

Howard, V., & Adan, A. (2022). "The end justifies the memes": A feminist relational discourse analysis of the role of macro memes in facilitating supportive discussions for victim-survivors of narcissistic abuse. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 16(4), Article X. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2022-4-10>

"The End Justifies the Memes": A Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis of the Role of Macro Memes in Facilitating Supportive Discussions for Victim-Survivors of Narcissistic Abuse

Vickie Howard¹ & Amina Adan²

¹ Department of Psychological Health, Wellbeing and Social Work, University of Hull, UK

² Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Kingston University, UK

Abstract

This article reports the results of a qualitative study which aimed to investigate the role of internet memes in facilitating supportive discussions among women on an online platform concerning narcissistic abuse. Narcissistic abuse is an under-recognised form of abuse underpinning experiences of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence. The study focuses upon women's communication through the use of Facebook memes. Studying these and their associated content/posts is important for examining narcissistic abuse experiences because memes have been identified as immediate conveyors of meaning, and associated posts and comments provide rich data that can generate new findings pertinent to abuse and support experiences. A total of 4 public Facebook pages concerning narcissistic abuse were used to analyse 100 memes and their attached comments/posts, which ranged from 15 to 175 per meme with an arithmetic mean of 39.4. Employing a feminist relational discourse analysis (FRDA) framework, the data were categorised in terms of thematic frames and dominant discourses of victim-survivors. The analysis identified how community-specific Facebook pages assisted help-seeking discussions and expressions of distress. It also suggested that memes function as speech acts to discursively shape online conversations related to experiences of narcissistic abuse. As immediate conveyors of meaning, memes facilitated emotional expression to provide psychosocial support and a form of feminist activism to those who experienced feelings of isolation and marginalisation within broader political, psychological, and social contexts.

Keywords: Facebook; platform vernacular; intimate partner violence; memes; help-seeking; psychosocial support; feminist relational discourse analysis

Editorial Record

First submission received:
August 17, 2021

Revision received:
May 27, 2022

Accepted for publication:
July 8, 2022

Editor in charge:
Lenka Dedkova

Introduction

Narcissistic abuse describes a form of abuse inflicted by individuals exhibiting severe narcissistic traits and associated patterns of abusive behaviour. It has been connected to underlying constructs of intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic abuse, and coercive control (Durvasula, 2019; Howard, 2019). It differs however from other forms of abuse, as the narcissistic abuser uses complex mechanisms of deception as both covert and direct forms of abuse towards the victim (see Howard, 2022; Milstead, 2018). This involves the narcissistic abuser manipulating

the victim's misplaced trust to confuse them about their own reality by using techniques such as gaslighting and pathological dishonesty (often incorporating infidelity) to enforce dominance and control (Howard, 2022). The narcissistic abuser can typically present themselves differently to the victim's friends, family and others, bringing the victim's accounts of their abuse into question and discreditation (Arabi, 2017). Narcissistic abuse can include psychological/emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, and physical violence. Emerging studies highlight the importance for women of identifying specific traits such as narcissism exhibited by their abusive partner to make sense of their partner's characteristics and to support personal healing processes (Howard, 2022; Marsden et al., 2022). However, it remains an under-recognised phenomenon, especially in the UK (Howard, 2019). We propose it is an important area for research in both supporting victim-survivors to understand and validate their experiences and in educating wider society about its features, harmful effects and in the development of supportive interventions.

Although men as well as women can experience narcissistic abuse, the statistical evidence indicates that more women (1 in 4) than men (1 in 6) experience domestic violence (Department of Health, 2017). Important differences between male domestic violence against women and female domestic violence against men include women's experience of higher rates of victimisation and serious harm (Walby & Towers, 2017; Women's Aid, 2022) and women are more likely to be killed than male victims of domestic violence (ONS, 2020). Women also experience higher levels of fear and a higher prevalence of experiencing coercive and controlling behaviours (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Myhill, 2015). However, it has been identified that women often do not report domestic abuse/IPV to the police (HMIC, 2015), resulting in the contextual features of the abuse remaining unclear which results in disparity in the understanding of the gendered nature of domestic abuse. Focussing specifically on women's experiences of narcissistic abuse as a form of IPV in this study, will lead to more coherent findings of the features of women's experiences. A further key consideration is that of the concept of patriarchy, referred to by Dobash and Dobash (1979) as a structural hierarchical organisation of social institutions and relationships that allows men to retain positions of power, privilege, and leadership within society. Through self-rationalisation, it creates an acceptance of subordination both by those who benefit and those placed in subordinate positions (DeKeseredy, 2021). These feminist positions are important in the consideration of narcissistic abuse as they point to societal mechanisms that may facilitate narcissistic abuse and fuel its ongoing invisibility as a form of domestic abuse/IPV. Hence, our study focuses on women's experiences of narcissistic abuse and aimed to investigate the role of internet memes in facilitating supportive discussions among women on an online platform concerning narcissistic abuse. As feminist researchers, we were concerned with women's collective accounts of their experiences of narcissistic abuse and how these are interpreted and represented (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2014, Thompson et al., 2018). The purpose of the research is to present an open and transparent account of women's voices and their experiences in the context of supportive discussion and help seeking. The theoretical premise of the research is that FRDA promotes the identification of stories to mobilise broader discursive systems of power and support collective change (Thompson et al., 2018).

Due to a lack of awareness and understanding from mainstream health and social care services, social media platforms worldwide are often used as sources of information and support for people affected by narcissistic abuse (Howard, 2019). Facebook is a popular social media platform which provides online forums enabling victim-survivors of narcissistic abuse to discuss their experiences with user posts that include direct expressive posts and internet memes. This available public data, whereby the users of narcissistic abuse Facebook pages employ both memes and associated posts to express their experiences, opinions, and distress, is viewed as an un-tapped resource by us, as the researchers of the current study. This enabled naturalistic communication to be investigated within an international sample to identify key communicative expressions and characteristics of narcissistic abuse. Because narcissistic abuse experiences and their associated dynamics are complex, memetic content and associated posts and comments offer a unique opportunity to appraise a broad spectrum of communicative expressions across hundreds of posts and give voice to women's silenced discourses whilst challenging established narratives of abuse (Lafrance & McKenzie-Mohr, 2014; Saukko, 2000). Other possible sources for analysis (e.g., magazine articles, online support/discussion groups) do not offer an equivalent rich opportunity for broad-span analysis, as memes specifically convey powerful discursive messages via combined images and text in the promotion of a new kind of understanding about society (Borzsei, 2014; Wiggins, 2019).

Internet memes can be a single image or juxtaposed with other memes and text, shared over email and social media they invite contribution and discussion by others (Borzsei, 2014). This study investigated how memes posted to public Facebook pages focussing on narcissistic abuse facilitate conversations/discussions and create online support forums to assist in information sharing and reduce victim distress and isolation. Existing studies in

the domain of health demonstrate that patients turn to online health communities and sites to share and check relevant factual information (Cline & Haynes, 2001), as well as receive and express empathy and emotional support from/to their fellow sufferers (Biyani et al., 2014; Nambisan, 2011; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007). We propose that there is a need to begin building a body of research investigating victim-survivor experiences of narcissistic abuse to increase understanding and move towards the formulation of health and social care support strategies. Exploring this unexamined area of narcissistic abuse within the context and content of a social media platform (Facebook), identifying memetic content in particular, forms a key starting point of enquiry and builds further on the growing body of research identifying the contribution of memes to emotional expression, political protest, and community building (Milner, 2016; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2018; Shifman, 2013).

The Use of Social Media Platforms and Memes

A meme can be identified as an image, lines of carefully formatted text, or photoshopped content, and it has become increasingly pervasive within social media platforms (Rogers, 2019). The word *meme* originated from Dawkins (1976) who used the term to refer to a new replicator of a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation. Rogers (2019) proposes that the meme can be studied as an intriguing object of online culture relevant across disciplines. He notes that it has been employed as a manipulative tool within the history of marketing in the form of subliminal advertising and priming as well as within political campaigns. Whilst acknowledging the manipulative genre of memes and their capacity for widespread persuasion and influence, they can also be used to address the needs and cultural values of particular sub-cultures or groups within social media platforms (Chen, 2012). Questions have been raised, for example, as to whether Facebook is a *meme machine* (Shifman, 2014) and whether memes are so effective that they can provide an account of an event and tell a story that facilitates comprehension through the easy accessibility of key images and text.

Mendes, Keller et al. (2019) conducted an analysis of memes and argued that social media platforms like Tumblr and Twitter have enabled the development of digitised narratives (on sexual violence) to be not only disclosed and known but also felt and experienced across digital networks. Their analysis of the Tumblr campaign "Who Needs Feminism?" included an analysis of hand-crafted signs that predominantly articulated experiences of sexual violence and were termed *pain memes* (Dobson, 2015). They stated that the handmade signs displaying key experiences that were uploaded to Tumblr allowed them to be read as memes. The authors were cautiously optimistic that using such story telling conventions as pain memes can challenge established myths and assumptions about rape through differing modes of representation. There are additional examples of scholarly work which identify the use of digital platforms for victim-survivors in obtaining support, advice, disclosure and storytelling in the pursuit of informal justice whilst formulating collective counter-narratives (to sexual violence; O'Neill, 2018; Salter, 2013).

