“YOU DON’T REALIZE THAT YOU FEEL SAFE UNTIL YOU DON’T”:
WOMEN’S STORIES OF DATING VIOLENCE

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By

JESSICA C. MCLEAN

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Head of the Educational Psychology and Special Education Department
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OR

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
University of Saskatchewan
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada
Abstract

Despite decades of activism and research concerning violence against women, young women continue to be victimized in both public and private domains. Movements such as #MeToo show the widespread and pervasive nature of gender-based violence, as well as the utility of sharing stories of trauma to connect and empower victims. Victims of gender-based violence (forms of which include dating violence and sexual assault) often hesitate to seek much-needed support for fear that their experiences will be dismissed or devalued by loved ones and social systems alike. As part of a larger study on the use of Digital Storytelling to empower survivors of dating violence, individual narrative interviews were conducted with 5 women exposed to wide-ranging forms of dating violence, such as severe physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as stalking. Using thematic analysis, four overarching themes were found: Experiences of Dating Violence, Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship, Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers, and finally, Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence. Within these overarching themes, subthemes included topics such as control and insidious abuse, social media as a site of power and control tactics, sexual coercion and abuse, safety and triggers, PTSD and depression, and making meaning of experiences of dating violence. The content of these narratives will be useful for service providers and community members seeking to understand the many dimensions and far-reaching impacts of dating violence, a topic which is inherently difficult to study (Snyder, 2019).
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Dedication

This thesis is, above all, dedicated to the five women who trusted me with their stories. The greatest strength of this work is the vulnerability, honesty, and courage you have shared. I hope I have done your stories justice in these pages.

To my sweet child, Leo, who came into the world in the midst of this journey – I see a future filled with curiosity, kindness, and joy in your eyes. This is dedicated to you, for being my biggest motivator, my writing buddy, and for making me smile even during the heaviest moments. I love you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The late 2010s saw a resurgence of feminist activism, with events such as the Women’s Marches of 2017, 2018, and 2019 (now estimated to have seen up to 5 million attendees worldwide (Women’s March on Washington, 2017)) and social media movements including #MeToo and #TimesUp serving as particularly notable watershed moments in Western culture. The marches, which initially occurred globally in January 2017, were a reaction to the election of Donald Trump to the office of United States president, despite his own recorded admission of “grabbing [women] by the p*ssy” (Fahrenthold, 2016). The latter movement initially arose after powerful Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein faced dozens of accusations of sexual harassment and sexual assault in October 2017. Using the hashtag MeToo (originally coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006), women in North America and beyond took to social media to share their stories of sexual assault, harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence. In the years since #MeToo began, the list of those accused has expanded beyond Harvey Weinstein to include over 260 individuals, such as singer R. Kelly, actor Kevin Spacey, comedian Louis CK, United States Senator Al Franken, and United States Supreme Court nominee (now justice) Brett Kavanaugh, among others (North et al. 2019; Rummler, 2020).

It seems that this same level of awareness and change has not yet spread from the public domain to the private; of the many accounts reported, relatively few have dealt with intimate partner violence or family violence. When they have, public reactions have not demonstrated the solidarity and support of the early #MeToo movement. For example, the defamation trial against actor Johnny Depp’s ex-wife, Amber Heard, based on Heard’s statements in a Washington Post opinion column including her description of herself as a “public figure representing domestic abuse” (Heard, 2018), ended in a jury verdict in Depp’s favour and overwhelming online hatred.
towards Heard (Hobbes, 2022). In a Rolling Stone article about the impact of this verdict on domestic violence survivors, psychologist Dr. Jessica Taylor was quoted as describing the Depp-Heard trial as essentially the death of the #MeToo movement (Dickson, 2022).

An earlier controversy over the value of the #MeToo movement which is of particular interest to the present study came from the accusations against actor and comedian Aziz Ansari. These allegations were published on an online blog (Way, 2018) and concerned sexually coercive acts during a first date. Public discourse (Weiss, 2018) following these allegations has minimized these events as simply a “bad date” and not a violation, further perpetuating a culture where women are seen as responsible for their own victimization. These conversations are reminiscent of similar backlash against date-rape activism of the 1990s as described by journalist Peggy Orenstein in her bestselling book, *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (2016). It is evident from the above discourse, the Depp-Heard trial, and other backlash against #MeToo that deeply rooted patriarchal norms of dating and sexuality are still functioning to blame victims under the guise of championing women's agency. The Ansari example has been touted by many activists (North, 2018; West, 2018) as the perfect example of normalized, systemic rape culture. Others have declared his alleged actions – including persisting with groping and other sexual advances after being told directly that these actions were unwanted – to exist in some grey area between healthy sexuality and violence (Framke, 2018). When framed in the context of dating violence, however, these actions exemplify the type of boundary violations experienced by far too many young women.

This recent action around sexual assault and harassment is drawing attention to the stories of women (as well as men and gender-diverse individuals) who have been silenced for decades. The widespread impact of “Me Too” shows not only that there are many stories to tell, but that
there is power, solidarity, and potential for change when victims share their stories of gender-based violence. It is within this context and with this purpose that the present study explores the narratives of young women who have experienced dating violence, particularly given that the narratives explored were told as part of a larger study involving Digital Storytelling. Digital Storytelling is an emergent methodology for articulating stories using video, voiceover, and other media. Choosing a personal story to tell, coming through a process of self-discovery, and sharing completed digital stories in a safe, supportive setting are all central parts of Digital Storytelling, based around the underlying belief that both telling and listening to stories can be transformative on individual and community levels (Lambert, 2013). Further, Digital Storytelling can give voice to marginalized communities, consistent with the goals of movements such as #MeToo and second-wave feminist consciousness raising.

It is vital to understand the high stakes of dating violence / domestic violence - these experiences can be traumatic and sometimes deadly in and of themselves, but they can also serve as crucial warnings of violent crime in the public domain. This can be seen in the cases of several mass shootings in the United States – NPR reported that the perpetrator of a November 2017 church shooting in Texas had previous charges for assaulting his wife and child (Fulton, 2017); the ex-wife of the perpetrator of the June 2016 shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida has spoken out to the media about his violence to her during their marriage (O’Connor & Jeltsen, 2016); and perhaps most relevant to this study, in May 2018, a 17-year-old shooter at a high school in Texas had previously harassed one of his victims who refused to date him. This victim’s mother believes not only that her 16-year-old daughter was specifically targeted in the shooting, but that she had some sense that the shooting might happen (Sarran Webster, 2018). Indeed, this tragic case illustrates the patterns of violence and harassment experienced by young
women and girls, whose desires and autonomy are disrespected. Further, it illustrates the lengths to which perpetrators or potential perpetrators of dating violence may go.

Finally, it is important to note that this study took place in Saskatchewan, Canada, which has consistently reported one of the highest rates of domestic violence when compared to other Canadian provinces (Ministry of Justice, 2018). A 2018 provincial review of domestic homicides reported that 48 people were killed by domestic violence (57 when perpetrator suicides were taken into account) in Saskatchewan between 2005 – 2014. Factors that may play a role in these domestic violence rates could be financial hardships and unstable economy, lack of access to services for those in rural areas, and intergenerational trauma (Ministry of Justice, 2018). As well, high profile cases of domestic homicide have devastated Saskatchewan communities such as the town of Tisdale, where a woman and her 3 children were killed by her boyfriend, who then committed suicide (Kotzer, 2018), and the village of McLean, in which Lisa Strang was shot and killed by her husband (Langenegger, 2017). Specific prevalence rates and impact will be addressed in Chapter 2 of this document; however, I believe this local cultural context of arguably normalized violence within relationships is crucial in understanding the setting and rationale for this research.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study had dual purposes, as both a part of a larger study and as a stand-alone cross-case analysis. The first purpose of the narrative interviews used in this analysis was to prepare study participants to talk and write about their experiences of dating violence as part of the larger study *Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence*. This larger study revolved around a Digital Storytelling workshop held weeks after the individual interviews were conducted; due to the limited time and scope of our Digital Storytelling
workshop, these interviews helped participants to complete the early steps of the Digital Storytelling process itself which would normally occur during the workshop experience. These steps include finding the purpose of the current story, the emotion, and particular moment to be expressed in the script for voiceover narration. Thus, the interviews were engaged in by participants as an active creation of the narrative of their experience of dating violence.

The cross-case analysis which is the focus of this thesis served a similar purpose to that of the larger study: looking for meanings and connections between the varied but often overlapping narratives told and giving voice to aspects of the interviews which may not have been featured in participants completed digital stories due to the concise nature of that medium. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to provide insight into the experience of intimate partner violence, which has been noted as difficult to study from the inside (Snyder, 2019).

**Research Question**

The research question for this study was simply, what are the narratives told by young women in our University of Saskatchewan community who have experienced dating violence? The question is intentionally broad to allow for the emergence of themes that are authentic to the diverse experiences and understandings of our research participants; as such, and as I will elaborate on further in Chapter 3, this study is inductive in nature.

**Researcher Standpoint**

Like many feminist researchers, I believe that researcher subjectivity cannot be ignored; thus, I will now reflect on my position in relation to my research project. I occupy both insider and outsider researcher statuses with regards to my topic of intimate partner violence. I am an insider due to my professional experiences; I am an outsider because I am not a survivor of intimate partner violence myself. I have, however, seen its impact on close friends and family
members. As is common, one need only go back a generation or two to find patterns of alcoholism and battering in my family’s background; though the stories are largely kept silent, the impacts of witnessing such abuse are apparent among my loved ones. As well, a friend’s rape within her dating relationship while we were young adults proved formative for me, as I tried to rise to the occasion to help my friend through experiences such as fearing the possibility of pregnancy and trying to make her home feel like a safe space rather than a site of violence. It is also likely that I experienced some elements of vicarious trauma during this time.

In large part due to these experiences, I have been drawn to work with those who have experienced sexual and/or domestic violence. This drive led me to the Saskatoon Sexual Assault & Information Centre, where I worked for years first as a volunteer and then as staff, and thus have bore witness to survivors dealing with the aftermath of sexual violence through forensic kits, flashbacks, police procedures, etc. Further, as part of my Master’s practicum at Family Service Saskatoon, I co-facilitated several groups specifically for female survivors of domestic violence; I then was a contract group co-facilitator for 2 further offerings of the group Abuse & Beyond. Through all these experiences, I have witnessed not only the depths of the damage that can be caused through various forms of abuse, but the depths of resilience and courage found within the survivors I have known. Being trusted to share in the vulnerable and painful stories of survivors of violence is exceptionally meaningful for me, and this value extends to the importance of honouring and respectfully sharing the stories that are detailed through this study.

**Brief Introduction to Feminist Concepts**

A feminist worldview is central to this study and to my assumptions as a researcher while conducting this analysis. Though feminist research will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, a few key concepts warrant introduction here: feminism and its core values, the
patriarchy/heteropatriarchy, and the role of the objectification of women in perpetuating and normalizing violence, including in dating relationships and in the home. These concepts are complex and nuanced, with decades of study, theory, and research behind them; as such, this section is meant only to function as a quick primer.

Feminism is a large and diverse movement with numerous branches and focuses; at its core is the goal of achieving rights, respect, and autonomy for women as well as sociopolitical and economic equality between sexes/genders (Newman & White, 2006; Valenti, 2007). Feminists fight for change regarding issues of gendered inequality such as sexual and gender-based violence, reproductive rights, equal pay, gender parity in positions of power, and intersectional issues pertaining to race, sexuality, ability, class, body size, and other marginalized identities (Moulding et al., 2021; Newman & White, 2006; Valenti, 2007). Feminism aims to dismantle existing Western societal structures which are inherently male dominated or patriarchal (sometimes termed “heteropatriarchal” to recognize the privilege afforded to heterosexuality under the patriarchy).

Patriarchal structures produce and maintain power dynamics which value straight, white men; within these power structures, both men and women are confined to rigid gender roles in which men are seen as rational, active leaders and women as overly emotional, passive, and naturally subordinate (Newman & White, 2006). Men in positions valued by the patriarchy typically experience economic benefits, more freedom and bodily autonomy than women or other marginalized groups, and access to spaces and roles that are otherwise restricted (e.g., seats of political or corporate power) (Newman & White, 2006; Valenti, 2007). These patriarchal structures are continually created and reproduced through formal institutions, policy, and media
and cultural messaging; they play out in the private sphere of home and family life including through intimate partner violence.

Violence and the threat of violence are key tools in keeping women, people of colour, LGBTQ communities, and other marginalized groups under patriarchal control. Dominant cultural messaging normalizes the objectification of women and subsequent view of women as the property of men (Jhally, 1999; Towns & Scott, 2013). Thus, men under patriarchy may believe themselves entitled to women’s time, attention, and bodies. Further, men are granted social license to treat women in possessive, controlling, jealous, and/or violent ways, and women are largely socialized to interpret this treatment as normal, expected, and even romantic (Chung, 2007; Towns & Scott, 2013). These norms perpetuate violence by dehumanizing women and stripping them of agency and personhood (Moulding et al., 2021; Towns & Scott, 2013). By using violence, the abusive partner can maintain control and keep their partner in a submissive, obedient role which reproduces a patriarchal, paternalistic power dynamic in the home (Moulding et al., 2021). Further, victims of intimate partner violence are disempowered from engaging in citizenship or activism due to the dominance of their abuser, and thus cannot challenge the societal structures maintaining patriarchal systems (Moulding et al., 2021).

**A Note on Gendered Language**

The scope of the larger study that these interviews are drawn from has been focused specifically on young women who have experienced dating violence; for this reason, I will generally use “she/her” pronouns in describing victims of violence. Though we were open to recruiting women who identified as trans, non-binary, and/or in same-sex, queer, or non-binary relationships, our sample consisted entirely of women who were cisgender and had experienced abuse in the context of a heterosexual, monogamous, romantic relationship. For this reason, I
will also typically use “he/him” pronouns to refer to the abusive partner. It is also worthy of note that current statistical data does show the bulk of reported experiences of domestic violence falling along these same gendered lines (World Health Organization, 2012). Of course, there may be a number of reasons for this, including but not limited to systemic factors regarding potentially marginalized victims’ comfort or ability in reporting their experiences of intimate partner violence. Finally, despite these demographic trends, it is crucial to note that anyone of any gender can be a perpetrator of dating violence, and anyone of any gender can be a victim.

“Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence” Study

As previously mentioned, the interviews for this study were part of a larger study entitled *Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence*. Further description of the larger study can be found in Chapter 3, as well as in the appendices; here, I offer a brief introduction to Digital Storytelling and its role in these interviews. Born out of narrative inquiry and traditional storytelling, Digital Storytelling is a multimedia mode of expression in which the creator combines a voice recording of their story with photographs, video, and other artifacts in one 3–5-minute video. Digital Storytelling has been widely used to amplify the voices of those in marginalized communities; it is typically taught in a 3-day intensive workshop, and thus is ideal for public health, education, and social justice endeavours in which time and resources may be limited. Workshop participants are not required to have any experience with writing, art, or media production prior to a basic Digital Storytelling workshop, and facilitators are trained to help participants express themselves fully and authentically (Lambert, 2013). Thus, the experience is often emotionally intense and therapeutic. Our larger study asked the question of whether Digital Storytelling would be an appropriate methodology for survivors of dating violence. We deemed it worth exploring due to Digital Storytelling's
emphasis on self-expression, the group setting, use of modern media, and the ability to control any sharing or dissemination of one's completed digital story. Our recruitment, as well as the interviews analyzed in this study, took place in the context of preparing participants to learn Digital Storytelling; participants came into the interview setting with the intent of shaping and sharing their story of intimate partner violence.

Glossary of Terms

This glossary is not meant to, and cannot, be considered a comprehensive description of types of abuse; abuse may also come in the form of financial or economic abuse or control, spiritual abuse, cultural abuse, and others. Due to the scope of this writing, the glossary only includes terms and types of abuse relevant to this study.

**Dating Violence**

For the purpose of this study, we define dating violence broadly as any sort of physical or sexual violence, verbal, emotional, or psychological abuse occurring during or after a romantic relationship. The term dating violence is sometimes used only to refer to relationships where the couple is not cohabiting, or to relationships which take place exclusively during adolescence; to be inclusive of varied experiences, our definition does not make this distinction.

**Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence is often understood as synonymous with intimate partner violence; however, domestic violence is best defined as more of an umbrella term including any violence within a household, including but not limited to intimate partner violence (World Health Organization, 2012).

**Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)**
The World Health Organization provides the following definition for IPV: “... behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours” (World Health Organization, 2017). Due to the similarity to our definition of dating violence, the term IPV will be used interchangeably with dating violence throughout this document.

**Sexual Violence / Sexual Abuse**

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organization as "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object” (2017). As well, the Department of Justice Canada includes the following in their definition of sexual abuse: “... using ridicule or other tactics to try to denigrate, control or limit their sexuality or reproductive choices is sexual abuse” (2001). The terms sexual violence and sexual abuse may be used interchangeably within this document, though is worthy to note the abuse of power involved in sexual violence towards an intimate partner.

**Emotional/Psychological and Verbal Abuse**

Instances described as emotional, psychological, or verbal abuse were particularly prevalent in our study, either as the primary form of abuse or occurring in conjunction with physical or sexual violence. These types of violence include but are not limited to “threatening to kill [the victim] (or to kill the children, other family members or pets), threatening to commit suicide, making humiliating or degrading comments about her body or behaviour, forcing her to commit degrading acts, isolating her from friends or family, confining her to the house, destroying her
possessions, and other actions designed to demean her or to restrict her freedom and independence” (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2016).

**Coercive Control**

The term “coercive control” was coined by Stark (2007) and describes the combination of coercion (using violence and threats to elicit particular behaviour) and control (structural deprivation of freedoms which results in obedience) used by abusive partners to entrap their victims (in Stark & Hester, 2019; Sweet, 2021).

**Gaslighting**

Gaslighting is described by the Center for Disease Control as “presenting false information to the victim with the intent of making them doubt their own memory and perception” (Breiding et al., 2015, p 15). Gaslighting may be used to make the victim believe that they are in fact the perpetrator of abuse occurring in a relationship (Sweet, 2021).

**Stalking**

Also called “Criminal Harassment,” stalking is defined here as “following [the victim] or watching her in a persistent, malicious, and unwanted manner. Invading her privacy in a way that threatens her personal safety” (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2016).

**Gender-Based Violence / Violence Against Women**

Finally, the United Nations defines violence against women as “. . . any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (1993).
This thesis document is organized into five chapters: Chapter 1 - Introduction; Chapter 2 - Literature Review; Chapter 3 – Methodology; Chapter 4 – Results; and Chapter 5 – Discussion. Chapter 2 serves to provide the necessary context for the study by presenting an overview of dating violence in Canada, as well as the dating violence / IPV literature as it pertains to the experiences of women in our study. Chapter 3 outlines the position of this study as feminist, social constructionist research from a qualitative, narrative perspective; it also details the procedural aspects of the study’s ethics, recruitment, and data generation. Chapter 4 outlines the overarching themes and subthemes found during the thematic analysis process, using illustrative extracts from participant transcripts to highlight the richness of their experiences. Finally, Chapter 5 integrates the results with the relevant literature and discusses strengths and limitations of the study, as well as implications for future research and for service providers.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is an extensive body of research on domestic violence in adult relationships dating back to early second-wave feminist activism and the creation of women's shelters. Despite the role that early experiences of dating violence can play in predicting later-in-life intimate partner violence (Manchikanti Gómez, 2011), research specifically on dating violence in adolescence and young adulthood is limited (Jennings et al., 2017). Much of the prior dating violence research has been quantitative in nature (Ismail et al, 2007; Toscano, 2014). Though quantitative research provides vital information via survey and longitudinal studies, these methods cannot capture the depth of experience which can be explored in qualitative research. Thus, the literature reviewed in this chapter will largely be qualitative in nature. I will first provide a brief look at prevalence rates for intimate partner and dating violence in Saskatchewan and discuss some of the most experienced physical and psychological sequelae associated with these forms of violence. From there, I will go into further detail on themes frequently encountered in prior qualitative studies of IPV and dating violence. These topics include family and cultural contexts which are thought to contribute to vulnerability to intimate partner violence; the role of manipulation and control and how it manifests in digital media use, isolation tactics, threats of aggression and self-harm, sexual coercion and rape, and sexual/reproductive health; the normalization and minimization of violence both by survivors and those they disclose to; and the complex process of ending the relationship and recovering from the experience.

Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence in Saskatchewan

The 2018 Family Violence in Canada statistical profile released by Statistics Canada in late 2019 clearly shows significant rates of violence amongst families and in intimate partnerships in Canada, as well as showing substantial concerns of this type in Saskatchewan.
specifically. Across Canada, close to 30% of victims of police-reported violent crime occurred between intimate partners (current and former). As well, violence was more common in boyfriend/girlfriend relationships than in spousal relationships, and the highest rates of IPV were found in the 25 – 34-year-old age group (Conroy et al., 2019). Canada’s highest rates of police reported IPV in 2018 were found in Saskatchewan with 655 victims per 100,000 people. Additionally, overall rates of police-reported violent crime rates as well as rates of IPV were higher in rural areas than urban, with IPV rates 1.8 times higher in rural than urban areas. Though this urban vs. rural comparison was made across Canada, it is particularly salient when looking at Saskatchewan given the rural nature of the province. Domestic violence and mental health services in cities such as Saskatoon (where the present study took place) serve not just urban residents but people from surrounding rural areas.

Also worthy of note is that across Canada, 945 intimate partner homicides occurred between 2008 and 2018, with 79% of these cases having a female victim (Conroy et al., 2019). As mentioned in the previous chapter, domestic homicide is a particular issue in Saskatchewan, with a 2018 provincial review showing that 48 people were killed by domestic violence (57 when perpetrator suicides were taken into account) in Saskatchewan between 2005 – 2014 (Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice, 2018).

**Forms of Intimate Partner Violence and their Impact**

The potentially devastating effects of intimate partner violence have been well documented, ranging from long-lasting psychological harm to the devastation of homicide (Conroy et al., 2019; Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice, 2018; World Health Organization, 2012). When physical violence is present in an intimate partner or dating relationship, injuries sustained to the body may include bruises, scratches, broken ribs or other bones, or any other
number of injuries caused by hitting, kicking, shoving, choking, throwing items, burning, assault with a vehicle, etc. (World Health Organization, 2012). Studies have shown that instances of strangulation are particularly strongly linked to future domestic homicide (Glass et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2014). Any of these injuries may cause permanent disability, scarring, or other physical aftereffects; further, such traumatic events may have indelible psychological impacts such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (described further below).

Psychological, verbal, or emotional abuse can also have devastating effects, with clinicians in community practice with survivors of intimate partner violence reporting client accounts that psychological abuse hurt them more deeply or in longer-lasting ways than the physical violence they have experienced (Lambert, 2019). Victims of psychological abuse have expressed that physical abuse can be easier to see as “real abuse,” for themselves and when disclosing to others, and thus can be preferable to psychological abuse and the self-doubt that accompanies it (Sweet, 2021, p 163). Psychological abuse can include wide-ranging tactics including but not limited to verbal taunts, threats of violence, degrading and belittling treatment, isolation from family, friends, and other supports (World Health Organization, 2012), and gaslighting (Breiding et al., 2015). Verbal attacks and belittling by an abusive partner often include profane and shame-based attacks (Øverlien et al., 2020), serving to diminish the self-worth and confidence of the survivor such that they will be less likely to seek help or believe they are capable or deserving of better treatment. Social isolation prevents family, friends, or other caring individuals from providing perspective, support, or any actions which might help extricate a survivor from the relationship; it also increases reliance on the perpetrator of the abuse as they seem to be the survivor’s sole source of support and human connection (Ismail et al., 2007).
Gaslighting refers to the act of intentionally making another person question their own reality, sanity, or memories, and was added to the Center for Disease Control’s intimate partner violence terminology in 2015 (Breiding et al., 2015). Examples of gaslighting may be insisting the other party said or did something in the past which did not occur, that an experience generally happened differently than the victim recalls, or that the victim is guilty of something that the perpetrator is responsible for (Sweet, 2021). Gaslighting is particularly notable as a way of reducing trust in one’s own experiences and intuition and making one overly reliant on the gaslighter (in this case, an abusive partner) for feedback and guidance. Thus, the impact of psychological abuse such as gaslighting is not solely the immediate effect of causing psychological distress and confusion, but also the indirect effect of contributing to isolation and self-doubt. One can see, then, how each aspect of one’s personality, self-perceptions, and life become infiltrated by psychological abuse, and in turn, how damaging it can be even with the absence of physical violence. Indeed, though the effects are indirect, psychological abuse can take a physical toll due to the impact of stress and ongoing trauma on the body and on health-promoting behaviours such as sleep, eating, and social support (Ismail et al., 2007; Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011; Watkins et al., 2014). Psychological abuse can also lead to long-lasting somatic symptoms that are thought to be linked to psychological distress or pain (Straight et al., 2003).

Though an in-depth analysis of the utility of the biomedical model of mental illness is beyond the scope of this writing, it is important to note the role of sexual politics and oppression in IPV, its effects on victims, and how these effects are culturally understood. As Moulding et al. (2021) detail, mental health diagnoses resulting from IPV can further traumatize survivors by placing their suffering as internal and associated with their identity, particularly if these diagnoses are then used as ammunition for further abuse. As well, since IPV can lead to panic
attacks and agoraphobia, women are confined to the home and lose the ability to engage as active, agentic citizens, consistent with feminist understandings of how patriarchal control is perpetuated.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may occur in those who have experienced intimate partner violence of any form, as are sub-clinical post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, difficulty in establishing trust, boundary, or attachment concerns, and coping through potentially destructive means such as substance use (Dutton et al., 2006; World Health Organization, 2017). PTSD is typically characterized by initial exposure to a traumatic event as well as the experiencing of sets of symptoms after the fact. Some of these symptoms revolve around memories of the event, such as nightmares or flashbacks, which may be triggered unexpectedly and can be difficult to control as well as being highly distressing. Other symptoms can include depression, hypervigilance, and anxiety, wherein the nervous system may seem to go into fight, flight, or freeze mode over any stimuli that are connected to the experience of trauma. In these ways, those experiencing PTSD may relive their traumatic experience repeatedly (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). PTSD can be caused by a single event, such as a car crash or single violent incident; however, for survivors of intimate partner violence, PTSD can come from years of overt and/or insidious abusive behaviour.

Due to the ongoing and emotionally complicated nature of IPV, its survivors may develop Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), which is characterized by symptoms such as nervous system dysregulation, dissociation, and somatic symptoms (Pill et al., 2017). Though C-PTSD is not yet included in the DSM, it is useful as a framework for understanding the nuanced nature of abusive relationships, where, though the perpetrator is the
source of pain and trauma, they are also typically a source of affection and a recipient of love from the abused partner. As well, because intimate partner violence comes with a great deal of stigma and shame, those who have experienced it may experience disenfranchised grief, in which their grief is not socially validated or recognized (Doka, 2008), and thus they may feel uncomfortable sharing their experiences with others for fear of judgment. For example, participants in Moulding et al. (2021) described only feeling accepted in IPV support groups and struggling to trust people who did not understand IPV. This isolation, as well as the multitude of losses associated with experiencing IPV and with leaving the relationship, may serve to further compound the effects of post-traumatic stress and be a barrier to help-seeking or recovery (Moulding et al., 2021).

Cultural and Family Contexts of Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence

The following sections explore the different contexts within which young women encounter and make meaning of relationships and dating violence. This context is meant to show the ways in which young women may be socialized to accept disrespectful, hurtful, and abusive treatment from their romantic partners without believing that they can expect or demand better. Looking critically at the existing cultural context which perpetuates dating violence is crucial in determining avenues for action and change.

