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# Navigating Cyber Intimate Partner Violence and Conflict: Negative Anticipation and Emotions During Text-Based Versus Face-to-Face Conflict Discussions in Young Adult Couples

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## Abstract

Young adult couples frequently use text messages to discuss conflicts within their relationship. While face-to-face conflicts have been shown to elicit more negative anticipation and negative emotions in victims of traditional, offline forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) (e.g., psychological and physical) compared with non-victims, no study has examined how victims of cyber IPV (C-IPV) experience conflicts, either text-based or face-to-face. This study investigated, among young adult couples, the interplay between C-IPV and conflict modality (text-based vs. face-to-face) in association with negative anticipation and negative emotions during the discussion. A community sample of 102 young adult couples completed a self-reported questionnaire of C-IPV in the last six months and engaged in two conflictual interactions: one text-based and one face-to-face. Negative anticipation of the upcoming discussion was assessed prior to each interaction, and negative emotions were assessed immediately after. Results suggest that text-based conflicts were associated with higher negative anticipation in partners experiencing average or high levels of C-IPV. In turn, negative anticipation was linked with higher negative emotions. Findings highlight the importance of promoting healthy conflict management through technology-mediated communication, especially among young adult couples experiencing C-IPV.

**Keywords:** cyber intimate partner violence, conflict management, technology-mediated interaction, couples, young adults

## Introduction

Digital interactions are increasingly common in romantic relationships, especially among young adults, who frequently rely on text-based communication to navigate conflicts.<sup>1</sup> The landscape of challenging digital interactions also includes more harmful forms of technology-facilitated violence, such as cyber intimate partner violence (C-IPV). While research shows that face-to-face conflicts can be particularly distressing for couples experiencing traditional, offline IPV, the experience of conflicts, either face-to-face or online, in couples facing C-IPV remains unexplored.<sup>2-4</sup>

C-IPV includes all forms of violence (e.g., sexual and psychological) experienced through technology within romantic relationships, ranging from overt (e.g., receiving violent messages online from a partner) to covert types of abuse (e.g., being geo-located by a partner without consent).<sup>5</sup> Young adults (18–29) are particularly at risk, with 40–73 percent reporting C-IPV.<sup>6</sup> Although C-IPV is a growing issue, research is lacking regarding its associations with modifiable relational factors such as conflict management. This study aims to examine, among young adult couples, the interplay between C-IPV and conflict modality (text-based vs. face-to-face) in association with

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negative anticipation of, and negative emotions during, a couple conflict discussion.

According to the contextual model of marital interactions, romantic partners develop expectations about upcoming interactions that are based on their relationship experiences and that may shape feelings during the interaction.<sup>7</sup> As violence can emerge from escalating conflicts, partners in violent relationships might expect that their conflictual discussions will be negative.<sup>3,4,8</sup> Individuals may then become more aware of social information aligning with their expectations and behave in ways that confirm their beliefs (e.g., by being critical), therefore generating negative emotions in both partners during the conflict.<sup>8–11</sup> Past research supports positive links between traditional, offline IPV, and negative emotions during couples' face-to-face conflicts, between relational difficulties and negative anticipation prior to a conflict and between negative anticipation and anger during the interaction.<sup>2,12–16</sup> In line with the contextual model of marital interactions, victims of C-IPV may be especially reactive to online conflicts, as the online context makes further victimization possible at any time or place.<sup>17</sup> Yet, whether C-IPV interacts with conflict modality in association with negative anticipation, and in turn, negative emotions have never been investigated. The current study seeks to address this important gap in the fields of partner violence and technology and to extend current knowledge on conflict management in violent relationships.

### The Current Study

This study relies on a within-subject and dyadic design.<sup>18</sup> We hypothesized that one's C-IPV would be more strongly linked with their own and their partner's higher negative anticipation, and in turn, higher negative emotions during the text-based conflict compared with the face-to-face conflict. Alternatively, we expected that the text-based conflict

would be associated with more negative anticipation and negative emotions than the face-to-face conflict, especially in partners reporting C-IPV (Figure 1). Traditional IPV was controlled to disentangle its shared variance with C-IPV.

