Factors That Influence the Perception of Coercive Control

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviour that can occur within intimate relationships, where these behaviours are used by one person in the relationship to regulate and control the life of their partner, and to create an uneven balance of power. Typically, coercive control includes emotional abuse, harassment, stalking, and controlling and manipulative behaviours. The present study investigated factors that influence perceptions of coercive control, including the location in which these behaviours occur, while comparing traditional experiences of coercive control with those which are facilitated by technology. 99 participants were presented with fictional vignettes which depicted four coercive behaviours. Two factors were manipulated; the type of coercive control (technology facilitated or in person), and the location in which the coercive control occurred (rural or urban). Participants were required to answer questions relating to victim blame, as well as complete the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire which measured participants' self-reported levels of empathy in order to explore the role of this trait on victim blame estimates. Contrary to anticipated findings, results indicated that victim blame associated with coercive control did not differ significantly according to location or the context of the coercive behaviours. Although participants' empathy levels correlated with victim blame estimates, overall levels of victim blame were low. The results of this study suggest that victim blame may not be attributed where there are clear coercive behaviours, and, at these low levels of blame, the contextual factors may have negligible impact.

Words: 239

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree of diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the University of Adelaide's Digital Thesis Repository, the Library Search and through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the School to restrict access for a period of time.

Contribution

In writing this thesis, my supervisor and I collaborated to design the appropriate study methodology and generate research questions of relevance, as well as design the survey which was used to collect data for this study based on an initial idea regarding my research interests. I conducted the literature search, and with guidance from my supervisor, analysed the data using appropriate statistical methods of data analysis. I wrote up all aspects of the thesis, with valuable input and revisions by my supervisor for each section, excluding the discussion.

Factors That Influence the Perception of Coercive Control

Overview

Coercive control is a prevalent form of intimate partner abuse (IPV) which is estimated to impact around 23% of Australian women and 16% of Australian men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Typically, coercive acts are recognised to include emotional abuse, verbal harassment, financial abuse, stalking, and controlling behaviours (Boxall & Morgan, 2021). These behaviours are used by a perpetrator to control their partner and create an uneven power balance within the relationship (Boxall & Morgan, 2021), with current research in this area describing coercive controlling behaviours as having detrimental outcomes for victims (Brennan et al., 2019). When acts of this nature occur concurrently, victims are deprived of their freedom and become trapped in abusive relationships (Woodlock et al., 2022). Despite high rates of prevalence, coercive control is yet to be formally criminalised as a separate offence in Australia, and, therefore perhaps not surprisingly, is often overlooked, especially where it occurs without physical or sexual violence (Boxall & Morgan, 2021). Current research indicates that frontline service providers experience some difficulty accurately recognising the pattern of behaviour which defines coercive control when physical harm is absent (Brennan et al., 2019). It is often difficult for victims to seek help for fear of not being believed, or being identified by the perpetrator when seeking help, especially if the abuse has occurred over a long period of time (Wendt et al., 2017).

Coercive control disproportionately places victims at risk of experiencing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as at risk of experiencing physical harm within the relationship as the behaviours escalate (Boxall & Morgan, 2021). Furthermore, coercive controlling behaviours, as well as physical abuse, obsessive contact, and stalking facilitated by the use of technology, have been identified as an emerging trend within

domestic homicide cases (Woodlock et al., 2022). When coupled with the recognition that the victims of coercive control may experience difficulty seeking assistance (Brennan et al., 2019), there is a need to better understand individuals' perception of coercive control, to ensure access to assistance is available for victims when sought.

Coercive Control and Victim Blame

One approach to understanding how individuals perceive the perpetration of violence is through the lens of Just World Theory (Lerner, 1980). This theoretical framework explains why people blame a victim for their maltreatment; individuals believe the world to be a fair place, and therefore this leads to the perception that victims must have done something to deserve the maltreatment, placing blame upon them while maintaining a sense of control over their environment (Lerner, 1980). It is well established for other forms of IPV that victim blame commonly occurs, with men tending to demonstrate comparatively more supportive attitudes toward victim blame when compared with women (see, e.g., Martín-Fernández et al., 2018). Research has also indicated that victims in relationships may be blamed for IPV more often, with some degree of minimisation of sexual assault within marital relationships (Huff & Rappleyea, 2020). Furthermore, there is some evidence that situational factors may impact victim blame (see, e.g., Dyar et al., 2021); for example, sexual assault victims who were verbally coerced tended to be blamed more than those who experienced physical force (see, e.g., Dyar et al., 2021).

In the context of coercive control specifically, there is some research which indicates that coercive control victims may also be blamed for the behaviours they experience. For example, Harris and Woodlock (2019) explored the use of digital technology by perpetrators of domestic violence and suggested that victim blame is well established in that context. This research indicates that service providers (e.g., police) have placed the blame on the victim in some instances, suggesting that by posting content online, victims have inadvertently placed

themselves in a position to be victimised (Harris & Woodlock, 2019). However, research has yet to consider victim blame in the context of coercive control in any depth, including consideration of how situational or contextual factors might impact perceptions of victim blame.

The Location of Coercive Control

The geographical location of victims who are experiencing coercive control can influence these victims in several ways; including impacting the occurrence of coercive control, presenting varying obstacles for help-seeking, and impacting outcomes for victims (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). Violence, especially against women, is often underreported in rural communities (Harris & Woodlock, 2021), and research indicates that issues faced by female victims of coercive control who live in urban locations are often exacerbated for victims in rural areas (Hooker et al., 2019). Although dated, the concepts published by Pease (2010) are relevant to research within this context. He argued that the socio-cultural aspects of rural areas perpetuate and reinforce gender roles and toxic masculinity, which, ultimately, leads to increased instances of violence towards women within these areas (Pease, 2010). Alcohol use is likely to be higher, especially for men residing in rural areas, as is the ownership and use of firearms (Kaukiainen & Kõlves, 2020). These factors influence the occurrence and increase the severity of coercive control in rural locations, and concurrently reduce the likelihood of victims accessing and receiving assistance, which only perpetuates the cycle of abuse and coercive control (George & Harris, 2014).

Perhaps not surprisingly, help-seeking for rural victims of coercive control is often more challenging given there are reduced support services (e.g., legal assistance), and victims experience greater difficulty accessing refuge (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). The dynamics of rural towns can make it challenging to speak out against a perpetrator, especially if they are a well-known and respected member of the community (George & Harris, 2014). Additionally,

more traditional and conservative community values are likely to exist (Farhall, 2022), meaning that raising the issue of violence against women with men who reside in rural locations may be more difficult due to the culture of masculinity and gender roles of males, which are often deeply ingrained and reluctant to change (Pease, 2010). There is now well-established research which indicates that victims who experience coercive control in rural locations experience difficulty accessing assistance given geographic isolation, limited support services, as well as the likelihood the perpetrator is known to the community (George & Harris, 2014). Furthermore, rural ideology suggests that individuals residing within these areas are self-reliant, and as a result, may not acknowledge the maltreatment they are facing, which in turn can lead to reduced instances of help-seeking by victims (Kaukiainen & Kõlves, 2020).

George and Harris (2014) conducted interviews with 30 women who had experienced coercive control, with a particular focus on regional and rural Victoria. This qualitative study found that the visibility of the victim to both the perpetrator and the community more generally, contributed to hesitancy around help-seeking (George & Harris, 2014). Additionally, there was some evidence that the financial circumstances of rural victims were more complex (e.g., a small jointly run family business, or being reliant on their husband's income), and may impact the ability to leave the relationship (George & Harris, 2014). Due to geographical isolation, there is potentially an increased risk of serious consequences due to delays in accessing emergency services (Harris, 2016). There is some evidence that experiencing coercive control in rural locations can also increase the likelihood of homicide (Tyson, 2020). Arguably, this should therefore increase the degree to which coercive control is taken seriously and acted upon in these regions.

In a study conducted by Baynard et al. (2019), the general helping attitudes and opinions of the members of rural communities were investigated in relation to IPV (Baynard

et al., 2019). Rural towns are often tightly knit communities of people, with altruistic values and beliefs. However, evidence suggests that these same patterns of helpfulness and assistance may not extend to situations which involve IPV, and the dynamics of rural towns and the proximity of members of the community to the perpetrator can lead to blame being placed upon the victim, and a lack of support for individuals who are in need of assistance or refuge (Baynard et al., 2019).

The current study aims to investigate the impact that the victim and perpetrator's location (the location of the coercive control) has over how blameworthy victims will be perceived by participants. Qualitative literature within this area suggests that victims who reside in rural locations will be blamed more by their community than victims who reside in urban locations, due to differences in beliefs regarding women, and the culture of rural and remote towns (Pease, 2010), but there has not yet been a direct experimental comparison. This is important within the context of coercive control, as victims' fears of being blamed for their maltreatment is arguably a key factor which influences the likelihood of help-seeking and better outcomes for these individuals.

The Type of Coercive Control

Traditionally, coercive controlling behaviours within an intimate relationship have been recognised as verbally attacking and insulting a victim, emotional abuse, harassment, financial abuse, stalking, and controlling behaviours (Boxall & Morgan, 2021), which are enacted by a perpetrator to create a sense of omnipresence in victims' lives (Woodlock et al., 2022). Recent research has begun to investigate the way technology is able to further exacerbate these patterns of behaviour. In a study conducted by Dragiewicz et al. (2018), technology facilitated coercive control (TFCC) is seen as an extension to 'traditional' coercive controlling behaviours whereby a perpetrator utilises technology to harm and control victims in abusive relationships, and that in this age, where technology is deeply ingrained as

a tool for communication within society, TFCC can present commonly within abusive relationships (Dragiewicz et al., 2018).

Recent research which has considered coercive control in Australia has begun to recognise the importance of these behaviours occurring in a digital context. TFCC includes behaviours such as sending abusive and defamatory messages, using or hacking victims' devices to control finances and personal information, enacting image-based abuse, stealing or impersonating the identity of a victim, and stalking victims using location tracking or GPS services (Harris & Woodlock, 2022, Dragiewicz et al., 2018). Technology only exacerbates traditional methods of coercive control as it allows for quick, anonymous, and somewhat continuous control to be exercised over a victim (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). Arguably, TFCC enables perpetrators to extend their control over their victim to a greater extent than acts which occur 'in person' (e.g., stalking without technological assistance; Harris & Woodlock, 2021).

