



Are social media platforms blurring the lines between coercive control and healthy relationship? A study investigating perceptions of coercive control

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate the relationship between social media (in particular, TikTok) and perceptions of coercive control. Participants viewed seven TikTok videos which involved coercive control and judged them using quantitative questions and open-ended question. The results showed that a moderate negative correlation was observed, indicating that individuals who approved of the behaviour shown in the video held more permissive attitudes toward CC and did not perceive the behaviour as CC, while demographical variables were found to have a non-significant influence on CC perception. Regarding the qualitative aspect of the research, the results showed individuals did not normalise or idolise the behaviour depicted in the videos but instead categorised it as controlling and threatening. The most common theme in relation to what individuals regarded as coercive control was 'restricting freedoms' with two subthemes: 'restricting travel' and 'restricting what an individual wears. Interestingly, individuals categorised videos depicting the use of physical violence as abuse and more serious than videos in which physical violence was absent. The present study expands upon previous research, offers directions for future research and highlights the value of education in raising awareness regarding coercive control.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social media

Social media platforms have attracted a vast number of users, making the platforms the most widely used sources of information (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). The ability to access social media platforms so easily and so frequently has allowed the platforms to become a key forum in which individuals can voice their opinions and disseminate information to a larger audience (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). Social media platforms offer interpersonally rich interactions through the form of graphic apps, videos, animation and multimedia cues which enable users to feel like they are present and included (Barak, 2007; Green et al., 2004). As a result of the strong grip that social media now holds on society, the platforms' ability to shape and change attitudes, beliefs and perspectives is slowly increasing (Barak, 2007; Green et al., 2004). Research has uncovered just how influential social media platforms are regarding areas such as politics,

romantic relationships, body image and public health (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Smith et al., 2024; Yacoub et al., 2018).

One social media platform in particular has become influential in the past few years and continues to attract new users daily. This platform is TikTok, with over 176 million downloads in the third quarter of 2019, and 232 million downloads in the fourth quarter of 2023 (Ceci, 2023). Social media users on average are also spending a longer duration on TikTok in comparison to other social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, with TikTok users spending 95 min on average scrolling on TikTok in comparison to 62 min on Instagram (The Guardian, 2024). TikTok also has many young users with 81.7 % of users in China under 35 years of age and 32.5 % of U.S users 19 years old and younger (Montag et al., 2021), making TikTok an influential platform for young minds.

Bresnick (2019) described TikTok as a virtual playground that allows young people to be creative without adhering to past narratives and online cultures associated with previous social media platforms. The

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ability of TikTok to allow users to feel liberated from previous online cultures offers users a unique platform that attracts a more opinionated and unfiltered audience. However, this could attract unwarranted opinions and negative behaviours more than other social media platforms. For instance, viral trends on TikTok, although on the surface appear to be harmless and comedic, appear to fuel toxic behaviours and help blur the line between what individuals perceive as healthy behaviours and coercive ones within a relationship. For example, the 'I saw it you can take it down' trend in particular saw women idolising when men act possessive in a relationship, with the content of this trend involving people showcasing screenshotted messages from their partner telling them to take down certain posts (e.g. Instagram selfies) that other people may find attractive (TikTok, n.d). The behaviour being exhibited and celebrated in this trend is the notion of individuals controlling what their partners post on social media, a common behaviour associated with coercive control (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018).

Specific features associated with TikTok enable these videos to become viral and shared among a large proportion of users of the platform. Features such as TikTok being primarily algorithm driven rather than centred around an individual's followers means there is a greater opportunity for these videos to appear on users' screens despite who the poster of the video follows and who follows them (Anderson, 2020). If a user interacts with the algorithm promoted content, more content similar to the interacted with content is then promoted to the user. Despite the feature offering opportunity for users' videos to become viral and gain a large audience, the app also offers opportunities for certain users to express extreme views and spread harmful content to the masses (Williams & Tzani, 2022). The negative repercussions of this algorithm driven content promotion is when a user interacts with content depicting or containing negative or harmful behaviours. By interacting with this content, even in a minimal context such as watching a video start to finish (Patel, 2025), influences the algorithm to present you with similar content. When this content involves a harmful behaviour and a user either interacts with the video out of curiosity, concern or to just explore the comments to see other user reactions, the algorithm is likely to present the user with more content similar to this harmful post (Williams & Tzani, 2022). This becomes a large concern when the harmful behaviour being depicted or shown is sometimes not only violent but also sometimes not immediately recognised as harmful, as is such the case with behaviours such as Coercive Control.