### Methods

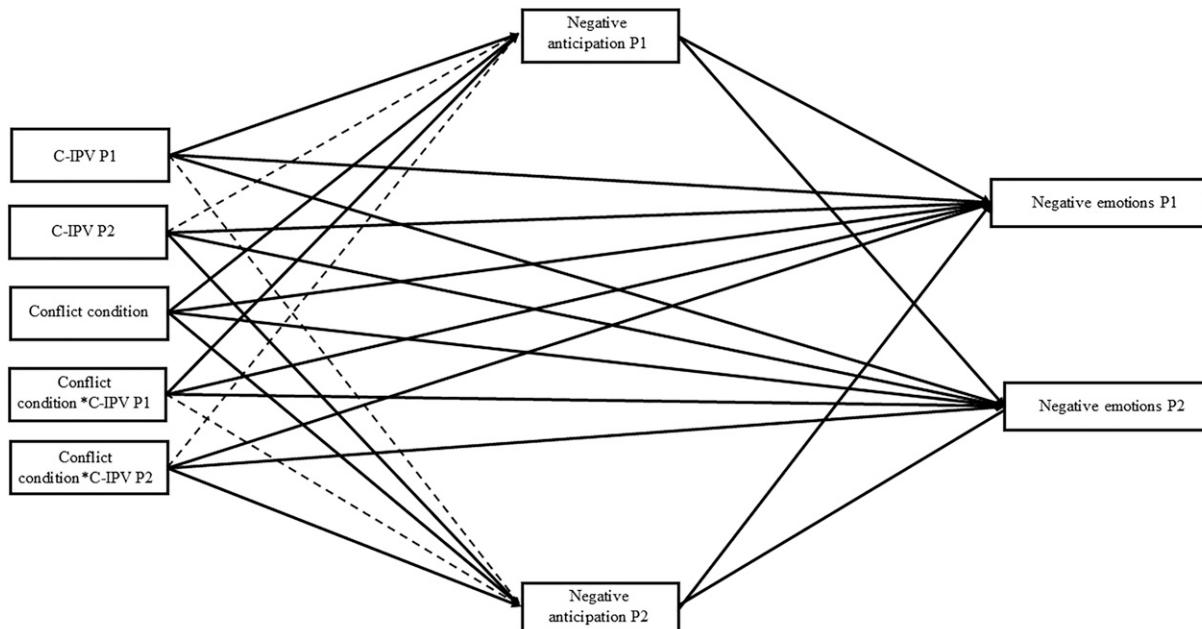
#### Participants and procedure

A sample of 102 young adult couples ( $n = 204$  participants; Table 1) was recruited from the general population, through online advertisements. Both partners had to be aged between 18 and 29 years, in a relationship for at least two months, and able to understand written and spoken French.

Both partners first individually completed self-report questionnaires on the online platform *Qualtrics*. In the following week, couples came to the lab for a two-and-a-half-hour session, during which partners engaged in (in a randomized order): (a) one 15-minute text-based conflictual discussion, sitting in separate rooms, using the application WhatsApp and (b) one 10-minute<sup>a</sup> face-to-face conflictual discussion, sitting in the same room. The topics for the two discussions were selected by the experimenters through a checklist and a priming interview with each partner.<sup>19,20</sup> Immediately before and after each discussion, participants individually completed self-report surveys to assess negative anticipation prior to the discussion and emotions during the discussion. Participants were each compensated CAN\$50. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Université de Montréal.

#### Measures

Before the lab session, C-IPV was measured with the Cyber Intimate Partner Abuse Instrument, translated into French using a back-translation procedure.<sup>21,22</sup> Participants



**FIG. 1.** Conceptual model of the associations between C-IPV, negative anticipation, and negative emotions. Positive associations were expected for all the links displayed in this figure. Exploratory links are dotted. C-IPV, cyber intimate partner victimization; conflict condition, 0, face-to-face, 1, text-based; conflict condition\*C-IPV, conflict condition × cyber intimate partner victimization; P1, partner 1; P2, partner 2.