In a recent study by Harris and Woodlock (2021), the experiences of technology facilitated coercive control for thirteen women living in rural Australia were investigated. The findings of this study illustrate the unique challenges faced by female victims of TFCC who reside in a rural location, and the impact this had on their experiences and responses to violence and coercive control, as well as their help-seeking behaviours (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). In this qualitative study, female victims recounted their experiences of TFCC, with many women describing how their partner would monitor and restrict their use of technology, threaten to use social media to publicise intimate images shared within the relationship, and would use GPS services to track their location (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). These women expressed the challenges they experienced due to their geographical location, and the complex issues associated with living in rural Australia (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). Some women recounted that due to the nature and spaceless contact that TFCC allows, their abuse

continued after separation from their former partner, and they felt like they were unable to escape (Harris & Woodlock, 2021).

Harris and Woodlock (2022) further examined the impact of technology facilitated coercive control on the victims and survivors of IPV in rural and remote Australia (Harris & Woodlock, 2022). Importantly, they identified that the digital coercive control experienced by the regional, rural, and remote women who were interviewed was akin to the experiences identified in previous research with urban victims (see, e.g., Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Specifically, both rural and urban victims of coercive control experienced TFCC; it was not exclusive to a particular location. However, Harris and Woodlock (2022) noted that the 13 victims interviewed in more remote areas were likely to experience additional stressors (e.g. feeling isolated from their family and friends, heightened anxiety and depression) resulting from their location (Woodlock & Harris 2022).

Previous research indicates that many women, when seeking help from the police in regard to TFCC, were provided with limited assistance by the police due to the nature of this form of coercive control (Douglas et al., 2019). Research to date suggests that digital coercive control, in particular, may not be taken seriously or recognised as a potential pre-cursor to violence (Harris & Woodlock, 2022). In this qualitative study, victims reported service providers (e.g., police) had not actioned their reports of coercive control as they would have anticipated (Harris & Woodlock, 2022). In a recent study by Woodlock et al. (2022), TFCC was argued to lead to the institutional betrayal of victims by the police whereby their experiences are trivialised and further exacerbated, leading to a reluctance to speak out in the future and continuing the cycle of abuse (Woodlock et al., 2022).

Although there is qualitative research investigating the lived experiences of victims of coercive control, factors which influence how these victims are perceived has yet to be established. The current literature relating to the impact of the location and context of

coercive control illustrates that victims who reside in a remote or rural location will face unique challenges associated with their location, and potentially higher proportions of victim blame (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). Furthermore, victims who experience TFCC can face higher levels of victim blame, due to the nature of TFCC (Harris & Woodlock, 2021). A direct experimental study will facilitate investigation into which combination of these contextual factors will lead to the highest levels of victim blame amongst participants, which may lead to a better understanding of the perception of coercive control by an individual with no experiences of coercive control themselves.

The Role of Empathy

The role of empathy within the available literature relating to intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, and image-based abuse is well established; high levels of empathy are negatively correlated with victim blame (Bongiorno et al., 2020; Harder, 2020; Koçtürk & Şahin, 2021). Previous research indicates that empathy towards victims can play a pivotal role in whether victims are confident disclosing their abuse to police or other community members (Clevenger et al., 2016). If victims of coercive control feel comfortable, confident, and empowered to seek help, this will ultimately lead to better outcomes for these victims (Clevenger et al., 2016). Police empathy levels have been shown to be positively correlated with the likelihood of the victim involving the legal system in assisting with their case; if victims are not treated with empathy, their likelihood of further involving the police decreases (Maddox et al., 2010).

George and Harris (2014) interviewed victims of coercive control and domestic violence regarding their experience with the Victorian Police Force. Victims who reported they had positive experiences recalled that police officers were kind, easy to talk to, and offered genuine feelings of compassion (George & Harris, 2014). One survivor recalled that the female officer she spoke with made her feel empowered for reaching out and was very

calming and supportive (George & Harris, 2014). However, within this study, there was a large proportion of victims who had a negative experience with police, reporting that the officers they spoke to were intimidating and did not empathise with their situation or validate their feelings (George & Harris, 2014). In one instance, a survivor recalled how police asked her to discuss the details of her abuse in a public area in front of her children and did not seem to understand or empathise with the severity of the situation she was currently experiencing (George & Harris, 2014). Furthermore, when victims were experiencing coercive control but did not experience any form of physical violence, the response from the police indicated a lack of understanding and empathy (George & Harris, 2014). For example, one woman recalled that the police downplayed her abuse, telling her to "suck it up and deal with it" (George & Harris, 2014, p. 69). When victims of coercive control have negative encounters or interactions with the police or other service providers, this reduces the likelihood that they will seek support in the future (George & Harris, 2014). As such, it is important to understand the relationship between empathy and victim blame in the context of coercive control, in particular, whether high levels of interpersonal empathy will reduce levels of victim blame within this context, and in turn improve and increase help-seeking behaviours for victims of coercive control.

In the context of this study, it is predicted that there will be a strong negative correlation between empathy and victim blame, and that participants' empathy will moderate the interaction between the location of the coercive control and victim blame scores. Based on previous research and current published literature, it is accepted that within different geographical locations, empathetic attitudes within the communities may vary based on the culture and beliefs held by members of the community. Furthermore, when high levels of empathy are paired with, in this experiment, victims of coercive control who reside in a rural or urban area, empathy scores will moderate this relationship, and for participants with high

levels of empathy, their perception of victim blameworthiness will be lower. By using moderation analysis to explore this interaction, the role of empathy within this context will be illustrated and better understood.

The Current Study

The current study aims to address the gaps within the published literature relating to coercive control, and to investigate how contextual factors might impact perceptions of victim blame, specifically, which factors can predict the perception of blame toward victims of coercive control. Research has tended not to directly compare experiences of urban and rural victims of coercive control, particularly in the absence of technology facilitated abuse. Additionally, previous research within this area is mostly qualitative and focuses predominately on the lived experiences of victims of coercive control (Baynard et al., 2019; George & Harris, 2014; Harris & Woodlock, 2022; Harris & Woodlock, 2021; Woodlock et al., 2022). As it is the first to consider coercive control and victim blame within this context, the current study intends to expand the literature using an experimental design, canvassing a more general population; individuals who have not experienced coercive control, or IPV more generally and who are potentially future service providers within this field. A within-subjects design was used for the type of coercive control that was experienced by the victim, with participants exposed to both types of coercive control: TFCC and in person coercive control. Participants were presented with vignettes that depicted heterosexual relationships, with the gender of the victim in both conditions being female, to reflect the generally reported incidence of coercive control (Harris & Woodlock, 2019). The location in which the coercive control was experienced was varied between-subjects: coercive control experienced in a rural location, and coercive control experienced in an urban location. The dependent measure in this experiment was the perceived level of victim blame placed on the victim. The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (Spreng et al., 2009), which measures participants' self-

reported levels of empathy, was included as a potential moderator of the relationship between type of coercive control and victim blame.

Hypotheses

1. It was predicted that perceived victim blameworthiness would be lower where coercive control occurred in an urban location when compared to where coercive control occurred in a rural location.
2. It was hypothesised that higher levels of victim blameworthiness would be placed upon victims of technology facilitated coercive control, compared with 'in person' coercive control.
3. It was predicted that participants' empathy levels would have a strong negative correlation with their victim blame scores.
4. It was predicted that the highest level of victim blameworthiness would be placed upon the victims of technology facilitated coercive control, occurring in a rural location compared to in person coercive control, occurring in an urban location.
5. It was hypothesised that empathy would moderate the relationship between the location of coercive control and victim blame.
    a. Participants with higher empathy scores would rate victims as being less blameworthy in both location conditions.

Method

Participants

A total of 105 participants volunteered to take part in the present study. Individuals were eligible to participate if they were 18 years of age or over, able to read and write English, and had not experienced, or been exposed to, domestic abuse or intimate partner violence, including coercive control. There were six participants who had not completed the measures of victim blame, and their data was therefore excluded; as a result, the final sample consisted of 99 participants. The majority of participants were first year psychology students (n = 67), who participated in exchange for course credit. The remaining participants were students currently completing their Honours degree in psychology (n = 32). The two groups did not differ significantly for any of the demographic data, with the exception of age, $F(1,97) = 14.08$, $p < .001$.

The overall mean age of participants was 23 years (SD = 9.98), ranging from 18 to 73 years. The majority of the sample were female (71.7%, n = 71), with 26.3% (n = 26) of participants identifying as male, and 2% identifying as transgender (n = 1) or non-binary/non-conforming (n = 1). The majority of participants identified as Caucasian (75.7%, n = 72), with 19.2% identifying as Asian (n = 19), and the remaining participants (5.1%) identifying as African (n = 1), South American (n = 1), European (n = 1), Peruvian (n = 1), and Indigenous Australian (n = 1).

Almost half of the participants (47.5%) indicated that they were in a relationship (n = 38), engaged (n = 2), married (n = 5), or living with a partner they were in a relationship with (n = 2). The majority of remaining participants (52.5%), indicated that they were single (n = 51), or divorced (n = 1).

In order to gain a general understanding of participants' social media use, questions relating to geographical tracking were included. The majority of participants (79.8%, *n* = 79) reported that they have used an application to track the location of another person, with a further 11.1% (*n* = 11) stating that they had not tracked another person's live location, and the remaining 9.1% stating that they were unsure as to whether they had done so or not (*n* = 9). Furthermore, 62.6%, (*n* = 62) of participants reported that they have used an application which shares their live location with others, such as Snapchat Maps, Find My Friends, or another geographical tracking app. Of the remaining participants, 35.4% responded that they have not shared their live location (*n* = 35), and 2% were unsure if they had (*n* = 2).

Design

A 2 (location: rural, urban) × 2 (type of coercive control: technology facilitated, in person) mixed between-within design was used, with location as the between subjects variable. Victim blame was measured as the dependent variable for both locations. Additionally, participant empathy was measured for each participant as a predicted moderator variable for the relationship between the type of coercive control and perceived victim blameworthiness. G*Power was used to run an A priori power analysis to compute the number of participants needed to accurately detect an effect within this study. As the desired effect size was .25, a medium effect size, a minimum number of 34 participants was needed to achieve this power.

