The effect of victim attractiveness and type of abuse suffered on attributions of victim blame and credibility in intimate partner violence: A vignette-based online experiment

Maisie Hall [1], Agata Debowska [1,2], & George Hales [1]

Author Note:

[1] Department of Psychology, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

[2] Faculty of Psychology and Law, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poznan, Poland

Corresponding Author:

Agata Debowska, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty of Psychology and Law, ul. gen. Tadeusza Kutrzeby 10, 61-719 Poznan, Poland. Email: adebowska@swps.edu.pl

Abstract

Victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) are frequently blamed and disbelieved, which may affect their willingness to report their abuse experiences. This vignette-based online experiment examines whether victim attractiveness (attractive vs unattractive) and the type of abuse suffered (psychological vs psychological plus physical abuse) may impact attributions of victim blame or victim credibility. The final sample included 167 UK residents (79% females) aged between 18 and 66 years ($M = 33.17$, $SD = 11.26$). Results indicated that the attractive victim was judged as being more credible than the unattractive victim. Results are discussed in light of societal attitudes towards IPV.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence (IPV); Victim blame; Victim credibility; Victim attractiveness; Vignette-based experiment

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to the experience of suffering physical, sexual or psychological abuse by a current or former romantic partner and is recognised as a major public health issue (Trabold et al., 2020). Psychological abuse can be particularly difficult for victims to identify due to its subtle and insidious nature (Spadine et al., 2020), and some acts of psychological abuse may even appear affectionate when observed or experienced in isolation (Marshall, 1999; Minto et al., 2021). For example, Prosman et al. (2013) found that half of those in their sample who had experienced psychological abuse did not describe their partner's behaviour as abusive.

Due to the complexities of identifying and leaving an IPV relationship, third-party perspectives become increasingly important in supporting victims throughout this process. However, blaming and disbelieving victims of IPV remains a common problem, even in countries with high gender equality indices (Gracia, 2014). Victim blame attribution (VBA) refers to blaming a victim for a crime committed against them, which devalues the crime itself (Illingworth, 2007). Previous evidence has illustrated that Just World Beliefs (JWBs; Lerner & Miller, 1978) – cognitive biases presupposing a general belief that the world is fundamentally fair and people therefore deserve any event they experience – may predict VBA in IPV scenarios (Valor-Segura et al., 2011). In addition, sexist attitudes have been associated with increased victim blame (Pedersen & Strömwall, 2013; Valor-Segura et al., 2011). This has been observed particularly in relation to cases of sexual abuse (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). VBA has also been associated with a lack of awareness of IPV (Eigenberg & Policastro, 2016), older age (Gracia & Tomás, 2014), and male gender (Nguyen et al., 2013).

Apart from observer-related characteristics, there are also situation- and victim-related factors which may affect observers' responses to IPV situations. Firstly, the type

of abuse has been found to impact third-party judgments. Specifically, psychological IPV is consistently perceived by observers as being the least serious form of violence (Hammock et al., 2015), despite research repeatedly showing that it typically results in more harmful and longer-lasting negative effects than either physical or sexual IPV (Williams et al., 2012). Wilson and Smirles (2020) also found that perpetrators of psychological abuse were assigned less blame than those guilty of physical IPV, suggesting that the depreciation of the severity of psychological abuse may carry implications for attributions of blame.

As for victim-related factors, physical attractiveness has been cited in rape and child sexual abuse research as being influential in the formation of third-party judgments (Deitz et al., 1984; Rogers et al., 2007; Tieger, 1981). Gerdes et al. (1988) found that both perpetrators and victims of rape were attributed more blame when judged as unattractive. More recently, Hand and Scott (2022) found that increased social attractiveness was associated with decreased VBA in an online setting. In another study, Weber et al. (2013) demonstrated that perceived attractiveness can reduce VBA and lead to more social support. Notably, research has identified a link between attractiveness and trust (Bascandziev & Harris, 2014; Wilson & Eckel, 2006; Zhao et al., 2015). Unattractive victims, compared with attractive victims, were judged more negatively, including lower ratings of trust (Shaw, 1972). This phenomenon has been attributed to the attractiveness halo effect (Dion et al., 1972); an implicit cognitive bias which results in positive traits being attributed to more attractive individuals. However, research examining the effects of victim attractiveness upon judgments of victims within the context of IPV is lacking.

1.1. **The Current Study**

This study aims to contribute to VBA research by positing that the physical attractiveness of an IPV victim and type of abuse experienced may influence the degree to which they are blamed and perceived as credible by third-party individuals. Furthermore, based upon the research outlined, randomisation checks were planned to verify that there were no significant differences between conditions in sexist attitudes, IPV awareness, just-world beliefs, and participant age. Whilst it is acknowledged that experiences of both IPV victimisation and perpetration are not constrained to a particular type of person, the current study focuses specifically on male-to-female IPV. This is due to the disproportionate frequency at which this dynamic contributes to IPV occurrences (Ansara & Hindin, 2010).

1.2. Hypotheses

The hypotheses for this study are as follows: the unattractive victim (vs the attractive victim) will be blamed more (H1) and perceived as being less credible (H2). The victim who suffers psychological and physical abuse (vs the victim who suffers purely psychological abuse) will be blamed less (H3) and perceived as more credible (H4). An interaction effect is also hypothesised between victim attractiveness and type of abuse on blame and judgments of victim credibility, where the unattractive victim subjected only to psychological abuse will be blamed most (H5) and judged as least credible (H6) overall.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

An a priori sample size calculation was conducted using G*Power 3.1. In order for the study to obtain 80% power and an effect size of .23 (Hockett et al., 2016) at the standard .05 alpha error probability, a total sample size of 151 was required to detect a significant model (F [1, 139] = 3.91). Thus, the final sample for the study – 167

participants – satisfied these requirements. Participants were recruited via the online data collection platform Prolific, where the survey was available to any user who fulfilled the eligibility criteria of being aged 18 years or older, a current resident of the United Kingdom, and fluent in English. The final sample was made up of 132 females (79.04%) and 35 males (20.96%) aged between 18 and 66 years ($M = 33.17$, $SD = 11.26$). Each participant received £2.75 upon completing the study.