1.2. Coercive control

Coercive control (CC) is a specific form of intimate partner violence (IPV) centred around a broad array of controlling behaviours which includes verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, sexual abuse and physical abuse (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Stark, 2009). Perpetrators assert control over their partner through using threats of violence, dependence, isolation and intimidation (Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Stark, 2009). CC focuses mainly on the non-physical aspects of the abuse and accentuates the psychological abuse that can have detrimental impacts on the individual's life such as their self-esteem and personal life (Barlow & Walklate, 2021). Further definitions of CC link the behaviours directly to a woman's freedom via behaviours that seek to control where she goes, what she wears, what she eats and how she socialises (Downes et al., 2019).

Stark (2009) also viewed CC as gendered, noting that men control women in an attempt to reinstate patriarchy in intimate relationships. However, definitions of CC have been recognised as lacking clarity and consistency (Hamberger et al., 2017). Barlow and Walklate (2022) argued that there are two essential issues that remain unresolved regarding the definition of CC. The first issue involves its gendered nature, while the second issue is the involvement of physical violence (Barlow & Walklate, 2022). Although definitions vary, there appears to be a consensus that CC should include psychological abuse.

1.3. Social media's impact on enabling coercive control

Research on CC and social media has focused on the impact social media has had on enabling CC through extending the spatial and temporal control of abusers (Cuomo & Dolci, 2021; Woodlock, 2017). Cuomo and Dolci (2021) documented the profound impact that social media had on extending the abusers' ability to coercively control victims through interviews with survivors, advocates, law enforcement personnel and prosecutors. Through these interviews, knowledge about CC was obtained, allowing for a greater understanding of the extent that social media plays in enabling coercive behaviours. Survivors described the relentlessness of the abuse they were subject to and how they would often receive simultaneous and repeated contact through social media platforms, text messages, phone calls and email. Survivors described being 'blasted' with threats across multiple different social media platforms in excessive of up to hundreds per day, portraying how damaging coercive behaviours are even in the absence of physical presence. Survivors discovered that abusers were able to move between multiple accounts and a variety of different social media platforms in order to harass the individual (Cuomo & Dolci, 2021).

Social media has allowed the creation of accounts to be swift and undemanding, hoping to encourage new users to their platforms. However, this ease has encouraged abusers to change their identity and create multiple accounts, sometimes within the space of a few hours, in order to extend their control (Cuomo & Dolci, 2021). The lack of surveillance across social media platforms enables abusers to proceed with their coercive behaviours online. This has resulted in discussions surrounding the lack of accountability showcased by social media sites in regard to their user's safety (Williams et al., 2023) especially in regard to victims of abuse (Woodlock, 2017), where policy and prevention strategies have not evolved with the ever-changing technological advances provided to abusers (O'Shea et al., 2019). There have been numerous documented cases of systematic safeguarding failures in regard to online harassment and cyberstalking, with Wolfe and Cammarata (2025) highlighting how social media platforms in some cases even facilitate cyber harassment through their lack of oversight and unmoderated approach to accountability for users engaging with harassing behaviour. However, the intricate feature of user privacy, freedom of expression and data collection practices makes the policing of an individual making seemingly legitimate accounts to harass another individual a difficult issue to address (O'Shea et al., 2019). Regardless, the psychological impact of cyberstalking on victims, potentially further facilitated by the advantages social media sites provide abusers and the lack of effective safeguarding on these platforms, is detrimental and wide ranging (Jansen van Rensburg, 2017).

Additionally, Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Facebook have unknowingly handed the abusers greater means of control through location tracking features (Woodlock, 2017). Perpetrators utilise geolocation to stalk an individual's whereabouts, giving them the chance to potentially show up to the specific location or intimidate the individual through alerting them that they are aware of where they are (Woodlock, 2017). However, removing the geolocation feature from social media apps would fail to stop the persistence of abusers because of the variety and accessibility of different avenues of communication offered by social media.

Social media not only extends the ability to exercise coercive behaviours, it also simultaneously impacts the survivor's mental and physical well-being. Woodlock (2013) conducted a study of 46 survivors of technology facilitated CC (TFCC) and found that 84 % of the sample reported detrimental impacts on their mental health, such as experiencing nightmares, panic attacks, anxiety and depression, demonstrating the profound impact that social media has with respect to a survivor's feeling of safety and mental well-being. This was further supported by George and Harris's (2014) study in which individuals who had experienced TFCC also described trauma-related symptoms and anxiety.