TABLE 1. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Variables	n	Percent
Individual characteristics (n = 204)		
Gender		
Woman	108	52.9
Man	89	43.6
Non-binary, queer, gender fluid, many genders	5	2.5
Questioning their gender	1	0.5
Chose not to answer	1	0.5
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	137	67.2
Gay or lesbian	14	6.9
Bisexual	25	12.3
Pansexual	10	4.9
Heteroflexible/homoflexible	6	2.9
Queer	3	1.5
Other (i.e., bisexual and demiromantic, bisexual, and queer)	3	1.5
Questioning their orientation	5	2.5
Prefer not to say	1	0.5
Occupation		
Students (part- or full-time)	136	66.7
Working (part- or full-time)	55	27
Other occupations	13	6.3
Annual income		
Under \$15,000	96	47.3
Between \$15,000 and \$45,000	72	35.5
Over \$45,000	35	17.2
Highest degree completed		
High school diploma	21	10.3
College or professional degree	110	54
University degree	73	35.7
Cultural identity		
White	159	77.9
Arab	10	4.9
Black	5	2.5
Other (e.g., East Asian) or more than one cultural identity	30	14.7
Relational characteristics (n = 102)		
Dyad composition according to gender identity		
Woman–woman	12	11.8
Woman–man	82	80.4
Man–man	2	2
At least one partner identifying to gender diversity	6	5.9
Cohabitation status		
Not cohabiting	61	59.8
Cohabiting	39	38.2
Relationship agreement		
Exclusive	199	98.5
Nonexclusive for both partners (e.g., open couple)	2	1
No relationship agreement	1	0.5

had to indicate the number of times, from 0 to 11+, they, and their partner, engaged in 27 cyberviolent behaviors in the last six months. Although some cyberviolent behaviors may conceptually overlap with psychological offline IPV, they are distinct in that they exclusively occur in online settings. Based on the maximum report method, the highest score between one's report of victimization and their partner's

report of perpetration was used for each item.<sup>23,24</sup> Scores were summed to create a global score of C-IPV victimization ( $H = 0.86$ ).<sup>b,25,26</sup>

Traditional IPV victimization was measured using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale.<sup>23</sup> Participants indicated the frequency (i.e., 0 to 20+ times) with which they, and their partner, engaged in 27 violent behaviors (i.e., sexual, physical, and psychological) in the last year. Global scores were created by summing all items, which were previously recorded by taking the midpoint for each response category and by relying on the maximum report method ( $H = 0.91$  in the current study).<sup>23,24</sup>

Before each discussion, negative anticipation of the upcoming conflict was measured with a modified version of a cognitive appraisal measure.<sup>27</sup> Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) *Disagree strongly* to (7) *Agree strongly*, and all items were summed to obtain a global score ( $\alpha = 0.74$  in the current study).

After each interaction, negative emotions during the conflict were measured by a 12-item questionnaire, adapted from the Positive and Negative Affective Scales to include more negative emotions (e.g., "frustrated") that might occur during couples' conflict discussions.<sup>28</sup> Participants indicated the extent to which they felt each emotion using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (0) *Not at all* to (4) *A lot*. All items were summed to compute a total score ( $\alpha = 0.85$  in the current study).

Potential covariates shown to be linked with conflict outcomes were assessed through a sociodemographic questionnaire: relationship length (i.e., in months), cohabitation status (i.e., 0 = *not cohabiting*, 1 = *cohabiting and/or married*), age (i.e., in years), and gender identity (i.e., 0 = *woman*, 1 = *man*, 2 = *gender-diverse*).<sup>13,29–32</sup>

## Results

Descriptive and correlational analyses are reported in Table 2. None of the potential covariates were associated with negative emotions in both conflict modalities and thus were not included as covariates. Traditional IPV victimization was included as a covariate to isolate the effect of C-IPV, given the co-occurrence between the two forms of violence.<sup>12–14</sup>

Results of multilevel structural path analysis based on the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model are presented in Table 3.<sup>18,33</sup> Dyads were treated as indistinguishable given the inclusion of both same- and mixed-gender couples. The model was estimated with random intercept and fixed effects, as it did not converge when using random effects. C-IPV, IPV, and negative anticipation were grand mean centered at the within and between levels.

At the within level, results showed no interaction between C-IPV and conflict modality to predict negative emotions. However, C-IPV significantly interacted with conflict modality to predict one's negative anticipation.