Materials

An online survey (see Appendix A) was designed specifically for this study, using Qualtrics software. Demographic information was collected, including participants' age, gender, ethnicity, and relationship status. Four vignettes were designed which depicted coercive control (see Appendix A), with reference to the conceptualisation of coercive control as outlined by the Australian Institute of Criminology (Boxall & Morgan, 2021).

Specifically, coercive control was characterised by four controlling behaviours, including emotional abuse, harassment, financial abuse, and stalking. The research of Robinson et al. (2016) was also used to inform the development of the vignettes; with aspects of the vignettes outlined by Robinson et al. (2016) being adapted for the online coercive control vignettes, to ensure consistency with the existing literature. This was done so by including TFCC behaviours which commonly present in real life situations of IPV.

Participants were randomly allocated to one of the two location conditions, such that participants either read the vignettes depicted in a rural location, or in an urban location. However, all participants read one vignette depicting 'in person' coercive control, and a further depicting 'technology facilitated coercive control', with the type of coercive control (in person, technology facilitated), manipulated. The order of the two types of coercive control vignettes were counterbalanced in order to minimise the effect of the order of presentation on the results.

Victim Blame Scale

A five-point scale measuring victim blame was adapted from previous research by Starr and Lavis (2018), which had originally been developed from research measuring victim blaming of rape victims (Abrams et al., 2003). The adaptation of this measure for the current study included altering wording to ensure relevance to coercive control and the vignettes designed for this study, rather than image-based abuse (Starr & Lavis, 2018). Additionally, two of the items from the scale used by Starr and Lavis (2018) were removed, as they were not relevant or appropriate for the current study, being that the original measure was developed for use within the context of image-based abuse (Starr & Lavis, 2018). Previous versions of the victim blame measure were found to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$ and $\alpha = .83$, respectively) (Abrams et al., 2003; Starr & Lavis, 2018). The internal consistency

for the adapted measure in the current study was also found to be acceptable when analysed for both the context conditions; in person (α= .75) and technology facilitated (α= .75).

A total of six questions were retained for the current study. Responses ranged from 1 (not at all or none) to 7 (completely or all) to measure the amount of blame placed on the victim (and, conversely, the perpetrator) for both vignettes depicting coercive control. Mean victim blame scores were calculated for each participant, where higher scores reflected higher blame being placed onto victims. Items three, four, and six, were reverse scored before an overall score of victim blame was calculated for each participant, for each vignette.

Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009)

Participants' trait empathy was measured using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al., 2009) (see Appendix A). This self-reported questionnaire measures a person's emotional ability to understand and respond to others (Spreng et al., 2009). The TEQ consists of 16 items, using a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from never (0) to always (4). Scores were combined to create an empathy score, ranging from zero to 64, with lower scores depicting lower levels of empathy in each participant (Spreng et al., 2009). A total of eight items were reverse scored before an overall score of empathy was calculated for each participant.

Notably, empathy scores for the TEQ differ according to gender, with males' general scores for this measure ranging from 43.46 to 44.45, and females scores ranging from 44.62 to 48.93 (Spreng et al., 2009). The internal consistency for the TEQ has been found to be good, with a published Cronbach's alpha score of (α= .87) (Spreng et al., 2009). The internal consistency for the current study was also found to be acceptable, with a Cronbach's alpha score of (α= .80).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the SONA research participation system, in addition to advertisement on a private Honours student Facebook page. Participants were provided with a link to complete the online survey through Qualtrics. Participants read through a letter of introduction and an information sheet, and provided their consent to participate by clicking "continue". Demographic information was obtained in the first set of questions, and participants were randomly assigned to one of the two location conditions: rural and urban. Each participant was presented with two vignettes (see Appendix A) representing the two types of coercive control (in person, technology facilitated); the order in which the vignettes were presented was counterbalanced. After each vignette, participants answered questions from the TEQ.

Manipulation checks were presented for both vignettes (in person, technology facilitated) which consisted of seven items scored on a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (not at all), to 5 (very much) (see Appendix A). These questions asked participants to rate the perceived control of the victim and perpetrator within their relationship, the isolation experienced by the victim, and the extent to which the victim in each vignette was experiencing emotional abuse, harassment, stalking, and controlling behaviours.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the data and test for normality. A Shapiro-Wilk test for normality was conducted and revealed that in person coercive control perceived victim blame scores ($p < .001$), TFCC perceived victim blame scores ($p < .001$), and Toronto Empathy Questionnaire scores ($p < .05$) all violated normality. It is suggested that formal normality tests be paired with the visual inspection of plots, as well as the consideration of shape parameters such as skewness and kurtosis coefficients (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012), hence normality was further assessed using Histograms and Q-Q plots. Victim blame scores for both TFCC and in person coercive control conditions were positively skewed (see Appendix B; Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6), and participants' TEQ scores were slightly negatively skewed (see Appendix B; Figures 7, 8). The data was therefore transformed and re-analysed, in order to ensure the violation of normality did not unnecessarily alter the results within this study. It was found that the transformed data did not change either the results or interpretation of the results in any meaningful way; the data still violated normality, hence the untransformed data was reported.

A small number of outliers were detected upon inspection of the boxplots; there were five outlying scores on the victim blame scales (see Appendix B; Figure 9), and one on the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire scale (see Appendix B; Figure 10) which were identified as being greater than 1.5 lengths from the edge of each box. In order to investigate the effects of these outliers, preliminary analyses were run, both with and without the inclusion of these values. Removal of these outliers did not have a statistically significant effect on the results, and the outliers were therefore included in the final data set.

Manipulation Checks

In order to test whether participants were able to identify the occurrence of coercive control, participants were asked questions relating to the perceived amount of control both the victim and the perpetrator had in their relationship. In both the rural and urban conditions, scores from the item, "how much control does Sarah/Eloise have in her relationship?", indicated that participants perceived the victim of in person coercive control (rural: M = .80, SD = .70; urban: M = 1.0, SD = 1.01) as having very little control in the relationship (see Table 1). Similarly, scores indicated that participants perceived the victim of TFCC coercive control (rural: M = .1.27, SD = .92; urban: M = 1.15, SD = .89) as having very little control in the relationship (see Table 2).

Table 1.

Manipulation Check Results for In Person Coercive Control.

	Urban	Rural	**Total**
How much control does Sarah have in her relationship?	1.00 (1.01)	.80 (.70)	.89 (.87)
How much control does Dave have in his relationship?	3.53 (.71)	3.63 (.53)	3.59 (.62)
How isolated do you think Sarah is?	3.30 (.91)	3.44 (.78)	3.37 (.84)
To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing emotional abuse?	3.62 (.53)	3.67 (.55)	3.65 (.54)
To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing harassment?	3.09 (.95)	3.10 (.91)	3.09 (.93)
To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing stalking?	1.28 (1.47)	1.38 (1.33)	1.33 (1.39)
To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing controlling behaviours?	3.66 (.67)	3.81 (.53)	3.74 (.60)

Table 2.

Manipulation Check Results for Technology Facilitated Coercive Control.

	Urban	Rural	**Total**
How much control does Eloise have in her relationship?	1.15 (.89)	1.27 (.92)	1.21 (.91)
How much control does Jack have in his relationship?	3.49 (.66)	3.56 (.54)	3.53 (.60)
How isolated do you think Eloise is?	2.79 (1.19)	3.06 (1.02)	2.93 (1.11)
To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing emotional abuse?	3.28 (.93)	3.60 (.60)	3.44 (.79)
To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing harassment?	2.96 (1.14)	3.21 (.89)	3.09 (1.02)
To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing stalking?	3.32 (1.09)	3.52 (.89)	3.42 (.99)
To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing controlling behaviours?	3.77 (.56)	3.85 (.46)	3.81 (.51)

In order to test the between-subjects variable, location, participants' responses to the question relating to how geographically isolated the victims were in each scenario were expected to differ between rural and urban conditions. This question, "how isolated do you think Sarah/Eloise is?" aimed to investigate whether the manipulation of location as a between subjects variable was successful within this study. It was predicted that participants would perceive victims in the rural condition as being more isolated, due to their geographical location. It was found that victims residing in a rural location were perceived as being more isolated for the victims of in person coercive control (M = 3.44, SD = .78) and TFCC (M = 3.06, SD = 1.02) than their urban counterparts (in person (M = 3.30, SD = .91), TFCC (M = 2.79, SD = 1.19) (see Tables 1, 2). Whilst there was a difference between these location conditions, it was not statistically significant for either the in person coercive control condition $F(1,97) = .73$. $p = .39$. or the TFCC condition $F(1,97) = 1.48$, $p = .23$.

In the vignette depicting TFCC, victims experienced location tracking through the use of a social media application, therefore participant responses relating to the extent to which the victim was experiencing stalking were expected to be higher in the TFCC condition compared to the in person coercive control condition, where no location tracking occurred. This item was included to test the manipulation of behaviours between the two vignettes (see Appendix A). Participants' perception of stalking behaviours was comparatively higher for the victim of TFCC, in both the rural (M = 3.3.52, SD = .90) and urban conditions (M = 3.32, SD = 1.09), compared to the victim of in person coercive control in both the rural (M = 1.38, SD = 1.33) and urban conditions (M = 1.28, SD = 1.47) illustrating that participants read and understood the vignettes and the different experiences of each victim (see Tables 1, 2). However, the results of a one-way ANOVA indicate the absence of a statistically significant difference in mean responses between location conditions for both the in person coercive control group $F(1,97) = .15$. $p = .70$ and TFCC group $F(1,97) = 1.01$. $p = .32$.

Location, Type of Coercive Control, and Victim Blame

In order to investigate whether perception of victim blame varied according to the type of coercive control and the location in which coercive control was perpetrated, a 2 (type of coercive control: online, in person) × 2 (location: rural, urban) mixed within-between subjects ANOVA was conducted for victim blame, with type of coercive control as the within subjects variable. Table 3 outlines the means and standard deviations for the perceived victim blame scores across location and type of coercive control. Notably, each of the means were below the neutral mid-point (of four on the Likert scale), indicating that participants tended to attribute low levels of blameworthiness to the victims irrespective of the location or type of coercive control.

Table 3.