2.2. Experiment Design

We address our research hypotheses with a 2x2 between-subjects vignette-based online experiment. Two categorical independent variables were manipulated, namely attractiveness of the IPV victim (attractive vs unattractive) and abuse type (psychological abuse vs psychological plus physical abuse). This resulted in four conditions overall: i) an attractive victim suffering psychological abuse; ii) an unattractive victim suffering psychological abuse; iii) an attractive victim suffering psychological and physical abuse; and iv) an unattractive victim suffering psychological and physical abuse. Attractiveness was manipulated through two different photographs used to portray the victim, whilst abuse type was manipulated through information provided in the vignette. All four conditions included the same details of psychological abuse; however the psychological plus physical abuse conditions included an additional incident of physical IPV. The outcome variables were victim blame and victim credibility. Both outcome variables were continuous, with victim blame measured using Likert-scale responses, and a semantic differential scale being used to measure judgments of victim credibility. Sexist attitudes, just-world beliefs, participant age, and domestic violence myth acceptance (DVMA) – as an indicator of IPV awareness – were also included as randomisation check variables.

2.3. Materials

2.3.1. Vignettes

In each of the four conditions, a vignette was presented to participants in the style of an online forum post written from the perspective of the victim (see Appendices A to D). To our knowledge, this is the first IPV study to present a vignette written in first-person. Minor spelling errors, informal grammar, and the use of an emoji were included to make the post appear as realistic as possible. The content of the vignette portrayed a woman, Alesha, expressing confusion over whether her boyfriend's behaviour constituted abuse. The vignette was carefully curated to realistically reflect a victim's perception of their IPV experiences. For example, victims often feel sympathy for the abuser or are manipulated into believing that the abuse is their own fault (Lim et al., 2015) and are often unable to recognise abuse ("I always feel guilty that I cant affford (sic) to buy him presents like he does for me" and "they don't understand the difficult life hes (sic) had"). Furthermore, by entitling the forum post "Is it abuse??" and the victim explicitly asking for an opinion, participants are primed to judge for themselves whether the situation is abusive.

All four conditions included the same details of verbal abuse and coercive control. However, the psychological abuse and psychological plus physical abuse conditions differed in the way in which Alesha's boyfriend reacted to a specific incident where dinner plans were cancelled after Alesha had been late leaving work. In both conditions: "when I got home he was really angry. He shouted and swore at me saying that after everything he does for me I don't care enough about him to be there on time". In the physical plus psychological abuse condition, the following information was added: "he shoved me hard and I started crying and then he grabbed my wrist really tight and wouldn't let me go whilst he shouted".

Victim attractiveness was manipulated by providing two photographs acquired from the Chicago Face Database (CFD) and presented in the format of a user's profile picture. The CFD is an online database providing high-resolution material for use in scientific research, along with norming data where each photograph is rated by 1,087 individuals over several criteria, including attractiveness (Ma et al., 2015). Gender, race, eye colour, and hair colour were kept homogenous across both photographs. Weight was kept approximately equal across both victims due to research suggesting that the build of a victim influences how vulnerable they are perceived to be, and thus how much blame or sympathy they receive (Hamby & Jackson, 2010). The photographs rated as most attractive (photo BF-002-006-HC) and least attractive (photo BF-007-006-HC) were used to portray the victims in the different conditions.

2.3.2. Questionnaires

Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS; Lipkus, 1991). This is a 30-item scale used to measure the degree to which respondents believe the world to be fair. The scale is made up of three subscales: personal (10 items), interpersonal (10 items), and socio-political (10 items). Responses were measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Scores for the total scale ranged from 30 to 180, where higher scores indicate a stronger bias towards just-world beliefs. Although previous studies have demonstrated acceptable internal reliability for this measure (e.g., Lipkus, 1991; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021), Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .63.

Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance Scale (DVMAS; Peters, 2008). The DVMAS was included as a measure of the extent to which respondents endorsed common myths surrounding domestic violence, used as an indication of IPV awareness. This scale is comprised of 18 items and four subscales: blaming the victim's character, blaming the victim's behaviour, exoneration of the perpetrator, and minimisation of the

IPV incident. Items were assessed on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Scores were summed, resulting in a possible final score ranging from 18 to 108. Higher scores represented greater acceptance of domestic violence myths and thus a lower awareness of IPV. Cronbach's alpha was .89 in the current sample.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Sexist attitudes were measured using the ASI; a 22-item scale consisting of two subscales entitled hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree), meaning that scores on the total scale ranged from 22 to 132. Higher scores reflect stronger sexist attitudes (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Manipulation check. In order to confirm that the photographs of the two victims facilitated an effective manipulation of attractiveness, participants were asked to rate the victim they saw on a semantic differential scale from 1 (unattractive) to 6 (attractive). To ensure that participants remained unaware that attractiveness was being manipulated, participants were also asked to rate the victim on a number of other distractor characteristics, such as 'irrational vs rational' and 'unfair vs fair'.

Control question. After reading the forum post, participants were asked: "did Alesha describe any instances of physical violence?". This question checked that participants had read the vignette thoroughly and could meaningfully complete the remainder of the study. Answers were dichotomous ("yes" or "no"), where the correct answer differed depending on the condition. Participants who answered the question incorrectly were excluded from analyses.

Distractor questions. To reduce the risk of participants determining the purpose of the study and affecting their responses, five distractor questions were presented which related to the information contained in the vignette. For example, "most couples have

arguments behind closed doors similar to the arguments described by Alesha". Responses were recorded on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree), but were not included in analyses as their sole purpose was to distract from the true aim of the study.