Like Mendes, Keller et al. (2019), as authors we are particularly interested in the concept of *platform vernacular* and how, in relation to narcissistic abuse, Facebook has been utilised to create platforms that appear to attract rich engagement as a specific social networking site for narcissistic abuse. Integral to our research is the awareness of how the public Facebook pages included in our study "have (their) own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, which can be considered as constituting a 'platform vernacular', or a popular (as in 'of the people') genre of communication" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257). Furthermore, we acknowledge how the use of memes may further perform emotion in the context of messages that are difficult to articulate (Miltner, 2014).

Narcissism, Narcissistic Abuse, and Access to Support and Understanding

Narcissism has been defined through theoretical identification and diagnostic classification within a psychiatric medical model (Levy et al., 2011). The psychiatric formulation of narcissism by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) focuses upon the narcissist's difficulties with self-identification and self-functioning within a diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Problems with personality and interpersonal functioning are identified as an inability to empathise with others, a grandiose sense of self-importance, and a sense of entitlement incorporating interpersonally exploitative behaviours. The language around the presentations of the narcissistic *type* centre around the *deflated narcissist* who possesses extremely fragile self-esteem and whose narcissistic tendencies may be covert and *thin-skinned* (Rosenfield, 1965, 1987; Shaw, 2014). Shaw (2014) also asserts that the label of a pathological narcissist has been identified in its opposite form as someone who is overinflated, grandiose, overt, aggressive, and controlling. By contrast, the Power Threat Meaning Framework views problematic behaviours

among those identified with narcissistic behaviour patterns as threat responses activated for protection and survival (Johnstone & Boyle, 2020). Notwithstanding these differing perspectives on the manifestations of a narcissistic person and the descriptions of a narcissistic personality, a consistent and predominant thread exists with regard to what severe narcissistic presentations entail, which is a driving force for the need for self-esteem. Because their own needs are central to their existence, narcissists lack empathy, a conscience, and general consideration for others' wellbeing. Fuelled by this very dynamic, inflicting abuse and harm on others becomes a factor within their interactions and relationships. This is especially evident within the context of close and intimate relationships because it is within these that the narcissistic individual is drawing upon experiences to bolster their own self-worth. If these key relationships/individuals no longer foster the narcissistic individual's self-esteem, they will often increase their abusive behaviours in an attempt to re-gain control, dominate, and prove their superiority over their target/victim (and often to themselves as a primary means of counteracting failing self-esteem; Howard, 2019).

Some scholars have suggested that narcissistic behaviours and personality patterns should not be medicalised as this effectively gives narcissistic individuals another reason not to take responsibility for their harmful behaviour (Durvasula, 2019). Feminist perspectives recognise the way in which gendered messages predispose girls and women to an internalisation of defencelessness, which can disempower women to accept abusive conditions, especially in the case of emotional abuse where inferred secrecy for the perpetrator makes it challenging for the isolated abused woman to access help (Ali, 2007).

Taking into consideration disparities in the recognition and understanding of narcissistic individuals and their varying presentations and harmful and abusive behaviours, abuse victims are not routinely identified (Howard, 2019). In turn, victims are often not aware they have experienced narcissistic abuse (often due to the manipulation and gaslighting they have experienced) until something triggers their own investigation or confusion around their experiences (see Howard, 2022). The victim is then left in the position of trying to find information to understand their experiences and access support from others who understand their descriptions. As evidenced among other marginalised groups (Cipolletta et al., 2017; Naslund et al., 2014; Pendry & Salvatore, 2015), social media platforms have been accessed by self-identified victims, survivors, and those seeking information in order to alleviate their distress and join a community who will have some understanding of their experiences, be able to answer their questions and offer support.

The Aim and Context of the Study

Acknowledging that narcissistic abuse is an underrecognised form of IPV/domestic abuse where victim-survivors turn to social media for support, the following aim and research questions have been formulated:

This study aimed to investigate the role of internet memes in facilitating supportive discussions among women on an online platform concerning narcissistic abuse. Such research is valuable because it illuminates powerful victim-survivor narratives around narcissistic abuse and examines the psychosocial benefits of online communities in facilitating supportive discussions and support seeking. In addition, analysing victim-survivor narratives on narcissistic abuse within the context of utilised memes can provide a greater comprehension of another form of IPV to extend and challenge dominant discourses on what IPV entails. This has the potential to contribute to more comprehensive policy on IPV and to establish societal responses to helping strategies for women experiencing narcissistic abuse. In summary, this study contributes to the analysis of violence against women which has called for a more comprehensive methodology to examine closely factors such as context and consequences, thus promoting a wider base of knowledge supporting the notion that abuse and violence is asymmetrical with men predominantly being abusive and violent towards women within IPV (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). It was intended that findings of the study would identify the memes and associated posts which enabled discussion, support and shared understanding whilst pointing to considerations for future research applicable to this marginalised group.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Facebook users use memes in discussions of narcissistic abuse and how does this relate to the expressive value of memes?

RQ2: What are the prominent discourses within the memes/comments identified and how were these connected to support seeking?

RQ3: What are the expressions of distress and indications of support received via memetic content?

Methods

Feminist Relational Discourse Analysis (FRDA) was utilised and combines two analytical phases which were employed as a means of simultaneously capturing experience and discourse, exploring central mechanisms for power and meaning in identity construction and social relations (Thompson et al., 2018). The first phase of the study involved accumulating discursive patterns through voiced accounts and the second phase involved tracing discursive realms and participants' positioning and discourses within these (Thompson et al., 2018).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the ethical review board of the authors' host institution (FHS168). Taking account of discussions involving ethical concerns regarding the analysis of data obtained from social media (Flicker et al., 2004; McKee, 2013), we paid special attention to situations in reported studies where the privacy of users has been placed at risk (Zimmer, 2010). To address these concerns, we focused only on Facebook pages that were identified as public (available for anyone to access, do not require a password, or are not referred to as private groups). Ethical considerations were also aligned with the ethical guidelines surrounding internet research (franzke et al., 2020). However, it was recognised that just categorising the data as public data does not remove important ethical considerations which still require careful thought and subsequent choices in the areas of anonymity and confidentiality (Hewson et al., 2016). To address possible harm when considering the possibility of tracing posts, any identifying information has been removed (Bruckman, 2004; Hookway, 2008) and individual posts are not identified as belonging to one of the particular public Facebook pages used for the study. Some words and details were removed from some posts where this did not detract from the meaning, which also reduced the risk of discoverability via search engines (Sugiura et al., 2017).

Data Selection

Qualitative data were collected from four Facebook pages concerning the subject of narcissistic abuse. All were publicly accessible online pages. Only memes and posts which were identifiable from women were selected for analysis. Where ambiguity in gender was apparent, content in the posts were reviewed to confirm the post was from a woman. The post was not considered for analysis if the researchers could not establish gender. The participatory nature of Facebook and its established effectiveness in creating digital communities make it a valuable research platform for obtaining insights into how users use memes to communicate and share their experiences (of narcissistic abuse; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015). To avoid possible misunderstandings, loss of meaning, and misinterpretation (Polkinghorne, 2005), only English-speaking public Facebook pages were selected (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Data From Public Narcissistic Abuse Facebook Pages.*

Public Facebook page	Total number of followers	Memes sample	Comments sample
https://www.facebook.com/pg/survivors7363/posts/	19,571	32	2,254
https://en-gb.facebook.com/Narcissistic-and-Emotional-Abuse-308444339340514/	351,356	27	1,182
https://www.facebook.com/freedomfromnarcissisticandemotionalabuse/	217,268	25	1,917
https://www.facebook.com/AfterNarcissisticAbuse/?ref=page_internal	184,007	16	1,605

Data were gathered over a four-week period. Applying a broad-brush approach, hundreds of memes were initially considered and organised according to image and text. Our sampling frame for data collection focused on a specific format of internet meme—image macro memes (images juxtaposed with phrases to create meaning). The choice of image macros was based on their relative simplicity and accessibility. Moreover, they were easy to distinguish as speech acts. According to Grundlingh (2018, p. 151) a speech act can be viewed as a trichotomy featuring the locutionary, illocutionary and the perlocutionary act: Defining them as the following “the locutionary act involves the production of sounds and the production of words. The illocutionary act refers to performing one of the functions of language, that is, the act of saying something. The perlocutionary act refers to the effects (intended and unintended) that result from saying something.” To Barthes (1957/1980, p. 110), speech is “by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity.” Given that these image macro memes can

represent an illocutionary act (Grunlingh, 2018) and can be effectively used to transmit powerful messages, this makes them a valuable prism for exploring narratives of abuse. One hundred of the most popular image macro memes (those generating the most shares, posts, and comments) from each Facebook page were then selected as the sample unit for analysis. The image macro memes with corresponding posts and comments were downloaded in 2019 over four consecutive weeks. Only data posted during this period were considered for analysis. The number of posts and comments made in response to each meme ranged from 15 to 175 with an arithmetic mean of 39.4. Each response post and comment varied in size, ranging from one word, to detailed accounts of experiences of abuse.

