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# Journal of Gender-Based Violence

## Interpersonal violence and abuse in young people's relationships in five European countries: online and offline normalisation of heteronormativity --Manuscript Draft--

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| <b>Manuscript Number:</b>  | JGBV-D-17-00022R2   |
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| <b>Abstract:</b>   | Qualitative interviews with 91 young people aged 13-18 in Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Italy and Norway explored their experiences of intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA). Some young women experienced extensive offline sexual pressure and young women were substantially more negatively affected by IPVA than young men. The data revealed that online space has created new mechanisms of control and surveillance that can intensify the impact of offline abuse. Analysing the data in the light of existing theories of cultural violence and coercive control, we explore both the normalising influence of prevailing heteronormative models of femininity and masculinity as well as young people's agency to resist such normalisation. |
| <b>Keywords:</b>   | young people, intimate partner violence, heteronormativity, cultural violence, online violence.   |
| <b>Additional Information:</b>   |   |
| <b>Question</b>  | <b>Response</b>   |
| <b>Key Messages</b><br>Please enter 2-3 single sentence bullet points describing the key messages of the paper.  | 1. Sometimes young people who experience and perpetrate IPVA understand this as normal gendered behaviour<br>2. the normalisation of abuse is further perpetuated when young people equate control to love, care and protection<br>3. Online space provides new patriarchal platforms for the extending the scope and regularity of monitoring and emotional abuse  |
| <b>Word Count</b><br><br>Academic articles should be between 5000 and 7000 words in length.<br><br>Policy and Practice articles should be between 2000 and 4000 words in length.<br><br>Open Space pieces should be between should be between 2000 and 4000 words in length. | 7520  |

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## ***Background***

1  
2  
3 Gender-based physical, sexual and emotional violence is a global concern (WHO, 2014).  
4  
5 Most of the studies on intimate partner violence and abuse (IPVA)<sup>1</sup> in young people's  
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7 relationships have been carried out using surveys in the United States (Schnurr et al 2010; Ali  
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9 et al 2011; Maas et al 2010). Prevalence data indicates that psychological violence may be the  
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11 most common form of abuse followed by moderate to severe forms of physical violence and  
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13 sexual abuse (Foshee et al, 2009; Foshee & Matthew, 2007). Protective factors for IPVA  
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15 victimisation appear to include bonding to parents and social skills (Mass et al 2010); risk  
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17 factors include experience of physical abuse from a parent and alcohol use (Scnurr et  
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19 al.2010). Across these studies (Schnurr et al 2010; Ali et al 2011) there appears to be  
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21 significant variation in how young people perceive violence, including violence between boys  
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23 and girls, in terms of both perpetration and victimisation. Whilst IPVA or 'teen dating  
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25 violence' is increasingly acknowledged in the US, in Europe recognition and research is  
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27 currently developing. A small body of European research (Barter, 2009; Fox, 2014) reveals  
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29 similar levels of prevalence, and a few studies have addressed the complexity of abuse in  
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31 young people's relationships using in-depth interviews to increase understandings of young  
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33 people's experiences (Barter et al 2009; Wood et al, 2010; Wood & Barter, 2015) There is a  
34  
35 paucity of research exploring the interconnectedness of online and offline abuse across  
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37 Europe. The British Home Office (2013) recently broadened their definition of domestic  
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39 abuse to include young people between the ages of 16 and 18 and to include the concept of  
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41 coercive control, which derives from Stark's work (Stark 2007). Including younger teenagers  
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43 (Fox et al, 2014) and the concept of coercive control have been important shifts that  
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45 addresses the limitations of focusing on incident- based violence (Aghtaie & Gangoli, 2015).  
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47 However, young people below the age of 16 may also experience IPVA and definitions that  
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1 do not incorporate gender differences are likely to conceal ‘gendered power relations and  
2 inequalities’ (Charles and Mackay, 2013: 610).  
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5 Several Studies identify the gendered aspect of IPVA, especially in relation to mental health  
6 (Bonomi et al, 2013; Barter & Stanley, 2016). Literature has also shown that ‘relational  
7 aggression’ which involves spreading rumours to damage the young person’s relationships  
8 and/or reputation with her/his peers has been evident in IPVA (Leadbeater et al., 2008). This  
9 type of abuse has flourished using new technology (Draucker and Martsolf, 2010). Further  
10 research is needed to enable understanding of how individual and family behaviours intersect  
11 to lead to subsequent experience of IPVA (Schnurr et al. 2010). Although theory-based  
12 interventions may help promote healthy relationships and development among adolescents  
13 (Ali et al 2011), given the complexity of IPVA in teenage relationships, Barter (2009:214)  
14 argues that ‘*any reliance on a single theoretical standpoint is likely to be inadequate in*  
15 *explaining the complexity of partner violence in young people’s relationships*’. In this paper,  
16 therefore, we identify theoretical tools on gendered power relations that have resonance with  
17 existing research with young people; we present an overview of our findings on young  
18 people’s experience of online and offline IPVA; and we then use three questions arising from  
19 our theoretical framework to explore the data in depth.  
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### 45 ***Theoretical framework***

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47 Aghtaiie’s (2016 & 2017) theoretical model uses the concepts of ‘cultural violence’ first  
48 introduced by Galtung (1990) to demonstrate how coercive control and violence can be  
49 normalised within a society. Galtung defines cultural violence as:  
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55 *‘The symbolic sphere of our existence exemplified by cultural features such as*  
56 *religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science...*  
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*Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong ... cultural violence highlights the way in which the act of direct violence and the fact of structural violence are legitimized and thus rendered acceptable in society'*(Galtung, 1990:291).