CC is often not recognised as a serious act because of the absence of physical violence, especially when exerted through social media (Stonard, 2020). Just as research surrounding dating violence saw cyber dating violence being viewed as less serious and more acceptable than adolescent dating violence (Stonard, 2020), there is the view that CC online is tolerated more than physical abuse. Intimate partner dating violence online was less likely to be defined as abuse, with individuals treating this form of abuse as less serious and less deserving of blame (Messinger et al., 2021). These societal perspectives are worrying in regard to CC exercised online as survivors often describe the non-physical aspects of the abuse (e.g. insults, humiliation) as more damaging than the physical abuse itself, due to the lasting effects it has on their mental well-being (Woodlock, 2013).

If society remains focused on the physical aspects of abuse, TFCC will continue to be under-monitored and under-researched and remain a prevalent issue amongst social media platforms. Regarding online abuse being less deserving than physical abuse minimises the victimisation of individuals and traps them in a vicious cycle of abuse, in which individuals do not feel recognised as victims and, therefore, will not report the behaviour or seek help.

1.4. The influence of age and gender on perceptions of coercive control

Research exploring perceptions and attitudes towards CC have highlighted the growing influence social media content and online discussions has had on individual opinions of CC related behaviour (Haase & Worthington, 2023). This influence of social media has been discussed in other contexts of harmful behaviour (Hybristophilia, Williams et al., 2024; Cybersuicide, Moir et al., 2023), where it has been suggested that the presentation of these harmful behaviours in an online format reduces the perceived severity of the behaviour. However, research has suggested these perceptions of CC may be impacted by gender. Head (2022) explored these gender differences and found a significant difference between perceived victim blame for males and females regarding CC. Specifically, the perception of victim blame scores were higher for males in comparison to females. Other research has supported these gender differences. Attreed and Kozlowski, 2018 found victim blaming was associated with gender role conformity. Individuals who had a greater adherence to stereotypically masculine traits were more likely to have attitudes associated with victim blaming. Qualitative studies focusing on men's accounts of CC have found that men often attribute their use of CC to traditional gender roles (DeShong, 2015), demonstrating that males do adhere to strong gender role conformity that, in turn, impacts their perception of CC.

In addition to gender role conformity, sexism has been shown to predict attribution of blame in cases of CC within intimate relationships. Wüller, 2021 found that individuals who possessed high levels of hostile sexism attributed more blame and demonstrated lower perceived sympathy towards the victim, thereby supporting the hypothesis of gender influencing perceptions of CC through underlying biases in the form of sexism and gender role conformity, ultimately downplaying the seriousness of CC and attributing more blame to the victim rather than the perpetrator. Further research conducted by Mojtabedi et al. (2024) highlights the evolution of gradually deepening sexist attitudes, discussing how hostile sexism can potentially manifest into the acceptance of other harmful behaviours and belief systems surrounding gender-based violence offences (e.g. rape myth acceptance).

Less research has been conducted regarding the impact age has on influencing perceptions of CC. However, research conducted in Northern Ireland has found that age is influential in the way young people understand and perceive CC. Lagdon et al. (2022) investigated the public's understanding of CC and found that young people in particular had lower awareness and were more likely to say that they had heard of CC, but that they were unsure of what it meant. The study also found that individuals who had not heard of CC were more likely to be younger. If younger individuals do not know of or understand CC and its

associated behaviours, then their evaluation of CC will be less punitive.

The lack of awareness and understanding about CC by younger people was further demonstrated in Lagdon et al., 2023 later study in which only 16 % of respondents had heard of the term CC and understood what it meant. Despite this, those who did not understand CC did agree that the scenarios they were presented with were abusive.

It is important that younger individuals are made aware of the behaviours associated with CC and understand the term CC in order to help inform their perceptions and to be able to recognise when CC is taking place. Research conducted by the 'National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children' (NSPCC: Wood et al., 2010) helped raise awareness of the impact age can have on perceptions of CC. The research found that of their sample, 50 % of young women thought that control was a fundamental aspect of an intimate relationship and, therefore, normalised their partners controlling behaviour. This demonstrates further how age can influence perceptions of CC as a result of younger individuals lacking awareness and understanding and their normalisation of this behaviour.

1.5. Social media's impact on individuals' perceptions of coercive control

Previous research has focused heavily on individuals' experiences of CC through social media and social media's contribution in enabling coercive behaviours to become more acceptable. A recent study explored service providers' accounts of young peoples' experiences of CC through in depth semi-structured interviews with 35 service providers (Burton & Gormally, 2024). Their findings demonstrated a common theme, indicating that social media, while having the ability to raise awareness surrounding CC, simultaneously had the potential to normalise harmful behaviours and be utilised as a vehicle for abuse. This is further strengthened by Barter et al. (2017) who noted that CC can be construed as love and protection. Therefore, social media posts that frame CC as an act of love or protection help normalise these harmful behaviours and prevent young people from recognising CC as a form of abuse.