Victim culpability (Miller et al., 2012). Three items were taken from Miller et al. (2012) which asked participants to indicate the degree to which they believed the victim (or her actions) were to blame, were responsible, or were the cause of the incident described in the vignette where they did not go for dinner. A 4-point Likert scale was used to measure responses (1 = not at all, 4 = completely), meaning that scores ranged from a possible 3 to 12. Scores were summed to calculate an overall score of victim blame, with higher scores indicating more blame being attributed to the victim. Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .82.

Witness Credibility Scale (Brodsky et al., 2010). This is a 20-item semantic differential scale used to assess the extent to which participants perceive the victim or witness of a crime to be credible. However, one item (scientific vs unscientific) was omitted from the scale as it was not relevant to the current study, leaving a total of 19 items. Each item is comprised of two contradictory adjectives – for example unreliable vs reliable – with the negative adjective at point 1 of the scale, and the positive equivalent at point 6. Participants were asked to rate where the victim falls for each adjective, based on the information provided in the vignette. The measure is made up of four subscales: knowledge (4 items), likeability (5 items), trustworthiness (5 items) and confidence (5 items). Scores were summed to obtain an overall rating of victim credibility, with possible scores ranging from 19 to 114, with higher scores reflecting more trust in the victim. This scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .91 for the current sample.

Lie Scale (Eysenck et al., 1985, as used in Debowska et al., 2020). This scale is included as a measure of social desirability bias in participant responses and is made up of three items from the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised Lie Scale (Eysenck et al., 1985): (1) "Are all your habits good and desirable ones?"; (2) "Have you ever taken anything (even a pin or button) that belonged to someone else?"; (3) "Have you ever said anything bad or nasty about anyone?". Responses were "yes" or "no". Total scores ranged from 0 to 3. Any scores of 2 or higher reflected a social bias in responses and resulted in exclusion of the participant.

2.4. **Procedure**

Ethical approval was granted by the Department of Psychology Ethics Committee at the University of Sheffield, and the study was pre-registered via Open Science Framework (pre-registration DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/E95PA). The study was hosted in Qualtrics and administered via Prolific where it was visible to any users who fulfilled the study's eligibility criteria (aged 18 or over, a current UK resident, and fluent in English). Upon choosing to take part in the study, eligibility was confirmed through a series of questions. An information sheet was then presented which outlined the study procedure, informed participants that all responses were anonymous, and notified that they were able to withdraw from the study at any point. They were also advised that some study content related to sensitive topics surrounding dating behaviours and that they should not participate if they did not feel comfortable. Informed consent was obtained before participants could proceed. Participants were randomly allocated to one of the four conditions using Qualtrics randomiser, and randomisation was stratified by sex in order to ensure an equal balance of males and females were allocated across conditions. Mean completion time of the study was 17 minutes.

2.5. **Statistical Analysis Plan**

All data were analysed using R version 4.1.1, and the R code used to prepare and analyse the data can be found at osf.io/vq5u2. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables, where the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) were calculated for all continuous variables (victim blame, victim credibility, DVMA, just-world beliefs, sexist attitudes and participant age), whilst the number of participants and sample percentages were provided for all categorical variables (abuse type and victim attractiveness). Randomisation checks were conducted by performing four analyses of variance (ANOVA) to compare scores on DVMA, just-world beliefs, sexist attitudes, and participant age in each of the four conditions. A chi-square test was also conducted to verify that participant sex had been equally distributed across conditions, and a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to check that ratings of victim attractiveness (measured on an ordinal scale) were statistically significantly different between conditions. To assess the effect of abuse type and victim attractiveness on victim blame and victim credibility, two 2x2 ANOVAs were conducted. Effect sizes (partial eta squared) were reported for statistically significant results.

3. Results

3.1. Participant Attrition

Two hundred and sixteen participants accessed the study link. Forty-nine participants were excluded from analyses or did not complete the full survey. Details of participant attrition are provided in Figure 1.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including mean and *SD*, were obtained for all variables for the total sample and across four conditions (see Table 1). In considering the possible range of scores, victim blame scores were low and victim credibility scores were

relatively high. The sample size and percentage of participants allocated to each