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Here we adopt the Aghtae's (2016& 2017) theoretical framework and expand Galtung's approach to include gender as a social hierarchy in which cultural features, such as heteronormative beliefs and notions of ideal manhood and womanhood, position masculinity as superior to femininity. Cultural violence serves to justify and normalise young men's sexual pressure, control and coercion as 'natural'. As Wood (2001) suggests, men are perceived as dominant and domineering and women as subordinate and in need of protection.

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This model appears to be confirmed by existing research with young people. Male power and aggression can be normalised amongst young people as a result of the dominant patriarchal culture (Fineran and Bennett 1999; Tolman et al. 2003; Lombard, 2014) with young men's sexually aggressive behaviour understood as merely 'boys being boys' (Connell 1987; Messerschmidt 2012). This context may affect young people's reporting of various experiences of violence and abuse with young people less likely to identify and report behaviour as abusive when wider cultural norms support and reinforce such behaviour. Hierarchical gender expectations often accompany attitudes that tolerate violent behaviours in young people's relationships (Licher & McCloskey, 2014). A key question in our analysis, therefore, is: Do young people who experience and perpetrate IPVA understand this as normal gendered behaviour?

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Stark (2007) argues that, within the Western context, masculinity is mostly associated with 'being in control'. Universal masculinity is equated to rationality, reasonableness and righteousness as opposed to female irrationality, emotionality and immorality. He employs

1 the concept of coercive control to demonstrate how men use different tactics to exert power  
2 over women. He argues that coercive control aims to ‘...*usurp and master a partner’s*  
3 *subjectivity... and its focus on imposing sex stereotypes in everyday life. The result is a*  
4 *condition of unfreedom... that is “gendered” in its construction, delivery and consequence*  
5 (ibid: 205).  
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12 Barter et al (2009) found that Stark’s (2007) understanding of coercive control resonated with  
13 young people’s (13-16 years old) accounts of their experiences. Aggression, controlling  
14 behaviours and sexual coercion are sometimes interpreted by young people within narratives  
15 of romance, love and caring (Wood, 2001; Wood et al, 2010; Barter, 2009). Although there is  
16 a focus on control in young people’s experience of IPVA, current heteronormative beliefs  
17 also endorse men’s lack of control of their aggression and sexuality whilst women are  
18 positioned as responsive passive beings. Young women are perceived as responsible for their  
19 male counterparts’ intractable behaviours. Their role as ‘sexual gate keepers’ (Powell, 2007;  
20 Eaton & Matamala, 2014), whose responsibility is to please boys, is sustained through  
21 normalisation of a heteronormative model in which initiating and engaging in various degrees  
22 of sexual activity is expected. A second question for our analysis, therefore, is: Do young  
23 people experiencing IPVA associate this with narratives of male’s ‘reasonableness’ and  
24 ‘being in control’ or with accounts of young men’s out-of-control behaviour which is in  
25 return often linked to young women’s ‘need to please’ and self-blame?  
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47 Finally, there are concerns that culture impacts on young people’s intimate relationships (see  
48 Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Barter et al, 2009; Nocentini et al, 2010; Fox et al, 2014) including  
49 through digital technologies (Drauker and Martsloff 2010), Given the increased internet  
50 usage by young people (Livingstone et al, 2011), offline cultural features such as presumed  
51 female submissiveness, that reproduce gender as binary and natural, rather than socially  
52 constructed (West and Zimmerman, 1997) are echoed in restrictive expressions of genders  
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1 using digital technologies as a medium. These cultural features can still carry the same  
2 connotations and may result in justification or acceptance of direct violence both online and  
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4 offline.  
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7 However, it remains important here to not fall into a ‘moral anxiety trap’ about young  
8 people’s use of digital technology in sexual relationships, but rather to recognise teenagers’  
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10 as agentic, competent social actors who can resist or comply with what is defined as  
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12 culturally appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours (Livingstone et al, 2011). Although  
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14 European research with young people on the physical digital interface in teenage  
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16 relationships is limited, emerging evidence from the US appears to confirm that digital  
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18 technologies are being used in young people’s intimate relationships both to argue, control  
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20 and perpetrate aggression, but also to seek help during a violent episode and to limit a  
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22 partner’s controlling behaviour (Draucker and Martsof, 2010). A third question therefore is:  
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24 How do young people engage with digital technologies and other resources in resisting IPVA  
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26 in both online and offline world?  
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### 38 ***Methodology:***