Research has also uncovered social media's contribution to normalising CC attitudes by exploring what coercive behaviours users of Twitter are exposed to (Haase & Worthington, 2023). Their research utilised reflexive thematic analysis to uncover potential themes and patterns, with three overarching themes emerging: the Educator, the Gaslighter and the Comedian. The overarching theme of the Comedian referred to users on twitter utilising humour when referring to coercive controlling behaviour witnessed on the social media platform. Users often made jokes and left comments such as 'lol' underneath posts demonstrating coercive controlling behaviours in an attempt to minimise the seriousness of the behaviour.

Although, humour can be used as a tool to open conversation in relation to sensitive subjects such as CC (Martin et al., 2021), humour can also help instigate and promote such abusive behaviour. Thus, the research by Haase and Worthington (2023) demonstrated social media's influence on normalising CC and downplaying the seriousness of the abuse through humour. The number of users who fit under the category of Educator was under half (Haase & Worthington, 2023), although this statistic can be generalised only to male violence against women as the scenario depicted a male perpetrator and a female victim. While it is important to note that intimate partner violence (IPV) and CC are more prolific against women, it is a behaviour in which male victims also suffer. Male victims of coercive behaviours often do not recognise their experiences as victimisation and are, therefore, less likely to report the behaviours and seek help (Hine et al., 2022). This is reinforced by Javaid (2018), who found that men who expressed feelings of vulnerability described how these feelings could characterise them as not "real men."

A study by Walkate et al. (2022) found that 89 % of their male sample had experienced emotional or psychological abuse from a female intimate partner, with 78 % experiencing isolation from friends and family because of their female intimate partner, indicating that men

form a large proportion of victims, and research needs to ensure that violence against men is also explored.

1.6. The present study

The present study was designed to fill in the gap in knowledge regarding the impact that social media apps, specifically TikTok, have on users' perceptions of CC. The study attempts to focus on the app's idolisation and normalisation of coercive behaviours through the use of comedic videos on TikTok. Previous research has explored perceptions of CC through social media to a certain extent, but it has failed to incorporate TikTok because the app is fairly new. The present study can help to influence social media policy regarding the content that is distributed by users of TikTok while simultaneously raising awareness regarding CC and social media's influence. Therefore, the goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between social media (TikTok) and the perceptions of coercive control.

1.7. Objectives

O1 – Investigate if interpretation of a TikTok video predicts attitudes towards coercive control.

O2 – Investigate if interpretation of a TikTok video predicts attitudes towards healthy relationships.

O3 – Investigate if age influences on perceptions of coercive control.

O4 – Investigate if gender influences perceptions of coercive control.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited via social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat). A link to the survey was distributed allowing individuals to complete the survey directly, which participants were also encouraged to share the link for further distribution, including friends and family of initial respondents. Recruitment was not restricted to these groups, with the survey being openly accessible to anyone over 18 and who had access to the survey link, enabling broader participation beyond direct personal networks.

A total of 107 responses were collected. After partial and incomplete responses were removed from the data set 63 participants had completed the survey in full. Specifically, responses were excluded if they were missing key quantitative measures essential for analysis as opposed to omitting optional qualitative text box entries. In the final sample, sixteen males (25.4 %) and 46 Females (73 %) completed the survey. Their mean age was 31.8 (SD = 14.4) with a range of 19–73. All participants originated from different regions of the UK, with the sample consisting of 88.9 % White participants, 6.3 % Black/African/Caribbean British participants, and 3.2 % belonging to other ethnic groups. Regarding sexual orientation, 96.8 % of the sample classed themselves as heterosexual, with the remaining 3.2 % of the sample classing themselves as bisexual.

2.2. TikTok videos

Participants were presented with a generalised definition of coercive control:

'Coercive control is an act, or a pattern of acts, of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation that abusers use to harm, punish or frighten survivors. It doesn't relate to a single incident – it is a purposeful pattern of behaviour. (Refuge, n.d.).