Family Contexts

There is a solid evidence base indicating that earlier experiences of abuse (whether child abuse or adolescent dating violence) increase vulnerability to further intimate partner violence later in life (Cui et al., 2013; Manchikanti Gómez, 2011). Though there are a variety of theoretical approaches to understanding this phenomenon, in keeping with the scope of this literature review, I will touch only briefly upon theoretical constructs before focusing on young
women’s own accounts of family violence and its impacts. Cui et al. (2013) described the social learning theory explanation for IPV, based on Bandura’s (1977) work, in which earlier experiences influence what an individual experiences as acceptable and teaches them how to behave. Similarly, Reynolds and Shepherd (2011) touched on the potential for attachment theory to explain later in life IPV by way of childhood neglect leading to insecure attachments and an increased need for dating/romantic relationships as well as increased sensitivity to rejection. In either approach, the family of origin creates a template for what to expect and how to act in relation to others. In the narrative study by Ismail et al. (2007), several participants had experienced or witnessed violence within their families of origin, and directly connected these experiences to their own expectations around relationships and what treatment they might tolerate from partners. One such participant mentioned thinking that growing up with loving family relationships would have led to greater ease in leaving an abusive relationship; other participants discussed the impacts of their experiences of child sexual abuse and physical abuse. The latter participant illustrated how normal abuse became in her life, drawing a direct parallel between “pissing off” her father in childhood, and later in life “pissing off” her boyfriend, with each man responding by hitting her (p 466).

The three participants in Reynolds and Shepherd’s (2011) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) reported similar family of origin concerns and an overall sense of disconnection in different social realms. Specifically, one participant described missing a father figure and how that played into her longing for protection in the form of a romantic relationship; another, whose father had died when she was young, described feeling “unloved” (p 11). That said, these participants also took responsibility for intentionally distancing themselves from their remaining family members. Regardless of how the relationships with family became
estranged, it is easy to see how the lack of strong social support in the family lives of these participants left them vulnerable to intimate partner violence.

**Pressure to Be in and Stay in Relationships**

Part of a feminist research approach entails an awareness and examination of the role of cultural and societal gender norms in women’s experiences (Chung, 2007). One must then look at the context in which young women pursue and stay in dating relationships not only as a reflection of individual behaviours and choices, but as informed by factors such as peer expectations, media messaging, and family and systemic norms and values. A barrier faced by women of all ages in disclosing violence within a relationship is the common, overly simplistic, and paternalistic response of being told to end the relationship. This response is typically perceived as judgmental, makes assumptions about the experience and character of victims of violence, (Meyer, 2016) and is generally reported by victims of violence as unhelpful (Edwards et al., 2012). As will be discussed, the motivations for staying in a violent relationship are typically experienced as multi-faceted and consisting of benefits of continuing the relationship as well as barriers and dangers associated with ending it.

In the study by Ismail et al. (2007) regarding adolescent dating violence in a Canadian context, participants spoke to the perceived social importance of being in a relationship – any relationship. As the authors stated, “The overall sense conveyed was that a bad relationship, even if characterized by manipulation and control, was preferable to no relationship at all” (p 465). As well, participants in the above study cited expectations of romantic relationships and love as influenced by fairy tales and pop culture. These expectations led to idealized views of their own romantic relationships which made it significantly more difficult to acknowledge the detrimental aspects of these relationships. Participants were “willing to tolerate the violence because they
wanted desperately to hold on to their romantic notions about relationships, notions that were passed along through the fairy tales they read as children, and through the media and popular culture that they were exposed to as teenagers” (Ismail et al., 2007, p 464). Though romantic relationships are a significant part of human life, these narratives which place such importance on romance for young women can feed into and encourage abusive relationships.

Along with emphasis on the importance of romance, more specific romantic fantasies, archetypes, or narratives can revolve around the uniqueness of first love or young love, the appeal of forbidden love, and the notion that outsiders to the relationship could not possibly understand. When negative aspects of the relationship were acknowledged by participants in the reviewed studies, they were not necessarily experienced as being reason enough to break up - due in part to the losses associated specifically with the end of a first love. Participants in Toscano’s (2014) study described their abusive relationships as starting off as a perfect romance, believing that their relationships could lead to marriage, or that since the loss of virginity had occurred within the relationship, that there was an obligation to stay together. These young women spoke of the importance of being each other’s “firsts,” and of being a “perfect couple” (p 67). Participants in Helm et al. (2017)’s focus group study of adolescent perceptions of dating violence described similar romantic rationales for staying in bad relationships, including the idiom “love is blind” and a general description of youth feeling tied to their partner, waiting for change, or simply feeling too committed to end the relationship (including because of the bond of sexual intimacy). In Ismail et al. (2007) one participant stated that “Girls are so vulnerable at that age, especially in high school; you think it’s love and you get caught up in that whole love relationship” (p 464). Another described “pressures she felt from her friends to be in a serious dating relationship and said that this contributed to her experiences during her early adolescent
relationships” (p 466). These experiences included physical, sexual, and psychological abuse by a series of boyfriends with whom she tried to find acceptance and love.

Young women in Ismail et al. (2007) acknowledged taking messages from pop culture to heart, with one participant stating that films depicting dating violence normalized the abuse by not depicting any sort of consequences for the abusive boyfriend. Though it was not stated which films this participant might have been referring to, even a cursory view of popular romantic films reveals abundant problematic themes. Much has been said in academic and popular media alike about the hugely successful *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* book and film franchises’ depictions of stalking and possessive and controlling behaviour as romantic and desirable (Bonomi et al., 2013; Collins & Carmody, 2011). In both properties, these abusive behaviours are meant to be read as how the male romantic leads show their passion and longing for the female main character – who in both cases, is younger and in a position of less power than he is. In *Twilight* in particular, the female lead is high school aged herself, and the relationship is portrayed not only as true love, but as a permanent bond for which the protagonist is eager to forsake her prior life, family, and humanity itself (by becoming a vampire). This media trope serves as an example of the type of story which may perpetuate the pressure that adolescent and young women feel to find intense romantic love at a young age.

Discussion of the pressures to stay in a relationship where violence is present must include recognition of the dangers of leaving. It has been consistently reported that ending an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time for a victim of IPV, (NCADV, n.d.). Intimate partner homicides may occur when the relationship is about to end, or long after it has ended (Snyder, 2019). Indeed, one of the typologies described by Kelly and Johnson (2008) is Separation-Instigated Violence, in which there is no history of violence prior to the end of the
In relationships where violence has already been established, participants in dating violence studies such as Øverlien et al. (2020) described explicit threats that the abusive partner would kill both her and himself if she tried to leave. Leaving a violent relationship safely often takes planning and multiple attempts, as well as a great deal of support (Helm et al., 2017). Even when a restraining order or no-contact order is in place, contact may resume after it expires, or an ex-partner may turn to stalking (Toscano, 2014).

**Gendered Expectations, Sexuality, and Rape Culture**

Even simply being in a romantic relationship carries important status and social value to young women, as described by the participants in Ismail et al. (2007) and Chung (2007). Participants in both studies shared observations regarding how women are often expected to take the onus for then managing and maintaining the relationship. Thus, if a relationship ends, it is the woman who has failed and expects negative judgement from those around her. This expectation (or experience itself) of outside judgement is common in adult women experiencing intimate partner violence in marriage or co-habiting relationships (Chung, 2007; Moulding et al., 2021), and it is noteworthy that even young women in less committed relationships are subject to the same pressures. Indeed, these young women felt that “acceptance of violence was often the preferable alternative to risk of rejection or being viewed negatively by peers” (Ismail et al., 2007, p 466).

Participants in Ismail et al. (2007) also discussed aspects of their abusive relationships which aligned with gender roles and stereotypes, such as wanting to make their male partners feel strong and in control. The gender stereotype of men as dominant and active agents and women as passive gatekeepers has historically influenced heterosexual relationship dynamics, particularly as they pertain to sexual interactions. Studies such as Edwards et al. (2014) have
explored the links between hypermasculinity, sexual aggression, and callous sexual attitudes.
Vokey et al. (2013), as cited in the above study, note that callous sexual attitudes “[prompt] the hypermasculine sexual exchange to become a depersonalized act rather than an expression of intimacy” (p 189). Women are meant to play the role of “passive recipients or responsible gatekeepers” (Schick et al., 2008, p 226) and are taught this role rather than how to recognize what they do or do not desire. Within this dynamic, “the rules of sexual engagement involve men pushing and women putting on the brakes” (Filipovic, 2008, p 20). This puts the onus on women rather than men to stop sex from happening, with male sexuality is depicted as constant and unstoppable (Cowan, 2000; Ryan, 2011). This type of sexual dynamic, though normalized, has been increasingly seen by feminist activists as one aspect of rape culture.

Rape culture received much attention from feminist activists and mainstream Western culture throughout the 2010s. The term refers to the overall effect of many societal factors which grant a social license to perpetrators of sexual assault by minimizing and shifting blame regarding sexual violence. Victim blaming and disbelief are perpetuated by attitudes which belittle the experiences of survivors of sexual assault (Moor, 2007); conversely, men and boys are taught essentially that they are entitled to sex and will not be held accountable for rape or sexual coercion (Valenti, 2010). As has been widely criticized by feminist authors and activists, media and advertisements can serve to dehumanize and objectify women (Jhally, 1999; Valenti, 2007; Valenti, 2010), thus minimizing the perceived impact of violence against women.

Young women are especially vulnerable to self-objectification within sexual relationships; essentially, seeing themselves as sexual objects only meant to provide pleasure, rather than as agents who can pursue their own pleasure. This focus on pleasing the partner above the self is exacerbated in youth by fears that he might end the relationship, cheat, or apply
pressure to achieve sexual gratification. In her book *Girls and Sex*, journalist Peggy Orenstein’s interviewees disclosed that oral sex was seen as a casual and expected occurrence (when received by a young man – reciprocating was not a common experience). Exemplifying the expectation that young men are entitled to sexual pleasure, a young woman stated that a girl who does not want to have sexual intercourse with a date will often give oral sex to avoid “something happening” (pp. 54 – 55) - strongly implying rape or coerced sexual intercourse. These sexual scripts clearly prioritize male sexual gratification over female pleasure, and even prioritize male satisfaction over female safety and agency - as Kennett et al. (2013) put it, “… females may feel pressure to consent to unwanted sex because traditional femininity norms value women primarily as sex objects, who aim to please others” (p 52).

Sexual violence is commonplace in IPV, though it may not be recognized as rape, due in part to widespread belief in rape myths. Edwards et al. (2011) proposed four key rape myths, cited in Ryan (2011)’s literature review on the topic of rape myths and sexual scripts. These myths include “husbands cannot rape their wives, women enjoy rape, women ask to be raped, and women lie about being raped” (p 774). As well, Cowan (2000) defines the following rape myths: “a) victim precipitation, or the belief that female victims of rape provoke rape; b) male sexuality, or the belief that men cannot control their sex drive; and c) male pathology, or the belief that rape is caused by mentally ill men” (p 240). These myths can clearly apply to abusive dating relationships – if one believes that husbands cannot rape their wives, it follows that those in dating relationships are also not committing rape when forcing sex. And, if male sexuality is uncontrollable, satiating a date with oral sex out of fear that he will otherwise attempt rape is a logical measure of self protection. Additionally, Moor (2007) specifies two acquaintance-rape specific myths, including victim precipitation and “that women say ‘no’ to sexual advances when
they actually mean ‘yes’” (p 22). Like with male sexuality, we see in the latter myth how sexual
gender roles feed on and perpetuate rape myths.

The final rape myth I wish to address is that of the ‘real rape’ script, which characterizes
rape as a forceful, violent attack by a stranger in a public space, where the victim physically
attempts to resist the attack (Ryan, 2011). By believing that incidents such as this are the
common experience of rape, women can believe that they will not be assaulted if they do not (for
example) walk alone at night and men can believe that they will not be perpetrators if they are
not violently attacking strangers. Those who believe the real rape myth may, as a result, not
recognize that they have experienced or even perpetrated sexual violence if their experience
involved a partner, friend, acquaintance, or if alcohol was involved in the experience (Kahn et
al., 2003; Ryan, 2011). Sex educator and author Emily Nagoski, in her response to a New York
Times article about supposedly ambiguous negative sexual encounters that read more like
unacknowledged sexual violence, poignantly stated that “What failed [the victim] is a culture
that told her that only the darkest navy blue is blue; the blue of the sky isn't blue at all” (2015).

Though there is some debate about the idea of insisting sexual assault survivors claim
their experience as violence (which is beyond the scope of this literature review) it is important
to note that when survivors do not recognize their experience as sexual assault, they will be less
likely to seek help and, as a result, they may suffer from the psychological sequelae associated
with rape without knowing why (Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). As well, belief in real rape myths
may increase risk of experiencing a sexual assault by leading women to ignore risk factors for
acquaintance or spousal / intimate partner rape as they do not conceptualize these contexts as
potentially risky (Turchik et al, 2010, as cited in Ryan, 2011). Particularly, young women who
are in their first sexual relationship may not know what is normal or healthy and be vulnerable to
abuse as a result. As one participant in Øverlien et al. (2020) expressed – “if you haven’t had sex before, you may not understand how it supposed to be . . . perhaps this is the way it should be” (p 810).

The above sections have established the setting in which young women experience dating violence. These young women may experience increased vulnerability to violence and abuse due to what has been normalized in their early lives, the pressures they face from peers and the media, and pressures to conform to expectations associated with gender and sexuality, particularly due to rape culture. I turn now to experiences young women may have as part of their dating violence experience, with a focus on manipulation and control.

**Manipulation, Control, and Violence**

Manipulation and control are well-established in the psychological and public health literature, as well as in community-based practice, as essential components of many domestic violence dynamics (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Towns & Scott, 2013; World Health Organization, 2012). Through the lens of manipulation and control, I will explore the role of digital media, isolation tactics, threats of aggression and self-harm, and sexual violence in rendering victims of dating violence powerless and trapped. First, I will discuss manipulation, power, control, and violence in a general sense.

The literature around intimate partner violence utilizes varying models and typologies, yet the role of control is relatively consistent. Kelly and Johnson’s (2008) typology includes that of Coercive Controlling Violence (CCV), which describes a pattern of IPV in which the abusive partner uses violence, emotional abuse, threats, isolation, and other tactics to maintain power and control over his partner. It is, however, important to note that Johnson and Kelly (2008) also define Situational Couple Violence (SCV) to describe dynamics where, rather than being based
in power and control and part of a pervasive pattern, violence occurs as an occasional escalation of conflict; Johnson and Kelly (2008) also state that SCV is the most common type of physical violence among married/cohabiting partners. However, due to the predominant role of abuse closely resembling Coercive Controlling Violence in the dating violence studies reviewed here, I will focus primarily on this type.