Data Analysis

Data analysis entailed two phases to incorporate the application of FRDA (Thompson et al., 2018) to image and textual online data, as indicated in Table 1. The first phase consisted of a post-structuralist discourse analysis to identify thematic frames incorporating in-vivo themes (recurring patterns of meaning drawn from the memes/posts), and theoretical accounting (termed discursive realms) whereby the themes and patterns are linked to previous research and theory, which is essential in a feminist post-structural analysis. The second phase involved analysing emergent voices whereby discursive patterns termed *dominant discourses* were identified according to first-person accounts and their relationship to personal and political accounts of collective experiences. These phases provided the authors with a conceptual toolkit that enabled them to systematically analyse the visual and textual elements of the image macros in order to discover how they produce meaning, both explicitly and implicitly. Furthermore, an analysis of the semiotic elements in memes (e.g., the signs and symbols) allowed the authors to determine how and what meanings were encoded and communicated through the interplay of words and images (Cannizzaro, 2016; Grundlingh, 2018).

Within phase one, the unit for analysis was the visual and textual content of each meme. Each unit was reviewed, categorised, and organised according to its individual characteristics and the topic messages conveyed within (Shifman, 2013). Prior to coding, an initial review of all the response postings was undertaken by us as the two involved researchers. Data analysis commenced with coding the memes and their response posts and comments. The focus of the analysis was limited to content immediately visible to a user scrolling through Facebook (no links were followed). To enhance intercoder reliability, we compared, discussed, and identified inconsistencies in coding practice. Memes were then thematically connected through the incorporation of discursive functions and grouped into thematic frames. These sometimes overlapped and not all memes fitted neatly in one frame. Each frame provided a useful heuristic framework with which to analyse the discursive nature of the memes; hence, they became an important element that served to determine the emergence of dominant discourses surrounding narcissistic abuse. This enabled identification of the ways in which a number of discourses operate in response posts and comments generated by the memes. Thus, a snapshot of online community *conversations* was provided that illuminated how individual accounts of lived experience coalesce into broader discourses surrounding narcissistic abuse. The combination of these analytical frameworks provided the means necessary to analyse the communicative function of memes for members of virtual communities. Once thematic frames had been identified for phase one of the analysis, these were then examined to identify dominant discourses, which comprised phase two of the analysis. This phase specifically focused upon the emergent voices within the discourses, which were analysed through further theoretical accounting. We examined each individual post and comment separately to accumulate multi-layered accounts of emergent voices whilst paying attention to the broader dominant discourses (Thompson et al., 2018). Through this feminist post-structural lens, we generated our findings—which are presented in the following section.

Results

Phase One: Thematic Frames and Theoretical Accounting

We identified four thematic frames that incorporated in-vivo themes of (1) loss and coercion, (2) giving and seeking validation, (3) accepting and rejecting painful/emotionally violent experiences, and (4) resilience and surviving. These incorporate the various and diverse experiences of self-defined victims and survivors of narcissistic abuse and are displayed in Table 2. This table also presents the theoretical and research literature (discursive realms)

used to make sense of the discursive patterns and dominant discourses identified from the data, which are discussed in further detail in Phase Two of the analysis.

Table 2. *Narcissistic Abuse Memetic Content: Thematic Frames, Dominant Discourses, and Discursive Realms.*

Thematic Frames	Example Quotes	Dominant Discourses	Discursive Realms & Theoretical Accounting
Loss and coercion	<p>"... You will lose yourself trying to help! I know first-hand. There is no appreciation or loyalty to you. In the end you are tossed aside when the moment presents itself..."</p> <p>"... a narcissistic abuser subtly positions themselves as the indisputable judge of ALL Things, the Definer of Reality. Invalidation can quickly cross into heavy gaslighting, as the victim is told that they don't actually feel what they say they feel, think what they say they think... then authoritatively inform them what they REALLY feel, think... The psychological effects are crippling."</p>	Marginalisation	<p>Coercive control (Stark, 1995)</p> <p>Loss of identity within emotional abuse (O'Doherty et al., 2016; Williamson, 2010)</p> <p>Cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Nicholson & Lutz, 2017)</p> <p>The validation of emotional abuse as damaging and long lasting (Follingstad, 1980)</p>
Giving and seeking validation	<p>"Divorce one and you will see things that aren't even human. Especially if you have kids and what they can do to them!!!"</p> <p>"Mine is attempting to do this right now, he manipulated my teenage daughter away from me and now has come after me for custody of her and has stopped paying child support."</p> <p>"... Gaslighting. 100% true you catch them lying, you bring evidence to their face, yet they have the audacity to yell at you, in order to seem innocent and make you look like you're the crazy one."</p>	Hidden Grief	<p>Psychological growth and change by shifting responsibility from the victim to the abuser (Sharma, 2001)</p> <p>Trauma bonds (Carnes, 2019)</p> <p>The transformative potential of humour (Vitis & Gilmour, 2017)</p>
Accepting and rejecting painful/emotionally violent experiences	<p>"I used to wish he'd just hit me. Then people could see the bruises."</p> <p>"No one saw the broken furniture or broken dishes. No one saw the mental, emotional, financial abuse."</p> <p>"To read these words, to hear my life in them... to know I'm not insane, deranged, overly sensitive... but most of all... to know I'm not alone. To know others have endured the things I endured. I am free of the people that hurt me, and I am healing every day. But I still have days, sometimes several in a row, where I struggle with my emotions. Doing my best to hang tough... as I hope all of you are..."</p>	Empowerment	<p>Recognising the social-cultural and social-psychological power of social isolation as an integral component of domestic violence (Browne, 1987)</p> <p>Transformation journeys and the recognition of multiple truths (Hesse-Biber, 2007)</p> <p>Externalising—owning experiences as a result of the narcissist's behaviour (Durvasula, 2019)</p>
Resilience and surviving	<p>"There's always going to be at least one person that knows what you went through because they went through the same thing..."</p>	Empowerment	<p>Recognising attachment/communication dynamics of psychological and emotional abuse (Carnes, 2019)</p> <p>The importance of recognising hope and personal strengths, whilst de-emphasising blame and the pathologising of women (Dominelli, 2002; Wood, 2015)</p> <p>Online justice mechanisms (Fileborn, 2014, 2017; Wånggren, 2016).</p>

Loss and Coercion

A key theme that emerged from the data was *loss and coercion*. Individuals appropriated humorous memes in ways that subtly highlighted personal traumatic experiences and captured the complex nature of narcissistic abuse, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. An Example Meme Depicting a Happy Innocent Care Free State Before Encountering a Narcissist and the Same Character Prepared to Fight, Following Contact With a Narcissist.



Posts in response to memes shared detailed and uncensored disclosures of psychological losses in the context of narcissistic abuse. They highlight the sense of loss that arises when an abusive relationship ends.

“I’ve always felt on my own. I never felt I had support from anyone else especially at night. I was lying in bed next to someone that I thought loved me only to find out they don’t really love you.”

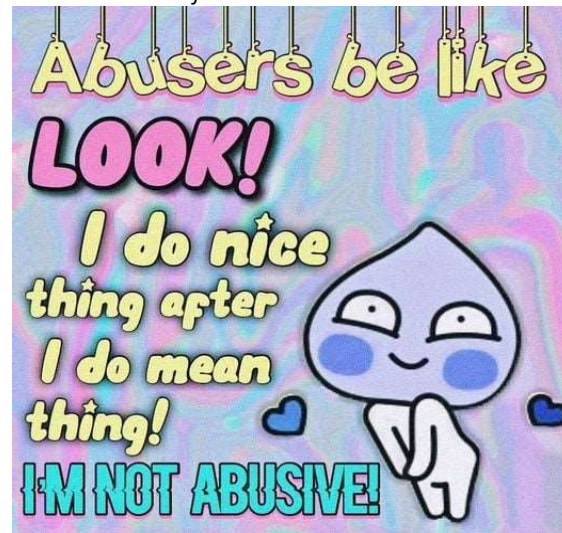
Experiences of the loss were also articulated within accounts of “what could have been” and disclosures centring on disappointment around the “time and aspects of self-identity which had been lost”. Expressions of emotional trauma were voiced through detailed accounts of “loss of a loving relationship” and concurrently embedded in narratives of loss of trust resulting from the coercive behaviour of the narcissist, removing the victim’s essence of self. Figure 2 depicts a coercive behaviour pattern discussed by women, influencing emotional trauma and loss of self.

“No one can understand unless they have been through it. I still can’t wrap my head around the mind control that he used to hurt me... we are done but he is still in my head. He raped my soul and it was his plan from the beginning.”