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41 A total of 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people across  
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43 five different countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Italy and Norway. These countries were  
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45 selected to provide a wide geographical spread and diversity in their levels of gender equality  
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47 (see European Institute for Gender Equality, 2013) as well as variations in young people’s  
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49 use of new technologies (Livingstone et al, 2011). It was a purposive sample selected to  
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51 include young people with experience of IPVA in their own relationships. Young people  
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53 were recruited through schools’ pastoral services, and from settings such as youth camps,  
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55 workshops for young people and specialist services including those working with IPVA.  
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1 Overall, 91 of the 100 interviewees shared personal experience of control, surveillance,  
2 sexual coercion or physical violence; these accounts form the basis of our analysis in this  
3 paper.  
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10 Ethical approval was provided by author's institution. Interested young people were given  
11 information about the research, for themselves and their parents. Young people gave their  
12 own consent to participate, and parental consent was also obtained if the young person was  
13 aged under 16 years. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the  
14 research and reminded the young person that they could leave the interview at any time  
15 without giving a reason and that they could refrain from answering any questions if they  
16 wanted to do so. Participants were assured confidentiality unless they disclosed current  
17 significant harm. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants throughout this paper.  
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33 An interview schedule and vignettes were used to gather data. While these research  
34 instruments were consistent across countries, guidance was received from young people's  
35 advisory groups in each country, to ensure that they were appropriate in both content and  
36 wording when translated from English. The interview schedule contained a list of themes and  
37 possible sub-questions addressing the topics of relationships, control and surveillance, sexting  
38 and sexual pressure, experiences of different forms of violence, impact, protective and risk  
39 factors as well as conceptual issues such as gender expectations. Sometimes vignettes were  
40 used at the beginning to facilitate the discussion and to put young participants at ease, if it  
41 was deemed necessary. All interviews were one-to-one and took place in private rooms in the  
42 organisations that introduced young people to the research team. The interviews lasted from  
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1 40 minutes to an hour and half. Afterwards, young people were thanked for their help, were  
2 given a voucher worth €10 and were directed to relevant sources of support.  
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5 Framework analysis (Ritchie et al, 2003: 219) which is a ‘matrix based method for ordering  
6 and synthesizing data’ was used to analyse the data to ensure that comparable issues were  
7 identified and understood in context. A thematic framework is the central component of the  
8 method. An inductive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was adopted to identify the codes  
9 based on extracts of transcripts relating to the research questions. Following familiarization  
10 and refining through raw data and cross-sectional labelling, the main themes were identified  
11 as: control and surveillance; physical and emotional violence; and sexting and sexual  
12 coercion. These were divided into a series of related subtopics. Each main theme was  
13 ‘charted’ in its own matrix with every respondent assigned a row and each column designated  
14 to a subtopic. Within each of these we identified the interplay of heteronormative cultural  
15 acceptance, normalisation and narratives of masculinity and the use of digital technologies  
16 such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. This process enabled us to explore and  
17 understand how and in which contexts, normalised patterns of IPVA are repeated or resisted  
18 by some individuals.  
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#### 40 *Participant characteristics*

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43 Recruiting participants was challenging in all five countries and reliance on others to  
44 gatekeep access to interviewees meant that researchers had little control over the diversity of  
45 the sample. Sometimes difficulties in recruiting were due to the fact that support services  
46 were either not available or scarce; schools might not be prepared to ‘open a can of worms’,  
47 as stated by one school’s principal in Norway who considered that the school lacked  
48 sufficient resources to offer young people the support they might need.  
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1 The majority of participants were female (67 female and 24 male) between the ages of 13-19  
2 with the majority falling within the age range of 16-17. They were mainly white European. A  
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4 small number were from dual heritage (5), Black Minority Ethnic (2) and Roma (6)  
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6 communities. The latter group were all from Bulgaria. The majority defined themselves as  
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8 Christians with some describing themselves as agnostic/ atheist, and a small number were  
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10 from a Muslim (2) background. In terms of sexuality, 86 identified as heterosexual, four  
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12 bisexual and one homosexual. Only two participants reported having some form of disability.  
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### 17 *Experiences of IPVA (online and offline)*

