ *We noticed the strain lockdown had on our relationship and decided to work through it then throw it away over difficult and abnormal circumstances* |
| | Parents should stay together | In this theme participants described how despite the difficulties in the relationship they felt it was important to remain as a couple for the children | ➢ We stayed together for the kids<br>➢ I also have two children and I think that they would prefer their parents to stay together |
| **Reasons to Leave** | | | |
| | I saw the real side of them | In this theme participants described how as a result of living together in the pandemic lockdown they saw a different side to their partner they had not seen before. | ➢ *I realised how controlling and manipulative he was*<br>➢ *I saw the real side of him*<br>➢ *When we really got to know each other he was horrible*<br>➢ *they became too much to deal with day in day out* |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Physical Violence was just too much | For some participants the triggering factor appeared to be the use of physical violence which precipitated their decision to end the relationship | ➢ *She pulled a knife on me*<br>➢ *He tried to kill me*<br>➢ *The relationship became just too abusive* |
| | We ran out of love | This theme related to no longer feeling in love with their partner | ➢ *It became boring*<br>➢ *We ran out of love when we spent too much time together*<br>➢ *We were better as friends*<br>➢ *He didn't treat me like a romantic partner anymore* |

The findings are consistent with prior research on why people stay in IPV relationships including being due to 'love' and a sense of commitment and parenting (Cravens et al, 2015). Love for a partner has been found to increase an individual's willingness to tolerate IPV but if love is no longer perceived as being expressed people are more likely to exercise agency and leave (Willan et al, 2019). Reasons to leave the relationship were also associated with a recognition of the perpetrator's true authentic nature which is consistent with previous research (Cravens et al, 2015). This was framed within the context of the intersection of individual factors and the stress of proximity due to COVID which is consistent with cognitive dissonance theories which indicate people excuse IPV as being 'inevitable' due to societal events related to stress (Shoultz et al., 2010).

**Discussion**

The study aimed to investigate IPV and stay/leave decisions during the UK coronavirus pandemic. The associations between gender, religion, proximity, financial strain, alcohol use, family cohesion, acceptance of partner behaviour, surface acting, and deep acting predictors were explored in relation to the presence of IPV and decisions to stay or leave IPV relationships. These variables were selected as they linked with the Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1981) and Ecological Theory (Dutton, 1995) which both postulate that individual, interpersonal/family, neighbourhood/community and policies and systems may contribute towards IPV. This study found support for these theories in that economic, structural and cultural changes as well as individual factors increase the risk of IPV (Ramjee & Daniels, 2013) which is consistent previous research which has found that health pandemics interact and exacerbate the risk of IPV (Jayatilleke et al., 2010),

The current study found that unbalanced family cohesion was predictive of verbal, physical and both types of abuse and the decision to leave an intimate relationship. This supports the existing literature that suggests unbalanced family cohesion is problematic for the family by increasing the risk of depression and relationship issues (Fosco & Lydon-Staley, 2020; Olson, 2000). This could imply that unstable family functioning which consists of extreme levels of partner separation or closeness can facilitate relationship dissatisfaction and strain, which could be an early indicator of relationship breakdown and an increased risk of IPV.

In contrast, balanced family cohesion has been claimed to promote the best family functioning by encouraging positive and healing effects (Daniels & Bryan, 2021; Olson, 2000; Ugwu et al., 2019). This was supported in this study whereby participants that reported experiencing IPV and remained in the relationship possessed higher levels of family cohesion (balanced) than those that did not remain. The qualitative findings also noted the role of the family and how "parents should stay together" as a factor for remaining in an IPV relationship. These combined findings suggest that strong partner bonds and feelings of togetherness could dissuade a victim from leaving an abusive partner by reinforcing feelings of belonging and promoting a sense of healing (e.g., things will get better, my partner loves me). Referring to Ecological Theory (Dutton, 1995), these findings support the view that unbalanced family cohesion was an important interpersonal/familial risk marker for IPV victimisation during the pandemic.