condition was calculated for each categorical variable (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Participant attrition from recruitment to the final sample.
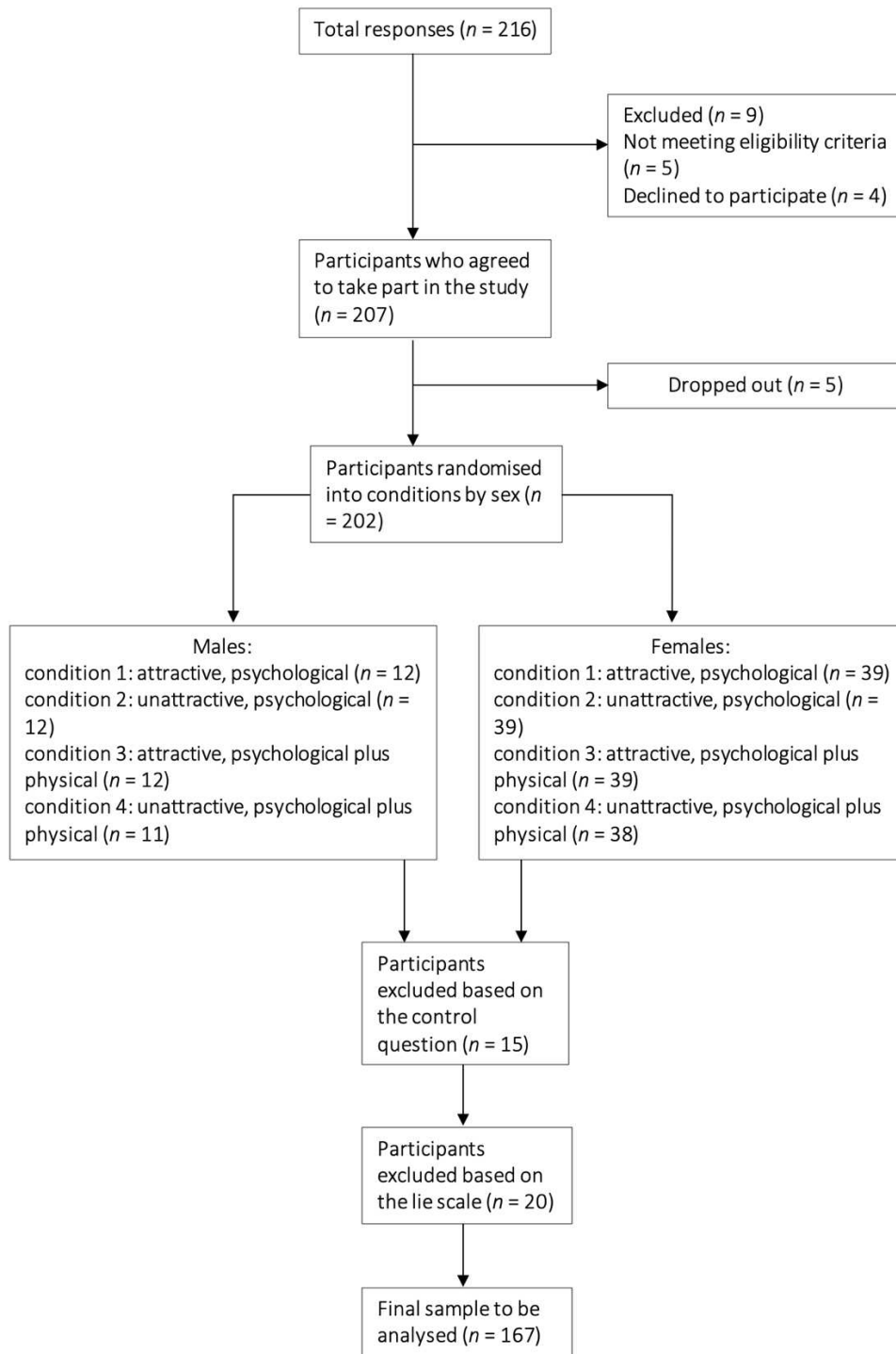
Table 1

Descriptive statistics of all continuous variables across four conditions and overall.

Sample Characteristics	Psychological, attractive victim	Psychological, unattractive victim	Physical abuse, attractive victim	Physical abuse, unattractive victim	Overall
Victim blame					
Mean	3.82	3.37	3.51	3.55	3.56
SD	1.48	1.00	1.10	1.19	1.20
Victim credibility					
Mean	78.28	71.72	79.30	75.57	76.17
SD	10.32	13.86	13.45	10.65	12.47
Just world beliefs					
Mean	111.31	106.79	110.88	107.02	108.96
SD	9.10	8.21	9.83	11.69	9.93
Sexist attitudes					
Mean	52.15	57.26	57.56	58.57	56.47
SD	11.58	17.36	16.48	15.57	15.54
DVMA					
Mean	33.59	34.86	34.77	39.55	35.72
SD	8.20	11.18	11.80	12.64	11.27
Participant age					
Mean	32.87	30.98	36.05	32.76	33.17
SD	11.22	8.85	11.25	13.15	11.26

Note. DVMA = Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance.

3.3. Randomisation Checks

The IV for all four ANOVAs was 'condition', and the dependent variables were DVMA, sexist attitudes, just-world beliefs, and participant age. All four ANOVAs were non-significant (DVMA, $F(3, 163) = 2.32$, $p = .077$; sexist attitudes, $F(3, 163) = 1.38$, $p = .252$; just-world beliefs, $F(3, 163) = 2.55$, $p = .058$; age, $F(3, 163) = 1.52$, $p = .211$), indicating that these characteristics were equally balanced and thus successfully randomised across all four conditions. The distribution of participant sex throughout conditions was tested by conducting a chi-square test. Results indicated no significant difference between participant sex across conditions, $\chi^2(3, n = 167) = 1.29$, $p = .73$, therefore suggesting that participant sex was randomised effectively.

3.4. Manipulation Check

Attractiveness ratings for the victim presented in the attractive condition ($Mdn = 5$) were higher than attractiveness scores for the unattractive victim ($Mdn = 4$). A Mann-Whitney test indicated that this difference was statistically significant, $U(N_{attractive} = 82, N_{unattractive} = 85) = 4434.50$, $p = .001$, indicating that the manipulation was successful.

3.5. Main Analyses

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was considered to include DVMA, sexist attitudes, just-world beliefs, and participant age as covariates. However, this could not be performed due to the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes being violated. Instead, two 2x2 between-subjects ANOVAs were conducted due to the data meeting the assumption of homogeneity of variances, and ANOVA being robust to violations of normality (Blanca Mena et al., 2017; Schmider et al., 2010). The first ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of abuse type (psychological vs psychological plus physical) and victim attractiveness (attractive vs unattractive) on attributions of victim

blame, whilst the second examined the effects of abuse type and victim attractiveness on judgments of victim credibility.

Victim blame. The interaction between abuse type and victim attractiveness was non-significant $F(1, 163) = 1.70$, $p = .195$. The main effect of abuse type was also non-significant, $F(1, 163) = 0.01$, $p = .739$, as was the main effect for victim attractiveness, $F(1, 163) = 1.16$, $p = .284$, suggesting that neither the type of abuse, nor the attractiveness of the victim, impacted attributions of blame.

Victim credibility. The interaction effect between abuse type and victim attractiveness on judgments of victim credibility was non-significant, $F(1, 163) = 0.56$, $p = .455$. The main effect of abuse type was also non-significant, $F(1, 163) = 1.69$, $p = .195$. However there was a significant main effect of victim attractiveness, $F(1, 163) = 7.53$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.043$, although the effect size was small (Cohen, 1988), with victim attractiveness explaining 4.3% of the variance in victim credibility scores. This suggests that the attractive victim was judged as being more credible than the unattractive victim.