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23 All ninety-one interviewees described experiencing or perpetrating control and surveillance,  
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25 sexual pressure and coercion, and physical and emotional abuse. Control and surveillance  
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27 was the most prevalent form of abuse, and had been experienced by almost all of the female  
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29 interviewees. A few young men described only perpetrating control but not being on the  
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31 receiving end and a very small number of young men from Norway described only being  
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33 victims.  
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38 Usually, these forms of control and surveillance were uni-directional; young women  
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40 particularly those from Italy, England and Norway, tended to describe experiencing control  
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42 and surveillance from male partners, :  
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47 *...There were times when he would just grab my phone from my hands and wouldn't*  
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49 *let go of it, so he would check my messages (Tatiana, female 16, Cyprus).*  
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52 Nearly two-thirds described experiencing behaviours which could be deemed emotionally  
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54 abusive (deceit; derogatory comments; being humiliated; betraying privacy; violent outbursts  
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56 and extremes of rejection followed by devotion). No interviewees described perpetrating  
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58 sexual coercion, but more than half of female participants described experiencing some form  
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1 of sexual coercion including: verbal and physical pressure to engage in sex; forced kissing,  
2 nudity, touching, and rape). Physical violence was less frequent but was reported by one third  
3 of the young women, including at least one interviewee in each country, and by nearly half  
4 the young women interviewed in Italy. Two young men reported being slapped or punched.  
5 One of them said that his girlfriend did it as a joke. Interviewees tended to experience  
6 multiple forms of IPVA. The majority of control and surveillance was accompanied by either  
7 sexual coercion (of young women) or physical violence (towards young women and one  
8 young man). For some, especially young women in Italy, emotional violence had been  
9 accompanied by physical violence.  
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26 IPVA takes both online and offline forms. Methods of online control included: being  
27 instructed not to chat with specific people or to delete contacts; being pressured or forced to  
28 give account passwords; having text conversations monitored or receiving constant phone  
29 calls and text messages to check on their whereabouts. Offline control included: having  
30 contact with friends limited by their partner; being told what to wear; experiencing partners  
31 turning up uninvited; and being confronted by their partner's anger if they wanted to take part  
32 in activities without them. Notably, there were relatively few accounts of online only control  
33 and surveillance and none at all in Cyprus and Norway. Rather, as Iacovos and Smaragda  
34 describe below, there appeared to be a melding of online and offline controlling behaviour  
35 and surveillance regardless of whether partners were physically present or not.  
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51 *We were at the computer together once and I noticed she was chatting with someone*  
52 *and I asked her, what's this all about and she told me (that some boy was talking to*  
53 *her) and I went crazy. And because I reacted, and she doesn't like it when I am like*  
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*that, when I start picking fights with her [...] she stopped doing that (Iacovos, male17, Cyprus)*

*'He said 'no you will not go out with so and so', 'no you won't wear that dress', ... I felt that I am 16 and I felt married! ... he would call that friend and check up on me or he would drive past to check that I was there, ... then he asked me for my Facebook password, and he didn't let me speak to any of my friends. [...] he wanted to check if boys sent me messages.'* (Smaragda, female 17, Cyprus)

It is interesting to note that within the Cyprian context, control within marriage was normalised by some participants.

Chiara stated that his ex-girlfriend used to slap him as a joke and he did not like it and hence he ended the relationship.

*I told her to stop it, but she kept doing it [...] I got annoyed and ended the relationship*(Chiara, male16, Italy)

Amy and Thea highlighted the omnipresence of the experience of digital monitoring:

*He breathed down my neck 24/7, it was horrible (Amy, female15, UK)*

*He sort of took over my life. (Thea, female 15, Norway)*

Emotional violence occurred on and offline, and most sexual coercion reported occurred offline, especially in Bulgaria and Cyprus. In both cases, digital sharing of images intensified the impact.

For example, Emma described her 16 year old boyfriend putting pressure on her to have phone sex when she was 14:

1                   *we used to speak on the phone almost every night, it, at first it was really light-*  
2                   *hearted conversations, ... then he started asking me questions like have you ever had*  
3                   *phone sex? And it just got a bit like heavy...* (Emma, female15, England)  
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8 Emma then described how her boyfriend forced her into sex with his friend and then shared  
9  
10 this on Facebook.  
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12                   *...He just made me do stuff with his friend ... there was a [post on Facebook] about*  
13                   *his friend taking a picture of something that happened. ..., he led me to a park and*  
14                   *started like pushing me around and forcing me to do things I didn't want to do and,*  
15                   *and he pushed my head down so hard. I was sick everywhere and then they just left*  
16                   *me (Emma, female15, England).*  
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26 According to the UK Sexual Offence Act 2003, this sits within the legal definition of ‘no  
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28 consent’. However, Emma did not report the incident to the police and did not wish to  
29  
30 elaborate on the above experience.  
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34 The data suggests that in both online and offline environments, there were some similarities  
35  
36 in the areas in which partners exerted control, surveillance, and violence. However, online  
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38 environments also enabled new forms of intrusion on space, tighter monitoring of actions and  
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40 increased opportunities to move from private to public emotional abuse. The dissolved  
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42 boundaries between on and offline environments has been highlighted in other research  
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44 (Tompson and Cupples 2008) that provides accounts of partners turning up online in the  
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46 password protected environments of young people’s own social media accounts, just as they  
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48 might turn up uninvited offline. These online accounts might be conceived of as more private  
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50 than social gatherings with friends in physical public spaces (Wyness 2014). However, in  
51  
52 these online environments, there are digital representations, such as friendship statuses, which  
53  
54 can give controlling partners very clear indications of whether their instructions have been  
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1 followed through or not – whether contact is stopped, whether the other party is blocked.