This study also found that being religious significantly predicted a greater risk of physical abuse and both types of abuse. This suggests that religion was an important individual factor (Ecological Theory; Dutton, 1995) associated with IPV during the UK pandemic. Research has proposed that religion could act as a risk and a protective factor for IPV (Renzetti et al., 2015), as religious grounds can be used by abusers to rationalise/justify their behaviour (Ross, 2012), and in difference, religion can promote positive coping strategies (Pargament, 2011). This study only explored victim risk factors, but it did not find support for religion to act as a protective factor against abuse. What remains unclear is the mechanism that may underpin the role of religion in acting as a contributory factor for physical IPV (or both physical and verbal IPV) in this study. Hence, it should be noted that the relationship between religiosity and IPV may be complex and the mediating factors underpinning this would benefit from further research. For example, the direction of causality is unknown in terms of whether people may turn to religion to cope with physical

IPV or whether religion may correlate with other factors such as beliefs about forgiveness or other socio-economic or community factors not explored in this study. This would benefit from further research.

Emotional Labour has not previously been considered in IPV research. Yet, the use of Emotional Labour strategies in the workplace has been supported to manage/regulate negative emotions to avoid damaging outcomes (Buric et al., 2018; Fuse et al., 2021). This study investigated two types of Emotional Labour: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting was found to contribute to a risk of verbal abuse but not physical abuse, and both types of abuse. Neither was it related to stay/leave decisions for victims. Hence, this study found partial support for hypothesis one but did not support the Emotional Labour component of leaving an IPV relationship (hypothesis 2), suggesting that faking emotions was associated with verbal forms of IPV, but it did not impact whether victims stayed/left their partners. However, deep acting was not associated with IPV or stay/leave decisions.

The results of this study show that high use of emotional faking (surface acting) was evident for victims of verbal abuse, which suggests that these victims engaged in surface acting techniques to manage and conceal their real emotions towards their partners. Thus, it could be hypothesized that surface acting could be used as a form of self-protection for victims to reduce and avoid further conflict and abuse because they engage in 'hiding what we feel and faking what we don't' (Mann, 1999). For example, it is possible that surface acting prevented verbal abuse from escalating to physical abuse because the victim of verbal abuse engaged in inhibiting what they felt and pretending to feel differently towards the perpetrator. This study supported evidence for surface acting as being an interpersonal/familiar risk factor (The Ecological Theory; Dutton, 1995) for verbal abuse during the pandemic. However, the direction of causality (which came first verbal abuse or surface acting) remains unclear, and this would warrant further research.

In addition, the process of adopting surface acting remains unclear. Within the Emotional Labour literature looking at employment, it is noted that a good person-job fit lessens the extent to which surface and deep acting is required. Surface acting is more strongly associated with dissatisfaction in the job role whereby individuals modify their external displays of emotions and expressions when they do not identify with their work roles (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Thus, surface acting is regarded as 'faking in bad faith' because the person conforms to the display rules required to maintain the role but does not

internally feel the emotions they are displaying (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). The findings in this study may replicate a similar process. For example, surface acting may have been a strategy adopted by victims of IPV in an attempt to conform to their partner's perception of their role. However, when this was combined with imbalanced family cohesion (the equivalent of low job satisfaction) the individual may have been less able or motivated to adopt surface acting, resulting in verbal abuse.

For example, research shows that people who are happy in their work are less likely to act on their experience of negative emotions or engage in 'leakage' behaviour and experience emotional exhaustion. However, those who are unhappy in their role engage in a higher frequency of surface acting and engage in increased leakage behaviours and are deemed inauthentic and less genuine by their audience (Frank et al, 1993) who then perceive their encounter with the employee as been staged (Grandey, 2003). Thus, it could be argued that in this study, the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions resulted in an increase in the frequency of surface acting required for those with imbalanced family cohesion, thus increasing the potential for 'leakage' behaviour and dissatisfaction from a partner who may perceive their behaviour as inauthentic. It is possible this may increase verbal abuse. Again, further research should be undertaken to clarify the process of surface acting in IPV relationships.