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the effects of victim attractiveness and type of abuse upon third-party judgments of IPV victim blame and credibility. Whilst results showed that the attractive victim was judged as being more credible than the unattractive victim, this was the only hypothesis (H2) that was supported. It was also found that victim attractiveness did not influence attributions of victim blame (H1), the type of abuse did not impact judgments of blame (H3) or credibility (H4), and the unattractive victim subjected only to psychological abuse was not blamed most (H5) and judged as least credible (H6).

Whilst the victim's appearance did not affect attributions of blame, it did impact judgments of credibility. By definition, IPV suggests the victim has (or had) a romantic

partner, and previous research has highlighted how the impact of the attractiveness halo effect on attributions of trust can be affected by context (McGloin & Denes, 2018). Thus, considering that the context of the current study relates to IPV, some participants may question whether an unattractive individual would experience abuse within a context that they felt would require a notable level of attraction to act as a sufficient catalyst for abusive behaviour, especially if participants are not informed about the reasons for abuse and may misinterpret, for example, coercive controlling behaviours as a sign of infatuation. This interpretation is also informed by early sexual assault research which found that some individuals believed rape to be a sexually motivated crime (Tieger, 1981), rather than an act of aggression and power (Miller, 2014). Whilst the understanding of rape has improved in recent years (McMahon & Baker, 2011), a fuller understanding of IPV has been delayed by the absence of an established operational definition (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Podaná, 2021), and the lingering perception that appearance could affect whether abuse may be suffered in a romantic relationship reflects this lack of understanding.

The finding that the type of abuse suffered did not affect judgments of blame or credibility should be considered within the context of the current social climate which, through movements such as #MeToo (https://metoomvmt.org), seeks to emphasise the importance of supporting victims, highlighting inequalities within social structures and increasing awareness of previously neglected or misunderstood topics, including abuse (Lang, 2019). Thus, the lack of victim blame observed in the current study - which reflects reduced negative judgments towards IPV victims when compared to previous studies (e.g., Meyer, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2013; Witte et al., 2006) - could be a positive consequence of this social narrative, as society becomes increasingly aware of the signs of IPV and now understands that victims should not be subjected to blame, regardless of

the type of abuse. However, the majority of participants in the current study were women, who might be more sensitive to campaigns such as #MeToo. Future studies should aim to recruit more men and include participant sex as a factor in analyses. It is also advisable that future studies evaluating the impact of similar social campaigns consider if effects differ for women and men.

Despite it being hypothesised that the attractiveness halo effect would result in the attractive victim being blamed less, this was not the case here. Thus, it appears that the effect of attractiveness on blame may be influenced by other factors. For example, attractive individuals are commonly perceived as more socially and professionally competent (Dion et al., 1972; Verhulst et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2010), which may result in the misconception that someone displaying such competencies would be more able to recognise - and leave - an abusive relationship. Thus, if a 'competent' victim is unable to leave, it could be misconstrued as 'choosing' to stay, which is a common reason that IPV victims experience blame (Eigenberg & Policastro, 2016; Meyer, 2016).

Notably, the first-person narrative used throughout each vignette differs from the usual third-person narration format employed in former studies. This may have contributed to a reduction in victim blame given that research has highlighted the importance of the relationship between IPV victims and the onlooker in determining reactions to IPV disclosures, where those who feel a closer connection to the victim react more positively (Edwards & Dardis, 2020). Thus, having the victim directly disclose personal feelings and experiences to the participant within the realistic setting of an online post, is likely to produce some level of empathy towards the victim, opposed to a distanced and objective description of an IPV scenario narrated independently. If this interpretation is supported by future studies comparing participants' evaluations of IPV

18

events written in first- and third-person, there may be implications for educational efforts as hearing victim experiences first-hand elicits a more positive and sympathetic reaction.

The way in which details of the abuse were presented in the vignette may have contributed to the formation of judgments about the victim, and thus could be considered limitations of the study design. Specifically, participants were asked to evaluate how much blame they attributed to the victim in reference to one specific event, described towards the end of the vignette. However, prior to mentioning this event, the victim also detailed a number of other IPV incidents which catalogued a pattern of abuse. Thus, it could be argued that being presented with a pattern rather than a single abusive incident would suggest to participants that the relationship was abusive, which in turn may decrease the likelihood of blaming the victim. Had the final event been presented in isolation, judgments of blame in the conditions of psychological abuse may have increased as participants may not have interpreted the incident as part of an abusive relationship - it may, for instance, have been interpreted as nothing more than an argument. However, it is probable that participants exposed to the physically abusive incident in isolation of the wider context would remain likely to interpret the situation as abusive, based upon previous research which has found that participants consistently perceive physical abuse as being the most serious form (Hammock et al., 2015; Wilson & Smirles, 2020). Therefore, it appears that perceptions of whether an incident is abusive contributes towards attributions of blame. Future studies should include a control question to verify whether participants construe the described situation as abusive. Another limitation of the current study is that victim blame was measured directly and so participants may have answered the questions in a socially desirable manner. Future research should consider using implicit measures of blame or a joint-blame question

(used to examine whether the victim and abuser are perceived to share blame for the situation).

5. Conclusion

The results of the present study replicate prior research by demonstrating that attractive individuals are judged as more credible victims when compared to unattractive individuals. Victim attractiveness did not, however, significantly impact attributions of blame although on average, the attractive victim received the most blame. Type of abuse suffered had no effect on judgments of victim blame or credibility. However, the method of first-person presentation of information detailing a pattern of abuse rather than a single incident may have enabled participants to feel a degree of empathy towards the victim and removed doubt as to whether the relationship was abusive. Thus, the results of this study suggest that negative judgments towards victims may arise when situations are ambiguous, which emphasises the need for public education in recognising signs of abuse and knowing how to respond effectively. Finally, the null results reported here may be reflective of increased awareness and a changing social conscience with regard to violence against women, which could have been partly affected by some high-profile, social media-fuelled movements, such as #MeToo.