2 Digital technology, then, allowed for the emergence of new types of coercive monitoring in  
3 which ideal genders and heteronormative beliefs were expressed.  
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### 10 ***Cultural violence: normalisation of IPVA through heteronormative beliefs?***

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12 Initially, when asked directly, the majority of interviewees (two thirds) did not think that their  
13 experience of IPVA was a 'normal' part of being in a relationship:  
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19 *'abuse should not be part of a relationship. It should be full of trust and not hurting*  
20 *each other, there should be happiness.'* (Lauren, female14, England).  
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24 However, although, Lauren had a good understanding of what a healthy relationship should  
25 look like, when she was slapped by her boyfriend for not wanting to go out with him and his  
26 friend, she played it down, and believed to preserve harmony, she would 'need to please' him  
27 by being more invested in the relationship .  
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35 A significant minority (one in five) did understand their experience as 'normal':  
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38 *'it's normal [for him to check on you] It shows interest'* (Lito, female 17, Cyprus)  
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41 Normalisation of IPVA was particularly prevalent amongst young men from Bulgaria and in  
42 Cyprus, where almost all participants accepted this as a 'normal' part of relationships:  
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45  
46 *'Asking friends about what your partner was doing without you and checking each*  
47 *other's online communication is normal for a relationship. In this way, you can be*  
48 *certain that your partner does not lie to you. This makes the relationship stronger'*  
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54 (Krista, male18, Bulgaria)  
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57 The extent to which IPVA was normalised appeared to relate to gendered attitudes about  
58 differences between boys and girls. Krista explained that *'In most cases, the boy is expected*  
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*to lead and make decisions, but sometimes he also has to listen to what the girl says'. And young people in Cyprus noted social expectations that men should be like 'hunters' whereas girls should be like 'Barbie' and 'submissive'. These expectations were reflected in essentialised differences between boys and girls. This cultural construction of femininity and masculinity legitimised the use of power and control which sometimes led to normalisation and justification of coercive control and sexual pressure. For example, in both Cyprus and Bulgaria, girls were considered to be 'more mature', 'innocent' and 'sensitive' than boys who tend to 'need more freedom' and be more focused on sex. Surveillance was particularly normalised within marriage:*

*'when the time comes [to marry] and I want to have a family ... then yes, there, up to a point, I will tell him where I am going, I will give him my password, he will (look at my mobile), because we will spend the rest of our lives together' (Voulla, female 18, Cyprus).*

In all countries, there were examples of beliefs in polarised gender binaries ('girls are more sensitive' and 'boys need to be tough') and some interviewees had previously normalised their experience drawing on gendered binaries in which difference meant dominance, but no longer held these beliefs at the time of the interview, as Serena explains:

*My partner used to think that girls are weaker physically and psychologically, they need to be protected. I used to think the same but after we broke I learned that this is not at all true...(Serena, female 17, Italy)*

Further, the extent to which gendered binaries were employed to normalise IPVA varied according to the form of abuse and whether it was unidirectional or not. Interviewees who experienced sexual coercion and those who both perpetrated and were on the receiving end of online and offline control and surveillance tended to see these behaviours as 'normal'. Some



1 young women, all from England and Norway, also described sexual pressure from peers or  
2 cultural expectations to have sex and again saw this as a cultural norm. Here Pernilla's and  
3  
4 Jade's decision to whether engage in sexual activity or not is constrained by implicit  
5 pressures. Hence the line between force and choice becomes blurred:  
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9  
10 *'When you are going out with someone when you are 15, you have sex'* (Pernille,  
11 female 16 Norway)  
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15 *Friends would say that if I was him I would not be going out with you because you*  
16 *are taking so long...* (Jade, female 16, England).  
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21 Sexual coercion in the form of persistent interpersonal pressure was seen as a gendered  
22 expectation by Lito who noted that society expected women to be *'proper'* and *'decent'* and  
23 exhibit good behaviour. In contrast, a boy who parties a lot and is seen with many girls was  
24 considered a *'stud'*, a *'macho man'* and will be praised for his masculinity. Within this  
25 framework, the heteronormative view of men as active and women as passive receptacles for  
26 male sexual gratification acts to perpetuate male domination over women's bodies. This  
27 description of expected feminine purity and endorsed male desire reflects the gender binaries  
28 that can be conceptualised as cultural violence. Within the Cypriot context, virginity was  
29 described as a young woman's *'only dowry'*; young women described being pressurised to  
30 remain virgins and this emerged as a key source of women's subordination:  
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46 *...For a girl, this is not an easy thing. Her whole world will change because she will*  
47 *give the most valuable things she has (her virginity). I don't know how to say it. It is*  
48 *her only dowry, the dowry that she can decide to whom to give it to, but for a boy it's*  
49 *just so easy...*(Elena, female 18, Cyprus).  
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57 Previous research has noted that Cyprian girls' sexual activity is under scrutiny and  
58 sometimes *in the local peer culture, girls are placed on a fabricated and culturally*  
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widespread “*virgin-whore*” continuum (Skapoulli, 2009: 85). Social and cultural discourses of appropriate femininity and masculinity demand that young women remain virgin, which in return leads to control over female sexuality.

Heteronormative beliefs were also evident at times in relation to physical and emotional violence, as these accounts of physical and emotional violence demonstrate:

*‘The boy should be the boss, the girl should do everything that he asks. But he should treat her well... I said to her: Let's go to dance! I was a bit drunk. She did not want to. I took her out and started beating her’.* (Peter, male 18, Bulgaria)

*‘Yes there are times when I take out [my anger] on her unintentionally and she tells me not to. To calm down [.. ] I take out my anger on her because I am stressed every day...every day I have nerves’.* (Iacovos, male 16, Cyprus)

Peter presents this gendered hierarchy as natural and Iacovos’ partner is described as calming him down, fulfilling her feminine role.