Simple slopes for the association between one's C-IPV and negative anticipation were not significant either in the text-based ( $b = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.179$ ) or face-to-face conflict ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $p = 0.914$ ). However, simple slopes for the association between modality and negative anticipation significantly differed according to C-IPV victimization (see Figure 2). Conflict modality (0 = *Face-to-face*; 1 = *Text-based*) was significantly and positively linked with

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE STUDY VARIABLES

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. C-IPV	0.51***	0.06	-0.09	-0.00	0.02	0.17	-0.09	-0.01	0.04
2. Negative anticipation (Text)	0.27***	0.24*	0.34***	0.04	0.27**	0.14	0.15	-0.07	-0.04
3. Negative emotions (Text)	0.07	0.42***	0.43***	0.08	0.20	0.11	0.07	0.02	0.06
4. Negative anticipation (FtF)	0.12	0.48***	0.22*	0.09	0.17	0.06	0.23	-0.17	-0.17
5. Negative emotions (FtF)	0.02	0.23*	0.66***	0.36***	0.27**	0.05	0.66	0.00	-0.03
6. Traditional IPV victimization	0.29***	0.10	0.17	-0.06	0.15	0.74***	0.07	0.13	0.06
7. Age	-0.08	0.03	0.00	0.04	-0.01	0.00	0.67***	0.05	0.30***
8. Relationship length	0.03	0.02	-0.12	-0.06	-0.09	0.22*	0.13	1	0.22*
9. Cohabitation status	0.13	0.09	0.05	0.07	-0.06	0.18	0.37***	0.12	1
<i>M</i>	3.22	15.78	7.08	15.06	6.46	10.80	22.39	23.06	—
<i>SD</i>	6.17	3.92	6.90	4.03	6.59	13.22	2.68	19.86	—
Range	0-38	6-27	0-38	6-26	0-43	0-68	18-29	2-96	—
Missing data (percent)	0	1.5	1.5	3.4	2.5	0	0	0	0

Actor correlations are below the diagonal. Partner correlations are above the diagonal. Correlations on the diagonal are cross-partner associations for the same variable.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

C-IPV, cyber intimate partner victimization; FtF, face-to-face conflict; IPV, intimate partner violence; M, mean; SD, standard deviation; Text, text-based conflict.

negative anticipation at average (mean level;  $b = 0.72$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ) and high (+1 standard deviation;  $b = 1.33$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) levels of C-IPV, but not in the absence of C-IPV ( $b = 0.42$ ,  $p = 0.256$ ). Results also showed a significant and positive indirect effect from conflict modality to negative emotions via negative anticipation (see Figure 3) at mean level ( $b = 0.32$ ,  $p = 0.043$ , 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.031, 0.769]) or high levels of C-IPV ( $b = 0.59$ ,  $p = 0.010$ , 95% CI = [0.160, 1.280]), but not in the absence of C-IPV ( $b = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.268$ , 95% CI = [-0.148, 0.620]).

At the between-person level, one's C-IPV was not significantly linked with their own or their partner's negative anticipation or negative emotions. One's higher negative anticipation was significantly linked with their own and their partner's higher negative emotions. One's traditional IPV victimization was also positively and significantly linked with their partner's, but not with their own, negative emotions. The model explained 1.9 percent of the variance in negative anticipation and 42 percent of the variance in negative emotions.

## Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine, among young adult couples, the interplay between partner's C-IPV and conflict modality (text-based vs. face-to-face) in association with negative anticipation and negative emotions during the conflict discussion. Partly in line with our initial assumptions, the text-based conflict was related to higher negative anticipation, which was, in turn, linked to higher negative emotions, in individuals experiencing average or high levels of C-IPV, but not in those experiencing no C-IPV. Therefore, C-IPV appears to be linked to a more adverse experience with text-based conflict management compared with face-to-face conflict management.