The experience of loss within the accounts of individual women was multi-faceted and renegotiated through cross-reference to the posts of other contributors to the identified meme, with comments co-constructed to compare experiences. The discursive realms (which involve the relationship of the thematic frame to theory and research) point to how women’s individual accounts of loss relate to experiences of coercive control to incorporate structural inequality, the systemic nature of women’s oppression, and the harms associated with domination within their lived experience, including restrictions on liberty (Stark, 1995): “Assaults, stalking me, more abuse that was no longer physical. Then he takes the children and doesn’t let them come home if he doesn’t get his own way.”

In this thematic frame, the loss of identity in abused women, particularly social identity and relational identity, has been widely associated with experiences of emotional abuse within intimate relationships (O’Doherty et al., 2016; Williamson, 2010): “I call it mental murder. I thought I was going to die even when he wasn’t around.”

Figure 2. An Example Meme Depicting the Manipulation Involved in a Pattern of Narcissistic Abusive Behaviour.



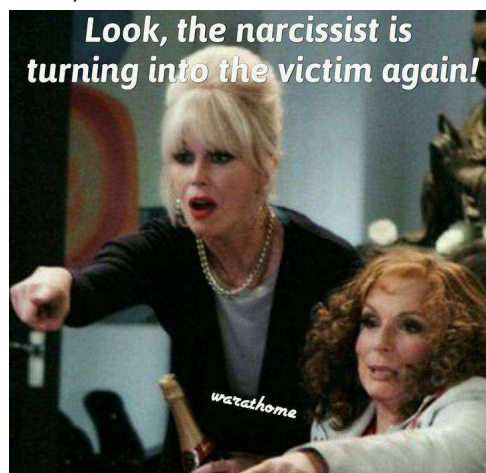
"Abusers be like LOOK! I do nice thing after I do mean thing! I'm not abusive!"

A cute cartoon character tries to look adorable against a pastel multi-coloured background.

Giving and Seeking Validation

A significant number of memes in the sample communicated messages aimed at validating personal accounts of abuse, while simultaneously seeking validation through commonalities of experience. Users on the pages appeared to make sense of their own experience through dialogue with others. Perpetrators of narcissistic abuse were constructed and positioned through humorous memes that validated victim-survivor experiences of their abuse and narcissistic behaviours (see Figure 3) and provided empowerment towards human dignity in the context of social justice (Misztal, 2013). Vitis and Gilmour (2017) state that when humour is underpinned by social justice, it can be transformative and revalue individuals by giving a human face back to targeted groups whose full humanity has been denied.

Figure 3. An Example Humorous Meme Depicting a Shared Experience of Narcissistic Abuse, Whereby the Abuser Attempts to Present Themselves as the Victim.



"Look, the narcissist is turning into the victim again!"

Television characters from Absolutely Fabulous, Patsy and Eddie, point forwards in unison.

"My ex told me the woman he was having an affair with would not leave him alone, though he had told her to stop contacting him. I can't believe he was trying to make me feel sorry for him, like he was a victim... because he had been caught cheating..."

Memes expressing encouragement created opportunities for users to share information related to helping victims/survivors identify and recognise "red flags" and "warning signs" within their narratives. Personal accounts of embodied experience were shared to validate painful and emotive disclosures of narcissistic abuse that consequently enriched their experience of information exchange (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *An Example Meme Communicating Insider Knowledge on the Pain of Narcissistic Abuse.*

This right here... this picture... says a thousand words... and if you can relate... then WE... have an unspoken bond...



"This right here... this picture... says a thousand words... and if you can relate... then WE... have an unspoken bond..."

A woman bends forward in distress in a desolate environment.

"I can't believe how similar all of our stories are. So many of us have this exact same story, which is ironic really when you think about how narcissistic people try to convince everyone how unique and special they are."

Post and response comments generated by image macro memes across the thematic frames varied in tone, topic, and stance (Shifman, 2014). Consequently, the speech acts generated diverse discursive patterns. Furthermore, users were able to move between different subject positions in relation to the different thematic frames and subsequent discourses.

The dynamics facilitating validation amongst the discussed experiences of abuse can be compared to feminist therapy which employs a sociocultural and systems approach towards psychological growth and change. Here, the guiding principle is one of shifting responsibility from the victim to the abuser and situating the problem of domestic abuse within a patriarchal society to help women escape the feelings of shame that often infiltrate their experiences (Sharma, 2001).

Accepting and Rejecting Painful/Emotionally Violent Experiences

The development and use of an insider language (e.g., love bombing) emerged as an important mechanism for building resilience and surviving following emotionally violent narcissistic abuse experiences and for recognising discernible features and patterns. Being able to accept and reject painful emotional experiences was also evidenced, enabling a shared ownership of experiences and allowing those unfamiliar with specific terms to ask questions and clarify meanings.

"That was my ex... I left more than once only to be love bombed again and I went back but then finally left. By this time though, I had no self-esteem as he had killed it. However, a great support network enabled me to get my confidence back. I am still working on my post-traumatic stress."

Specific experiences related to being isolated within emotionally violent episodes within narcissistic abuse. The lack of understanding from others (family and friends) additionally affected experiences of isolation and influenced their acceptance or rejection of the situation they were living in: "My husband did this to me and my grown-up children have not spoken to me for eight years. I never had a chance to defend myself."

Figure 5 presents a humorous interpretation with a dark undertone of a key feature of narcissistic abuse, experienced as emotionally violent pathological dishonesty. Being able to reject painful experiences was an important collective response in gaining back autonomy and self-preservation, often whilst concurrently experiencing isolation.

Figure 5. A Humorous Meme Example Representing the Deflection of a Victim-Survivor's Experience of Pathological Dishonesty.



"Go down 2 blocks make a right and then make a left, you'll see where I lost interest in your lying ass."

A man looks out the driving window of his car whilst a woman points forward to give directions.

In accordance with women's individual expressions of isolation during emotionally violent episodes, their accounts resonate with Fischer's (1976, p. 172) definition of isolation as "a sense of loneliness or of rejection by others". However, as a community of women, their expressions of isolation centred on a separation from society as a whole, because their experiences appeared to be imperceptible to those who have not experienced narcissistic abuse themselves. This discourse resonates with Wilson's (1987, p. 60) definition of social isolation as "the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society". Both processes of accepting and rejecting emotionally violent experiences were supported by the discourses present in the conversations between women and served to reduce isolation.

"... that is true. Beware ladies these people are charmers and will promise you the world but in the end they will leave you alone and go to someone new. You will question what did I do to deserve this when I was so faithful and loyal to this man. Sorry to say but it's true."

Through these discourses, the balance of power was constantly adjusted and readjusted, with the posts demonstrating the subjugation and transformation journeys of individuals where the personal and political merge to exhibit multiple truths that overcome the silence of past experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Lanier and O'Maume (2009) assert that both social-structural and social-psychological components of social isolation are probable risk

factors for intimate partner abuse victims and that isolation is one notable and negative outcome of domestic violence (Browne, 1987; Walker, 1979, as cited in Lanier & O'Maume, 2009).

Resilience and Surviving

Following the realisation that what an individual has experienced is narcissistic abuse, memes were used that reflect empowerment, hope, and recognition of the features of a narcissistic personality and the abusive patterns these individuals inflict. Abusive cycles were identified and advice provided within the posted comments, helping others to be aware of abusive cycles (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. An Example Meme Depicting the Narcissistic Abuser Saying They Have Changed, but the Reality Is They Remain the Same.



"When he comes back into your life saying he's a changed man."

A supermarket price tag of ice cream has \$6.99 crossed out, with a new lower price sign of \$6.99.

Memes and responses represented the risk of being drawn back into a relationship via further communication with the abuser and re-kindling attachments via manipulation and coercion (termed "hoovering"). Insider language was evident in the supportive discussions occurring in response to a memetic post. Alongside hoovering, other insider terms were referred to in discussions on surviving and thriving following narcissistic abuse with an educative and affirming explanation to others following the memetic post. "Trauma bonding" (Carnes, 2019) is an example of a process commented upon in which readers are reminded it is not love they are missing from the narcissist but rather the addictive pull of remaining in a relationship due to an attachment formed via manipulative means: "Trauma bonded and trying to heal from it all..."

The impact of relationships with others who fuel the harmful behaviour of the narcissist, often by not expressing their own views on how the narcissist has behaved, was commented on as a key abusive dynamic accompanying the narcissist's behaviour (see Figure 7).

Being aware of and eradicating these individuals from victims' lives was identified as a key survival step. These individuals were sometimes referred to as "flying monkeys", a reference to the film *The Wizard of Oz* in which flying monkeys mindlessly carry out the wicked witch's bidding.

"Toxic by proxy is still toxic..."

"I have no time for spineless fence sitters, bye bye..."

"People who claim to care about you and are in a position to defend you or have your back but remain neutral or say stupid crap like 'it's not my business' or 'it's not my place to say anything' or 'I don't want to get involved' do not get to remain in my life. Those people are just as vile as the abuser because they are passive enablers."