Then TikTok videos were presented to all participants. Seven videos were selected from TikTok displaying coercive behaviours (controlling what their partner wears, who they see, restricting freedoms etc). The seven videos were selected for their idolisation and normalisation of

coercive controlling behaviours. The videos utilised in the survey appeared on the researchers 'for you' page (FYP) alongside the researcher searching particular words such as 'possessive', 'controlling' and 'relationship' to gather a wide variety of relevant videos. Four of the videos depicted CC featuring a male perpetrator and a female victim, whilst the other three videos depicted CC featuring a female perpetrator and male victim.

2.2.1. Video 1

The video depicted a female dancing to music featuring lyrics stating: "That's what I like," with text that read, "When he's a where are you, 10 missed calls, better be no boys, delete this now type of boy," with two heart emojis.

2.2.2. Video 2

A female is in the video with hearts in her eyes with text that reads, "when a man tells me what I should/shouldn't wear and is very protective about me." The video also utilises music with lyrics, "I just died in your arms tonight."

2.2.3. Video 3

This video depicts a female laughing with text that reads, "When he asks for his passport for his lad's holiday but you've cut it up."

2.2.4. Video 4

A female is in the video with text that reads, "When he threatens me but I actually kind of like it." The video also utilises an audio which says, "Who is she going to choke you if you don't get out of my face."

2.2.5. Video 5

This video depicts a male with text that reads, "When your girlfriend starts being dramatic because she does not want you to go out with your friends." The audio depicts what his girlfriend would say to stop him going out - "Let me just slam my head in the car door, that's how much I am worth."

2.2.6. Video 6

A male has edited himself so it looks like he is in the airport with his suitcase with text reading, "When you tell her you're going on a lad's holiday so she cancels your passport the day of the flight." The song used in the video features the lyrics: "There is a time and a place for all this and this is not the place."

2.2.7. Video 7

The final video depicts a male with his girlfriend ringing his female friends on the phone saying that he can't talk to them anymore. The text reads: "When your girlfriend makes you cut off all your female friends."

2.3. The questionnaire

Regarding the quantitative element of the study, three questions were asked after each of the seven videos: "Do you agree with the behaviour depicted in the video?", "Do you consider the behaviour in the video coercive control?" and "Do you think the behaviour in the video demonstrates part of a healthy relationship?" All three questions were answered yes/no. The fourth question was open-ended, asking individuals to explain what they thought specifically was coercive in the video that they had just watched.

2.4. Procedure

Participants were recruited via a questionnaire link posted on social media sites. Participants were presented with an ethics document before completing the online survey, including a participant information form and consent form. Once participants had read both documents, they were asked to indicate whether they consented to taking part in the

research.

After consent was obtained, participants were presented with demographic questions about their age, gender identity, sexual identity and ethnic identity. Participants were then presented with the TikTok videos. Participants watched these videos and answered the three yes/no questions, followed by the open-ended question regarding what they believed to be coercive about the video previously watched. Following completion of the study, participants were given a debrief form which included support links to sites that offer CC support.

2.5. Analysis

2.5.1. Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data was based on the three closed questions. The responses were coded yes = 1 and no = 2. The overall score for each participant on each of the three variables was totalled to create three continuous variables (agreement of behaviour in video, ability to identify CC and agreement the behaviour in the videos is part of a healthy relationship). The maximum value participants could score on the variables was 14 and the minimum they could score was 7. Alongside these three variables, gender and age were also included in the analysis. Pearson’s *r* correlations were selected to investigate the relationship between the variables. In relation to gender and overall attitudes towards CC an independent *t*-test was used.

2.5.2. Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative element was derived from the open-ended fourth question, where participants explained what they specifically thought was coercive in each video. Since most responses were brief, often consisting of just one or two words, all responses were reviewed to identify recurring patterns. Through this initial review, common ideas or descriptors emerged, which were then categorised into codes representing key themes. The frequency of each code was then counted to determine how often certain aspects of coercive control were mentioned.

2.6. Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was obtained prior to data collection and adhered to the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics for the variables are shown in Table 1. Of the 63 participants, 96.4 % disapproved of the behaviours depicted in the videos, highlighting a strong recognition of CC. However, differentiation in perception was noted based on the presence of physical violence. For example, in the first video, which depicted an intimate

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations for all continuous variables (N = 63).

Variables	Agreement of Behaviour	CC	HR	Age
Agreement of Behaviour.	1	-0.30*	0.05	-0.15
Ability to identify Coercive Control (CC).	-0.30*	1	-0.18	-0.19
Agreement the behaviour in the videos are part of a healthy relationship (HR).	0.05	-0.18	1	0.099
Age.	-0.15	-0.19	0.099	1
Mean	13.75	7.87	13.90	31.65
Standard Deviation	0.51	1.17	0.295	14.20

Statistical significance: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

partner dictating who their partner could see and controlling their social media activity, seven participants agreed with the behaviour. In contrast, in video four where it explicitly mentioned physical violence (choking), there was no agreement from participants. This contrast underscores the tendency to perceive CC as more serious when it involves overt physical violence, while more subtle controlling behaviours are potentially overlooked.