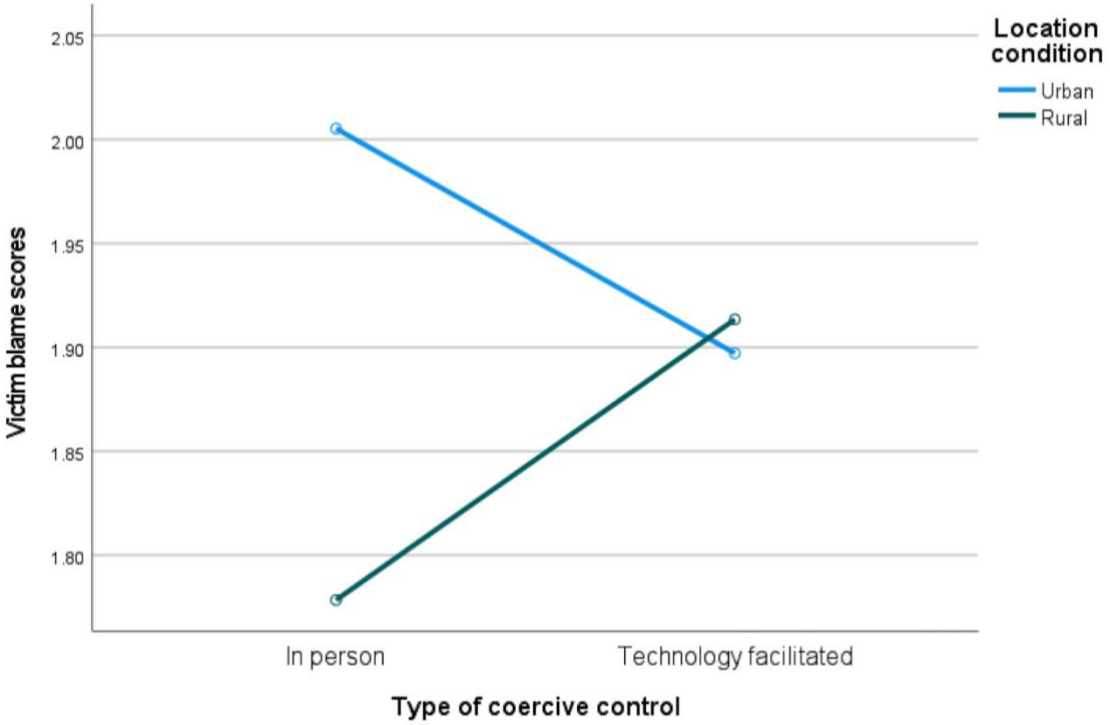
Means (and Standard Deviations) for Perceived Victim Blame for the Location and Type of Coercive Control.

	Rural	Urban
Technology Facilitated	1.95 (0.73)	1.90 (0.72)
In person	1.79 (0.72)	1.90 (0.80)

Contrary to the original hypothesis, the main effect of type of coercive control was non-significant, $F(1,97) = .04$, $p = .84$, $\eta p^2 = .000$, indicating that perceptions of victim blame did not differ significantly according to whether coercive control was facilitated by technology or in person. Second, there was also no statistically significant main effect between the two location conditions (rural, urban) on participants' perceptions of victim blame, $F(1, 97) = .62$, $p = .43$, $\eta p^2 = .006$. Although it is acknowledged that there was no statistically significant interaction for perceptions of victim blame, the pattern of results observed for the data is potentially of interest, and worthy of further exploration into this interaction (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the interaction effect between the type and location of coercive control was non-significant, $F(1,97) = 3.24$, $p = .075$, $\eta p^2 = .032$; indicating that there was no significant difference for the perceptions of victim blame according to whether coercive control was perpetrated in an urban or rural location.

Figure 1.

Estimated Marginal Means for the Interaction Between the Location of the Coercive Control (Rural, Urban), and the Type of Coercive Control (In Person, Technology Facilitated).



The Role of Empathy in the Perception of Victim Blame

Well established in previous literature is the strong negative correlation between empathy levels and victim blame scores (Dyar et al., 2021). As was hypothesised, the current study found the same correlation to be true; participants with higher levels of empathy tended to have lower levels of perceived victim blameworthiness (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Correlations Between Participant Empathy and Perceived Victim Blame

	Technology-Facilitated Victim Blame	In Person Victim Blame
Technology-Facilitated Victim Blame	-	
In Person Victim Blame	.584**	-
Participant Empathy	-.228*	-.34**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In order to further explore the role of empathy, the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was included as a potential moderator of the relationship between the location of the victim and perceived victim blame (see Figure 2). Specifically, it was hypothesised that participants' empathy levels would alter the strength of the relationship between location of the perpetration of coercive control and perceived victim blame scores; empathy (*M*) moderates the effect of location of the coercive control (*X*) on perceived victim blame (*Y*) in such a manner that blame is reduced; as empathy increases, victim blame scores decrease. In line with the principles outlined by Hayes (2022), the location in which the coercive control was occurring was randomised (between subjects) and it was assumed that there was no meaningful relationship with participant empathy. A one-way ANOVA was run which confirmed that the empathy scores of the two location conditions did not differ significantly $F(1,97) = 1.66$, $p = .20$ (see Table 5).

Figure 2.

A Conceptual Diagram where X Represents the Independent Variable (Location), Y Represents Perceived Victim Blame, and M Represents Participant Empathy.

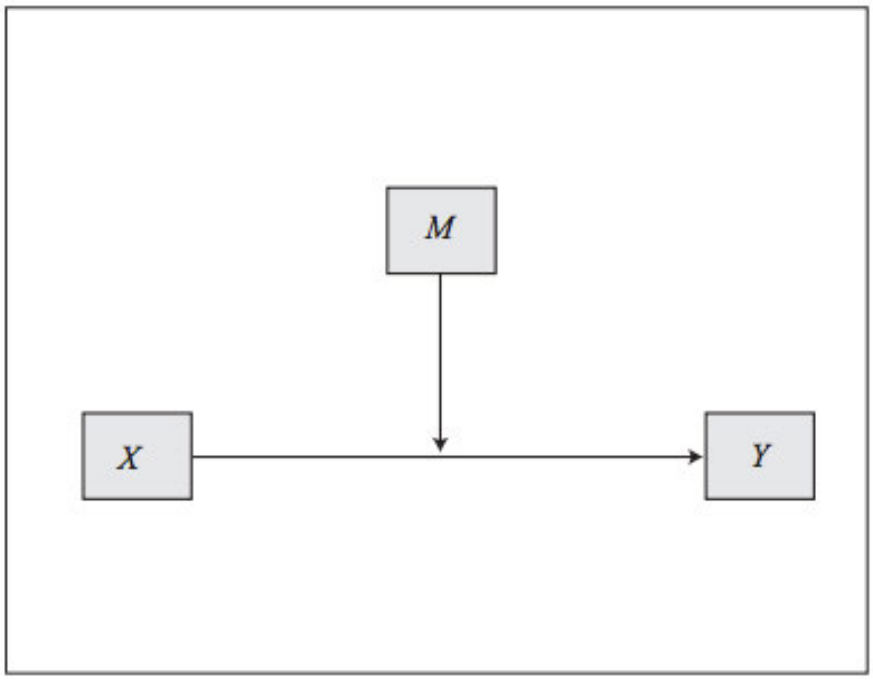


Table 5 outlines the means and standard deviations for participant empathy across location and gender. Notably, the mean scores for the participants fell outside of the range which has been recognised to reflect general scores for this measure. Specifically, males generally score between 43.46 and 44.45, whereas females score between 44.62 and 48.93. Overall, female participants' mean empathy score was 50.87 (*SD* = 6.46) and male participants' mean empathy score was 46.73 (*SD* = 6.40).

Table 5.

Means (and Standard Deviations) for Participant Empathy for Location, Coercive Control, and Gender.

	Rural	Urban	Total
Participant Empathy			
Female	51.40 (5.82)	50.19 (7.24)	50.87 (6.46)
Male	47.64 (5.99)	46.07 (6.81)	46.73 (6.40)
Total	50.59 (6.00)	48.85 (7.29)	49.76 (6.67)

To explore moderation, the PROCESS macro procedure can be utilised. PROCESS (Hayes, 2022) is a computational tool designed for use within SPSS which allows for the effects of a moderator variable (participant empathy scores) to be tested on the association between an independent variable (location of coercive control) and a dependent variable (perceived victim blame) (Hayes, 2022). However, as noted earlier, there was no significant relationship identified in this study between location of the coercive control and perceived victim blame. As such, it was decided that further consideration of potential moderation would not be explored, given the absence of the significant relationship.

Exploratory Analyses: Gender, Empathy, and Victim Blame

A Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to explore the relationship between participant empathy and perceived victim blame, based on previous literature (see, e.g., Chowdhary, 2019, Clevenger et al., 2016, Hudson-Flege et al., 2020, Inzunza, 2015, van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). The relationship was significant, r = -.295, p <.001., suggesting a moderate correlation. As illustrated in Table 3, there was a small negative correlation between participant empathy and perceived victim blame for technology-facilitated coercive control, and a small to moderate negative correlation between participant empathy and perceived victim blame for in person coercive control.

As previously examined, empathy scores measured according to the TEQ are generally expected to vary according to gender; previous research has indicated females generally tend to allocate less victim blame (see, e.g., James, 2018). Additionally, it is well established within literature in this area is that females generally tend to be more empathetic than males (Spreng et al., 2009). Given the strong negative correlation between participant empathy and perceptions of victim blame within this study, exploratory analyses were conducted to explore whether participant gender impacted perceptions of victim blame for coercive control

There were unequal sample sizes and unequal variances within this sample of participants; there was a disproportionate number of female participants (n = 71). Due to this, a cautious approach was taken to the exploratory analyses, which were conducted using one-way between-group ANOVAs (interpreted using Brown-Forsythe; see Tomarken & Serlin, 1986) for perceived victim blame, with gender as the between-subjects variable.[1] There was a significant difference between perceived victim blame for males and females, F(1, 95) =

[1] The non-parametric alternate (i.e., Kruskal-Wallis) was not used given research has indicated this alternative may be less adequate when sample sizes are unequal (see, e.g., Tomarken & Serlin, 1986). Tests were conducted using both transformed data and the original dataset, and given the pattern of results was unchanged, the original data has been reported.