References

Ansara, D. L., & Hindin, M. J. (2010). Exploring gender differences in the patterns of
    intimate partner violence in Canada: A latent class approach. *Journal of
    Epidemiology & Community Health*, *64*(10), 849-854.
    http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech.2009.095208

Bascandziev, I., & Harris, P. L. (2014). In beauty we trust: Children prefer information
    from more attractive informants. *British Journal of Developmental
    Psychology*, *32*(1), 94-99. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12022

Blanca Mena, M. J., Alarcón Postigo, R., Arnau Gras, J., Bono Cabré, R., & Bendayan,
    R. (2017). Non-normal data: Is ANOVA still a valid option? *Psicothema 2017,
    29*(4), 552-557.

Brodsky, S. L., Griffin, M. P., & Cramer, R. J. (2010). The witness credibility scale: An
    outcome measure for expert witness research. *Behavioral Sciences & the
    Law*, *28*(6), 892-907. https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.917

Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.).
    Academic Press.

Debowska, A., Horeczy, B., Boduszek, D., & Dolinski, D. (2020). A repeated cross-
    sectional survey assessing university students' stress, depression, anxiety, and
    suicidality in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in
    Poland. *Psychological Medicine*, 1-4.
    https://doi.org/10.1017/S003329172000392X

Deitz, S. R., Littman, M., & Bentley, B. J. (1984). Attribution of responsibility for rape:
    The influence of observer empathy, victim resistance, and victim
    attractiveness. *Sex Roles*, *10*(3-4), 261-280. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00287780

Dion, K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. (1972). What is beautiful is good. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *24*(3), 285-290. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0033731

Edwards, K. M., & Dardis, C. M. (2020). Disclosure recipients' social reactions to victims' disclosures of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *35*(1-2), 53-76. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516681155

Eigenberg, H., & Policastro, C. (2016). Blaming victims in cases of interpersonal violence: Attitudes associated with assigning blame to female victims. *Women & Criminal Justice*, *26*(1), 37-54. https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2014.997417

Eysenck, S. B., Eysenck, H. J., & Barrett, P. (1985). A revised version of the psychoticism scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *6*(1), 21-29. https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(85)90026-1

Gerdes, E. P., Dammann, E. J., & Heilig, K. E. (1988). Perceptions of rape victims and assailants: Effects of physical attractiveness, acquaintance, and subject gender. *Sex Roles*, *19*(3-4), 141-153. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00290151

Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*(3), 491-512. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491

Gracia, E. (2014). Intimate partner violence against women and victim-blaming attitudes among Europeans. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, *92*(5), 380-381. https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.13.131391

Gracia, E., & Tomás, J. M. (2014). Correlates of victim-blaming attitudes regarding partner violence against women among the Spanish general population. *Violence Against Women*, *20*(1), 26-41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801213520577

Hamby, S., & Jackson, A. (2010). Size does matter: The effects of gender on perceptions of dating violence. *Sex Roles*, *63*(5-6), 324-331. https://doi.org/ 10.1007/s11199-010-9816-0

Hammock, G. S., Richardson, D. S., Williams, C., & Janit, A. S. (2015). Perceptions of psychological and physical aggression between heterosexual partners. *Journal of Family Violence*, *30*(1), 13-26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-014-9645-y

Hand, C. J., & Scott, G. G. (2022). Beautiful victims: How the halo of attractiveness impacts judgments of celebrity and lay victims of online abuse. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *130*, 107157. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.107157

Hockett, J. M., Smith, S. J., Klausing, C. D., & Saucier, D. A. (2016). Rape myth consistency and gender differences in perceiving rape victims: A meta-analysis. *Violence Against Women*, *22*(2), 139-167. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215607359

Illingworth, H. (2007). *Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime: Brief to the CSC review panel*. https://crcvc.ca/docs/CSC_Review_May07.pdf

Lang, H. (2019). #MeToo: A case study in re-embodying information. *Computers and Composition*, *53*, 9-20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2019.05.001

Lerner, M. J., & Miller, D. T. (1978). Just world research and the attribution process: Looking back and ahead. *Psychological Bulletin*, *85*(5), 1030-1051. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.85.5.1030

Lipkus, I. (1991). The construction and preliminary validation of a global belief in a just world scale and the exploratory analysis of the multidimensional belief in a just world scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *12*(11), 1171-1178. https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(91)90081-L

Ma, D. S., Correll, J., & Wittenbrink, B. (2015). The Chicago face database: A free

stimulus set of faces and norming data. *Behavior Research Methods*, *47*(4), 1122-

1135. https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-014-0532-5

Marshall, L. L. (1999). Effects of men's subtle and overt psychological abuse on low-

income women. *Violence and Victims*, *14*(1), 69-88. https://doi.org/

10.1891/0886-6708.14.1.69

McGloin, R., & Denes, A. (2018). Too hot to trust: Examining the relationship between

attractiveness, trustworthiness, and desire to date in online dating. *New Media &

Society*, *20*(3), 919-936. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675440

McMahon, S., & Baker, K. (2011*). Changing perceptions of sexual violence over

time.* http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.229.909&rep=re

p1&type=pdf

Meyer, S. (2016). Still blaming the victim of intimate partner violence? Women's

narratives of victim desistance and redemption when seeking support. *Theoretical

Criminology*, *20*(1), 75-90. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480615585399

Miller, A. K., Markman, K. D., Amacker, A. M., & Menaker, T. A. (2012). Expressed

sexual assault legal context and victim culpability attributions. *Journal of

Interpersonal Violence*, *27*(6), 1023-1039.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260511424493

Miller, L. (2014). Rape: Sex crime, act of violence, or naturalistic adaptation? *Aggression

and Violent Behavior*, *19*(1), 67-81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2013.11.004

Minto, K., Masser, B., & Louis, W. (2021). Lay understandings of the structure of

intimate partner violence in relationships: An analysis of behavioral clustering

patterns. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 1-22.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520986276

Mitchell, D., Angelone, D. J., Kohlberger, B., & Hirschman, R. (2009). Effects of

    offender motivation, victim gender, and participant gender on perceptions of rape

    victims and offenders. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *24*(9), 1564-1578.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260508323662

Nguyen, T. T., Morinaga, Y., Frieze, I. H., Cheng, J., Li, M., Doi, A., ... & Li, C. (2013).