3.2. Agreement of behaviour and ability to identify CC

The relationship between agreement of the behaviour in the videos and ability to identify CC was investigated using Pearson *r* correlation. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. Not perceiving the behaviour as CC was negatively associated with disapproval of the behaviours shown in the videos (*r* = -.30, *n* = 63, *p* = .017).

3.3. Agreement of behaviour and agreement the behaviour in the videos is part of a healthy relationship

The relationship between agreement of the behaviour in the videos and attitudes towards healthy relationships was not significant (*r* = .05, *n* = 63, *p* = .69).

3.4. Age and ability to identify CC

The relationship between age and ability to identify CC was not significant (*r* = .19, *n* = 63, *p* = .14).

3.5. Gender and ability to identify CC

An independent samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the Ability to Identify CC scores between male and female participants. There was no significant difference in overall identification scores between the groups, *t*₆₁ = -.98, *p* = .33, with male participants (*M* = 7.63, *SD* = 1.02) showing similar scores to female participants (*M* = 7.96, *SD* = 1.22). The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .33, 95 % CI: 1.01 to .35) was very small (eta squared = .02).

3.6. Themes

The results of the coding process revealed four themes in relation to the behaviours participants believed were CC: restricting freedom, isolation from friends, controlling, and threatening.

3.6.1. Restricting freedom

Of the 441 comments analysed, the majority (140 comments, 31.7 %) associated CC with restricting an individual’s freedom. Two sub-themes were apparent in the participants comments: restricting travel and restricting what the individual wears. Restricting travel was present in 20.4 % of the responses while restricting what the individual wears was present in 11.3 % of the responses. Comments attributed the restriction of travel to trust issues and jealousy, such as, “Cutting up a passport shows no trust,” and “Stupid behaviour, will make younger teens think this is cool and acceptable, she’s clearly got trust issues.” Other comments viewed the restriction of travel as depriving the individual of their basic rights: “Restricting partners rights/opportunities,” and “Extremely unhealthy as everyone is entitled to and should be able to go on holiday.”

For the restricting what the individual wears subtheme, participants expressed how telling an individual what to wear can be damaging to the individual’s independence: “He’s effectively limiting her independence,” “Making decisions for someone else is overruling their thoughts,” and “If another person controls this narrative, then it is taking away a person’s freedom and independence.” Other comments were concerned with the act of telling the individual what to wear as being

disguised as a protective aspect of a relationship, with comments such as: "Telling her what she can/can't wear and disguising it as being protective," "A loved one should be protective but not in a way they are telling you what to wear" and "I think being protective of your partner is good and healthy as long as it does not result in you becoming restrictive."

3.7. Isolation from friends

The second most frequently mentioned theme in relation to behaviours associated with CC was isolation from friends, with 125 (28.3 %) comments referencing this behaviour. Participants voiced concerns regarding the use of manipulation in order to isolate individuals from their friends: "Manipulating him with her behaviour so he doesn't go out," "Changing moods so he doesn't go out with his friends," and "Manipulating the boyfriend to think going out with his friends is a bad thing." As in the restricting travel theme, the issue of trust and jealousy was prevalent in participants comments in relation to why individuals isolate their partner from friends. Comments referenced insecurities and trust as main focus points: "Not trusting, not wanting them to have a life," "His partner could have an insecurity of him hanging out with his friends," and, "There's a lack of trust, dominating freedom."

3.8. Controlling

Some 26.3 % (116 comments) associated controlling as a critical behaviour associated with their perceptions of CC. Comments highlighted increased monitoring of social media as a controlling behaviour, stating: "Controlling what she can and can't post online," "Controlling what they can and can't post, who they can/can't be around," and "Telling your partner to delete this now is controlling." The majority of the comments used one or two-word responses including phrases such as: "Controlling," or "Controlling behaviour," in relation to the videos presented.

3.9. Threatening

The final theme accounted for 9.8 % (43 comments) of responses. These comments appeared to have a more serious undertone than the previous themes, linking threatening behaviour directly with abuse. Comments included: "I think this is an abusive relationship," "No amount of violence should be deemed acceptable," and, "Threatening someone is abuse no matter the circumstances of how it is perceived." The majority of comments related to this specific theme identified threatening behaviour as a critical behaviour related to their perception of CC.