The on-line communities of those who have experienced narcissistic abuse were valued as experts-by-experience who have made a real difference when working through the individual trauma experiences of victims and survivors

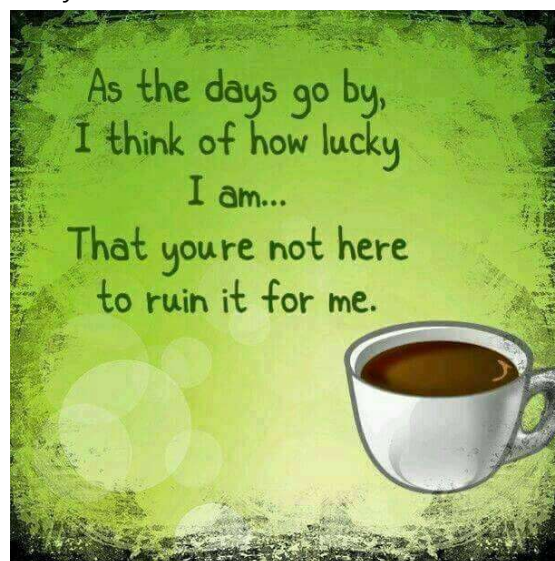
of narcissistic abuse: "I couldn't have done it without this amazing group of beautiful people who refused to be bitter but comforted me and shared their experiences with me..."

Figure 7. *An Example Meme Reflecting Family and Significant Others Who Fail to Acknowledge Abuse and Thus Enable the Narcissistic Abuser.*



The use of humour was evidenced both in the responses to both memetic and post content. The humour in the memes displayed a familiarity and ownership in its central message. The end-result was empowerment of those reading the meme and the accompanying visual image due to the immediate understanding and identification with what is being depicted (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. *An Example Meme Representing Victim-Survivors' Recovery and a Detachment From the Narcissistic Abuser.*

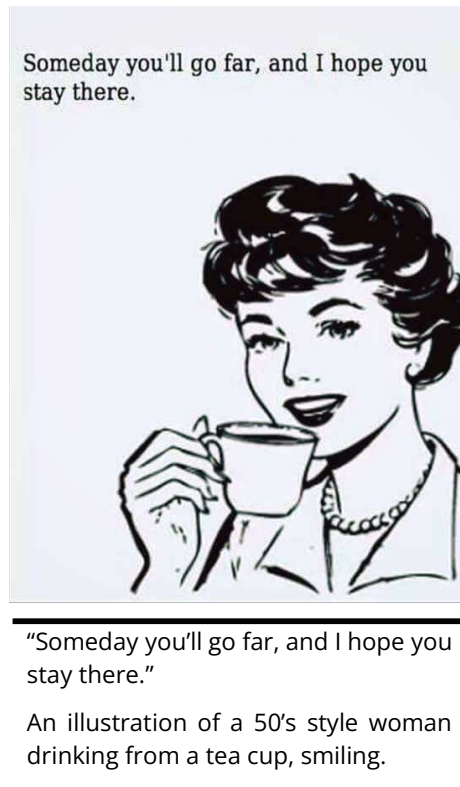


"As the days go by, I think of how lucky I am... That you're not here to ruin it for me."

A full coffee cup is below the text, placed on an aesthetic green background.

Forms of memes were experienced as irony, dark humour, and ultimately strength in the recognition of the message and the individual's survival, even though the resulting comments may have disclosed distressing, disturbing, and emotionally violent experiences (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. *An Example Meme Depicting Hope and Freedom From The Narcissistic Abuser.*



Phase Two: Analysing Emergent Voices and Dominant Discourses

Discourses About Marginalisation

The second analytic phase identified first person accounts in the discursive constructions of women. The aforementioned thematic frames and generated posts and comments characterise a distinct discourse of marginalisation. Users positioned themselves as "outsiders", portraying themselves as "misunderstood" and "hidden". Victims and survivors expressed common experiences of exclusion from established and accepted discourses related to "domestic abuse", where maintaining the online community has afforded them the space to share their stories. Owing to the perceived complexities inherent in covert narcissistic abuse and the deceptive nature of the narcissist, victim-survivors described how it felt to have their experiences minimised and ignored by professionals and family members despite their vulnerabilities. Health and social care professionals were represented as *naïve* and susceptible to the charms of narcissists and unprepared to accept victim-survivor accounts of abuse.

"MY WHOLE MARRIAGE! One of my family members early on asked me what I was doing to make him so angry. They believed he was such a nice guy it must be me. Recently he verbally and emotionally attacked them, and they have seen him for who he really is."

"If you're reading about narcissism from an academic, or a clueless therapist or 'expert', you'll find that they miss the most important thing about a narcissist... that they are truly evil. They don't believe in evil, so they wind up making excuses for the narcissist or 'explaining them', meaning, finding made up reasons for their behaviour other than that the narc chose to be evil and enjoys hurting people. They are why survivors had to take recovery from NarcAbuse into their own hands with pages like this, to overcome the wave of BS they publish. We KNOW the truth. We've seen it and lived with it."

Users expressed personal experiences of "narcissistic rage" (Krizan & Johar, 2015) and their responses to memes highlighted a shared sense of unrecognised and unacknowledged trauma (Kaplan et al., 2016). Moreover,

discourses on marginalisation foregrounded the collective perception of a lack of mainstream language to express experiences relating to narcissistic abuse.

“... would rather be hit by him that way I could show everyone what he was like but... I could call the police and they would see what he had done... it’s the mental torture which no one can see.”

Such discourses further deepened the diverse accounts of isolation and mobilised defences of denial. These resonated with identifications of cognitive dissonance where women struggled to accept the attachments they had (had) with their narcissistic partner and the love some still felt towards them, notwithstanding the abuse they had experienced (Festinger, 1957; Nicholson & Lutz, 2017).

“... I thought I was going mad I had no contact with anyone but him, he cut me off from everyone. Nobody noticed what I was going through... they were all brainwashed by him... it didn’t take long for me to start doing the same just pretending everything was normal...”

Moreover, the analysis revealed powerful and painful disclosures of psychological injury and the articulation of intense frustrations at the stigma experienced when seeking support. These were underpinned by gendered narratives of dominance and subordination, leading to robust conversations validating emotional abuse as damaging and long lasting (Follingstad, 1980) and advocacy of concrete strategies to “break the cycle” and embrace empowerment.

Discourses About Hidden Grief

Across the presented memes and resulting comments there emanated a strong sense of loss and a difficulty in articulating this to others. Comments by victims and survivors of narcissistic abuse expressed a realisation that the person (narcissist) was portraying a false self to ingratiate themselves with the victim, who then has to accept the fact that the person they loved and cared for was “not real”. The survivor is then left “mourning the living dead” (Clough, 2019).

The behaviour experienced near the end of a relationship with a narcissist generated discourses reflecting a developing awareness that the ongoing relationship was based upon a trauma bond for the victim, whereby the attachment to the narcissist was not one of love but enabled by a dynamic in which the victim was consumed by a highly addictive relationship based upon the presence of danger, shame, or exploitation (Carnes, 2019).

Discourses were identified reflecting the loss of an imagined future, whether this was an intact family unit, growing old together, or the loss associated with a relationship based on mutual support. In fact, there were discourses associated not just with the loss of a yearning for mutual support but the realisation that the trusted person (narcissist) had been intent on removing any sense of self the victim may have had through their acts of betrayal, dishonesty, and complete disregard for the victim’s experiences and wellbeing.

Other discourses comprised reflections by victims and survivors of their original personas and how they viewed the world prior to their experiences of narcissistic abuse. Realisations of their experiences were presented in comments and memes as ‘aha’ moments that allowed integration of a new knowledge and reality, enabling the discourses to fully incorporate traumatic experiences into victim/survivor consciousness: “It takes true courage to tear off their mask and face the truth of the damage they did to you.”

Discourses About Empowerment

Memes and subsequent comments highlighted a powerful discursive thread of empowerment predominantly associated with trauma experiences. The “it’s not me” realisation of the victim-survivor was indicated as a “phoenix moment” at the beginning of a journey of empowerment. Durvasula (2019) advocates that victims should avoid making their experiences about themselves and instead own them by viewing them as caused by the narcissistic person’s lack of empathy, manipulation, and control. Through the memetic content and comments, increasing empowerment was reflected in the consolidation and co-construction of shared views and narratives, which facilitated the development of insight and understanding into patterns of narcissistic behaviours and the impact these can have on victims.

“The truth is these types cannot accept responsibility for their harmful and abusive behaviour. They can’t stand on their own because they are wrong, so they lie and enlist others to back them up. They are extremely weak people. It takes a strong person to reflect and think about what they have done

to make people scared and sick and to adjust their behaviour accordingly. So, they lash out at others blaming them for what they have actually done. At the very least they will never grow as human beings. They will always stay the same.”