What is unclear is how leakage of surface acting may then enact itself in the relationship subsequently. For example, the research suggests that some employees may purposely 'break' their character to cope with emotional dissonance. Thus, the emotional dissonance experienced by victims of verbal abuse may result in them revealing their negative feelings to their partners. Whereas for others "the show must go on" (Grandey, 2003). Future research would benefit from exploring the mechanisms that underpin this. For example, this study only explored if people reported being victims of verbal abuse in the relationship and did not ascertain if they were also perpetrators (e.g. if they engaged in verbal abuse towards their partner). Thus, what remains unclear is what takes place after the person has revealed their true emotions (either consciously through choice or unconsciously through leakage). Future research would benefit from exploring this, especially as it might have been predicted that this leakage of inauthenticity could lead to either an increase in IPV to physical aggression or the person ending the relationship and leaving. However, in this study surface acting did not contribute to either physical IPV or stay/leave decisions. Thus, a more complex psychological mechanism appears to have occurred in these instances. For example, it could also be that surface acting is a strategy adopted in less physically IPV relationships and those

characterised by coercive control. Or it could be that people who experience physical aggression (or both verbal and physical aggression) do not adopt surface acting as a strategy either because they do not experience emotional dissonance and/or because this is no longer effective as a safety behaviour. This is consistent with the qualitative finding that one of the primary decisions to leave an IPV relationship was when the partner used physical violence. Thus, the complex mechanisms underpinning surface acting and IPV would benefit from further research. The qualitative findings also suggested that it was when the perpetrator's mask slipped (surface acting) and the victim saw the "real side" that prompted them to end the relationship. Hence, future research could explore the role of emotional labour in perpetrators of IPV.

In terms of decisions to stay or leave, this study found that high acceptance of positive closeness behaviours was predictive of stay decisions for victims. Closeness behaviours refer to partners engaging in housework, childcare, finances, support, discussion of problems and confiding. It could be argued that the need for some of these behaviours was heightened during the pandemic, which could have resulted in victims being more forgiving, understanding, or appreciative of their partner's contributions (positive actions). This was consistent with the qualitative findings where participants identified they remained in the relationship due to love and "working things out". These combined findings suggest that victims who remained in an abusive relationship during the UK pandemic placed greater value on positive partner behaviours, which could convey that a victim stayed for or focused on the 'good' parts of the relationship at the cost of their physical safety. The implications of this for people working with victims of partner violence should be considered.

**Implications for Practice**

- It is important to understand and consider how the restrictions and consequences of the lockdown further exacerbated IPV risk to increase victim safety during times of crisis. The social measures put in place can be argued to have increased stress and strain between partners, whilst reducing vital victim protective factors. This could have implications for people with an increased risk of IPV if they are required to adhere to a household curfew (e.g., if on probation) or if they become unable to leave their home due to other factors (e.g., physical health or childcare).
- This study demonstrated that unbalanced family cohesion and high use of surface acting strategies may be early indicators of verbal abuse and/or controlling behaviours. Whilst future research would benefit from understanding these mechanisms further, it could be

helpful for professionals that work with vulnerable people in relationships to ask more general questions about relationship functioning and relational acting in relationships when considering risk.

- Views towards IPV and barriers to help-seeking may differ in certain religions, and this is a complex field to navigate. Professionals working with people who report they are religious should not assume that religion acts as a protective factor for IPV and instead the relationship between religion and IPV should be driven through a formulation approach with the individual.

**Limitations**

Due to the limited sample and responses obtained, it was not possible to identify if any particular religious groups were more at risk of reporting physical IPV. Neither was it possible to ascertain the direction of this relationship and hence causality could not be assumed. This study could not investigate whether the independent variables explored caused an increase in IPV because of the pandemic, nor could comparisons be made between victims that reported one incident of IPV compared to repeated abuse. In addition, the study did not ascertain the links between the independent variables and participants who may have been both victims and perpetrators of abuse. Finally, the sample was predominantly white (78.7%) and non-religious (72.1%) which could indicate cultural bias. Therefore, these findings may be unrepresentative of and limited to explaining IPV during the UK pandemic for people who identify as Black, Asian, or an ethnic minority.

**Future research could:**

1.) Could explore the importance of how balanced family cohesion acts as a barrier that can deter a victim from leaving an abusive relationship and thus from seeking support.
2.) Further in-depth analysis could be undertaken to understand the role of emotional labour in intimate partner relationships and how these may manifest in victim-perpetrator interactions in IPV relationships.
3.) Victim and perpetrator risk factors should be investigated in combination to clarify how they interact to exacerbate the risk of IPV and stay/leave decisions.
4.) The role of religion in relationships could be explored in terms of how this may impact help-seeking behaviour in IPV relationships involving physical violence.
5.) Should widen the collection of data to include people from more diverse backgrounds.

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