    College students' perceptions of intimate partner violence: A comparative study

    of Japan, China, and the United States. *International Journal of Conflict and*

    Violence (IJCV), *7*(2), 261-273. https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-3023

Pedersen, S. H., & Strömwall, L. A. (2013). Victim blame, sexism and just-world beliefs:

    A cross-cultural comparison. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, *20*(6), 932-941.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2013.770715

Peters, J. (2008). Measuring myths about domestic violence: Development and initial

    validation of the domestic violence myth acceptance scale. *Journal of Aggression,*

    Maltreatment & Trauma, *16*(1), 1-21.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/10926770801917780

Pinciotti, C. M., & Orcutt, H. K. (2021). Understanding gender differences in rape victim

    blaming: The power of social influence and just world beliefs. *Journal of*

    Interpersonal Violence, *36*(1-2), 255-275.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517725736

Podaná, Z. (2021). Patterns of intimate partner violence against women in Europe:

    Prevalence and associated risk factors. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community*

    Health. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-214987

Prosman, G. J., Lo Fo Wong, S. H., & Lagro-Janssen, A. L. (2014). Why abused women

    do not seek professional help: a qualitative study. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring*

    Sciences, *28*(1), 3-11. https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.12025

Rogers, P., Josey, N., & Davies, M. (2007). Victim age, attractiveness and, abuse history

    as factors in the perception of a hypothetical child sexual abuse case. *Journal of*

    Sexual Aggression, *13*(2), 121-137. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600701644835

Rollero, C., & Tartaglia, S. (2019). The effect of sexism and rape myths on victim

    blame. *Sexuality & Culture*, *23*(1), 209-219. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-

    9549-8

Schmider, E., Ziegler, M., Danay, E., Beyer, L., & Bühner, M. (2010). Is it really robust?

    Methodology, 6(4). https://doi.org/10.1027/1614-2241/a000016

Shaw, J. I. (1972). Reactions to victims and defendants of varying degrees of

    attractiveness. *Psychonomic Science, 27*(6), 329-330.

    https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03328979

Spadine, M., Patterson, M. S., Brown, S., Nelon, J., Lanning, B., & Johnson, D. M.

    (2020). Predicting emotional abuse among a sample of college students. *Journal*

    of American College Health, 1-9.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1740709

Taylor, J. (2020). *Why women are blamed for everything: Exposing the culture of victim-*

    blaming. Hachette UK.

Tieger, T. (1981). Self-rated likelihood of raping and the social perception of

    rape. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *15*(2), 147-158.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(81)90014-3

Trabold, N., McMahon, J., Alsobrooks, S., Whitney, S., & Mittal, M. (2020). A

    systematic review of intimate partner violence interventions: State of the field and

    implications for practitioners. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21*(2), 311-325.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018767934

Valor-Segura, I., Expósito, F., & Moya, M. (2011). Victim blaming and exoneration of

    the perpetrator in domestic violence: The role of beliefs in a just world and

    ambivalent sexism. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, *14*(1), 195-206.

    https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_SJOP.2011.v14.n1.17

Verhulst, B., Lodge, M., & Lavine, H. (2010). The attractiveness halo: Why some

    candidates are perceived more favorably than others. *Journal of Nonverbal*

    Behavior, *34*(2), 111-117. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10919-009-0084-z

Weber, M., Ziegele, M., & Schnauber, A. (2013). Blaming the victim: the effects of

    extraversion and information disclosure on guilt attributions in cyberbullying.

    Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 16(4), 254-259.

    https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2012.0328

Williams, C., Richardson, D. S., Hammock, G. S., & Janit, A. S. (2012). Perceptions of

    physical and psychological aggression in close relationships: A review.

    Aggression and Violent Behavior, *17*(6), 489-494.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.06.005

Wilson, J. M., & Smirles, K. (2020). College students' perceptions of intimate partner

    violence: The effects of type of abuse and perpetrator gender. *Journal of*

    Interpersonal Violence, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520908025

Wilson, M., Crocker, J., Brown, C. E., Johnson, D., Liotta, R., & Konat, J. (1985). The

    attractive executive: Effects of sex of business associates on attributions of

    competence and social skills. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *6*(1), 13-23.

    https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp0601_2

Wilson, R. K., & Eckel, C. C. (2006). Judging a book by its cover: Beauty and

    expectations in the trust game. *Political Research Quarterly*, *59*(2), 189-202.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/106591290605900202

Witte, T. H., Schroeder, D. A., & Lohr, J. M. (2006). Blame for intimate partner

    violence: An attributional analysis. *Journal of Social and Clinical*

    Psychology, *25*(6), 647-667. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2006.25.6.647

Yamawaki, N., Green, J., James, M., Brenes, T., Yirenya-Tawiah, A., & Wang, A. N. Y.

    (2020). Gender, perpetrator attractiveness, and ambivalent sexism as predictors of

    victim blaming, minimization, and subjective fear in stalking

    incidents. *Psychology*, *11*(11), 1675-1690. https://doi.org

    10.4236/psych.2020.1111106

Zhao, N., Zhou, M., Shi, Y., & Zhang, J. (2015). Face attractiveness in building trust:

    Evidence from measurement of implicit and explicit responses. *Social Behavior*

    and Personality: An International Journal, *43*(5), 855-866.

    https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2015.43.5.855

Appendix A

Vignette portraying an attractive victim suffering psychological abuse (condition 1)

Home | Log in | Sign up | Contact us   Q Search

Alesha93
Member since 2020

24th JANUARY 2020 AT 2:03PM

Is it abuse??