8.55, $p < .005$, where coercive control occurred in person (see Table 5). Specifically, the perception of victim blame scores were higher for males ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .93$) when compared with females ($M = 1.77$, $SD = .65$). However, there was no significant difference between perceived victim blame for males ($M = 2.10$, $SD = .80$) and females ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .70$), $F(1, 95) = 2.49$, $p = .118$, where coercive control was facilitated by technology. Separating the data by location, a one-way between-groups ANOVA (interpreted using Brown-Forsythe) was conducted for perceived victim blame, with gender as the between-subjects variable. Results indicated that gender did not impact perceptions of victim blame where the coercive control occurred in a rural location, for either in person coercive control, $F(1, 49) = .207$, $p = .65$, or online coercive control, $F(1, 49) = 1.12$, $p = .29$. However, for the urban location, there was a significant gender difference for in person coercive control, $F(1, 44) = 11.61$, $p < .05$, but not online coercive control, $F(1, 44) = 1.61$, $p = .21$. Specifically, where the coercive control occurred in person in an urban location, the perception of victim blame scores were higher for males ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .97$) when compared with females ($M = .77$, $SD = .56$) (see Table 6). Although these exploratory analyses should be viewed with some caution, the pattern of results may prove useful for guiding further research.

Table 6.

Means (and Standard Deviations) for Perceived Victim Blame for the Location, Type of Coercive Control, and Gender.

		Rural	Urban
Technology Facilitated	Male	2.15 (1.04)	2.10 (0.80)
	Female	1.85 (0.76)	1.85 (0.70)
	Total	1.95 (0.73)	1.90 (0.72)
In person	Male	1.88 (0.76)	2.26 (0.93)
	Female	1.77 (0.72)	1.77 (0.65)
	Total	1.79 (0.72)	1.90 (0.80)

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the factors which lead to a change in the perception of coercive control, and, in participants' levels of perceived victim blameworthiness. Current literature within this area of research suggests that the difficulties faced by the victims of coercive control in regard to seeking assistance are exacerbated in rural areas, as well as if they are experiencing technology facilitated coercive control (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Harris, 2016; Harris & Woodlock, 2022; Harris & Woodlock, 2021; Woodlock et al., 2022). However, there has not yet been an evaluation of how these factors may influence the perception of victim blameworthiness. In order to expand the scope of available literature, this was the first experimental study to investigate the relationship between the location of coercive control, the type of coercive control, and perceived victim blameworthiness. At present within Australia, few jurisdictions have formally criminalised, as a separate offence, those behaviours which constitute coercive control, and consideration of the introduction of a specific criminal offence is relatively recent (Boxall & Morgan, 2021). As such, the development of further research, and in turn the implementation of new policies and legislation designed to combat and prevent coercive control, is imperative as it will result in improved outcomes for victims and the wider community. This study was designed with the intention of providing further insight into coercive control and the perception of victim blame, as well as with the aim to link aspects of coercive control with other areas of IPV more generally in order to expand the current available literature.

The results of this study indicate that neither the location of the coercive control, nor the context of the coercive control have a statistically significant influence on victim blame scores. Although it was originally predicted that there would be a significant difference between the perceptions of victim blameworthiness between the rural and urban conditions, the difference was not statistically significant. This result was unexpected, as previous

qualitative literature suggests that female victims living in a rural location recount greater difficulty when working with service providers in these spaces, as well as their challenges when experiencing traditional values concerning women and the role of women within a relationship often held by the members of rural communities (Harris, 2016. Pease, 2010. Harris & Woodlock, 2021. Harris & Woodlock, 2022). Furthermore, when women who reside in a rural location also experience TFCC, their abuse is exacerbated and they face unique and detrimental challenges (Harris, 2016. Pease, 2010. Harris & Woodlock, 2021. Harris & Woodlock, 2022). However, within the context of this study, the results do not indicate this to be the case.

In order to further analyse the results of this study, the data could be collapsed, and rather than considering both the location and the context of coercive control, using data from both location conditions in conjunction would allow for further insight into how the two scenarios (the context of the victim blame) influence participants' perception of victim blameworthiness. It is predicted that the majority of participants, as they are students at the University of Adelaide, reside in an urban area, and may not possess as strongly those traditional beliefs which may influence greater levels of victim blame which are more commonly held by individuals who reside in rural locations. In the future, collecting data from individuals who reside in a rural location and comparing victim blaming attitudes in comparison to those held by urban residents would be beneficial and allow further insight into the beliefs and values of individuals in rural communities in regards to coercive control.

The results conclude that as was hypothesised, empathy scores and victim blame scores are significantly negatively correlated. This finding is important, as it expands the current literature regarding empathy and victim blame, and illustrates that coercive control closely aligns with other forms of IPV within this context. Previous research within the field of IPV and domestic abuse has clearly established the negative correlation between empathy

and victim blame, particularly in the scope of sexual assault and imaged-based abuse on female victims (Dyar et al., 2021, Oritz & Smith, 2021). In the current study, both male and female participants' empathy scores exceeded the predicted range published by Spreng et al. (2009). Due to the empathy scores of participants being higher than predicted, and the well-established correlation within the current literature, it is not surprising that victim blame scores are consistently low (Attreed & Kozlowski, 2018; Spreng et al., 2009).

The results which have emerged from this study illustrate a strong negative correlation between empathy and perceived victim blameworthiness, and as a result, it can be concluded that being able to empathise with victims of coercive control is essential. Current literature has highlighted the importance of empathy within police work and has begun to consider the possibility of 'teaching' empathy (Inzuzuna, 2013). Studies have found that with the development of specifically designed programs, police officers' victim blaming attitudes may be improved and secondary victimisation (victim blame) can be reduced (Chowdhary, 2019). The current study only further highlights the importance of empathy in reducing perceived victim blameworthiness and assisting victims of coercive control.

The predicted interaction between the location and context of coercive control was that victims of technology facilitated coercive control who reside in a rural location would be perceived as being the most blameworthy. Contrary to previous research (Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Harris & Woodlock, 2022; Harris & Woodlock, 2021), the results within this study are statistically insignificant, and do not confirm this prediction to be true. One explanation for these results is that participants may not have recognised victims in rural areas as being more isolated than victims in urban areas. Additionally, the prediction that empathy would moderate the relationship between the location of coercive control and victim blame scores was not supported. Further analyses within the current study have suggested that a

relationship between gender, location, and victim blame may emerge with the development and implementation of further research within this area.

Exploratory analyses were run to examine the effect of gender on the results. Whilst not originally hypothesised, it was expected that female participants would perceive victims as being less blameworthy due to expected higher levels of empathy (Spreng et al., 2009). In line with previous research (see e.g., Attreed & Kozlowski, 2018), this was the case in the current study. Furthermore, it was found that there was a significant difference between male and female victim blame scores when coercive control is occurring only in person, with male participants reporting higher levels of victim blame. Interestingly, and cautiously suggested, there was a difference between the victim blame scores when coercive control occurred in an in person context in an urban location, with males having higher mean victim blame scores than females. Although firm conclusions should not be drawn, these results suggest the possibility that either the location or the context of the coercive control, or the characteristics of the victim could influence the perception of victim blameworthiness, and with further research, more supportive evidence for this interaction may emerge.

One explanation for the statistically insignificant results within this study is this is the lack of ambiguity held by participants regarding whether coercive control was occurring or not. Previous research in this area suggests that most people are unfamiliar with coercive control, and how detrimental the behaviours which are recognised as coercive control can be, especially within a technology facilitated context (Stark & Hester, 2019), however, participants within this study were able to clearly recognise these behaviours. The scenarios presented in the survey were constructed in a way so as to be in accordance with current legislation and the findings of previous research, that illustrate patterns of behaviour which constitute coercive control, such as harassment, emotional abuse, and stalking (Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Robinson & Pinchevsky, 2016). The scenarios in this study all depicted four

or more coercive controlling behaviours, and manipulation checks within this study indicate that participants clearly recognised coercive control to be occurring when reading scenarios depicting coercive controlling behaviours, and the victims within the scenarios were perceived as having little control within their relationship. Furthermore, participants were able to clearly identify singular behaviours enacted by the perpetrator as being harmful to the victim, such as stalking, harassment, and emotional abuse. The manipulation checks suggest that the coercive controlling behaviours were clear to participants, which could have influenced very low victim blame scores, rather than the factors originally believed to predict the perception of victim blame. In order to further explore this effect, future research should aim to investigate the role of participant ambiguity on victim blame. For example, scenarios with varying instances of coercive controlling behaviours could be presented, as well as scenarios similar to those presented in this study. In real world instances, victims may reach out and seek assistance after only experiencing one or two behaviours which are classified as coercive control, and if victim blaming attitudes differ significantly when a smaller number of behaviours have been experienced and presented to service providers, this will change how these victims receive assistance and affect overall outcomes for these victims.

One limitation within this study which may have led to a lack of statistical significance between factors is the population from which data was collected for this research. The participants were all psychology students at the University of Adelaide; a cohort of individuals who are expected to have higher levels of empathy and a greater understanding of the detriments of adverse life experiences than students from other areas of study, or the general population (Camarano, 2010). Previous research has predominantly focused on the experiences of the victims of coercive control, as well as service providers, but has not included the perception of victim blame held by members of the wider community. In order to fill this gap in the literature, data was collected from individuals who

had never experienced coercive control. The results which have emerged from this study are encouraging, as the participants within this sample may become future psychologists and service providers who work with the victims of IPV and coercive control.

Previous literature within this area focuses predominantly on female victims with a mean age of 33 who have experienced coercive control over an extended period of time (Boxall & Morgan, 2021; Harris & Woodlock, 2022). The mean age of participants within this study was 23 years of age, and whilst the participants in this study were able to clearly identify that coercive control was occurring, they may have a limited understanding of the real-life effects of coercive control, or IPV more generally, especially as they have not experienced it themselves. By adding participants from a wider age range, who subsequently have more life experience, the results of this study will be more comprehensive. In addition, younger individuals who have grown up and experienced technology as a tool for communication within friendships and romantic relationships possibly have a greater understanding of the detriments it can present, therefore resulting in lower levels of victim blame. As well as collecting data from a broader age range, it would be interesting and beneficial to replicate this study with a sample of participants who have been exposed to or experienced themselves IPV or coercive control in both an in person and technology facilitated context. By doing this, the insight of those with experiences of coercive control and their subsequent perceived victim blameworthiness levels could be compared to the data collected within this study. Furthermore, the inclusion of current service providers within this field, such as police officers, psychologists, lawyers, and social workers would allow for the perceptions of victim blame held by professionals to be examined, as well as allow for the development of a better understanding of coercive control and victim blame in the contexts of these professions. For example, it is well established that the attitude held by police officers

in relation to domestic violence is mostly negative (McPhedran et al., 2017; Segrave et al., 2016), so victim blaming attitudes may differ within this group.