Transformation in the healing process was denoted by powerful discourses displayed in both memetic representation and subsequent comments where individuals openly expressed how these public pages have helped reduce their isolation, increased their understanding of narcissistic patterns of behaviour and abuse experiences, and stimulated decisions on “what to do”. Discursive narratives of empowerment reflected the importance of hope and the recognition of personal strengths and resilience. Both are components of feminist interventions/therapies designed to empower women and recognise personal experiences in the public context (the personal is political) whilst de-emphasising blame and the pathologising of women (Dominelli, 2002; Wood, 2015). These concepts intertwine with notions of *online justice mechanisms* whereby victim-survivors’ experiential accounts are believed and taken seriously (Fileborn, 2014; Wånggren, 2016) and may contribute to healing and recovery processes (Fileborn, 2017).

Discussion

The findings indicate that memes are common, effective, and productively used to initiate and facilitate supportive discussions. The analysis illuminated the meme as an immediate conveyor of powerful messages (about narcissistic abuse; Shifman, 2013). As illustrated through the thematic frames, memes as speech acts initiate and shape conversations and portray emotions which coalesce into broader discourses. Theories of multimodality and semiotics suggest that the internet macro memes examined in this research can be viewed as illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts that align to meaning making (Chandler, 2007; Grundlingh, 2018; Iedema, 2003). Moreover, because they permit expression, they are mobilised to generate discussion and not merely memetics.

The thematic frames and dominant discourses identified indicate that to function successfully as a speech act, the context of the meme (the text and the image) must be interpreted within the broader context of the nuanced communication of the online community—thus, they must be understood experientially in a larger context in order to make sense. Within the context of a narcissistic abuse victim-survivor Facebook page, the memes are interpreted in connection with existing discourses of domestic abuse, as well as within a repertoire of user narratives. We argue here that images with overlaying text (image macro meme) in the vernacular sense function *enthymematically* whereby users create meaning through their collective perceptions or beliefs. Therefore, to successfully fill in the gaps in order to decode the meme and attribute meaning, memes require users to be socially, culturally, and politically situated or at least *in the know* about the topic. This relates to the concept of platform vernacular, which demonstrates how group communication and grammar emerges through digital communication, facilitating new narratives on previously invisible experiences and emotions (Mendes, Belisário et al., 2019).

Further to this discussion, the guiding research questions of the study are revisited by incorporating the FRDA results to examine the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts that may have shaped the discourses identified (Cheek, 2000). Here, an underlying aim of *deconstruction* (Derrida, 1967/1976) is utilised to question “... and expose the underlying meanings, biases, and preconceptions that structure the way a text conceptualizes its relation to what it describes” (Denzin, 1994).

How Do Facebook Users Use Memes in Discussions of Narcissistic Abuse and How Does This Relate to the Expressive Value of Memes?

The findings indicate that the memes concerning and representing the lived experiences of narcissistic abuse that were shared amongst users functioned to elicit supportive conversations and to structure stories and narratives. The memes as speech acts (Grundlingh, 2018) served to create openness to sharing stories and personal narratives related to narcissistic abuse—facilitating messages of support. Analysis of the corresponding comments and posts further illustrates the capacity for memes to mediate, through humour and dramatic statements, implicit and explicit expressions of fear, trauma, and anxiety. This communication occurred against a backdrop of reported isolation where Facebook page users regretted a lack of understanding from their “real life” communities but, conversely, experienced a high level of understanding and compassion from the virtual Facebook community where the meme facilitates a rapid translation of narcissistic abuse experiences. In addition, memes appear to

have been used as a form of feminist activism to represent emotional representations of the acts and consequences of narcissistic abuse, and to challenge grand discursive narratives of what domestic abuse/IPV looks and feels like. This has enabled memetic content to expand definitions of domestic abuse/IPV and create powerful embodied counter-narratives of resistance against established ideals (of the understanding of domestic abuse/IPV; Thompson et al., 2018). This finding aligns with other research which highlights the ability of on-line spaces and social media to function as a form of counter-public sphere and to contest dominant social and cultural narratives (of sexual violence; Fileborn, 2017).

What Are the Dominant Discourses Within the Memes/Comments Identified and How Are These Connected to Support Seeking?

The dominant discourses identified in this study (marginalisation, hidden grief, and empowerment) co-constructed accounts of women's narcissistic abuse experiences. The issue of language was important because the (insider) language appeared to join the online community of victims and survivors together whilst also separating them from wider society due to a lack of understanding and translation. For example, insider language involves such terms as "love bombing", "hoovering", and "flying monkeys" that describe various behaviours and relationship dynamics between narcissists and their targets/victims. The expressions voiced regarding professionals' lack of understanding of the narcissist's behaviours focused on their failure to acknowledge just how damaging such behaviour is to victims, specifically the psychological violence inflicted. Indeed, the term "narcissistic abuse" is not part of the repertoire of diagnostic or language employed by health and social care professionals, possibly being viewed instead as a colloquial term for emotional and psychological abuse. Similarly, the academic and scholarly literature often avoids using this term and posits research from the viewpoint of the *disordered* narcissist rather than from their distressed and damaged victims (see Day et al., 2020; Green & Charles, 2019).

In this research, victim-survivors viewed themselves as substantively different from victims of purely physical harm. The physical nature of domestic abuse was perceived to be visible to all, understood and vividly captured within mainstream narratives. Conversely, the pernicious emotional violence inflicted by a narcissist was positioned as "invisible" and "unheard". Hidden grief and empowerment discourses appeared to promote and facilitate steps towards recovery and mutual support whereby unspeakable truths are encouraged and the silence is broken. Van der Kolk (2015) states that experiences of traumatic events cannot be left behind until they are acknowledged, including the invisible demons that have been present. Here, identity, agency, and resistance (Thompson et al., 2018) are demonstrated where women question their identities and how these have been fragmented during their experiences of narcissistic abuse. Consequently, there was a move towards counter-narratives where the women expressed a determination to recognise and overcome the oppression that had been endorsed through societal expectations and discriminatory attitudes surrounding their experiences of abuse. Here, a process of achieving ongoing justice was emergent which Fileborn (2017, p. 1485) attributes to "... a process of becoming, rather than a single moment or achievement."

What Are the Expressions of Distress and Indications of Support Received via Memetic Content?

Somewhat surprisingly, the findings revealed that memes as speech acts facilitate high levels of self-disclosure of intimate experiences of trauma and abuse. These were common in the context of narcissistic abuse. Moreover, expressions of powerful emotions were also prevalent amongst users. Here, we suggest that uncensored disclosures were mediated by the visual anonymity afforded by the online space (Suler, 2004), as well as the possibility for the meme to convey powerful and emotive messages with the capacity to connect with multiple voices and identities (Milner, 2012). Furthermore, memes visualise the complex experiences of narcissistic abuse victim-survivors at a point when articulating precise descriptions of emotions and experiences can be difficult. This is comparable to how other studies have highlighted how forms of social media and activist sites facilitate a way for victim-survivors to share their experiences in a way that is meaningful to them (Fileborn, 2017; Powell, 2015a; Powell, 2015b). This appears to have supported the formation of emotional and socially supportive bonds (Akram et al., 2020). The findings also demonstrate how "virtual" communities, which can be defined as essentially transient and shifting in nature, can be created through online interaction, highlighting the psychosocial benefits of narcissistic abuse online communities.

Limitations

We used FRDA as an adapted framework to perform an online data analysis of internet macro memes and their resulting posts and comments. Key components of FRDA were adapted to meet the aims of our study and its associated research questions and these broadly followed the analytical criteria of phases one and two. We did not include all aspects of FRDA, but clearly combined the two analytical phases to facilitate an exploration of how experiences and discourses came to be situated through voice (Thompson et al., 2018). The data we obtained, when specified, referred to heterosexual relationships. This was not intentional and emerged naturally within the data sample. Therefore, we cannot infer any similarities or differences that may be apparent within same-sex relationships. We exclusively used Facebook as a source for narcissistic abuse page identification, which may limit the results of the study by providing a bias towards how memes and posts are utilised according to one specific platform. In addition, there may have been barriers for some women in expressing both memetic content and/or associated posts for fear of these being accessed or viewed by abusive partners or others (Laxton, 2014). It could be surmised that only women who felt comfortable expressing themselves on a public page used this platform. It is possible that there may be omissions in data where the content may have been of a more sensitive nature and was not posted because women were fearful of (further) risk of harm or online harassment (Jane, 2016). We found that the more readily captured and expressed memetic content and supportive discussions amongst victim-survivors of narcissistic abuse were situated within the theme of Resilience and Surviving. Despite women identifying infidelity and sexual manipulation within the identified data, the supportive discussion was not in-depth and was equally not readily represented in memetic content. This points to an area of narcissistic abuse which requires further research.