Although we did not observe associations from C-IPV to negative anticipation and negative emotions in either conflict modality, C-IPV moderated the individual's reactivity to the interactional context. For those experiencing C-IPV, engaging in a text-based conflict was appraised more negatively than engaging in a face-to-face conflict, which, in turn, generated more negative emotions. In line with the contextual model of marital interactions, individuals experiencing C-IPV may negatively anticipate online conflicts as they occur in a similar setting to the one in which they were victimized.<sup>8</sup> As some studies reported the benefits of text messages for more control over the exchange, more time to respond, and greater attention to the discussion, others linked the lack of nonverbal cues to miscommunication between partners and higher negative emotions.<sup>34-37</sup> The results of the current study suggest that text-based conflicts may not be inherently related to negative conflict management but may be more challenging for partners experiencing C-IPV.

One's higher negative anticipation was also linked with their, and their partner's, higher negative emotions across conflict discussions, in line with the contextual model of marital interactions and previous empirical studies.<sup>8,9,12</sup> Negative anticipation of an upcoming conflict may negatively impact interpretations and behaviors during the interaction, which could affect both partners' emotions.<sup>8-11</sup>

Similar to studies that observed links between IPV perpetration, emotional dysregulation, and conflict escalation, our results showed that one's traditional IPV victimization (i.e., the

TABLE 3. ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN C-IPV, NEGATIVE ANTICIPATION, AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS DURING THE CONFLICT DISCUSSIONS

Results	Actor effects			Partner effects		
	b	SE	p	b	SE	p
<i>Associations with negative anticipation</i>						
<b>Within level</b>						
Conflict condition	0.72	0.315	<b>0.022</b>			
Conflict condition*C-IPV	0.09	0.046	<b>0.044</b>	-0.04	0.053	0.498
<b>Between level</b>						
C-IPV	-0.01	0.048	0.914	0.05	0.056	0.410
Traditional IPV victimization	0.03	0.036	0.479	-0.01	0.041	0.772
<i>Associations with negative emotions</i>						
<b>Within level</b>						
Conflict condition	0.13	0.481	0.785			
Conflict condition*C-IPV	0.03	0.077	0.726	-0.11	0.088	0.231
Negative anticipation	0.45	0.110	<b>0.000</b>	0.17	0.140	0.230
<b>Between level</b>						
C-IPV	-0.10	0.062	0.123	-0.06	0.077	0.465
Traditional IPV victimization	-0.05	0.049	0.333	0.12	0.059	<b>0.042</b>
Negative anticipation	0.96	0.227	<b>0.000</b>	0.46	0.179	<b>0.011</b>

Significant *p*-values are bolded.

Conflict condition, 0, face to face, 1, text based.

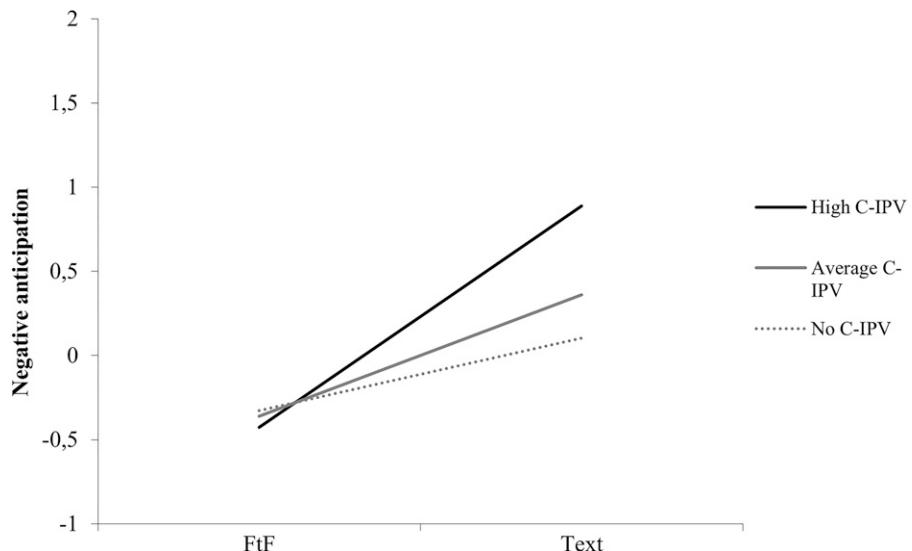
partner's perpetration) was associated with their partner's higher negative emotions.<sup>2,12,38,39</sup> The absence of a similar association for C-IPV may suggest that the perpetration of this form of violence is less directly related to emotional processes and potentially more involved in dynamics of control and dominance.<sup>40</sup> These findings highlight the necessity to examine C-IPV and traditional IPV separately, as they appear to be linked differently with couples' conflict management.