The vignettes were brief, hypothetical accounts of coercive control and as such, a limitation of this study is the exclusion of any cultural factors. As a result, it can be predicted that participants perceived white Australian victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, 75.7% of the sample identified as Caucasian. Current literature suggests that the difficulties faced by women from a refugee background, or a non-western cultural background are not dissimilar to other women, but that accessing support for coercive control, in both rural and urban environments can be more challenging due to a lack of understanding surrounding the complexities of culture held by white Australian service providers (Murray et al., 2018). Whilst this study did not aim to consider any cultural factors, the inclusion of victims and perpetrators from non-western cultures, or scenarios depicting countries other than Australia should be considered in future research.

Additionally, this study did not include victims and perpetrators from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. The scenarios presented were hypothetical in nature, and in order to construct the rural and urban conditions as similarly as possible, the socioeconomic status of the victim and perpetrator may have been implied. The victims and perpetrators in both location conditions had large properties with large amounts of farmland (rural) or a large property (rural). Participants may have perceived this as an indication of wealth, which may have inadvertently influenced their perception of victim blameworthiness. In order for results to be generalised to a wider population, exploring the role of income, employment status of both the victim and perpetrator, and housing situations should be further explored.

A further limitation within this study is that the coercive control scenarios portrayed only a female victim and a male perpetrator in a heterosexual relationship. Research in the area IPV suggests that individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ are at a similar or greater risk

of experiencing DV than the heterosexual population (Seymour, 2017). Furthermore, 'same-sex' partner abuse is underreported to the police and not as well known by service providers (Seymour, 2017). The exclusion of homosexual relationships within the available literature is to a detriment to policy development; without the consideration of the experiences of non-heteronormative relationships, policies will not be inclusive and may not be applicable to couples who fall outside of the female victim, male perpetrator trope (Seymour, 2017). In order to broaden the scope and to improve generalisability of the current study, the future scenarios presented to participants should be inclusive of same sex couples and LGBTQIA+ victims and perpetrators.

This study has uniquely explored the factors which influence the perception of victim blame within participants who themselves had never been exposed to coercive control or IPV. Whilst the original hypotheses have not been supported, the results that have emerged from this research are promising; when coercive control is clearly occurring, victims are empathised with and they are not blamed for their abuse. Although not originally considered, the role of gender within this study suggests that a relationship between gender and victim blame may emerge with the development of a more structured and deliberate study. The next step within this area would be a continuation of the consideration of the factors which lead to changes in perceived victim blameworthiness by undertaking further research obtaining data from a wider population, including individuals who have experienced coercive control, service providers, and the introduction of varying presentations of coercive controlling behaviours. In the future, cultural factors should also be considered, as well as relationships between individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+. With further exploration, these findings have the potential to educate service providers, as well as the general public. Raising awareness regarding the issue of coercive control is highly important as it will lead to better outcomes for victims when seeking help for their abuse.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire for Participants

Demographics

Participant's age _____

Participant's gender
1. Male
2. Female
3. Non-binary or Non-conforming
4. Transgender
5. Other (please specify) _____

Please choose the option which best reflects your current relationship status:
1. Single
2. In a relationship
3. Married
4. Separated
5. Divorced
6. Widowed
7. Engaged
8. Living with a partner whom you are in a relationship with

Please indicate your ethnic background
1. Caucasian
2. Asian
3. African
4. Indigenous Australian
5. Other (please specify) _____

Please indicate your highest level of education you have completed
1. High school (up to grade 10)
2. High school (year 12)
3. TAFE or Trade school
4. Undergraduate degree
5. Postgraduate degree
6. Other (please specify)_____

[Participants will be randomly assigned to two conditions; either rural, or urban locations. In both conditions the participants will read and respond to one scenario depicting only 'in person' coercive control, and one scenario which depicts online coercive control. The order of these scenarios will be counterbalanced for both conditions.]
This will be removed for the survey

SCENARIO 1 – 'IN PERSON' COERCIVE CONTROL

Vignette developed with reference to:

Boxall, H., & Morgan, A. (2021). Experiences of coercive control among Australian women. *Australian Institute of Criminology.*

Rural condition

Text in bold (highlighting coercive control) will be reverted to normal when adapted into a Qualtrics survey format

Dave and Sarah are married and live on a remote cattle station, approximately 13.5 hours drive from the nearest capital city. Dave is responsible for a large area of the station, and works long hours doing physically demanding work. Sarah is responsible for managing the homestead, and for raising their three young children. Sarah intends to run errands in the closest town, and asks Dave if he would mind her taking their only car for the day. She also mentions that she will need for him to **transfer some money**, so she can purchase some new clothes for their son, and for her to attend a routine medical check-up. Dave becomes enraged. He convinces Sarah not to run the errands, despite her having believed the errands to be important. She recalls past disagreements where Dave has **yelled at her** and she decides not to go. Sarah often feels that the tone which Dave uses with her is **threatening**. He often **insults** her, which makes her feel **ashamed and belittled**. Although Sarah has previously spoken with her family members about her concerns, more recently she has tended not to, because it ends up with Dave trying to **interfere with her relationships with her family members**.

Urban condition

***Text in bold (highlighting coercive control) will be reverted to normal when adapted into a Qualtrics survey format**

Dave and Sarah are married and live on a spacious property, approximately 15 minutes drive from the nearest capital city. Dave has a large amount of responsibility in his job, and works long hours doing physically demanding work. Sarah is responsible for managing their home, and for raising their three young children. Sarah intends to run errands in the city, and asks Dave if he would mind her taking their only car for the day. She also mentions that she will need for him to **transfer some money**, so she can purchase some new clothes for their son, and for her to attend a routine medical check-up. Dave becomes enraged. He convinces Sarah not to run the errands, despite her having believed the errands to be important. She recalls past disagreements where Dave has yelled at her and she decides not to go. Sarah often feels that the tone which Dave uses with her is **threatening**. He often **insults** her, which makes her feel **ashamed and belittled**. Although Sarah has previously spoken with her family members about her concerns, more recently she has tended not to, because it ends up with Dave trying to **interfere with her relationships with her family members**.

Scenario 2 – Technology Facilitated Coercive Control

Vignette developed with reference to:

Boxall, H., & Morgan, A. (2021). Experiences of coercive control among Australian women. *Australian Institute of Criminology.*

Robinson, A. L., Pinchevsky, G. M., & Guthrie, J. A. (2016). Under the radar: policing non-violent domestic abuse in the US and UK. *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice, 40*(3), 195-208.

Rural condition

***Text in bold (highlighting coercive control) will be reverted to normal when adapted into a Qualtrics survey format**

Eloise and Jack are a couple who met in high school. They began their relationship in year 11, at the age of 16. Eloise now works shift work as a nurse at a small country hospital, in a town where they both live. Jack asked Eloise to print out her shift roster, saying that it would make it easier to organise their personal life. However, Jack has begun to use the roster to **keep track of Eloise's movements**. Jack has become angry when Eloise has done overtime at work, questioning her and making her **account for her whereabouts**. He frequently checks her location using *Find My Friends* (a mobile phone tracking app). Jack also **monitors Eloise's social media accounts**, and has previously asked her to unfriend and unfollow people from her work. Although Eloise and Jack know most of the people in the town they live, Jack has always been jealous of any male friends that Eloise has had, and sometimes **accuses her of having an affair**. Jack justifies his behaviour, saying he is trying to protect Eloise.

Urban condition

***Text in bold (highlighting coercive control) will be reverted to normal when adapted into a Qualtrics survey format**

Eloise and Jack are a couple who met in high school. They began their relationship in year 11, at the age of 16. Eloise now works shift work as a nurse at a major city hospital, close by to where each of them live. Jack asked Eloise to print out her shift roster, saying that it would make it easier to organise their personal life. However, Jack has begun to use the roster to **keep track of Eloise's movements**. Jack has become angry when Eloise has done overtime at work, questioning her and making her **account for her whereabouts**. He frequently checks her location using *Find My Friends* (a mobile phone tracking app). Jack also **monitors Eloise's social media accounts**, and has previously asked her to unfriend and unfollow people from her work. Although Eloise and Jack know most of the same people, Jack has always been jealous of any male friends that Eloise has had, and sometimes **accuses her of having an affair**. Jack justifies his behaviour, saying he is trying to protect Eloise.

Measure of Victim Blame – In Person Scenario
(Adapted from the measure used by Starr & Lavis, 2018).
Please answer the following questions in relation to the vignette you have just read.

1 (not at all or none)	2	3	4 (somewhat)	5	6	7 (completely or all)

1. How much do you think Sarah should be blamed for her situation?
2. How much control do you think Sarah has over the situation?
3. How much control do you think Dave has over the situation?
4. Do you feel much sympathy for Sarah?
5. Sarah is to blame for things turning out the way they did.
6. Dave is to blame for things turning out the way they did.

Measure of Victim Blame – Technology Facilitated Scenario
(Adapted from the measure used by Starr & Lavis, 2018).

Please answer the following questions in relation to the vignette you have just read.

1 (not at all or none)	2	3	4 (somewhat)	5	6	7 (completely or all)

1. How much do you think Eloise should be blamed for her situation?
2. How much control do you think Eloise has over the situation?
3. How much control do you think Jack has over the situation?
4. Do you feel much sympathy for Eloise?
5. Eloise is to blame for things turning out the way they did.
6. Jack is to blame for things turning out the way they did.

Measure of Empathy – Adapted from the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

Adapted from the measure developed by: Spreng, R. N., McKinnon, M. C., Mar, R. A., & Levine, B. (2009). The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 91*(1), 62-71.

Please read each statement below carefully and rate how frequently you feel or act in the manner described. Circle your answer on the response form. There are no right or wrong answers or trick questions. Please answer each question as honestly as you can.

0 Never	1 Rarely	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Always

1. When someone is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too.
2. Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal.
3. It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully.
4. I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy.
5. I enjoy making other people feel better.
6. I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.

7. When a friend starts to talk about their problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else.
8. I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything.
9. I find that I am "in tune" with other people's moods.
10. I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses.
11. I become irritated when someone cries.
12. I am not really interested in how other people feel.
13. I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset.
14. When I see someone treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them.
15. I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness.
16. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them.