Similar to Coercive Controlling Violence, the Duluth model (Pence & Paymar, 1993), which has been criticized but is still widely used in interventions with perpetrators of IPV (Bohall et al., 2016), posits that abuse comes from a gendered inequality in the relationship which allows the abuser (typically assumed to be the male partner in a heterosexual, cisgender couple given the way this privilege contributes to gender inequality) to dominate the relationship using abusive tactics as described above. The non-abusive partner is subjected to their partner’s control in terms of what they do, who they see, how they dress, and more (Chung, 2007; Towns & Scott, 2013). The abusive partner is likely to engage in constant surveillance to ensure that their partner behaves as expected (Øverlien et al., 2020; Toscano, 2014; Towns & Scott, 2013). To avoid violence and conflict, the abused partner may start to engage in self-surveillance and be unlikely to resist any of their partner’s demands (Moulding et al., 2021; Towns & Scott, 2013). This is a sharp contrast to an egalitarian model of relationships, in which communication, respect, and boundaries are key (Love Is Respect, n.d.).

The ways in which displays of manipulation, power, and control may manifest can vary from relationship to relationship; as such, the topics reviewed here are not exhaustive but instead represent experiences salient to the present study. First, I turn to the issue of control via technological and social media means.

**Digital Media, Control, and Dating Violence**
Technology such as smartphones and tablets have undeniably changed the lives of those who use them, and society, over the past decade; the internet itself has allowed for previously unimaginable connection and access between individuals. Given the sheer number of potential platforms available for communication online (such as email and social media sites/apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter or video chat apps like FaceTime), as well as specifically for seeking romantic and/or sexual relationships or encounters (Tinder, Bumble, Hinge), and given the high level of engagement with these platforms seen in adolescents and young adults, the internet is an important site of young people’s experiences. This is especially significant when one considers how easily accessible a given individual might be at any time, to anyone who may want to communicate with them – phoning, texting, or direct messaging on many of the above platforms, not to mention video chat and more public forms of communication, are all available through smartphones which are likely on and with their user for most of the day and night. The 2013 *Young Canadians in a Wired World* series of studies included findings such as 85% of Grade 11 students owning smartphones, and over a third of students sleeping with their phones to be aware of messages coming in through the night (Johnson, 2013). As well, due to the asynchronous nature of profile pages for sites like Facebook and Instagram, one user might access the photos, videos, online event pages, and thus the experiences, plans, or thoughts of another user without their knowledge. Further, an abuser or other bad actor may use any of this content as they wish. Finally, tools such as Google Maps and its StreetView feature, apps which encourage users to “check in” at their current location, and dating apps such as Tinder, all utilize location and GPS technology in such a way that can provide information not just in an abstract and online way, but in a way that translates directly into the offline, physical world. Recently, tracking devices such as Apple AirTags (Bluetooth-enabled location trackers the size of a coin)
which are meant to help find lost personal items, have been used to facilitate stalking and harassment. Women have reported finding AirTags placed by their abusive ex-partners in locations such as vehicle wheel wells and their child’s backpack (Holpuch, 2022). It follows that in situations of dating violence, where control is key, these platforms and devices provide an abusive partner with the means to contact their partner repeatedly, constantly, through multiple means, and in realms that are public to varying degrees. Further, this extensive level of contact has become normalized in a culture of constant communication and access (Stonard et al., 2017).

The 2010 study by Draucker and Martsolf on electronic aggression and dating violence serves not only as a valuable source of information on the topic at hand, but as an illustration of how rapidly technology advances and the implications of these constant changes. In this early study addressing the intersection between electronic aggression and dating violence, participants were speaking of adolescent dating violence they had experienced around 2005 – 2008. For this cohort, cell phones and voice calls were the primary source of electronic aggression. The authors acknowledged technological changes that had occurred in the few years between the participants’ experiences and the time of the study; indeed, the ubiquitous use of smartphones and dominance of text-based communication that has arisen in the several years following their study has led to further shifts in modern experiences of dating violence.

Over the last several years, “sexting,” in which nude photos and other sexual material are sent digitally, has become commonplace. Journalist Peggy Orenstein, who interviewed over 70 adolescent girls and young women for her book Girls & Sex (2016), discussed the seemingly high prevalence of girls being coerced into sending “sexts”. Further, she asserted that “coercion into sexting appears to cause more long-term anxiety, depression, and trauma than coercion into real-life sex” (p 22); this claim is worthy of further investigation as more research is done into
technology and dating violence. Sexting can certainly contribute to manipulation in the context of dating violence, as described by one participant in Øverlien et al. (2020) who recalled the power her abusive partner held over her by threatening to share intimate images he had of her (including images she had sent him and images he had taken both with and without her consent).

Despite the changing involvement of technology and introduction of phenomena such as sexting, the themes found in Draucker and Martsolf (2010) and other studies of modern dating violence are overall consistent with older literature regarding intimate partner violence in terms of power dynamics and abuse tactics. In these studies, technology served as a site of arguments between partners, of the abusive partner’s monitoring and controlling behaviours, and of verbal abuse itself. Participants described their abusive partner calling them excessively throughout the day, with one reporting 80 calls in one day (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010). These calls were often meant to act as checks on the whereabouts and behaviours of participants. More recently, a participant in Øverlien et al. (2020) recounted her partner demanding that she text him almost constantly with her activities and whereabouts; another participant’s partner had demanded she send him a picture showing who she was out with. In Towns & Scott (2013), a participant described being tracked via her partner surveilling online credit card transactions on a card he had encouraged her to use; another participant in that study described phone calls which appeared loving at first before becoming more obviously a means of monitoring her. Stonard et al. (2017) also described the gradual increase in frequency of contact as potentially masking the unhealthy nature of these behaviours.

Participants in Draucker and Martsolf (2010) also reported violations of their privacy where their partners had gone through their saved voicemail or text messages; one participant disclosed that her boyfriend had installed software on her computer which allowed him to access
and download her files, which he then confronted her with. She stated that “he hacked into my Facebook account. I had an account open in 2005. This is 2007. . . He goes back to 2005 and prints out all the messages, reads every single message. . .” (p 138); a similar hack was described by a participant in Toscano (2014), alongside other forms of technology-based abuse.

The term “techno vigilance” was used by the participants in Toscano’s (2014) qualitative study on dating violence in college students aged 18 – 20 years old. They described techno vigilance as the use of technology by the abusive partner to keep in constant contact with them and demand frequent updates regarding their actions and whereabouts. These participants described aggressive and demanding phone calls and text messages from their partners; as well, they recounted a lack of respect for privacy regarding their phones and social media accounts. One participant mentioned her boyfriend having her computer passwords and hacking into her email and Facebook accounts; another mentioned her boyfriend physically going through the missed calls and text messages on her phone (Toscano, 2014).

A focus group study by Stonard et al. (2017), which discussed adolescents’ perceptions of Electronic Communication Technology (ECT) in dating and dating violence, touched on youth beliefs around topics including password access to their partner’s accounts, viewing partner’s text and call histories to see who they are in contact with (either with or without that partner’s knowledge), and deleting contacts off partner’s devices or accounts. Interestingly, participants in that study reported that young women were more likely to engage in these behaviours than young men were, a perception that merits further research. These participants also normalized their partners having password access to their accounts during the relationship, largely to address fears around infidelity. This contrasts with the previously mentioned studies of
dating violence where the abusive partner accessing the participants’ accounts or communications was described as a clear violation (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Toscano, 2014).

Young women in the above studies also experienced public verbal or written aggression through technological means, describing profanity laden and/or threatening voicemails belittling them, public social network posts insulting them, and even a website devoted exclusively to hating them and encouraging hateful comments from other members of the high school community (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010). In some cases, these messages were sexually driven and meant to humiliate (Øverlien et al., 2020). Again, though the technological forum for this public abuse is a more recent development, an abusive partner belittling or insulting their spouse in public settings is established enough that it is an item on Foshee’s (1996) scale of physical and psychological victimization and perpetration (in Jennings et al., 2017).

Certainly, this is not to say that all social media or smart technology is inherently dangerous; social media activism and support for women, girls, and other marginalized groups can be found in many forums and communities online. As well, in Draucker and Martsolf (2010) and Øverlien et al. (2020) participants reported using technology to seek help (from emergency services or from friends) or secretly record their partner’s abuse on their smartphone as evidence, respectively. Further, though these young women reported clear boundary violations from partners via digital means, technological spaces also served as opportunities to enforce boundaries. Participants in both Draucker and Martsolf (2010) and Draucker et al. (2016) described choosing to hang up on calls from their abusive partner, set their phones to “silent,” or completely block and cut off contact through multiple platforms, sometimes deleting their accounts entirely. Though social media and technology can be used in abusive manners, they can also be valuable resources for young women; indeed, the larger digital storytelling project this
thesis was born from is centred around the potential of digital media as a site of self-expression and empowerment.

**Isolation Tactics**

An integral part of establishing and maintaining control in an abusive relationship is removing access to outside freedoms and supports (Moulding et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019). As described above, psychological abuse and gaslighting can be used to increase reliance upon an abusive partner (Sweet, 2021); even criticizing and belittling a woman’s clothing choices can ultimately have this impact by making her doubt her own judgement (Towns & Scott, 2013). Verbal abuse may include assertions that the victim is unworthy of love or care and that the abuser is the only person that could love them, that the victim is stupid, crazy, or incompetent (Moulding et al, 2021; Towns & Scott, 2013) and could not survive without the abuser, or that family or friends are not good for the victim or are interfering with the romantic relationship.

Further, the abusive partner may isolate the victim by talking about her to others in her community, making claims about her mental health and/or undermining her credibility (Moulding et al., 2021; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010). The abusive partner may also accuse his spouse or girlfriend of infidelity if she tries to see friends or otherwise have a social life outside of the relationship (Moulding et al., 2021). Without outside perspective from family or friends, the person being abused is more vulnerable to believe the manipulations of their partner, normalize any violence, and feel powerless to leave.

As well as pervasive verbal and psychological abuse, an abusive partner may forcibly cut off contact with other supports. In adult IPV where partners are married and/or cohabiting, the violent partner may physically isolate their victim by moving the couple or family to a community far away from the abused partner’s usual supports, or simply by centering family life.
around his own family of origin (Wendt & Hornosty, 2010). In dating violence, the abusive partner may disallow his victim from spending time with outside friends (Chung, 2007; Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011; Toscano, 2014), either explicitly or by using guilt to convince her that she should prioritize him. The latter can establish a dynamic in which the abused partner believes she is betraying her abuser anytime she puts her own or others’ needs before his (Toscano, 2014). All of these methods often escalate over the course of a relationship, such that the victim of violence may not notice the demands of the abuser becoming less reasonable due to their gradual encroachment (Moulding et al., 2021; Toscano, 2014).

Participants in both Reynolds and Shepherd (2011) and Ismail et al. (2007) spoke about their experiences of social isolation and how they contributed to staying in the relationship. In the former study, a young woman spoke about not seeing her friends for months and states that “at that time in my life, I was completely isolated” (Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011, p 15). In the latter study, a participant stated that “I turned to my boyfriend for support because I felt like I had nothing else. . . Everyone turned their backs on me. So when it got really bad, I had no choice but to stay with him” (Ismail et al., 2007, p 469).

Though the abusive partner himself can wield a great deal of power in terms of manipulating and controlling the victim, there are many ways in which current Western culture creates a context which facilitates such behaviour. As previously discussed, common cultural narratives around romantic relationships reflect and reinforce young women’s dependence and reliance on their romantic partner to meet their emotional, sexual, and other needs (Ismail et al., 2007). Similarly, young women may feel pressure to only speak positively of their partners and minimize any abuse because of the view that she is responsible for the relationship and for her partner’s actions, further disconnecting her from outside supports (Chung, 2007). Societal
messaging which reinforces the romantic relationship as young women’s primary priority and vilifies caring adults or parents can serve to further create isolation for those experiencing dating violence.

**Threats of Aggression and Self-Harm**

Along with overt physical aggression, threats of aggression play a central role in an abusive partner (in adult or young adult IPV) maintaining power and control (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). An abusive partner may threaten violence not only to the primary victim herself, but to any children, pets, property, etc. (Wendt & Hornosty, 2010; World Health Organization, 2012). The abused partner is likely to comply not only to protect those that are being threatened, but also because she has been made to believe that she is responsible for her partner’s violence (Chung, 2007; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010). An abused partner may not turn to any outside authority or support system due to fear of reprisal from the abuser; indeed, an abused partner may outwardly side with the abuser if encountering outside authorities as this may be the safest response for her (Snyder, 2019). In a dating relationship, a young woman may also not seek outside help when threatened for fear of parents’ reactions, including disallowing her from further contact with her abusive partner (Chung, 2007; Toscano, 2014). As well, threats may not revolve around physical harm, but rather around the relationship itself, including threats of cheating or ending the relationship entirely; these threats were also described as effective in maintaining control (Toscano, 2014).

It is also important to note that the abusive partner may threaten or carry out harm against himself. This may present as threatening suicide if the abused partner does not behave a certain way, especially in cases where she is trying to end the relationship (Helm et al., 2017; Øverlien et al., 2020; Toscano, 2014). Often, this is part of a pattern of the abusive partner blaming the
abused for his own emotional pain, broader negative life circumstances, or his outbursts themselves (Toscano, 2014). This can lead to women using placating strategies to try to meet their abusive partner’s needs and thus avoid conflict, though evidence suggests these strategies may not be helpful (Anderson et al., 2014).

It is crucial to note that self-harm and suicidal ideation are far from inherently abusive, and that these experiences are already stigma laden. This section is not meant to create further stigma or isolation for those struggling with self-harm or suicidal thoughts. There are many non-abusive potential reasons one might turn to self-harm, or deal with suicidal ideation, such as trying to cope with emotional pain or trauma. However, in the case of the abusive relationship, these threats or actions can act as a manipulation, meant to further control the abused partner, and shift responsibility for the abuse and the safety of the abuser to the abused partner (Toscano, 2014). The abused partner in this scenario is likely to go to great lengths to ensure the safety of the abusive partner, even at great cost to her own needs, well-being, and autonomy. Yet, she may be dissuaded from turning to any outside parental or mental health sources by a partner who is isolating and manipulating her.