In some cases, IPV appeared to be reinforced by the peer culture that positions exploitation as 'normal' by displaying support for the perpetrator and blaming the victim. Below, Tone’s account of comments on a picture describes a ‘new’ digital platform being used in combination with ‘old’ narratives of heteronormativity and dominant masculinities to produce and reproduce cultural violence:

*‘He began to talk dirty to me, calling me nasty things, like 'go to the kitchen, whore', but I didn't do as he wanted, I am not a slave. ... [He posted an old picture saying that his girlfriend was unfaithful to him with a girl] and then he kept writing these nasty comments, and people started commenting ...really horrible stuff* (Tone, female 17, Norway)

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3 ***Masculinity as ‘reasonableness’, ‘caring/love’ and ‘being in control’?***  
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8 The heteronormative beliefs described above were interwoven with narratives of  
9  
10 reasonableness, care and control in some young people’s interpretations of IPVA. When  
11  
12 controlling behaviour was justified within the online and offline worlds, this utilised a  
13  
14 discourse of what was ‘reasonable’ as well as referring to male egotism and expectations of  
15  
16 female obedience:  
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21 *‘To have your girlfriend ‘like’ photos of people she doesn’t know isn’t such a nice*  
22  
23 *thing to see in Facebook [...] when she does that it’s as if she is saying she doesn’t*  
24  
25 *want me...I don’t want another man to come anywhere near her...I tell her not to*  
26  
27 *wear certain clothes...’* (Chrysanthos male 16, Cyprus).  
28  
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31 In contrast, young men described control exerted by their girlfriends as unreasonable and  
32  
33 tended to respond to single incidents of controlling behaviour by switching off their phones  
34  
35 or ending the relationship. For example, Stefano was told by his girlfriend that she did not  
36  
37 want him to hang around with a certain group of friends when his ex-girlfriend was there:  
38  
39

40 *‘I don’t accept these things. There is no reason to. I left her immediately’* (Stefano,  
41  
42 male 16, Italy)  
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48 Sometimes male control and surveillance were justified as a sign of love and protection. This  
49  
50 was more prevalent in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Italy. For example, Serena explained:  
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54 *Initially I thought it was ok... I even kind of like it, you know... I thought it was a sign*  
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56 *he really cared for me* (Serena, female 17, Italy)  
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Serena's comment indicates how aggression, controlling behaviours and sexual coercion can be interpreted as masculine expressions of love and caring. Being told what to wear and not to wear was also interpreted as a sign of protection and hence reasonable

*'...I can understand why he says that because he doesn't want me like, because some girls get like half naked...he just gets protective...he doesn't want like to lose me'*. (Chloe, female 15, England).

Rather than narratives that described masculinity as 'being in control', accounts of young men's out-of-control behaviour and young women's self-blame appeared more prevalent.

Dany (Female 18, Bulgaria), one of the interviewees who did not normalise abusive behaviour, said that abusive behaviour is 'common enough' as boys sometimes *'think with their penis, which is their main problem'*. Gendered self-blame and submissive femininity was evident when young women saw themselves as partially responsible for young men's uncontrollable emotional outbursts. For example, Aysa described her boyfriend's behaviour as sometimes hysterically furious and uncontrollable. She reported being terrified but she attributed some responsibility for his behaviour to herself:

*In a way, I have provoked him [by sometimes saying nasty things back to him], or at least I was not capable of helping him and calming him down.* (Asya, female 18, Bulgaria)

Liam (male 15, England), who described his own controlling behaviour, referred to his emotional and physical violence as 'play fighting'. He perceived his ex-partner as controlling, but he thought that his requests to have access to her Facebook password or forbidding her to talk to her ex-boyfriend, were reasonable.

1 Some young people were unsure whether male control was appropriate. For example, Guilia,  
2 whose boyfriend repeatedly pressurised her to have sex and once physically tried to force her  
3 to get undressed, resulting in bruising, declared that *'it is normal for men to ask for more'*, it  
4 *is the women who must be ready to say no*, then she retracted and said:... *why is it normal? It*  
5 *is also their responsibility to respect women's decisions'*. She questioned her boyfriend's  
6  
7 behaviour when he tried to persuade her not to go to another city for further education. She  
8  
9 appeared uncertain in her assessment of his behaviour:  
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17 *'He says, 'if you really love me, you wouldn't go'.....If he trusts me why is he doing*  
18  
19 *so? Does he want to control me? Isn't this blackmailing? (Guilia, female17, Italy)*  
20  
21

22 Nevertheless, Guilia also stated that she valued her relationship with this young man because  
23  
24 he was so protective, self-assured and *'I know I can always count on his wise advice'*.  
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### 29 ***Young people's agency***