Manipulation Checks

In person scenario

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5 Very much

1. How much control does Sarah have in her relationship?
2. How much control does Dave have in his relationship?
3. How isolated do you think Sarah is?
4. To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing emotional abuse?
5. To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing harassment?
6. To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing stalking?
7. To what extent do you think Sarah is experiencing controlling behaviours?

Technology Facilitated Scenario

1 Not at all	2	3	4	5 Very much

1. How much control does Eloise have in her relationship?
2. How much control does Jack have in his relationship?
3. How isolated do you think Eloise is?
4. To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing emotional abuse?
5. To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing harassment?
6. To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing stalking?
7. To what extent do you think Eloise is experiencing controlling behaviours?

Personal Use of Social Media

Please select all social media platforms you currently use:

1. Instagram
2. Facebook

3. Snapchat
4. Twitter
5. TikTok
6. Email
7. Messenger
8. WhatsApp

Have you, or anyone you know, ever used *Find My Friends, SnapMaps*. or another geographical tracking device to check the location of someone?

1. Yes
2. No

Do you currently use a social media app which shares your live location with another/others?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636 if you experience any anxiety or discomfort from these questions. Furthermore, if you are a student, you may visit the free and confidential Student Life Counselling Support Service (phone 8313 5663 or visit ground floor of the Horace Lamb Building).

Appendix B

Figure 3.

A Histogram Illustrating the Distribution of the Data for Participants' Perceived In Person Victim Blame Scores

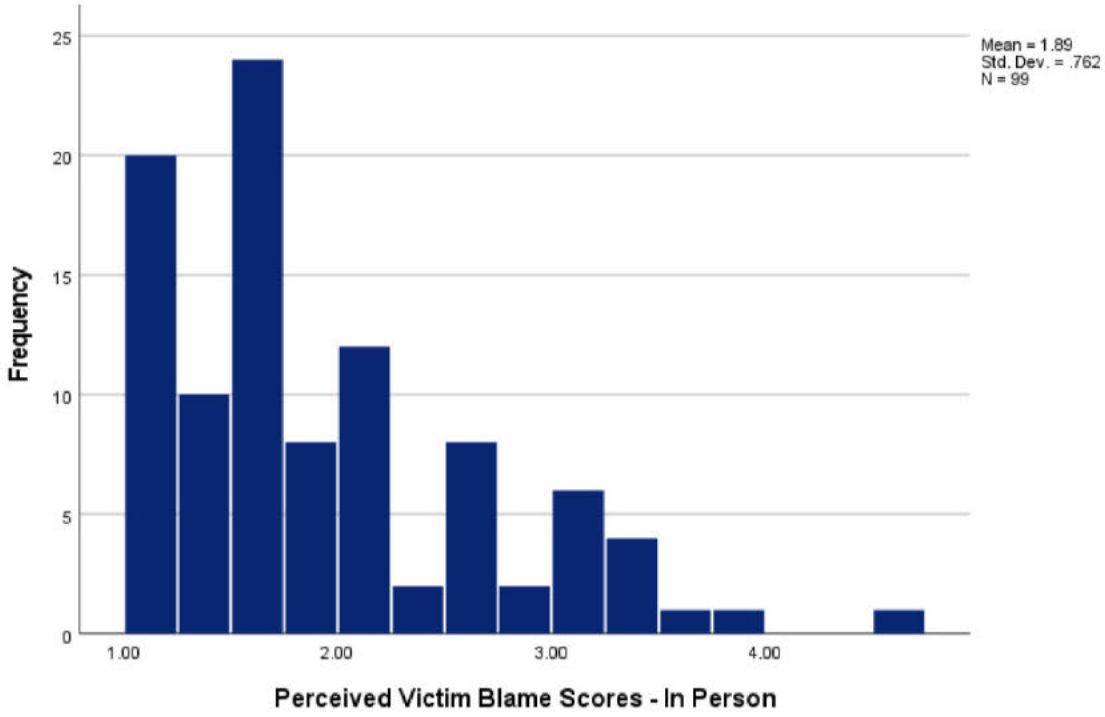

Figure 4.

A Q-Q Plot Illustrating the Distribution of the Data for Participants' Perceived In Person Victim Blame Scores

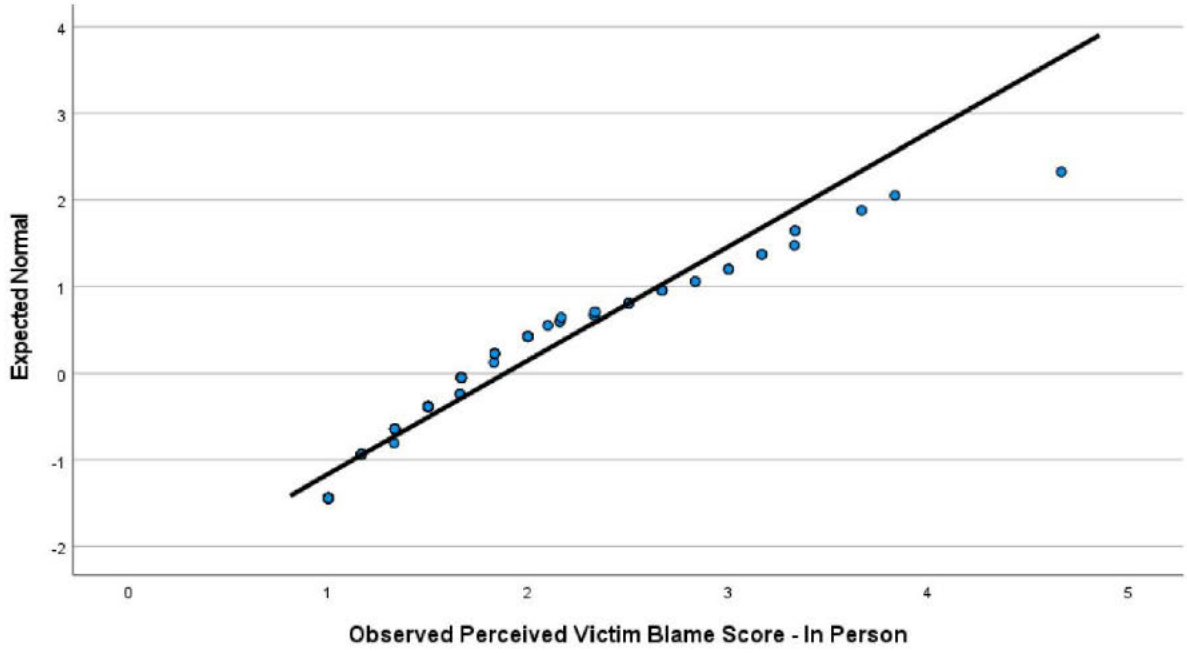

Figure 5.

A Histogram Illustrating the Distribution of the Data for Participants' Perceived TFCC Victim Blame Scores

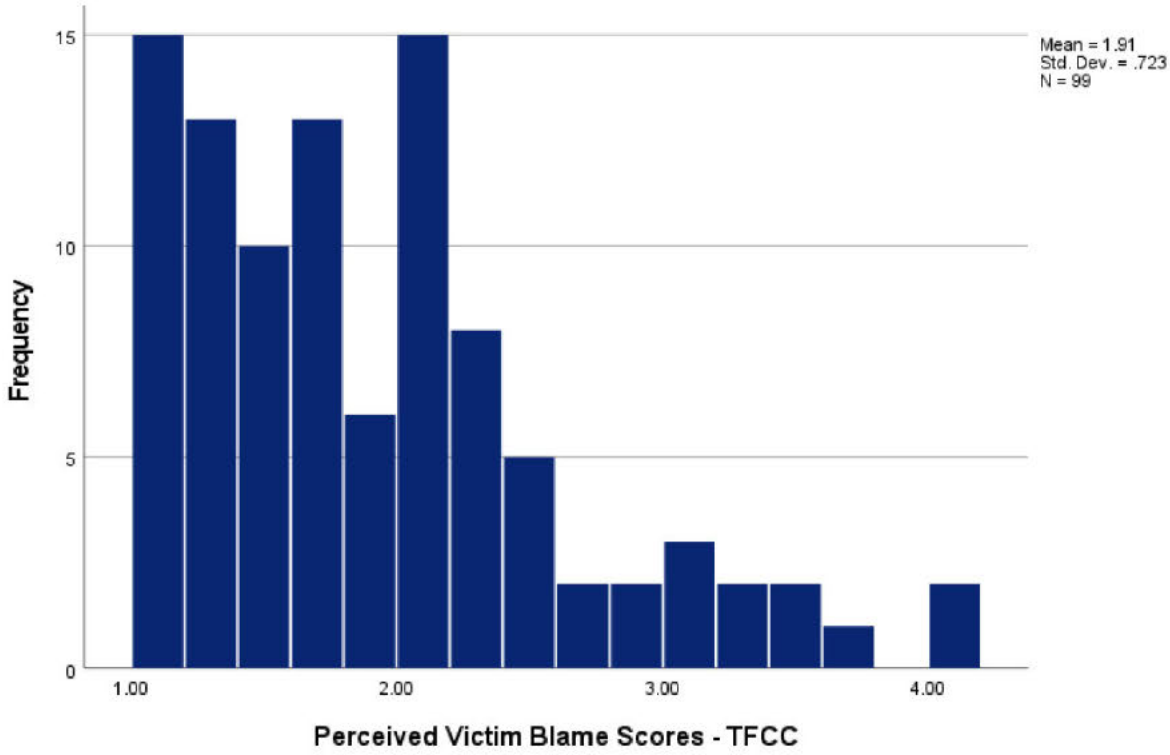

Figure 6.