Hi everyone,

I need some advice. I have been with my boyfriend for almost 11 months and I love him but there are some things in our relationship that bother me.

The main thing is that we argue a lot which is really draining. If I ever want to speak to him about anything he gets really defensive and turns things round onto me.. everything is MY fault. He is older than me and says I am stupid and selfish because im young and that he puts up with a lot by being with me.

He also buys me a lot of stuff which is really nice of him, but I never ask for any of it. He has a more stable income than I do and I always feel guilty that I cant afford to buy him presents like he does for me. Then he brings it up in arguments saying that he does everything for me and puts more effort into the relationship than me. He buys me clothes and then gets upset if I wear something else, and he says I make more of an effort and dress up for other people more than I do for him.

Then last night we were supposed to be going out for dinner but I was late leaving work and when I got home he was really angry. He shouted and swore at me saying that after everything he does for me I dont care enough about him to be there on time. I started crying because I hate it when he shouts, and he just said I always cry and I need to take more responsibility for my actions.

Im so confused because I know how much he loves me and I dont know if I am just being dramatic. All couples have arguments but is this more than that?? I wanted to post on here as I feel like i cant go to my friends because im not as close to them anymore. They willl tell me to leave him but they dont understand the difficult life hes had 😔

Appendix B

Vignette portraying an unattractive victim suffering psychological abuse (condition 2)

Alesha93
Member since 2020

24th JANUARY 2020 AT 2:03PM

Is it abuse??

Hi everyone,

I need some advice. I have been with my boyfriend for almost 11 months and I love him but there are some things in our relationship that bother me.

The main thing is that we argue a lot which is really draining. If I ever want to speak to him about anything he gets really defensive and turns things round onto me.. everything is MY fault. He is older than me and says I am stupid and selfish because im young and that he puts up with a lot by being with me.

He also buys me a lot of stuff which is really nice of him, but I never ask for any of it. He has a more stable income than I do and I always feel guilty that I cant afford to buy him presents like he does for me. Then he brings it up in arguments saying that he does everything for me and puts more effort into the relationship than me. He buys me clothes and then gets upset if I wear something else, and he says I make more of an effort and dress up for other people more than I do for him.

Then last night we were supposed to be going out for dinner but I was late leaving work and when I got home he was really angry. He shouted and swore at me saying that after everything he does for me I dont care enough about him to be there on time. I started crying because I hate it when he shouts, and he just said I always cry and I need to take more responsibility for my actions.

Im so confused because I know how much he loves me and I dont know if I am just being dramatic. All couples have arguments but is this more than that?? I wanted to post on here as I feel like I cant go to my friends because im not as close to them anymore. They willl tell me to leave him but they dont understand the difficult life hes had 😔

Appendix C

Vignette portraying an attractive victim suffering psychological plus physical abuse

(condition 3)

Home | Log in | Sign up | Contact us
Search

Alesha93
Member since 2020

Is it abuse??

24th JANUARY 2020 AT 2:03PM

Hi everyone,

I need some advice. I have been with my boyfriend for almost 11 months and I love him but there are some things in our relationship that bother me.

The main thing is that we argue a lot which is really draining. If I ever want to speak to him about anything he gets really defensive and turns things round onto me.. everything is MY fault. He is older than me and says I am stupid and selfish because im young and that he puts up with a lot by being with me.

He also buys me a lot of stuff which is really nice of him, but I never ask for any of it. He has a more stable income than I do and I always feel guilty that I cant affford to buy him presents like he does for me. Then he brings it up in arguments saying that he does everything for me and puts more effort into the relationship than me. He buys me clothes and then gets upset if I wear something else, and he says I make more of an effort and dress up for other people more than I do for him.

Then last night we were supposed to be going out for dinner but I was late leaving work and when I got home he was really angry. He shouted and swore at me saying that after everything he does for me I dont care enough about him to be there on time. He shoved me hard and I started crying and then he grabbed my wrist really tight and wouldnt let me go whilst he shouted. He said I always cry and I need to take more responsibility for my actions.

Im so confused because I know how much he loves me and I dont know if I am just being dramatic. All couples have arguments but is this more than that?? I wanted to post on here as I feel like I cant go to my friends because im not as close to them anymore. They will tell met to leave him but they dont understand the difficult life hes had 😔

Appendix D

Vignette portraying an attractive victim suffering psychological plus physical abuse

(condition 4)

Home | Log in | Sign up | Contact us   🔍 Search

24th JANUARY 2020 AT 2:03PM

Is it abuse??

Hi everyone,

I need some advice. I have been with my boyfriend for almost 11 months and I love him but there are some things in our relationship that bother me.

The main thing is that we argue a lot which is really draining. If I ever want to speak to him about anything he gets really defensive and turns things round onto me.. everything is MY fault. He is older than me and says I am stupid and selfish because im young and that he puts up with a lot by being with me.

He also buys me a lot of stuff which is really nice of him, but I never ask for any of it. He has a more stable income than I do and I always feel guilty that I cant affford to buy him presents like he does for me. Then he brings it up in arguments saying that he does everything for me and puts more effort into the relationship than me. He buys me clothes and then gets upset if I wear something else, and he says I make more of an effort and dress up for other people more than I do for him.

Then last night we were supposed to be going out for dinner but I was late leaving work and when I got home he was really angry. He shouted and swore at me saying that after everything he does for me I dont care enough about him to be there on time. He shoved me hard and I started crying and then he grabbed my wrist really tight and wouldnt let me go whilst he shouted. He said I always cry and I need to take more responsibility for my actions.

Im so confused because I know how much he loves me and I dont know if I am just being dramatic. All couples have arguments but is this more than that?? I wanted to post on here as I feel like I cant go to my friends because im not as close to them anymore. They will tell met to leave him but they dont understand the difficult life hes had 😔

Alesha93
Member since 2020