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35 While much of the data revealed pervasive normalisation of gendered hierarchies and  
36  
37 acceptance of 'universal masculinity' as both controlling and impulsive, with feminine roles  
38  
39 associated with self-blame, there were also identifiable moments when young people  
40  
41 described challenging this culture. As Drauker and Martsloff (2010) have noted, familiarity  
42  
43 with digital technologies provided opportunities for resistance. Young women and young  
44  
45 men described digital technology enabling them to block their partners from social media  
46  
47 spaces, to shut down Facebook pages, change their phone numbers and to report  
48  
49 victimisation. Some young women used their familiarity with digital technology to be  
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52 'careful', that is, to avoid surveillance by hiding their traces online. Others, who were  
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54  
55 confident in their friends, were also able to recruit their peers into not mentioning their name  
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58 on the internet and not opening or reading abusive posts. Attention to context and exploration  
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1 of young people's use of available other resources (such as friends, families and supportive  
2 services) provides a means of understanding how both online and face-to face IPVA can be  
3 challenged.  
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8 The interaction between personal perspectives, and peer groups were significant in deciding  
9 when and how to challenge. Peers could act to confirm submission to abusive behaviour but  
10 they could also collectively challenge controlling behaviour, as Cristina noted:  
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16 *some friends had told me not to [give him my Facebook password]... (Cristina,*  
17  
18 *female 18, Italy)*  
19  
20

21 Young men tended to be much quicker to reject controlling or coercive behaviour as  
22 'ridiculous' or 'not normal' when it was aimed at them, perhaps reflecting structural norms of  
23 male dominance. In contrast, young women tended to take some time to develop a growing  
24 confidence and agency to question submissive peer, familial and cultural norms, perhaps due  
25 to a lack of cultural norms around challenging abusive behaviours. But even where  
26 controlling behaviour was normalised, young women could hold different views on their  
27 experiences at different times. Here, Soulla explains how her boyfriend used to gets 'restless'  
28 when she went out without him or forced her to share her Facebook password with him:  
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42 *... I liked it!... I said ok, 'this guy must be interested in me to do such a thing [jealous,*  
43 *coercive behaviour] ...But [at other times] I said 'Ok, this guy is insecure and I don't*  
44 *like the way he's dealing with his insecurities...I just felt that something had to*  
45 *change, that it wasn't possible to continue in that way... (Soulla, female 16, Cyprus)*  
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51 Although Soulla's account replicates heteronormative understandings of roles, first depicting  
52 coercive behaviour as positive attention and then finding reasonable explanations for  
53 emotional abuse, she nonetheless indicates the potential for shifts away from acceptance  
54 towards rejection over time and a dawning realisation that this may be abusive behaviour.  
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1 The importance of family environments was underlined by the fact that many of those  
2 interviewed who experienced IPVA had also witnessed domestic violence in their family  
3 homes. In these contexts, emotional abuse and controlling behaviour could be actively  
4 normalised by parents:  
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10 *When I told my mum that we were having some problems because of his jealousy she*  
11 *told me that this was in fact just a demonstration of his affection for me. (Cristina,*  
12 *female18, Italy)*  
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18 Whilst some young people ended abusive relationships with the active support of parents who  
19 repeatedly told them to leave, the above highlights the crucial importance of the construction  
20 of masculinity and femininity in the family context that could at times normalise behaviours  
21 that endorse male domination and control. Eventually, it was her friend's advice to end the  
22 relationship that Cristina followed (for more detailed responses on prevention and  
23 intervention see Hellevik et al, 2015). The intersection of friendship and family cultures  
24 therefore appear key contextual factors which can potentially support young people's  
25 journeys towards challenging abusive behaviour.  
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38 The attitudes of workers and cultures in specialist and generic services for young people were  
39 also significant. Emma (female 15, England) had witnessed her mother's experience of  
40 domestic violence but they had both received specialist support which Emma saw as enabling  
41 her to reject heteronormative roles.  
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49 *... I've realised what makes a good relationship ... speaking to people at X service'*  
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52 Emma also highlighted that 'schools can be sexist without realising it '*...boys make [sexist*  
53 *jokes] like about women belonging in the kitchen... we asked 'Sir if we can go and play on a*  
54 *football pitch', he was like 'Oh stop messing about girls' ...they all laugh about [abusive*  
55 *relationships and] they say stuff like "If my bird didn't do what I tell her, I'd just smack her".*  
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However, Emma also suggested resistance to cultures that maintain gendered hierarchies and normalise violence can be enabled by institutional cultures that clearly oppose male dominance:

*most domestic violence is because the man thinks that he's better than the woman and that he's dominant over her ... , I think a good thing to be would be to add, like for an hour in high school, stuff like this to the curriculum, and ... maybe people who hadn't heard it was wrong would [then] know it was wrong, and girls would be able to recognise it (Emma, female15, England).*

Emma had not approached a teacher to report the sexual violence she had experienced because she would feel 'awkward' and 'embarrassed' feeling that 'there's not much they can do'. Although the extent to which schools can 'facilitate young people's resistance to dominant discourses about youth sexuality remains questionable' (Spencer et al 2008 p.353), our data suggested that some schools have been able respond to IPVA with supportive interventions. And in these instances, the role of a competent teacher or external expert had been important.