A Q-Q Plot Illustrating the Distribution of the Data for Participants' Perceived TFCC Victim Blame Scores

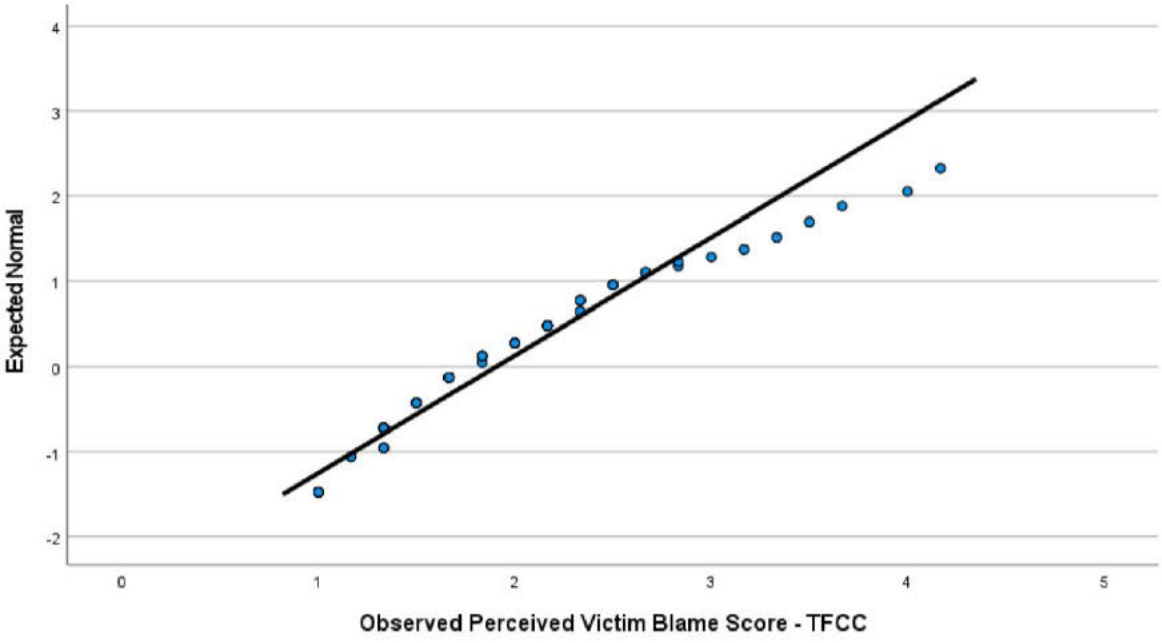

Figure 7.

A Histogram Illustrating the Distribution of the Data for Participant's Toronto Empathy Questionnaire Scores

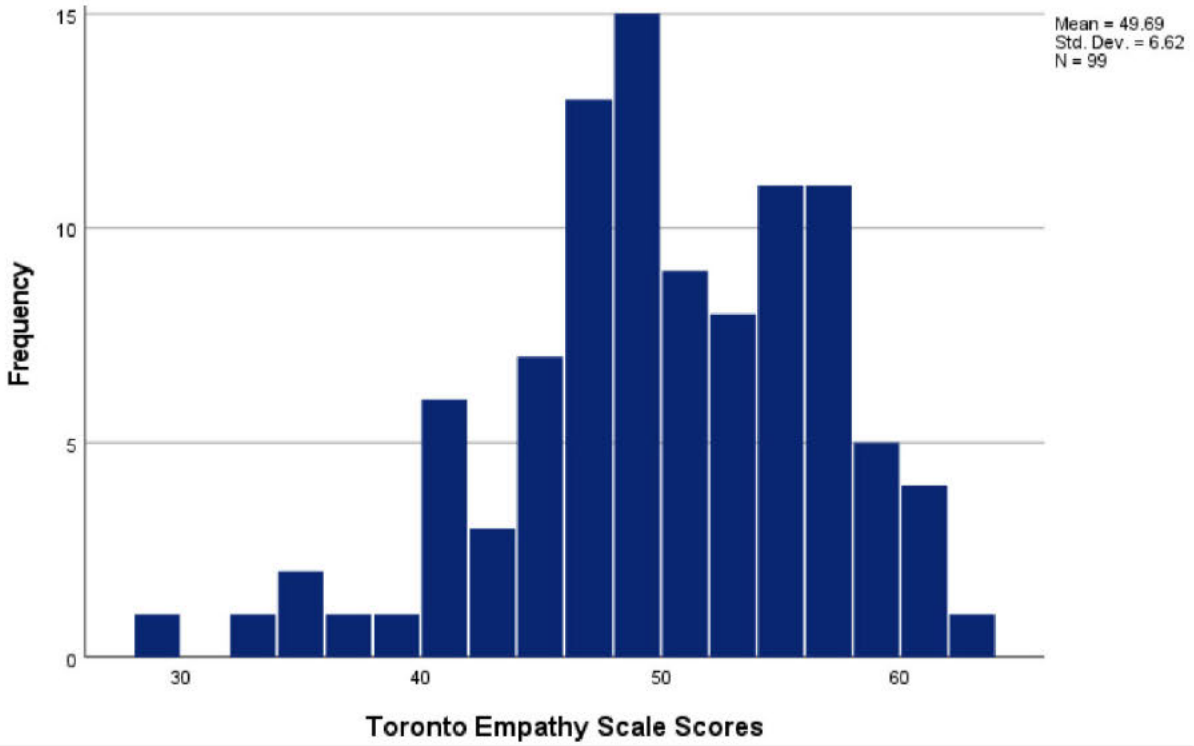

Figure 8.

A Q-Q Plot Illustrating the Distribution of the Data for Participant's Toronto Empathy Questionnaire Scores

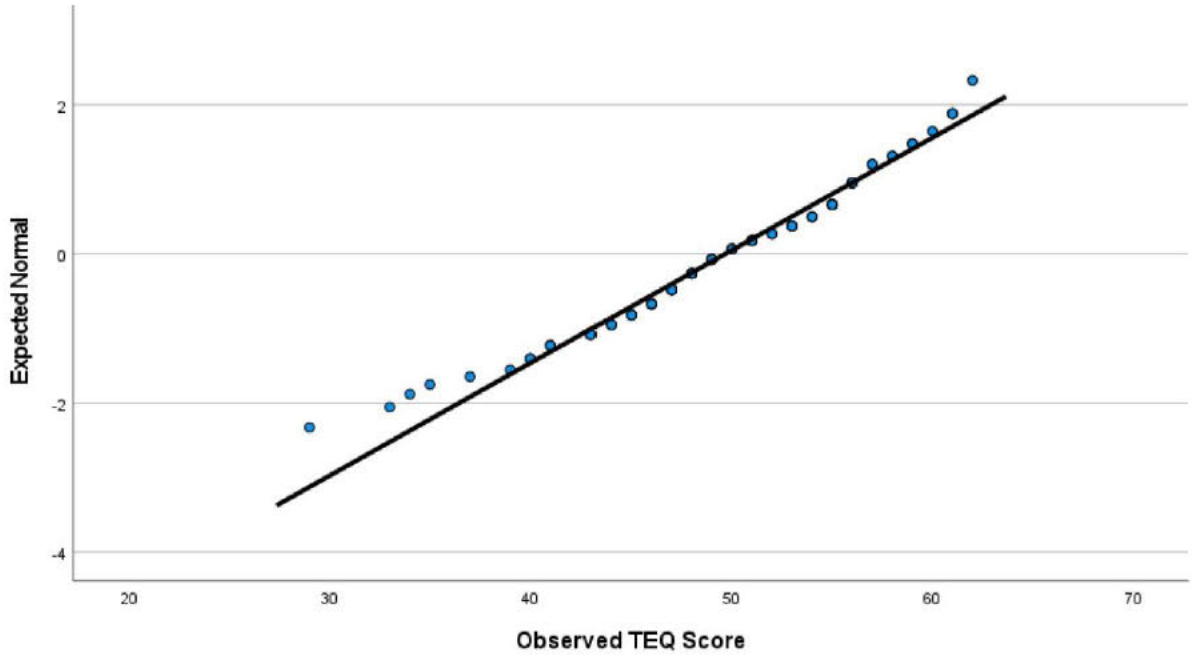

Figure 9.

Boxplots for both In Person Coercive Control and TFCC Illustrating Outliers Within the Data

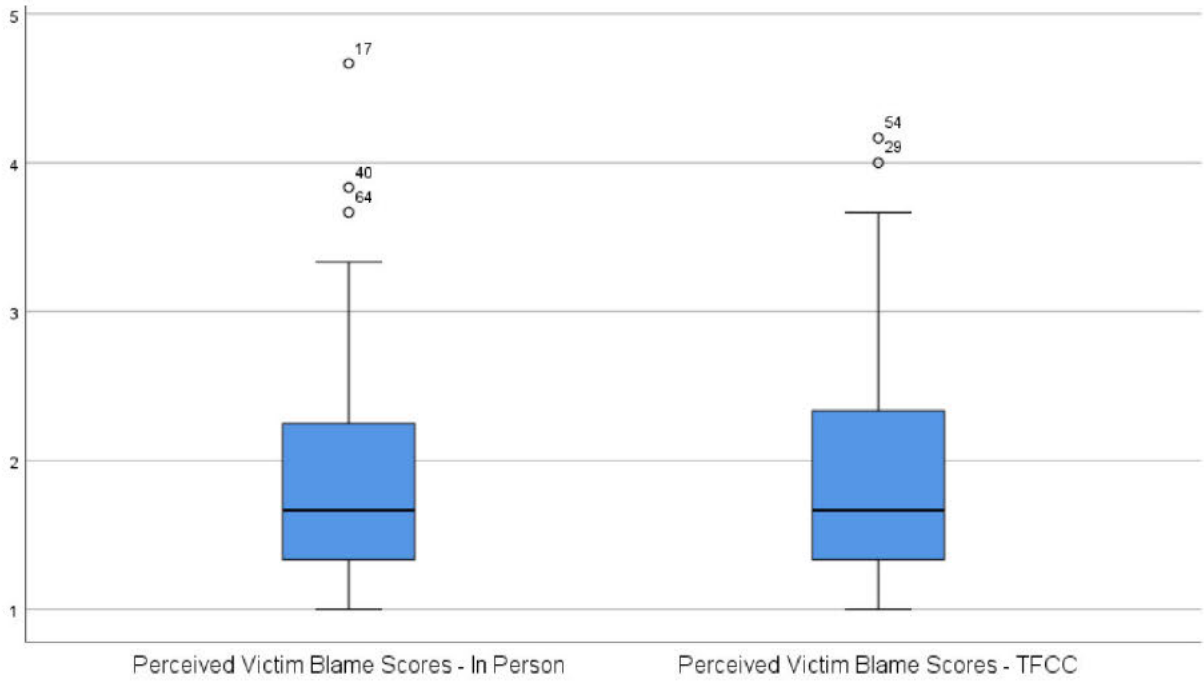

Figure 10.

A Boxplot for Participants' Toronto Empathy Questionnaire Scores Illustrating Outliers Within the Data