4. Discussion

The present study's aim was to investigate the relationship between social media (TikTok) and the perceptions of CC with four objectives. The first objective investigated the relationship between interpretations of TikTok videos and attitudes towards CC. A moderate negative correlation was found, suggesting that individuals who agreed with the behaviour depicted in the video had more permissive attitudes towards CC (did not think the behaviour CC). This was further demonstrated as 96.4 % of participants disapproved of the behaviour depicted in the video.

The findings are consistent with previous research, specifically Haase and Worthington's (2023) research on Twitter usage. The theme 'Educator' found in their research can be seen to translate to the current study in regard to users expressing their concern with coercive behaviours and using their platform to help educate others on the topic, through labelling the behaviours viewed as abuse/harassment (Haase & Worthington, 2023). Nevertheless, previous research has recognised social media's influence in normalising coercive behaviours through

comedic videos and humour (Haase & Worthington, 2023). Haase and Worthington (2023) observed Twitter users commenting 'lol' and downplaying the seriousness of the behaviours witnessed.

The present study lends support to previous research showing individuals struggling to recognise CC in the absence of physical violence (Burton & Gormally, 2024). For example, the videos that did not mention physical violence resulted in less serious responses, often attributing the coercive behaviours to trust issues or jealousy. However, when physical violence was mentioned in videos (e.g., choking), the comments appeared to have a more serious undertone with behaviours being categorised as abuse and intolerable. This was also shown in the frequency of participants who agreed with the behaviours featured in the first video viewed, which depicted their intimate partner telling them who they can/cannot see, calling 10 times a day and telling their partner to delete posts, as seven participants agreed with the behaviour, whereas the video referencing physical violence such as choking received no agreement.

Although these numbers are small, they demonstrate a lack of awareness of CC in the absence of physical violence, and this influences perceptions of CC as witnessed in participants' qualitative responses. In connection with the second objective, the perception of the video was found to not have a significant relationship with attitudes towards healthy relationships.

The third objective investigated the relationship between age and ability perceive and/or identify CC. In relation to this objective, the findings are inconsistent with previous research (e.g., Wood et al., 2010) which found that younger individuals had a lesser understanding of CC. This discrepancy may be a result of the mean age of participants being 32 years, as older individuals have been shown to have a greater understanding and awareness of CC than younger individuals (Lagdon et al., 2022). The lack of younger participants in the present study may account for the lack of an association.

Regarding the fourth objective, gender was found to not be significant in influencing identification of CC. Previous research has found greater victim blame and lower perceived sympathy regarding CC in males (Head, 2022; Wüller, 2021). The present study, however, found no significant difference between the perceptions of males and females. The sample in the present study had a lower proportion of males, with only 16 males (26 % of the sample).

4.1. Implications of the findings

The present study highlights critical areas for education regarding TikTok policy and educating individuals to better identify coercive behaviours and understand what is meant when referring to CC. There is a need for changes to TikTok policy and standards, allowing for a more suitable online culture relating to intimate partner relationships. The present study supports previous research suggesting that social media can influence perceptions surrounding CC, whether for good or for bad. The sample used in this study is not representative of the vast amount of people who utilise TikTok every day. Policies surrounding CC should be implemented to restrict the usage of accounts idolising or normalising coercive controlling behaviours through comedic content.

TikTok guidelines highlight several restricted themes, specifically themes regarding sexually suggestive content and dangerous activity/challenges. However, within the community guidelines of restricted content, there is no mention of CC (TikTok, 2024). As the majority of these videos utilise humorous music and an absence of physical violence, TikTok deems them as suitable for viewers. However, as research has discovered, CC can have damaging long-lasting impacts on individuals' physical and mental well-being (Woodlock, 2013). Implementing stricter policies surrounding CC would help decrease this normalised narrative.

TikTok policy also states that, to be able to possess an account on the app, you must be at least 13 years of age (TikTok, 2024). As previous research has suggested, age can be an influential factor in perceptions of

CC since younger individuals not as aware or understanding of the behaviours which are associated with CC. Although, the present study did not find age to be a significant influence towards perceptions of CC, the mean age of the sample was greater than studies which have documented age as an influencing factor. The age limit on TikTok being 13 years enables younger individuals to view these videos as normal parts of a relationship because of their portrayal as normalised behaviours in every relationship. Although, TikTok does restrict certain content dependent on age, there should be changes surrounding the age limits to avoid misinforming younger individuals, specifically focusing on videos that do not feature physical violence or depictions of sexual content, as these usually slip through the net. Further implications include education programmes to raise awareness around the topic of CC aimed at all age groups, as the current study saw participants being less likely to call certain behaviours abuse and be more tolerable of CC in the absence of physical violence. Education surrounding what CC is, behaviours associated with the term and how to recognise it should be taught throughout schools to help increase the awareness and understanding that young people have.