**Sexual Coercion, Rape, and Control**

Rape and sexual coercion were experienced by several participants in Toscano (2014) and Øverlien (2020). One participant in the former study stated that after the first time she was raped by her partner, at age 14, she felt she no longer had the right to say no (Toscano, 2014, p 69). A couple of these participants described going on to engage in more sexual behaviour in future relationships, with one stating that her later sexual partners knew about her prior relationship and thus felt entitled to the same level of sexual access as her prior partners had. These participants also struggled to name their experiences of sexual violence as rape and
described considerable self-blame. One participant did not name her experience as rape until after her disclosure to friends years later, despite having described her partner not allowing her to leave his vehicle, pushing her down, and her resisting via saying no, crying, and trying to push him off her. Another described her self-blame after being raped, stating “I wanted to blame myself because then it wouldn’t happen again. If I had to blame him it could happen again that’s a scary thing” (p 69). Participants in Øverlien et al. (2020) similarly described experiences of coerced or forced sex (e.g., having sex so they would be allowed to leave a situation, or having her partner forcibly pin her down and have sex with her despite her saying no) but did not name them as rape. These experiences were largely in relationship contexts where other physical and emotional violence was present.

Exposure to violence in a dating relationship can also impact young women’s sexuality and future relationships in less direct ways – Offman and Matheson’s (2004) study on sexual self-perceptions of women who had experienced abuse defined positive and negative sexual schemas and found that women in abusive relationships had more negative sexual self-perceptions, and that these self-perceptions became more negative with longer time spent in an abusive relationship. These negative sexual schemas framed sexuality as shameful or embarrassing, as opposed to positive sexual schemas which painted women’s sexuality as passionate, romantic, and open to experience. Further, women who had experienced sexual coercion were found to experience more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem when compared with women who had not experienced sexual coercion. When one thinks of the impacts of dating violence described above (such as how young women may experience loss of autonomy and become less likely to seek outside help or see themselves as worthy of better treatment from a partner) it is apparent that sexual coercion could naturally follow and be seen as
a normal and acceptable part of intimate relationships. The role of consent in a violent relationship also merits further examination – as Øverlien et al. (2020) suggest, the power imbalance inherent in intimate partner violence may render any victim in this type of relationship unable to truly consent.

One of the young women interviewed by Peggy Orenstein in her book, *Girls & Sex* (2016), succinctly stated “I think girls aren’t taught to express their wants. We’re these docile creatures that just learn to please” (p 58). Though this comment was referring to the pressure to give oral sex, it can also apply much more broadly to cultural sexual expectations for girls and women which lend themselves to abusive or at least unequal power dynamics around sex. Indeed, Offman and Matheson (2004) interpreted the negative sexual self-perceptions shown by their participants as a sign that women in abusive relationships may place their own sexual desires and needs as a lower priority than those of their partner; indeed, that “to the extent that abuse undermines a woman's sense of control, she may learn that she should not express her own sexual needs, desires, and limits” (p 552).

In contrast, positive sexual self-perceptions were seen as a possible source of resilience in Offman and Matheson’s (2004) study. These self-perceptions seemed to be separate from negative sexual self-perceptions, and the authors suggested that this may mean that women can distinguish between and compartmentalize positive and negative aspects of sexuality. Further, these positive self-perceptions seemed resistant to abuse and thus could bolster young women’s ability to seek out and establish healthy relationships. Similarly, Kennett et al. (2013) found that sexual resourcefulness (along with other factors such as relationship satisfaction) in young women led to lower frequency of coercive sex. Sexual resourcefulness here refers to the ability to plan and deal with unwanted sexual scenarios, including how to communicate with one’s
partner as well as effective use of self-talk. Interestingly, and consistent with the cultural context of gender and sexuality presented above, these authors also found endorsement of traditional gender norms played a role in likelihood of expressing consent to unwanted sexual activity. Those who endorsed traditional gender norms showed less sexual resourcefulness, lower relationship satisfaction, and higher frequency of consenting to unwanted sex (Kennett et al., 2013).

Also noteworthy is the role of sexuality and sexual availability in the control tactics used by abusive partners in dating relationships. As well as the threat of disseminating intimate photos discussed above, Øverlien et al. (2020) talked about the sexually demeaning and humiliating insults (“slut”, “whore”, “loose”) used to humiliate one participant, including publicly (p 808). Young women described their partner controlling her dress because of concern that she would appear “slutty” (Towns & Scott, 2013, p 544), or attract other young men (Chung, 2007). This shows that sexual control in a dating violence context can manifest not just in obvious sexual coercion or violence, but in more subtle ways of controlling self-expression and bodily autonomy.

**Sexual Health and Pregnancy**

Dating violence has also been linked to sexual health outcomes such as unprotected sex, pregnancy, and exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As described above, rape, sexual coercion, and a relationship dynamic which prioritizes the desires of the abusive partner in sexual situations are often present with intimate partner violence (Chung, 2007; World Health Organization, 2012). One commonality between the five young women in the Ismail et al. (2007) study who had experienced dating violence was pregnancy – each young woman had become pregnant within their abusive relationship, and each pregnancy was terminated. One of the three
participants from the Reynolds and Shepherd (2011) study had also become pregnant from her abusive relationship. There is also substantial evidence for IPV occurring during pregnancy (World Health Organization, 2012) as well as inconsistent findings which suggest that abuse may begin or escalate during pregnancy (World Health Organization, 2011). Additionally, IPV during pregnancy is associated with poor health outcomes for mother and baby alike (World Health Organization, 2011). In the cases of the young women in Ismail et al. (2007) and Reynolds and Shepherd (2011), even though most of the pregnancies were not carried to term, one can see the role of intimate partner violence in coercive sexual experiences and specifically, coercive practices around safer sex or birth control.

**Normalization and Minimization of Violence**

Given the vulnerability of young women exposed to dating violence, the role of caring and supportive authority figures such as parents, teachers, and health service providers is vital in prevention and early intervention. However, the studies presented here more commonly offered examples of authority figures downplaying or normalizing the abuse that participants disclosed. As well, some participants anticipated having their experiences being invalidated and chose not to disclose because of this expectation (Øverlien et al., 2020). The participants in Ismail et al.’s (2007) study reference the lack of formal education regarding dating violence as perpetuating a message that dating violence was normal, unimportant, and expected. Further, one participant reported outright dismissal from authority figures at her Catholic school, stating that “girls felt like they couldn’t turn to anybody because of the school system. Teachers never recognized it and would not listen if someone tried to tell them something they didn’t want to hear” (p 470).

Studies have shown that in cases of sexual violence, reaction to the victim’s disclosure can determine a great deal about whether they acknowledge their experience as rape (Botta &
Pingree, 1997; Pitts & Schwartz, 1997), and more recent research indicates that reactions to disclosures of dating violence may have similar influence in how victims proceed in making sense of their abuse (Edwards et al., 2015). Indeed, participants in Ismail et al. (2007) described health care professionals who they encountered due to sexual health issues as “disinterested” (p 468). As such, these young women did not disclose the abuse that they had experienced even when asked directly, due to expectations they would be dismissed, judged, or shamed. Adult women survivors of IPV have reported similar minimization when seeking help for mental health in the aftermath of their abuse (Moulding et al., 2021).

Participants in Ismail et al. (2007) specifically referenced emotional abuse as being overlooked by parents and other authority figures due to its lack of visible injury or physical suffering. Notably, one of these participants described her emotional suffering and said that “Nobody ever knew what it did to me because they couldn’t see it” (p 468). This quote speaks to the isolation of the experience of emotional abuse, even without accounting for any intentional isolation tactics used by an abusive partner. In contrast, studies such as Kulkarni et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of empowering, empathic treatment for survivors of IPV.

**Ending the Relationship and Moving On**

One commonality between several of the qualitative studies reviewed was the participants’ reports of natural times of change within adolescence as allowing them to leave their abusive relationships. Many of these young women had experienced dating violence during their high school years. As such, there were multiple reports of starting over in college or university, especially for those who relocated for their education (Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011; Toscano, 2014). Participants in Toscano (2014) talked about knowing in advance that the relationships would end, with one young woman saying “I knew that there was an end point. . .
I’m gone there’s nothing he can do” (p 70). That said, leaving the relationship was rarely simple or easy – one participant in Draucker and Martsolf (2010) reported an escalation in their partner’s attempts to control her via repeated unwanted phone calls when she went away to college. Other women reported extended periods of breaking up and getting back together repeatedly before a final break up. Further, even in cases where restraining orders were in place, the relationship would often resume after the order was lifted (Toscano, 2014). One interesting exception to this messy and prolonged breakup was in cases of infidelity; as stated in Toscano (2014), “Teens described abuse as forgivable but infidelity crossed the line” (p 70). These relationships were described as having clean breaks.

Turning points not related to post-secondary education were also reported, such as especially heated arguments or simply a temporary separation leading to clarity for young women (Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011). One participant in Reynolds and Shepherd (2011) had been staying in the relationship for the benefit of her and her abusive partner’s son; her turning point came from realizing that her partner was not going to be an involved parent. One can draw a parallel between this realization and the young women who ended the relationship by leaving for university or college; in both scenarios, the young women were able to prioritize a valued life experience or new direction over the abusive partner and find the resilience to move on. Further, leaving an abusive relationship was seen as part of growing up for these participants. Participants mentioned openness to new experiences as well as learning from their experiences of violence as ways they made meaning as they moved forward with their lives (Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011). Though these narratives were filled with hope of a future without relationship violence, it is important to note that experience of dating violence in adolescence or young adulthood is often a predictor of violence in future intimate partner relationships (Cui et al., 2013). The end of a
violent relationship, then, is a valuable time for intervention and support in empowering young women to recognize and pursue healthy relationships.

Summary

In summary, the literature on adult intimate partner violence is extensive, and the body of research focusing on adolescent and young adult dating violence is growing. Within the scope of this thesis, it was appropriate to focus on salient topics from prior qualitative work on dating and intimate partner violence, such as the forms of IPV and their physical and psychological impact, contexts that contribute to young women’s vulnerability to dating violence (including family background, pressure to maintain a relationship, and gender roles and sexuality), the role of manipulation and control in dating violence and the ways in which this control can manifest (such as through technology, isolation, threats of aggression and self-harm, and sexual coercion and rape), how dating violence can be minimized or normalized, and finally, what the experience of ending an abusive relationship may look like for young women. Through this exploration, one can see the complexities and pressures young women face while experiencing dating violence, as well as the importance of providing access to supports outside of the abusive relationship.
Chapter 3 – Methodology

Social Constructionist Perspective

One key divide in ontological perspectives is that of positivism vs. social constructionism. Where positivistic views of science and knowledge posit that there is one objective truth that is observable, social constructionism generally holds that all or most knowledge is generated within a specific context, by “knowers” who are inherently subjective. Thus, any knowledge should be treated as subjective, changeable, and altered by the biases of any who observe or contribute to the phenomena being studied. Though positivistic views are valuable in certain contexts, for this study of dating violence, this researcher holds that a social constructionist viewpoint is most appropriate. There are a multitude of reasons for this, such as the situating of dating violence within a culture that itself defines, refines, polices, but also perpetuates violence. This same cultural context includes ever-evolving views on human rights, personhood, relationships, and ethics; these views are often produced, challenged, and reproduced through societal institutions such as family, media, education, government, and healthcare. These complex machinations, then, play an often-unquestioned role in how survivors of dating violence construct and process their own experiences. This researcher assumes that it is virtually impossible to tease out the subtle forces that may be at work in any individual’s story or experiences as objective facts; rather, one should view participants’ stories as constructed by the tellers’ experiences but also as shaped by the tellers’ own beliefs and worldview, through a use of the archetypes and available narratives (Reismann, 2008) that a participant may be likely to use to understand and recall their story. Particularly in cases of violence and trauma which may be difficult for a person to cope with or make logical sense of, memory becomes fallible, and
storytelling may serve to help with meaning-making around a situation that quite simply overwhelms the brain and body.

**Narrative Research**

At the core of narrative research is the recognition of the significant role of storytelling throughout human history and modern societal structures alike; it is understood that storytelling is how humans pass down valuable information, cultural lore, and traditional knowledge, and indeed, how we process and understand the world around us. Narrative research is a natural fit for the study at hand for many reasons, including the power of sharing stories in creating solidarity and action amongst oppressed groups. The #MeToo movement, which in many ways provides the context for the present study due to its timing and subject matter, found strength and momentum in sharing common stories and speaking truth to power. As well, due to the open-ended nature of narrative interview questions, we were able to gather thick, rich descriptions of participants’ experiences; this has allowed the process of inductive qualitative data analysis to construct themes that are consistent with and meaningful to the stories of the participants, and which properly amplify the voices of the participants as a result.

**Qualitative Research**

A qualitative research approach was chosen for this study for myriad reasons; the most important being the utility of qualitative research to reflect rich, nuanced accounts of participants’ experience from their own perspectives and in their own words. As detailed below, this study takes on a feminist research approach, focused on empowering participants and treating them as equal members of the research team. Qualitative approaches (particularly during which interview data is used) are well suited to feminist research given the potential for
unstructured or semi-structured interview guides, which allow the participant to guide the content of the interview in a way that simply is not possible with large-scale survey data.

A crucial model for this thematic analysis is the guide provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). These authors provide a flexible, non-prescriptive approach to basic thematic analysis which, they assert, can be applied across types of qualitative research, varied theoretical perspectives, and functional considerations such as form of data. Importantly, they describe thematic analysis as appropriate for beginning researchers. While this study is narrative in many aspects, such as the interview guide and researcher worldview and underpinnings, the data analysis found within will not examine specific linguistic choices and implications to the degree that one might expect from a traditional narrative analysis. Rather, it will focus more on the content of participant’s stories, while still recognizing the function of these stories as being told to a specific audience for a specific purpose (Reissman, 2008). One crucial element Braun and Clarke speak to is the importance of researcher assumptions being clear and upfront; I will reflect this by outlining my background and assumptions and practicing reflexivity as much as possible.