Conclusion

This study revealed that memes, specifically image macro memes, function as speech acts that initiate and discursively shape online conversation related to experiences of narcissistic abuse. Moreover, the findings specify the beneficial effects derived from such engagement. Although thematic frames and memetic representations often incorporated insider humour, distressing emotions reflecting trauma experiences were generated within and in response to these memes. The humorous presentation of a meme, where the subject centres around a harsh reality that is highly consequential at both a personal and societal level, has also been found in other emerging research on the use of memes (de Saint Laurent et al., 2021). Internet culture is especially significant in this examination of abuse discourse as the internet is recognised as an important channel available to those who feel unheard and marginalised, as well as those looking for enhanced coping and support through digital media (Mackenzie et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study applied the core feminist research principle of giving voice to the marginalised and producing useful knowledge with the aim of making a difference to women's lives (Westmarland & Bows, 2019).

The discourses identified in this study highlight the diverse, complex, and shifting notions of narcissistic abuse captured in accounts of lived experience. The findings elucidate the important role of online platforms in providing a means of feminist activism and psychosocial support to those who experience feelings of isolation, which has specific significance to women experiencing domestic abuse/IPV. Furthermore, specific features of women's experiences of narcissistic abuse are identified, adding to the literature on understanding the context and consequences of the gendered nature of domestic abuse/IPV. Due to a societal gap in the awareness and understanding of narcissistic abuse, those who experience this form of abuse continue to be at risk of receiving little or no support from family, friends, and health and social care services in working through the traumatic experiences they have endured. The meme as an immediate conveyor of meaning has been shown to promote understanding and facilitate a shared identification of experience for victim-survivors. This study thus adds to the literature on the value of social media platforms in reducing marginalisation and isolation, questioning the inequity of health and social care responses. However, it goes further by identifying the need for additional research on online platforms that may facilitate a wider societal recognition of narcissistic abuse and, in doing so, challenge social injustice in the current negation of victims' voices.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest to report.

Authors' Contribution

Vickie Howard: conceptualization, writing original draft, investigation, methodology, formal analysis, visualization, writing—review & editing. **Amina Adan:** conceptualization, writing original draft, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, validation, writing—review & editing.

References

- Akram, U., Drabble, J., Cau, G., Hershaw, F., Rajenthiran, A., Lowe, M., Trommelen, C., & Ellis, J. G. (2020). Exploratory study on the role of emotion regulation in perceived valence, humour, and beneficial use of depressive internet memes in depression. *Scientific Reports*, *10*, Article 899. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-57953-4>
- Ali, A. (2007). Where is the voice of feminism in research on emotional abuse? *Journal of Gender Studies*, *16*(1), 73–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589230601116224>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Arabi, S. (2017) *Power: Surviving & thriving after narcissistic abuse*. Thought Catalog Books.
- Barthes, R. (1980). Myth today. In *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans., pp. 109–159). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957).
- Biyani, P., Caragea, C., Mitra, P., & Yen, J. (2014). Identifying emotional and informational support in online health communities. In J. Tsujii & J. Hajic (Eds.), *Proceedings of COLING 2014, the 25th international conference on computational linguistics: Technical papers* (pp. 827–836). Dublin City University and Association for Computational Linguistics. <https://aclanthology.org/C14-1079>
- Borzsei, L. K. (2014). Makes a meme Instead: A concise history of internet memes. *New Media Studies Magazine*, *7*. https://www.academia.edu/3649116/Makes_a_Meme_Instead_A_Concise_History_of_Internet_Memes
- Browne, A. (1987). *When battered women kill*. Macmillan Free Press.
- Bruckman, A. (2004). Opportunities and challenges in methodology and ethics. In M. D. Johns, S.-L. S. Chen, & G. J. Hall (Eds.), *Online social research: Methods, issues and ethics*. Peter Lang.
- Cannizzaro, S. (2016). Internet memes as internet signs: A semiotic view of digital culture. *Sign Systems Studies*, *44*(4), 562–586. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12697/SSS.2016.44.4.05>
- Carnes, P. (2019). *The betrayal bond - Breaking free of exploitative relationships* (2nd ed.). Health Communications.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Cheek, J. (2000). *Postmodern and poststructural approaches to nursing research*. Sage.
- Chen, C. (2012). The creation and meaning of Internet memes in 4chan: Popular internet culture in the age of online digital reproduction. *Habitus*, *3*, 6–19. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.363.7029&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Cipolletta, S., Votadoro, R., & Faccio, E. (2017). Online support for transgender people: An analysis of forums and social networks. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, *25*(5), 1542–1551. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12448>
- Cline, R. J. W., & Haynes, K. M. (2001). Consumer health information seeking on the Internet: The state of the art. *Health Education Research*, *16*(6), 671–692. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/16.6.671>
- Clough, C. C. (2019, September 28). *Mourning the living dead*. Medium. <https://medium.com/little-red-survivor/how-to-survive-mourning-the-living-dead-d3c6607b1d31>
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford University Press.
- Day, N. J. S., Townsend, M. L., & Grenyer, B. F. S. (2020). Living with pathological narcissism: A qualitative study. *Borderline Personality Disorder and Emotion Dysregulation*, *7*, Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40479-020-00132-8>

- de Saint Laurent, C., Glăveanu, V. P., & Literat, I. (2021). Internet memes as partial stories: Identifying political narratives in coronavirus memes. *Social Media + Society*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305121988932>
- DeKeseredy, W. S. (2021). Bringing feminist sociological analyses of patriarchy back to the forefront of the study of woman abuse. *Violence Against Women*, 27(5), 621–638. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220958485>
- Denzin, N. (1994). Postmodernism and deconstruction. In D. R. Dickens & A. Fontana (Eds.), *Postmodernism and social inquiry* (pp. 182–202). Guilford.
- Department of Health. (2017). *Responding to domestic abuse: A resource for health professionals*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-abuse-a-resource-for-health-professionals>
- Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). John Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1967).
- Dobash, R., & Dobash, R. (1979). *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy*. Free Press.
- Dobash, R., & Dobash, R. (2004) 'Women's violence to men in intimate relationships: Working on a Puzzle', *British Journal of Criminology*, 44(3), 324–349. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azh026>
- Dobson, A. (2015). Girls' "pain memes" on YouTube: The production of pain and femininity on a digital network. In S. Baker, B. Robards, & B. Buttigieg (Eds.), *Youth cultures and subcultures: Australian perspectives* (pp. 173–182). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315545998-16>
- Dominelli, L. (2002). *Feminist social work theory and practice*. Palgrave. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-62820-5>
- Durvasula, R. S. (2019). *"Don't you know who I am?" How to stay sane in an era of narcissism, entitlement, and incivility*. Posthill Press.
- Festinger, L. (1957) *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Fileborn, B. (2014). Online activism and street harassment: Digital justice or shouting into the ether? *Griffith Journal of Law & Human Dignity*, 2(1), 32–51. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/227182>
- Fileborn, B. (2017). Justice 2.0: Street harassment victims' use of social media and online activism as sites of informal justice. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), 1482–1501. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw093>
- Fischer, C. S. (1976). *The urban experience*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Flicker, S., Haans, D., & Skinner, H. (2004). Ethical dilemmas in research on Internet communities. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(1), 124–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303259842>
- Follingstad, D. R. (1980). A reconceptualization of issues in the treatment of abused women: A case study. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 17(3), 294–303. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0085926>
- franzke, a. s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., & Carter, M. (2015). #Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(3), 255–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152>
- Green, A., & Charles, K. (2019). Voicing the victims of narcissistic partners: A qualitative analysis of responses to narcissistic injury and self-esteem regulation. *SAGE Open*, 9(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019846693>
- Grundlingh, L. (2018). Memes as speech acts. *Social Semiotics*, 28(2), 147–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2017.1303020>
- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC). (2015). *Increasingly everyone's business: A progress report on the police response to domestic abuse*. <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/increasingly-everyones-business-a-progress-report-on-the-police-response-to-domestic-abuse/>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). Putting it together: Feminist research praxis. In S. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Feminist research practice* (pp. 329–349). Sage. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412984270.n11>
- Hewson, C., Vogel., & Laurent, D. (2016) *Internet research methods* (2nd ed.). Sage.