Social media campaigns would also help to raise awareness regarding the topic. TikTok, in particular, could engage in an awareness campaign that could be shown to users when scrolling. It is essential to inform the public regarding the seriousness of CC, whether there is physical violence associated with the behaviour or not. Awareness programmes would help to prevent CC by encouraging individuals to be better at identifying CC. Awareness programmes could incorporate the use of case studies focusing on victims of CC, as research has found case studies to be significantly more effective at delivering a message than other methods (Bonney, 2015) and have helped improve students' ability to comprehend complex questions about real-world issues (Dori & Herscovitz, 1999).

4.2. Limitations

Despite important practical implications arising from the present study, a potential limitation was that participants only originated from one country (United Kingdom). Nevala, 2017 explored CC prevalence rates and found CC prevalence to be much lower in countries such as the UK (3 %) when compared to other countries such as Lithuania (16 %) and Bulgaria (11 %). These lower prevalence rates of CC, such as in the UK, are claimed to be attributed to higher gender equality, with Nevala, 2017 showcasing that countries that score higher in gender equality had a lower prevalence rates of CC. However, these differences in prevalence rates alone do not necessarily reflect societal attitudes regarding CC. While higher prevalence may potentially indicate a broader social tolerance or normalisation of such behaviours, it does not automatically imply complacency. Further research is necessary to explore how prevalence rates interact with societal attitudes toward CC, particularly in countries with varying levels of gender equality. To address this limitation, future research should examine CC across different cultural contexts to provide deeper understanding of social understanding and potential tolerance to CC.

Another practical limitation may have derived from the framing of question four (asking individuals to explain what they thought specifically was coercive in the video that they had just watched) as this may have inadvertently operated as a leading question. Additionally, the use of a binary scale (e.g. yes/no) may have limited the results by lacking the nuance a more flexible scale, such as a Likert scale, could provide. Incorporating a more flexible scoring system in future research would enhance the ability to discern differences in interpretations and responses to CC behaviours.

Research has attributed perceptions surrounding CC and prevalence rates to cultural variables (Archer, 2006). Research has found that violence within an intimate partner relationship was more prevalent in collectivist countries (Negy et al., 2013), with the style of abuse also dependent on the culture (Yoshioka & Choi, 2005). In addition, Coleman

and Straus (1986) discovered that violence was more prevalent in intimate partner relationships in which decision-making was dominant by either the female or the male in the relationship. Therefore, decision making and predominant gender roles may have an impact on the prevalence of CC witnessed in an intimate relationship.

Previous research suggests that gender roles influence perceptions of CC for males and females (Attreed and Kozlowski, 2018; DeShong, 2015) with greater conformity to gender roles associated with higher victim blame and lower levels of sympathy (Wuller, 2021). Therefore, cross-cultural research is needed in order to investigate the influence of gender role conformity and stereotypes in influencing perceptions. Additionally, while we ensured that the TikTok stimuli was balanced for perpetration, we did not analyse whether participants were more likely to classify male-to-female coercion as coercive control when compared to female-to-male coercion. Given the potential influence of gender on perceptions of coercive control, future research should also explore this potential influential factor in coercive control perception and identification.

5. Conclusions

This study documented the influence of social media on perceptions of CC. Participants recognised and categorised the behaviours depicted in the videos as controlling and negative despite the videos' normalisation and idolisation of the behaviour. The findings highlighted the importance of education in raising awareness and understanding surrounding CC since the qualitative analysis showed a lack of awareness CC in the absence of physical violence. The findings revealed important information regarding what individuals view as coercive behaviours and those that they overlook. The present study provides important information surrounding TikToks influence on perceptions of CC and highlights the potential benefits of awareness programmes in schools and on social media platforms.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Holly Scothorne: Writing – original draft. **Calli Tzani:** Supervision, Conceptualization. **Maria Ioannou:** Supervision. **David Lester:** Writing – review & editing. **Lucas Rogers:** Writing – review & editing. **Thomas James Vaughan Williams:** Writing – review & editing. **John Synnott:** Supervision. **Greta Darmanin Kissaun:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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