## ***Conclusion***

Our data suggests that in all five countries, online and offline control and surveillance was accepted as normal by many young people. Some young Cyprian women deemed control and surveillance as ordinary and acceptable if married. Normalisation of IPVA was particularly prevalent among young men from Bulgaria and in Cyprus, where almost all participants accepted this as a normal part of relationships. Justification of control and surveillance as a form of love and protection was also more prevalent in Bulgaria and Cyprus as well as Italy.



1 Unlike the other four countries, female virginity and chastity emerged as an important factor  
2 in Cyprus. Verbal abuse was extensive and tolerated by many young people interviewed;  
3  
4 physical violence was also normalised, especially when alcohol was involved. Offline sexual  
5  
6 pressure was extensive for some young women in all five countries and was normalised to the  
7  
8 extent that rape was sometimes not recognised. Some young women, all from England and  
9  
10 Norway, expressed cultural expectation to have sex when in a relationship. Apart from  
11  
12 Cyprus, young people in the other four countries had sent sexual images of themselves and in  
13  
14 England in particular this was perceived as normal behaviour. In all five countries using  
15  
16 social networking as a means of perpetrating abuse intensified the impact. However, impact  
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18 varied according to gender with young women reporting substantially more harmful impact  
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20 than young men.  
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27 Our data also indicates that sometimes the dominant culture of masculinity equates to  
28  
29 righteousness and to 'being in control' which can provide an atmosphere of tolerance that  
30  
31 normalises abusive behaviours. This embedded tolerance among some young people can be  
32  
33 conceptualised as cultural violence in which direct violence, for example beating your  
34  
35 girlfriend for not submitting to your wishes, can be regarded as acceptable.  
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40 As previous research has shown, the normalisation of abuse is sometimes further perpetuated  
41  
42 when young people equate control to love, care and protection (Wood et al, 2010; Barter,  
43  
44 2009). When this was perpetuated by peers and parents, it can further legitimize, consolidate  
45  
46 and reinforce the denial of IPVA. This means that IPVA should be put in the wider context in  
47  
48 which culture of violence is embedded. As McCarry and Lombard (2016: 128) have noted:  
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50 *Challenging attitudes that condone violence both at the individual and community level is a*  
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52 *key priority in its prevention'.*  
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1 Normalisation of gendered violence and abuse does not mean that every young woman  
2 blindly follows this model. Some young women and young men reject it outright and others  
3 negotiate the parameters of what is expected of them. Young people's accounts suggest that  
4 change at an individual level is possible where dominant gendered cultural features are  
5 challenged by peer cultures, family support, specialist services or learning over time.  
6

7 Identifying whether interventions address those factors that facilitate and constrain  
8 individuals' agency in the face of cultural violence could provide a means of ensuring the  
9 relevance of any programmes in this area (see Hellevik et al, 2015).  
10

11 Progress towards challenging binary stereotypes of femininity and masculinity appears slow,  
12 even in the context of supportive family, peer and service environments, and this may reflect  
13 the dominance of cultural structures, indicating that the process of challenging cultural  
14 norms and structural violence is complex. Those young women who did not conform to some  
15 of the cultural expectations they encountered also continued to repeat some heteronormative  
16 patterns, such as feeling responsible for pleasing and placating partners. Our data confirmed  
17 that heteronormative models of femininity and masculinity that are inscribed in cultural  
18 scripts of national, school, peer and familial practices (cultural violence) are used to justify  
19 controlling behaviours, sexual pressure and coercion.  
20

21 Aggression, controlling behaviour and sexual coercion can be framed by young people using  
22 narratives of romance and love but still impact upon young women's self-esteem. Any  
23 theoretically informed interventions (Ali et al 2011) seeking to reduce young people's  
24 perpetration and experience of IPVA should therefore draw on understandings of dominant  
25 masculinity and young people's competence as social actors. We have used Aghtaie's (2015)  
26 framework of cultural violence and Stark's (2007) work on universal masculinity to provide  
27 a useful starting point for understanding how young people's experience of pressure and  
28 control is underscored by dominant narratives of ideal manhood and womanhood, leaving  
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1 some young women feeling that they should accept abuse even though they may suffer in the  
2 process. Digital technologies do provide new patriarchal platforms for extending the scope  
3 and regularity of monitoring and emotional abuse, but they also offer methods of resistance.  
4  
5 Young people who experience IPVA, and some who perpetrate it, are showing the capacity to  
6  
7 challenge cultures that promote and endorse male domination and heteronormative beliefs. In  
8  
9 line with previous literature (Draucker and Martsloff, 2010), theorising young people's  
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11 experience of IPVA therefore must also engage in understanding of how old and new forms  
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13 of support and technologies can be mobilised to build opportunities for resistance.  
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<sup>ii</sup>The terminology 'dating violence' is commonly employed in the US literature. However, this term does not  
27 transfer easily to other contexts (Barter, 2009). This is because, in the UK, adolescents hardly ever use the term  
28 'dating' in their everyday conversation.  
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