**Feminist Research**

Traditionally, research on domestic violence, dating violence, and sexual violence have been spearheaded by feminist academics; as well, feminist movements have been behind the creation of shelters for battered women and their children, and important legal changes such as the recognition of marital rape as a crime. For decades, feminists have sought to draw attention to the oppressions faced by women from varying class, racial, ability, and other intersections, and thus to fight for equality, safety, and opportunity. Feminists have used the rallying cry “the personal is political” and brought previously private struggles of women into the public realm.
Given this historical background, it seems only appropriate for a study focused on empowering young women to utilize a feminist research paradigm.

In this view of ontology, participants’ oppressive experiences are understood to affect their view of reality. Like social constructionism, feminist researchers acknowledge the existence of multiple truths; this can be seen as a vital aspect of treating survivors of violence as experts on their own experiences. Further, feminist researchers emphasize removing the power differential between researcher and participant (inasmuch as this is possible) and recognize that the power differential is all too present in positivistic research – as stated in Hays and Singh (2012, p 41), when women have been represented in research historically, it has usually been in a pathologizing manner. Thus, as stated by McHugh et al. (2008), “…feminist research is distinct from traditional research in that it is grounded in the experiences and stories of women, and the representation of women's experiences is critical” (p 235). In contrast to some traditional research approaches, a feminist worldview holds that these participants are competent, self-aware, and agentic, despite the traumatic experiences they have had. To a feminist researcher, it is the experiences of violence that are abnormal, and not that the participants themselves are any lesser for having been through them. Ismail et al. refer to the aims of feminist research as “empowerment, action, and change” (p 473); through this I began to see my aspirational identities of activist and academic as cohesive and attainable.

I also hold the assumption that, along with their potential to pathologize, more empirical/positivist views of research are limited in their ability to describe experiences of gendered violence accurately and sufficiently. For example, feminist analyses of existing studies of sexual assault (such as Nicola Gavey’s 1999 article “I Wasn't Raped, But. . .”) discuss how research on sexual assault has tended to define and categorize women's experiences to fit into
positivistic research standards, at the cost of allowing survivors to define their own experiences.

Along the same lines, it is not the place of the researcher to categorize or judge the experiences of participants; rather, researcher and participant work together as a team to create the most authentic, deep understanding of the research topic as possible. Further, Hoover and Morrow (2015) found, in a study of researcher reflexivity in sexual violence research, that participants felt connected with each other, found meaning in participation, and felt politically engaged in the project. This is consistent with the aims of feminist research given above. Epistemology and axiology are based around the relationship between researcher and participant and recognizes my own experiential knowledge and potential biases; rhetoric will be participant focused.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Though the choice of narrative inquiry was made by the principal investigator prior to my involvement in this project as a research assistant, the reasons for this choice are evident. Along with data collection, the narrative interviews used here served to help participants in the larger Digital Storytelling study begin to organize their thoughts and experiences into a meaningful script to use in the process of creating their digital story. The voiceover script is one of the most significant elements of crafting a digital story, and due to the condensed time frame of our Digital Storytelling workshop, the research team deemed that these interviews would add vital preparation time as well as allowing participants to revisit these painful experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Further, narratives are defined as not being necessarily objective windows into the original experience; rather, they are recognized as being crafted for a specific audience at a specific time, with a chosen meaning that the storyteller wishes to convey (Reismann, 2008); this is true both of the process of creating a digital story and of the process of beginning to recount the lived experiences in the context of the interview. Murray (1999) states
that narratives are social creations, and that “we are born into a culture which has a ready stock of narratives which we appropriate and apply in our everyday social interaction” (in McKenzie-Mahr and Lafrance, 2011, p 50).

**Participant Recruitment**

After receiving ethical approval for the larger Digital Storytelling study (including the one-on-one interviews featured here) from the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board (BEH 17-43), recruitment began via the distribution of posters at the university’s student health and student counselling services, relevant departments on campus (Education, Women and Gender Studies), populous common areas on campus, and a counselling agency in the community which specializes in working with survivors of intimate partner violence. As well, after being granted an ethical amendment allowing this, a bulletin post with the same information as the poster was posted to the University of Saskatchewan student website, PAWS. Though not all participants mentioned where they had seen recruitment materials for the study, those who did were most likely to mention the PAWS posting. It is important to note that since the individual narratives interviews were part of this larger study on Digital Storytelling, Digital Storytelling was a prominent part of our recruitment materials; the full study title “Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence” was used on the posters, as was a description of all research activities for the larger study including but not limited to these interviews. It is likely, then, that the mention of Digital Storytelling played a role in the interest of respondents in this study / these interviews. As well, we provided (and advertised) a $100 honorarium to be received after completion of the final phase of the study (the workshop and focus group). We anticipated needing approximately 17 hours of each participant’s time for the
entire study, and this honorarium was deemed appropriate in covering costs such as parking, childcare, or other logistical needs.

Our study was open to people of any race, sexual orientation, religion, or other cultural group; however, we did not specifically target any of these populations.

The initial inclusion criteria for our study were:

- Self-identified as young women
- Over the age of 18
- Experienced violence in an intimate relationship within the last two years
- Not in a current state of physical or emotional crisis
- Able and willing to reflect on and talk about their experiences in an individual and group context
- Anticipate remaining committed to attending all activities for the larger project (individual narrative interview, digital storytelling workshop, post-workshop focus group).

Due to the sensitive nature of our study and screening materials, each potential participant was asked to contact either a phone number or email address designated specifically for this study. The phone was set up in a private room on campus, with a password protected voicemail. The email address was shared by the student researcher and principal investigator. The bulk of respondents contacted the researchers via email; however, for reasons of confidentiality, the student researcher tried to arrange phone screenings for each respondent such that respondents would not divulge sensitive information through email.

Over 30 unique respondents contacted us via email expressing interest; of these, 20 were contacted for phone screen interviews. Those who were not contacted via phone either a) did not
respond to the reply email sent by the student researcher or b) were found to not fit the inclusion criteria for the study through the email exchange. Some respondents self-identified as male; some had not experienced dating violence. Upon reflection, perhaps our recruitment materials could have been clearer regarding our inclusion criteria. Of the 20 who were contacted by telephone (at a time chosen by the respondent, with the guideline that they should be in a place where they have privacy and would feel comfortable talking about their experiences), 12 completed the phone screen and were found to be good fits for the study. No information was recorded during screening interviews, beyond a yes-or-no indication of whether the respondent met the study criteria. The record of whether criteria was met did not contain any identifying information. The phone screening script can be found in the Appendix and contained questions such as “When did your experience of dating violence occur?” “What would you like to share about your experience of dating violence?” and “What do you hope to get out of your participation in this project?” In response to the latter question, many participants expressed interest in using their traumatic experiences to help others. Contact information for local counselling services were kept at hand and passed on to any interested respondents (regardless of whether they met inclusion criteria) who identified themselves as being in crisis, currently experiencing dating violence, or who the student researcher felt could benefit from this information.

We made a few exceptions to the inclusion criteria we had originally outlined – 5 of our participants had experienced abuse over 2 years in the past (on average, around 3 – 5 years prior to recruitment). We chose to include them regardless, as all were able to recall and articulate their experiences of violence in detail, and all expressed still feeling affected by these experiences. Additionally, 3 participants’ experiences fell slightly outside of what is traditionally
considered dating violence – one experienced prolonged stalking after the end of a short-term dating relationship; one experienced a stand-alone incidence of violence within an otherwise non-violent relationship, and also spoke of an acquaintance rape experience, and the third experienced violence within her marriage (and had been married at a young age). Of the initial 12 respondents chosen, 3 withdrew from the study before completing a one-on-one narrative interview (2 explicitly, and 1 by not responding to further attempts at communication). Narrative interviews were completed with 9 participants, 1 of whom declined to release her transcript or continue to the Digital Storytelling workshop. 5 participants released their transcripts for the purposes of this cross-case analysis and were thus included in this analysis. Recruitment continued until the desired number of participants for the larger study (9) was met; because the larger study used a focus group methodology for data collection, this number was deemed ideal in representing a wide range of experiences while allowing for participant comfort in the group setting.

Specific participant demographics were not collected beyond establishing that participants met inclusion criteria; this was to protect participant confidentiality due to the potential of others in the community or university setting recognizing elements of any given participants story, particularly if paired with identifying information. Participants did range in age from late teens to late thirties; some were currently married or in long-term relationships; some had children; many appeared Caucasian. All participants had experienced abuse at the hands of a male partner. Some participants identified that Canada was not their country of origin and/or that English was not their first language. Overall, even without specific demographic information, it is apparent that our sample was diverse in multifaceted ways; though qualitative
research does not purport to be generalizable to larger populations, it is our hope that this diversity will add to the depth of understanding of dating violence.

**Data Generation**

Data for this study was generated through one-on-one narrative interviews, arranged via phone or email with participants who had completed the phone screen interview and were found to be a good fit for the study. These interviews were anticipated to take approximately 60 – 90 minutes per interview; most fell within this timeframe, though a couple were closer to 40 minutes in length, and one ran for approximately 100 minutes. Interviews took place in a quiet, private room on the University of Saskatchewan campus; this room is often used for research or observation, and thus contains a two-way mirror and recording equipment that was not used for our purposes. An element of building trust between the student researcher and participants came from the researcher explaining the presence of this equipment and offering to show participants that no one was on the other side of the mirror. The only recording was done on a handheld digital audio recorder purchased specifically for the project. As well, the student researcher provided a small lamp and cushions to add warmth and comfort to the space. Prior to beginning the interview, participants reviewed the full consent form for the larger study and were given the opportunity to ask any questions or express any concerns they may have. The full interview guide can be found in the Appendix; after an opening statement thanking participants for their interest, clarifying the primary purpose of the interview as a means of preparing for the Digital Storytelling workshop, and asking what drew the participant to be interested in the study, the primary narrative question was asked. This question was simply “Please tell your story about being abused in your dating relationship(s).” Additional probes were provided to the student
researcher as part of the interview guide; some interviews utilized all probes, others touched on the topics in the probe unprompted.

Data Analysis

As mentioned above, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guide to thematic analysis was used as the primary model for this data analysis. Though I conducted the interviews, they were transcribed by the Qualitative Research Laboratory at the University of Saskatchewan; thus, I made certain to spend a great deal of time reviewing transcripts and recordings to stay close to the data. As mentioned above, transcripts were also checked by participants, and I compiled notable quotations from my initial reviews of the transcripts both for the use of participants in crafting their digital stories, and as an initial informal analysis. I also completed a preliminary analysis for a poster presentation in 2018 based on my initial review of transcripts (Martin & Bauer-McLure, 2018); though the final codes and overarching themes in this thesis differ somewhat from this poster presentation, there is also significant overlap which I feel shows consistency between analyses.

For the present analysis, I listened to the interview recordings and checked them against the transcripts, and read each transcript multiple times, making notes and marking initial codes as they came up. I found working with hard copies of the transcripts most productive and have a good record of my evolving thoughts through highlighting, notes, and tabs on these documents as well as in digital form. I went through each transcript one at a time, and then began comparing my initial codes across participants; as well as the physical tabs, I used an Excel spreadsheet to group similar codes and track how often they occurred both within and across participants’ transcripts. This helped collapse and clarify a number of codes, after which point, I printed the codes and physically grouped them together. During this stage, subthemes and overarching
themes either emerged or became clearer – some subthemes (such as Sexual Coercion, Losing Trust, and Social Media and Online Communication) were deemed important even during the initial poster analysis and felt significant again at this stage, while others (such as Reflections on the Relationship) were more challenging to elucidate.

Finally, significant extracts were pulled from the transcripts and aligned with corresponding subthemes; this was done until all significant extracts were organized, at which point subthemes were organized into overarching themes. The overarching themes were refined and re-examined repeatedly until each subtheme fit clearly and could not be meaningfully collapsed further. Some subthemes were removed or collapsed as part of this process. The overarching themes are to be understood as building on and relating to each other. Figure 4.1 shows these relationships; constructing this figure was helpful in confirming my own understanding of these themes. Conversations and feedback between myself and my supervisor further helped to ensure that every theme and extract presented are purposeful and necessary in understanding the analysis and the data itself.

Trustworthiness

To establish rigor for this study, multiple strategies for trustworthiness were used – member checking, supervisor debriefing, simultaneous data collection and analysis, the use of thick description, and an audit trail. Member checking is described by Hays and Singh (2012) as “not just reviewing transcripts with the participants; it is asking them how well the ongoing data analysis represents their experience” (p 206). Through this strategy, researchers can ensure a credible, authentic depiction of participant voices. As well, member checking is consistent with this study's feminist research paradigm. These checks were carried out in between the individual interviews and the Digital Storytelling workshop; the student researcher met one-on-one with
each participant to review their full transcript, as well as to give participants a condensed sheet of quotations from their transcripts which stood out to the student researcher as particularly salient and likely to be useful in writing their Digital Story scripts. Participants were given the opportunity to look over these materials and make any changes/corrections they felt necessary. The selection of these quotations from the transcripts also served as an initial stage of analysis while still engaged in the data collection process, familiarizing the researcher with the text, and allowing initial impressions to be made.

**Ethical Considerations**

I feel that it is crucial to conduct research with women exposed to dating violence in a way which clearly communicates a respect for the participant and their lived experiences, so as not to cause further harm, self-doubt, or self-blame. When working with participants, to be an ethical researcher, one must deliberately and explicitly seek to empower; this means believing participants and treating them as experts in their own lives. Further, researchers, by virtue of their research questions, may be sending a message to their participants about what and who matters; as Becker-Blease and Freyd put it, “Whether we ask or don't ask, those participants are getting a message about whether their abuse matters and whether researchers want to hear about it” (2006, p 225).

Survivors (of abuse and other trauma) are often very aware of what will or will not be upsetting (or, in fact, beneficial) for them, and that it may be unethical for researchers to assume that survivors will not make the best, informed choice about how participation might affect them. As the authors (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006) put it, "Researchers must be careful that their efforts to protect survivors do not send the message that the survivors are incompetent. Treating survivors as overly vulnerable risks repeating abuse dynamics that cause further harm" (p 223).
In a study of dating violence, Ismail et al. (2007) stated that participants were eager to participate, and that “. . .their enthusiasm may be attributed to the fact that many of their past efforts to address the issue have been met with skepticism, disbelief, and dismissive attitudes” (p 470). Indeed, participants in this study spoke of prior experiences in which they were silenced and expressed that they had wanted to participate in the research to help others and experience the benefits of speaking out.