- Hookway, N. (2008). Entering the blogosphere: Some strategies for using blogs in social research. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 91–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107085298>
- Howard, V. (2019). Recognising narcissistic abuse and the implications for mental health nursing practice. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 40(8), 644–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2019.1590485>
- Howard, V. (2022). (Gas)lighting their way to coercion and violation in narcissistic abuse: An autoethnographic exploration. *Journal of Autoethnography*, 3(1), 84–102. <https://doi.org/10.1525/joae.2022.3.1.84>
- Iedema, R. (2003). Multimodality, resemiotization: Extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice. *Visual Communication*, 2(1), 29–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357203002001751>
- Jane, E. A. (2016). Online misogyny and feminist digilantism. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 30(3), 284–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1166560>
- Johnstone, L. & Boyle, M. (2020). *The power threat meaning framework: Towards the identification of patterns in emotional distress, unusual experiences and troubled or troubling behaviour as an alternative to functional psychiatric diagnosis*. British Psychological Society.
- Kaplan, R. L., Levine, L. J., Lench, H. C., & Safer, M. A. (2016). Forgetting feelings: Opposite biases in reports of the intensity of past emotion and mood. *Emotion*, 16(3), 309–319. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000127>
- Krizan, Z., & Johar, O. (2015). Narcissistic rage revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108(5), 784–801. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000013>
- Lafrance, M. N., & McKenzie-Mohr, S. (2014). Women counter-storying their lives. In S. McKenzie-Mohr & M. N. Lafrance (Eds.), *Women voicing resistance: Discursive and narrative explorations* (pp. 1–15). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203094365>
- Lanier, C., & Maume, M. O. (2009). Intimate partner violence and social isolation across the rural/urban divide. *Violence Against Women*, 15(11), 1311–1330. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209346711>
- Laxton, C. (2014) *Virtual world, real fear: Women's Aid report into online abuse, harassment and stalking*. Women's Aid. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/evidence-hub/research-and-publications/virtual-world-real-fear/>
- Levy, K. N., Ellison, W. D., & Reynoso, J. S. (2011). A historical review of narcissism and narcissistic personality. In W. K. Campbell & J. D. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and treatments* (pp. 3–13). Wiley.
- Mackenzie, E., McMaugh, A., & Van Bergen, P. (2020). Digital support seeking in adolescent girls: A qualitative study of affordances and limitations. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 14(3), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2020-3-5>
- Marsden, S., Humphreys, C., Hegarty, K. (2022). Why does he do it? What explanations resonate during counseling for women in understanding their partner's abuse? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(13–14), NP10758–NP10781. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260521989850>
- McKee, R. (2013). Ethical issues in using social media for health and health care research. *Health Policy*, 110(2–3), 298–301. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2013.02.006>
- Mendes, K., Belisário, K., & Ringrose, J. (2019). Digitised narratives of rape: Disclosing sexual violence through pain memes. In U. Andersson, M. Edgren, L. Karlsson, & G. Nilsson (Eds.), *Rape narratives in motion* (pp. 171–197). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13852-3_8
- Mendes, K., Keller, J., & Ringrose, J. (2019). Digitized narratives of sexual violence: Making sexual violence felt and known through digital disclosures. *New Media & Society*, 21(6), 1290–1310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818820069>
- Milner, R. M. (2012). *The world made meme: Discourse and identity in participatory media* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas]. KU ScholarWorks. <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/10256>
- Milner, R. M. (2016). *The world made meme: Public conversations and participatory media*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262034999.001.0001>
- Milstead, K. (2018, July 11). *Defining narcissistic abuse: The case for deception as abuse*. PsychCentral. <https://psychcentral.com/lib/defining-narcissistic-abuse-the-case-for-deception-as-abuse/>

- Miltner K. M. (2014). "There's no place for luls on LOLCats": The role of genre, gender and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an internet meme. *First Monday*, 19(8). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i8.5391>
- Misztal, B. A. (2013). The idea of dignity: Its modern significance. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 16(1), 101–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431012449237>
- Myhill, A. (2015). Measuring coercive control: What can we learn from national population surveys? *Violence Against Women*, 21(3), 355–375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214568032>
- Nambisan, P. (2011). Information seeking and social support in online health communities: Impact on patients' perceived empathy. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 18(3), 298–304. <https://doi.org/10.1136/amiajnl-2010-000058>
- Naslund, J. A., Grande, S. W., Aschbrenner, K. A., & Elwyn, G. (2014). Naturally occurring peer support through social media: The experiences of individuals with severe mental illness using YouTube. *PloS One*, 9(10), Article e110171. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0110171>
- Nicholson, S. B., & Lutz, D. J. (2017). The importance of cognitive dissonance in understanding and treating victims of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma*, 26(5), 475–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2017.1314989>
- Nissenbaum, A., & Shifman, L. (2018). Meme templates as expressive repertoires in a globalizing world: A cross-linguistic study. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 23(5), 294–310. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy016>
- O'Doherty, L. J., Taft, A., McNair, R., & Hegarty, K. (2016). Fractured identity in the context of intimate partner violence: Barriers to and opportunities for seeking help in health settings. *Violence Against Women*, 22(2), 225–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801215601248>
- Oeldorf-Hirsch, A., & Sundar, S. S. (2015). Posting, commenting and tagging: Effects of sharing news stories on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 44, 240–249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.024>
- Office for National Statistics (ONS). (2020, November 25). *Domestic abuse victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020*. [https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020#:~:text=For%20the%20year%20ending%20March,100%20men%20\(Figure%201\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/domesticabusevictimcharacteristicsenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020#:~:text=For%20the%20year%20ending%20March,100%20men%20(Figure%201))
- O'Neill, T. (2018). 'Today I speak': Exploring how victim survivors use Reddit. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 7(1), 44–59. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v7i1.402>
- Pendry, L. F., & Salvatore, J. (2015). Individual and social benefits of online discussion forums. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 50, 211–220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.067>
- Pfeil, U., & Zaphiris, P. (2007). Patterns of empathy in online communication. In *CHI '07: Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 919–928). ACM. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1240624.1240763>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Language and meaning: Data collection in qualitative research. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 52(2), 137–145. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.137>
- Powell, A. (2015a). Seeking informal justice online: Vigilantism, activism and resisting a rape culture in cyberspace. In A. Powell, N. Henry, & A. Flynn (Eds.), *Rape justice: Beyond the criminal law* (pp. 218–237). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Powell, A. (2015b). Seeking rape justice: Formal and informal responses to sexual violence through technosocial counter-publics. *Theoretical Criminology*, 19(4), 571–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480615576271>
- Rogers, R. (2019). *Doing digital methods*. Sage.
- Rosenfeld, H. (1965). *Psychotic states: A psycho-analytical approach*. The Hogarth Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429479335>
- Rosenfeld, H. (1987). *Impasse and interpretation*. Tavistock Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203358887>
- Salter, M. (2013). Justice and revenge in online counter-publics: Emerging responses to sexual violence in the age of social media. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 9(3), 225–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659013493918>

- Saukko, P. (2000). Between voice and discourse: Quilting interviews on anorexia. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(3), 299–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040000600301>
- Sharma, A. (2001). Healing the wounds of domestic abuse: Improving the effectiveness of feminist therapeutic interventions with immigrant and racially visible women who have been abused. *Violence Against Women*, 7(12), 1405–1428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778010122183928>
- Shaw, D. (2014). *Traumatic narcissism: Relational systems of subjugation*. Routledge.
- Shifman, L. (2013). *Memes in digital culture*. MIT Press.
- Shifman, L. (2014). *Memes in digital culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stark, E. (1995). Re-presenting woman battering: From battered woman syndrome to coercive control. *Albany Law Review*, 58(4), 973–1026. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/re-presenting-woman-battering-battered-woman-syndrome-coercive>
- Sugiura, L., Wiles, R., Pope, C. (2017). Ethical challenges in online research: Public/private perceptions. *Research Ethics*, 13(3–4), 184–199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016116650720>
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326. <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>
- Thompson, L., Rickett, B., & Day, K. (2018). Feminist relational discourse analysis: Putting the personal in the political in feminist research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 15(1), 93–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1393586>
- van der Kolk, B. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin.
- Vitis, L., & Gilmour, F. (2017). Dick pics on blast: A woman's resistance to online sexual harassment using humour, art and Instagram. *Crime Media Culture*, 13(3), 335–355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016652445>
- Walby, S., & Towers, J. (2017). Measuring violence to end violence: Mainstreaming gender. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 1(1), 11–31. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239868017X14913081639155>
- Walker, L. E. (1979). *The battered woman*. HarperCollins.
- Wånggren, L. (2016). Our stories matter: Storytelling and social justice in the Hollaback! movement. *Gender and Education*, 28(3), 401–415. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1169251>
- Westmarland, N., & Bows, H. (2019). *Researching gender, violence and abuse - theory, methods, action*. Routledge.
- Wiggins, B. E. (2019). *The discursive power of memes in digital culture: Ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429492303>
- Williamson, E. (2010). Living in the world of the domestic violence perpetrator: Negotiating the unreality of coercive control. *Violence Against Women*, 16(12), 1412–1423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210389162>
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Women's Aid. (2022). *Domestic abuse is a gendered crime*. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/domestic-abuse-is-a-gendered-crime/>
- Wood, L. (2015). Hoping, empowering, strengthening: Theories used in intimate partner violence advocacy. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, 30(3), 286–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109914563157>
- Zimmer, M. (2010). "But the data is already public": On the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12, 313–325. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-010-9227-5>

About Authors

Vickie Howard (MA MSc MA) is a lecturer in mental health in the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Hull, UK. Her research interests include investigating victim-survivor (online) recovery pathways following a pathological relationship.

Amina Adan (Dr) is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Kingston University, UK. Her research area is focused on gender based violence, victim-survivor narratives and online help-seeking behaviours.

✉ **Correspondence to**

Vickie Howard, Department of Psychological Health, Wellbeing and Social Work, Cottingham Road, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK, V.Howard@Hull.ac.uk

© Author(s). The articles in *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* are open access articles licensed under the terms of the [Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) which permits unrestricted, non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.