Although this study's in-lab design limited recall bias in negative anticipation and emotions, it may have reduced natural differences between conflict modalities, given our 15-minute, more synchronous, text-based conflict.<sup>34</sup> Future

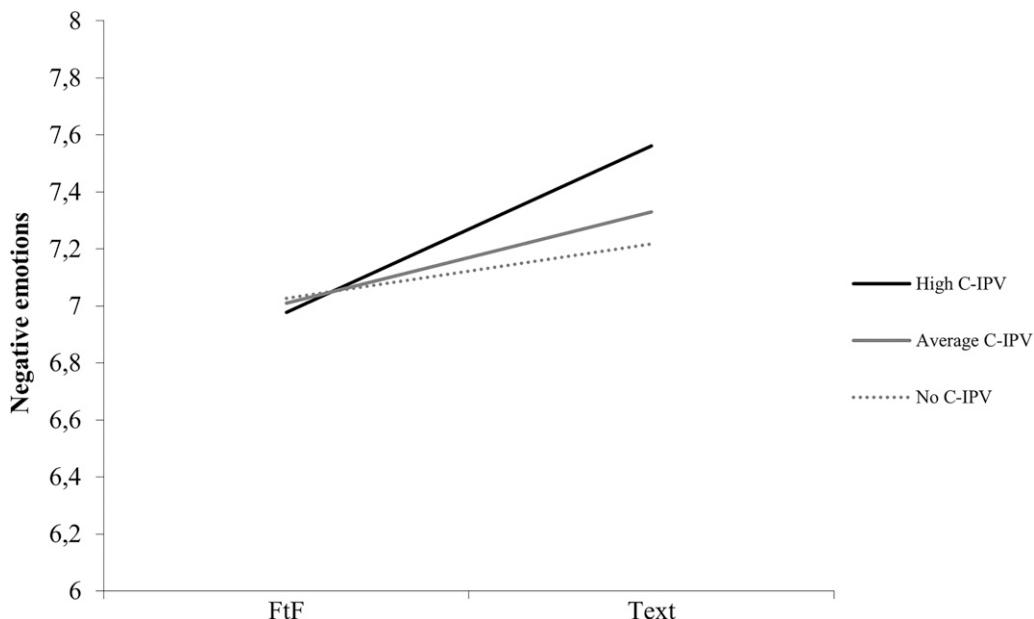
studies could leverage ecological momentary assessment to examine text-based conflicts in couples' daily lives.

### Conclusion

This study is the first to examine the interplay between C-IPV and conflict modality to understand negative anticipation of, and negative emotions during, couples' conflicts. Findings underline the need for prevention and intervention efforts to cultivate young adults' skills to manage relational conflicts online, especially for those who experience C-IPV. Interventions could be integrated into existing educational programs to help youth develop written communication



**FIG. 2.** Associations between conflict conditions and negative anticipation at different levels of C-IPV. FtF, face-to-face conflict; Text, text-based conflict.



**FIG. 3.** Indirect associations between conflict condition and negative emotions through negative anticipation at different levels of C-IPV.

skills to manage online conflicts effectively and make informed choices about the medium they use for difficult conversations. Such interventions could prevent patterns of negative communication and C-IPV from possibly crystallizing in later adulthood.

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#### Notes

- The text-based discussion was longer to account for the fact that written communication takes more time than verbal communication.
- As partners may report a specific subtype of C-IPV, but not others, which can affect Cronbach's alpha coefficients, we calculated the  $H$  coefficient as a reliability indicator.

#### Authors' Contributions

F.L.: Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, and writing—original draft. S.M.: Investigation and writing—review and editing. M-P.V.-M., A.B., and G.M.: Writing—review and editing. M-È.D.: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, resources, writing—review and editing, supervision, project administration, and funding acquisition.

#### Data Availability

Data will be made available from the authors upon request.

#### Author Disclosure Statement

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

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