This study used semi structured, but open-ended, narrative interview techniques; this approach is also consistent with my feminist research paradigm. Campbell et al. (2009) suggest the following feminist interview guidelines: “providing information, exhibiting a warm demeanor, listening to participants, and allowing participants to make choices about their participation” (in Hoover and Morrow, 2015, p 1479).

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in this study, confidentiality was deemed especially important. Limits to confidentiality were discussed with each participant, such that if something was disclosed that could not be kept confidential, there would be no betrayal of the participant's trust without discussion and involvement of the participant in decision-making. Interviews were recorded; we chose audio recording in part due to its added level of confidentiality when compared to video. Due to the interconnected nature of the community of Saskatoon, we have de-identified survivors' stories as much as possible without losing authenticity; this consideration has been present throughout each phase of data collection, analysis, management, and reporting. Most importantly, the mental health and well-being of participants has been nurtured however possible. I have experience and training in offering support and counselling to domestic violence and sexual assault survivors and used this training in all interactions with participants. I also referred participants to other services, as necessary.
Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity is crucial for ethical reasons as well as gauging the trustworthiness of the study; reflexive practices can include journalling, debriefing, or any other medium through which the researcher can mindfully analyze their own experience, how they are impacted by the study, and the power they hold as a researcher interacting with participants (Hays & Singh, 2012; Hoover & Morrow, 2015). Reflexivity was pursued in several different ways throughout this project, including debriefing between myself and my supervisor, some personal journalling on my part, and most importantly, my ongoing engagement with digital storytelling. Though the process of digital storytelling can be seen as mostly relevant to the larger study that I was research assistant for, rather than the research presented here for my thesis, I found digital storytelling to be a meaningful creative outlet myself, crafting 2 digital stories during my training in the methodology, and 2 digital stories during the period of time between the data gathering phase of research and the bulk of my thesis writing and data analysis. My most recent digital story focused on my experience conducting these interviews; the script for this digital story is included in the Appendix. Creating this digital story involved engaging deeply with my empathy, emotions, and desire for societal change, which emerged throughout my involvement in this project. It would be unethical for me to pretend I could be unmoved as a researcher when hearing these women’s traumatic, hopeful, and all-too-real narratives; engaging in digital storytelling helped me stay close to their experiences while processing my own reactions, and to make meaning of my own.

Summary

The present study was grounded in a social constructionist perspective, utilizing feminist, qualitative, and narrative research practices to describe and analyze the dating violence
experiences of young women in Saskatchewan. A narrative interview guide was used, focusing on broad questions to allow participants to focus on what they believed to be significant in sharing their stories. Special care was given to ethical considerations of research on a potentially vulnerable population, with a focus on informed consent, confidentiality, and the feminist principle of equalizing power between researcher and participant as much as possible. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines was undertaken, with the student researcher coding interview transcripts and using these codes to further organize the data into subthemes and overarching themes.
Chapter 4 - Results

Introduction

The following chapter presents the results of the study, organized by theme, including extracts from the data set which provide illustrations of the participants’ experiences of dating violence. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms are used; as well, personal details and other potentially identifying information are obscured or omitted where necessary, but with care not to alter meaning. Ellipses (…) are used to indicate places where text (such as interviewer speech, utterances such as “umm” or “like,” or information irrelevant to the topic at hand) has been removed from the extract; square brackets [ ] indicate a change or clarification, (e.g., replacing a person’s name with a pseudonym or descriptive text). First, I introduce the participants by pseudonym and briefly summarize their narratives, then I present the overarching themes and subthemes found through this analysis. The overarching themes found were Experiences of Dating Violence, Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship, Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers, and finally, Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence. Each overarching theme is comprised of subthemes. Figure 4.1 lists the subthemes belonging to each overarching theme and illustrates the relationship between overarching themes, while Table 4.1 (located in the Appendix) lists all overarching themes and subthemes, along with example codes from each subtheme. Experiences of Dating Violence is the foundational theme, providing context for the following overarching themes; Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship as well as Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers deal with participant interactions with their partner and with the outside world, respectively; finally, Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence explores the inner
experiences of young women in this study, and builds upon the external events and interactions described in the prior themes.

![Figure 4.1 – Overarching Themes](image)

**Participants**

“Rachel” was in her early twenties; she was a university student who dated her verbally and emotionally abusive partner throughout high school and still had some contact with him. Her partner controlled her via threats to himself, including digitally sending her images of his self-harm. She described ongoing symptoms of depression, a diagnosis of PTSD, and a deep impact of this abuse as well as family-of-origin abuse.

“Taylor” was in her early twenties and an international university student. She experienced emotional and psychological abuse during her relationship with an ex-boyfriend over ten years her senior, whom she dated back in her home country. She described going from being a positive, happy person to experiencing depression and suicidal ideation. She recounted
her ex-boyfriend’s jealousy and controlling behaviour, as well as distant and unpredictable treatment which left her confused and depressed.

“Robin” was in her mid-twenties; she was a university student who experienced physical, sexual, and emotional abuse from her ex-boyfriend. Her story of abuse detailed how he controlled her (e.g., how she dressed, who she could be friends with, and her social media usage), manipulated her, coerced and forced her into unwanted sexual acts, and physically assaulted her on a regular basis. Robin described the impact of this experience on her views of people, her expectations that others will harm her, and her overall identity.

“Becca” was in her late twenties; she was a professional from abroad. She had a brief, casual relationship with a co-worker early in her career, and was stalked by her ex-partner for years following the end of the relationship. She described her ex-partner invading her space and violating boundaries both at home and in their shared workspace and sending her waves of aggressive, angry emails. She described the systemic barriers she faced in her former institution when trying to seek protection and justice, and the impact these barriers have had on her.

“Mallory” was a woman in her mid-thirties; she was a student with a young child. She had a three-year relationship with her abusive partner, during which she experienced physical and emotional abuse. Her partner was a drug dealer, and both she and her ex-partner used substances including opiates. She described him as having mental illness which caused him to dissociate; it was during these episodes that he would be physically violent with her. One such incident led to her hospitalization and his arrest; he ultimately died by suicide. Mallory’s story, as she told it, was one of abuse, mental illness, recovery, love, and grief.

**Experiences of Dating Violence: “I Just Felt Very Out of Control When I Was with Him”**
The first overarching theme is Experiences of Dating Violence. This overarching theme is presented first as it provides crucial context for the more abstract and internal elements of the themes which follow. Subthemes included within Experiences of Dating Violence are: Lies, Threats, Control, and Insidious Abuse; Alcohol and Substance Use; Social Media and Online Communication; Sex, Sexual Abuse, and Intimacy; Incidents of Physical Violence; and Hope for Change, Turning Points, and Ending the Relationship.

Lies, Threats, Control, and Insidious Abuse: “If There’s No Consequence, He Tries Again”

Every participant’s story, regardless of the specifics of the violence and abuse experienced, contained elements of control and manipulation, via lies, demands, and threats. For some participants, this meant mind games, tests, and verbal abuse while for others, it meant explicit threats of physical harm to her or to the partner himself. Participants experienced limits to their freedom, fear for their safety, and a lack of stability or security within the relationship itself.

Robin’s relationship was characterized by control as well as sexual abuse and physical violence; she spoke of the slow encroachment on her boundaries and the start of her partner’s lies, under the pretense of him joking:

. . . he would tell me things like, ‘So what if I had another girlfriend right now?’ . . . And then he started saying things like, ‘Okay, yeah actually I have a baby . . . with my ex-girlfriend.’ And then he would always just be like, ‘Ha ha, just kidding.’ . . .So, it just kind of started out slow, with sick little things like that. . .

Robin described not knowing whether her ex-partner was cheating on her throughout the relationship. The threat of her former partner cheating or ending the relationship contributed to her being coerced into sexual acts that she did not want.
Robin also spoke of what she was and was not “allowed” to do while in her relationship, including limits on her friendships, clothing, social media use, and activities: “I was not allowed to go out with any of my friends for years. For about two and a half years I was not allowed to hang out with my friends unless it was a girl.” These restrictions also came about over time, as the relationship became more established:

When I first started dating him, he was always like, ‘Oh yeah, you can just be like how you want to be, and you can wear what you want, and I like you for whatever you are.’ And then after some time . . . he told me, ‘Okay, you're not allowed to wear shorts to school. . . You have to come home right after school always. Because you're just going to be talking to other guys . . .’ And so, I always did it. I always did it. I always did everything that he asked me to. I never said no. . . And maybe I should have said no. But you don't know that until it's too late, basically.

Taylor also experienced controlling and possessive behaviour in her relationship, largely when it came to her platonic friendships with other men. She described the unpredictability of her relationship and her former partner (with multiple break-ups and reconciliations), how she recognized his manipulative behaviour but still struggled to leave the relationship, and how detrimental these experiences were to her mental health. Specifically, she mentioned her sadness and confusion when her former partner broke up with her only a week after telling her that he loved her.

Rachel experienced manipulation and threats via her ex-partner’s struggles with mental health and self-harm, as well as his threats of going to her father (who she also experienced abuse from, and who forbid her from dating):
He said he would tell my father I was the reason he was going to kill himself. . . It happened every day. . . If I did something he didn’t like, he said he would kill himself. He would text me and send me messages on Facebook, saying that today was going to be the day he kills himself . . . I would have to stay up very late so he wouldn’t do anything.

Rachel also recalled her ex-boyfriend’s involvement with police over illegal weapons in his possession; he forced her to take them and threatened police action if she told anyone. She described any attempts at standing up for herself as being met with accusations from her partner that she was abusing him, to the point where she felt she could not speak up. Mallory also attributed her partner’s controlling behaviour to his perceived mental health issues, stating that she believed his delusions contributed to his fears around her leaving, which in turn led to him controlling her actions and social life.

Finally, Becca described insidious veiled threats as part of her former partner’s stalking behaviour: “There was never ‘I’m going to hurt you.’ It was always ‘you should be careful. You should watch out.’” Many of these threats came via email; however, she also experienced physical stalking around their university campus and at her home.

And he did things like left little calling cards. . . he would move something in my house, like move something in my garden just kind of to show that someone had been there. . . And like I could never prove that it was him.

Overall, Becca described her experience as one of having her boundaries violated, and her ex-partner pushing to see what he could get away with, stating that “… if there's no consequence, he tries again.” Becca did detail one incident which resulted in her ex-partner being removed from their campus after being caught on camera tampering with her workspace late at night. Other than this incident, Becca’s ex-partner did not experience formal consequences for much of
his behaviour towards her. It is, however, relevant to note that Becca’s ex-partner was never caught violating the intervention order she had against him, and thus would not have a criminal record, despite her fear and anxiety.

**Alcohol and Substance Use: “I Had to Be Extra Nice When He Was Drunk”**

Most participants mentioned alcohol or drug use in some manner; this substance use was largely described by participants as a normal, relatively harmless, facet of university social experiences and settings. Thus, I will focus on incidents where alcohol or drug use most seemed to contribute to violent behaviour. These incidents were most prominent in Robin and Mallory’s recounting of their experiences.

Robin described the normalization of her ex-partner being drunk, and how she altered her behaviour in response. She described drinking being a significant part of her relationship with her ex-partner, calling it “what we did when we were together.” Robin also described her ex-partner frequently asking her to pick him up and drive him when he had been drinking, and how she came to expect that he would be drunk when she saw him:

... after a while I just started assuming that he was going to be drunk and taking the necessary precautions just in case he was drunk. And I had to be extra nice when he was drunk... he would get mad at me like right away.

Mallory described the role of drugs, drug dealing, and the drug dealing lifestyle in her life with her former partner. She specified that she and her former partner did not drink alcohol significantly but did have positive experiences using various recreational drugs (i.e., hallucinogens and MDMA) together. Her former partner was a drug dealer, and she described both of their substance use increasing as he was dealing more. Mallory also described the financial benefits of the drug dealing lifestyle and how she “fell under that spell” of being able to
save money and have nice things. Mallory was the victim of multiple assaults from her former partner; the assault that left her hospitalized and led to her partner’s arrest occurred while she had been informally detoxing from her opiate use, and while her partner was supposed to be doing the same in his own space. Because Mallory was given morphine while she was hospitalized for her injuries from this assault, and because of her intense grief and depression after her partner’s death, she experienced a significant relapse.

. . . I was shut right off. I had a guy in my life that could get heroin in the mail, so I literally didn’t even have to go anywhere. And I wouldn’t. I would just sit in my house, and I would wear the same onesie for seven days, not shower, not brush my teeth, not anything.

Mallory accessed support through in-patient drug rehabilitation and, at the time of our interview, continued to participate in 12-step programming which was meaningful for her.

Social Media & Online Communication: “I Was Not Allowed to Have Facebook with Guys On It For About a Year”

Social media, texting, email, and dating apps all featured in participants’ stories, both as sites of abuse tactics and as sources of learning. Most prominently, women spoke of constant communication from their abusers. Mallory described her early communications with her partner being received via Facebook messages; because she was not friends with him on Facebook at the time, the messages were hidden until she logged in on her computer:

. . . he had been messaging me for two months. Not like steady, there were probably like six messages over a two-month period. . . right away he was like, ‘We need to go out, I want to take you out on a date, I want to take you out for supper, I want this, I want that’. . . He just sort of wore me down.
Social media and real-world connections were also the content of conflicts in some instances; Taylor spoke of a close platonic friendship she had developed with a man she had initially met via the dating app Tinder as being a source of jealousy for her abusive partner, with her abusive partner eventually punching this friend. Taylor also referenced her partner messaging her after she had left a conflict situation, calling her a bitch, and otherwise blaming her for ruining his night. One of the break-ups in Taylor’s relationship occurred after her ex-partner saw a picture of her with her male friend and the friend’s girlfriend posted to Facebook. Taylor was hurt and confused as her ex-partner had told her he loved her only a week prior. Finally, during a period when Taylor and her ex-partner were separated, he accessed her Facebook account and read her conversations:

I don’t know how, but he figured out my password or I forgot my Facebook open on my computer and he hacked my Facebook and read a lot of conversations. . . We [were] separated, we were just friends. I started to talk to other boys. . . tried to move on with my life. . . he read all of these conversations with other boys. I don’t know why, but he was so mad with me. . . Sent me messages, e-mails, and stuff . . . He called me bitch and stuff and that I wasn’t respecting him.

Robin, whose partner exerted control over her friendships, how she dressed, and her activities, also extended this control to her use of Facebook – “I deleted all of my guy friends off Facebook as per request by him. I deleted my original Facebook account. I was not allowed to have Facebook with guys on it for about a year.” Facebook and Facebook Messenger were also used by Rachel’s ex-partner as he threatened suicide and manipulated her via his own self-harm. However, the one positive mention of online resources also came from Rachel, as she described
coming across a blog post about signs of abuse in a fictional story and recognizing signs of abuse in her own relationship as a result.

Becca’s experience of being stalked by her ex-partner after their short-lived, casual relationship began with angry, threatening emails. Becca described her shock at receiving these emails, and her initial effort to respond with non-committal kindness, which was met with further anger. Though her ex-partner stalked her in real life as well, she spoke of fear and stress specifically from the nature of the emails:

[The emails] came in waves, but the waves were infrequent. . . Which always made them scary – and they were always in the middle of the night. So, I would wake up in the morning and there’d be an email from him. And so, then I’d be afraid, you know, you get an email and you’d be afraid to check it. . . People would say ‘oh if you get an email from him, don’t read it.’ Like how could I not read it? Like how could I not? If there were threats in his email, how could I not be like aware, you know, make myself aware of them?

Becca also encountered difficulties in how to deal with the emails. She described people telling her to just ignore the emails, which she did after her initial reply. However, when she then tried to claim the emails were harassment, she was told by their shared institution that she would have needed to explicitly tell her ex-partner to stop emailing her for the emails to be considered harassment.

Years later, after leaving her home country and having no contact with her ex-partner for some time, Becca described making a profile on a professional networking site:

I hadn’t heard from him . . . I made a [networking site] page and within ten minutes of making that page, even though it was like three o’clock in the morning in [home
country], he had followed me on [the networking site]. And so, it took me about another ten minutes to work out how to block someone. . . I thought I was pretty safe here but that just made me realize ‘okay now he knows where I work because it's on my [profile].’

Though Becca spoke of the specialized nature of her field making it more likely that she will have further contact with her ex-partner in person as well as online, one can see how constant access to online communication continues to permeate her experience of stalking, psychological control, and insidious abuse.

**Sexual Coercion, Abuse, and Health: "I Don't Want to be Doing This, But You're Doing It Anyways"**

Rachel and Robin both experienced sexual coercion and unwanted sexual acts within their abusive relationships (though neither of them labelled their experiences as rape during our conversations). Rachel also mentioned experiencing a sexual assault from a perpetrator other than her ex-partner and disclosed the ongoing difficulty she has with physical intimacy due to flashbacks. Robin described multi-faceted sexual abuse from her ex-partner, which also continued to impact her sexual relationships. While sexual abuse was not a part of Becca’s experience of dating her ex-partner, one of his threats after their breakup regarded spreading a false rumour that she had given him a sexually transmitted infection.

Rachel’s relationship was overall characterized by manipulation, threats, and guilt; regarding sexual contact, she described the following:

He would still want to kiss me, and I couldn’t say no to that. He would touch me, and I didn’t want him to, but I couldn’t really say that because he would become passive aggressive, and I wanted to avoid that. . . He would say stuff like I don’t love him, or we never do anything anymore. It wasn’t that bad, I guess, but it made me feel bad.
It is common for those who experience sexual coercion or violence within the context of a dating relationship to minimize their experiences or see them as normal, as illustrated by Robin’s statement that: “. . . sometimes you just don't want to do it and they're just making you do it and you're just lying there like – ‘I don't want to be doing this, but you're doing it anyways.’”

Robin also described her ex-partner forcing her into several sex acts; she looks back at the nature of these sexual acts as proof of abuse in and of themselves, stating that “he made me do really weird things that no, pretty much eighteen/nineteen-year-old wants to do, or is comfortable doing. But, I mean, he liked them, so you're like, ‘Okay, I'll try it.’” She described a fear that if she did not agree to all her partner’s sexual desires, he would cheat on or leave her; as mentioned above, one of her partner’s ongoing manipulations was to say that he was cheating, and then dismiss it as a joke.

Robin recounted a specific night where her ex-partner forced her into several different sex acts despite her discomfort and pain:

. . . I still remember because it was really painful, and it was really shitty, and I really didn't like it. We were at my parents’ house and, of course, we were drinking. And he wanted to do like everything. So, we did like regular sex . . . and he made me do anal that time. And then he also forced me to let him fist me. . . it really hurt, and I was like, ‘This is totally not cool. I don't know why we have to do this.’ He was just like, ‘Oh, please. Oh, please.’ And then makes you feel bad, like, ‘Fuck, then he'll do it with somebody else.’ . . .So it's like, I want to be the one, right?

Robin also described how sex contributed to the physical violence in her relationship, with one assault from her partner occurring because he felt that she “was feeling looser than usual” during sex. He asked if she had had sex with someone else (she had not). Robin recounted
how this escalated: “he just straight grabbed my hair and just kneed me right in the face. And so, I had a broken nose and two black eyes. . . And yeah, I just bled everywhere.” She later found out that she was pregnant at that time, which she believed may have explained her feeling “looser.” She went on to have an abortion.

Robin also talked about having frequent sex in her relationship with her ex-partner, and how this has become normal to her, leading to conflict in her more recent relationships where she has taken on the role of sexual aggressor: “. . . I want to do it all the time and he doesn't. So, I'm like, ‘Are you not normal or am I not normal?’”

**Incidents of Physical Violence: “I Just Begged. . . For Him to Let Me Go”**

Robin and Mallory both experienced direct physical violence from their former partners, and those incidents will be the focus of this section. Robin described the first physical fight occurring between her and her former partner after her birthday celebration; her partner was driving and:

. . . he ended up making me so mad that I grabbed the steering wheel. . .we eventually just like hit the side rail. His car was totaled, we got picked up by the police and everything. And so that was, like, the first big fight, I guess.

She described physical fights then becoming a normal part of their relationship, with their frequency waxing and waning throughout the relationship; as well, she described the fights as being bilateral to some extent.

And then after that it just seemed like normal to fight with him after that. . . But after about a year, we fought really aggressively, like fist fight, at least once every three months. And then it became, for a period of time, it became more and more. So, like one fist fight every month.
As well as “fist fights,” Robin described her ex-partner slapping her, biting her breast (“he bit the top of my boob and took all the skin from it . . . it was like totally gone. It was just like a mess”), grabbing her by the hair and kneeing her in the face, and “kicking her ass.” She described the last, worst, physical fight as leading to a mental shift for her, which will be detailed in a subsequent section of this paper.

Mallory also experienced physical assaults regularly, particularly as her former partner’s drug use increased and struggles with mental health worsened. She described her partner seeming to dissociate and then feel guilt and panic when he became aware again. Because of his dissociation and reactions to having hurt her, Mallory downplayed her injuries upon at least one occasion, describing an incident where she “didn’t want to make him feel bad for hurting me because he already very obviously felt fucking terrible.” Mallory described the typical pattern of this physical violence:

He would just go away sometimes, and his eyes would glaze over. It was like he wasn’t even present anymore and that’s when he would hurt me. He would do like all the things; he would throw me across the room, bite me, kick me, punch me, and stomp on me, like all the things. Normally, it was only for like a few seconds and then it was like his eyes would clear and he would be like, ‘Holy fuck!’ . . .

Mallory experienced an assault from her former partner that led to her hospitalization and his eventual arrest. Prior to this assault, she had informally detoxed from drugs away from their home; her partner was supposed to be doing the same:

. . . the morning that I was going to leave [to go back home] he came there, and he hadn’t gotten sober . . . I don’t even remember what he was talking about because it just didn’t make any sense . . . he beat me up for three and a half hours approximately. He broke like
all the bones on this side of my body pretty much, my lung was punctured and collapsed. And like my kid was just playing outside. I couldn’t get through to him and then finally I just begged and begged and begged and begged and begged and begged for him to let me go, ‘just let me go see [my kid]’ is what I kept saying. . . Finally, his eyes cleared, and he was just like, ‘go!’ And I ran outside, I was totally naked, bleeding from various places, he had bitten pieces of my skin out. . . I ran outside and sat down. That was as far as I could go. . . He started to walk away, and he asked me for a hug, and I was like ‘No, I can’t get up’ then he started to run towards me. So, then I ran to the neighbours . . . naked and bleeding . . . He went and got in his vehicle and left . . .

Mallory described intense fear of her partner returning after she was released from hospital. He was eventually arrested, though he died before any trial or sentencing could take place.

**Hope for Change, Turning Points, and Ending the Relationship: “This is Going to Be the Last Time He Kicks My Ass”**

Participants in this study spoke of their reasons for staying with their abusive partners, as well as what lead to them ending the relationship or otherwise moving on. A few characterized their relationships or contact with their former partner as being on-again, off-again; Taylor described her ex-partner as being “hard to stop liking,” and further stated that she had hope for positive change throughout the relationship:

I always had the hope that things could change; that he could change, and we could have a good relationship one day . . . even though he made me feel sad, he has good qualities too. . . I just hoped that I could change this, or he could change this. . . So, this one and a half year with him, we broke up, we go back, we broke up, we go back.
Taylor’s opportunity to permanently end the relationship came when she left her home country for Canada; she described her scholarship to university as making her feel a sense of worthiness after spending much of the relationship dealing with depression and self-doubt. Taylor described her academic opportunities giving her an ability to start a new life, going as far as to say, “I only think I got out [of the relationship] because I came to Canada.”

Similarly, the transition from high school to university helped Rachel get away from her ex-partner. She described trying to break up with him while they were in high school together, and him repeatedly refusing to accept it. As well, Rachel stated that talking to her ex-partner felt like an addiction, and at the time of our interview, she did still have some contact with him. She described the challenges of trying to cut off contact with him completely:

    I am trying to break it off and I did say to him that I don’t want to talk. And I actually believe it, so I feel like that’s a step forward for me. . . I find it hard to just reach the stage where I can just block him and cut off all communication. . . I’m still trying to see what a future without him is like.

Robin’s relationship was also impacted by the transitional nature of young adulthood as her former partner ultimately moved away with his family. However, Robin also expressed feeling that she could not end the relationship while he was still living in the same city as her because of his threats against her:

    I felt like at some points I couldn't have left because he would find me. . . I felt like he would find me, and he used to sometimes threaten me that if I did leave him, he would do this and that. . .

Robin also experienced an internal shift regarding staying in the relationship during a particularly brutal physical assault from her ex-partner:
So, he pretty much just grabs my hand and runs me into the apartment building and just straight up kicked my ass. Like straight up for nothing kicked my ass so hard, I actually got it on video. . . at that point, I was so sick of getting my ass kicked. . . I just let him kick my ass at this point because I was like, ‘This is going to be the last time he kicks my ass, or I'm either going to kill myself or I'm going to kill him, or I'm just going to leave.’

Due to the circumstances of Mallory’s partner’s assault on her, his jail time, and subsequent death, the last communication she had from him was via voicemail:

He called me and left me a voicemail before [his death] and said, ‘I’m done, I can’t live with what I did to you. And I can’t live with that [her son] almost didn’t have a mom’ he’s like, ‘that’s not okay.’ And then that was it.

Becca’s dating violence experience involved a short, casual relationship which she ended when her partner showed signs of wanting to get more serious. However, her ex-partner then stalked her for years and despite her efforts to involve their university and local law enforcement in ending his stalking, contact from him did not truly end until she left their university and moved from her home country to Canada. As Becca herself stated, “basically it never stopped.” Becca noted that she did not leave her home country solely to get away from her ex-partner, but that it certainly contributed to the decision to leave, stating that she likes that she does not live at her former home anymore. At the time of our interview, Becca continued to worry about further contact from her ex-partner.

**Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship: “He Was Hard to Stop Liking”**

The second overarching theme in this study is Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship. Stories, especially ones dealing with trauma and significant life events, play a crucial role in making sense of one’s experiences. In this theme, I highlight how participants
described and speculated about their relationship dynamics as part of their stories, including aspects of their former partners’ identities and motivations, and perspectives and concerns about their former partners. The subthemes within this section are Family of Origin Abuse and Other Earlier Life Experiences, Reflections on the Relationship, Perceived Role of the Partner’s Mental Health and Concern About His Future Actions and Remembering and Mourning the Good.

Reflections on the Relationship: “Try to Fill His Empty”

Participants in this study shared their perceptions around the dynamics of their relationships as well as personality traits, possible motivations, and perceived mental health concerns of their former partners. Even though we do not have first-hand knowledge from the partners about their perspectives, we can still gain valuable insight from the interpretations provided by our participants. Overall, participants expressed a genuine desire to make sense of their former partner’s actions; as well, they described elements of their partners’ actions that they still felt unable to understand.

Taylor described conversations with her ex-partner in which she tried to get a sense of why he was with her and if he even liked her. She believed that he did not show any interest in her interests or who she was as a person, and “he just wanted to have someone, just to try to fill his empty.” She recounted feeling that their relationship was one-sided, with her trying to have a good relationship with her partner while he “played with [her] feelings.” She also described her friends asking her why she was with her ex-partner, and her own confusion on the matter:

That is the big thing that I feel so confused because I do not have an answer. I know what’s happening, I know he’s trying to manipulate, control of everything to me. I know that but I do not have an answer. It was hard to get out of.

Rachel also expressed confusion over her partner’s actions, stating that:
. . . the way he switched between moods . . . I couldn’t tell what he was going to do next, and it was really confusing. And it made me feel almost crazy because he was so different with other people, but with me he was so different, and I just couldn’t understand why that was.

Both women felt their own mental health suffer because of their partner’s unpredictability and lack of care; Taylor described her partner as distant, while Rachel told of her partner laughing at distress she experienced because of his actions.

Becca felt that it was the feeling of rejection that her ex-partner could not deal with when she ended their relationship which led to his angry emails toward her, and his stalking behaviour: “This whole thing went down because I broke up with this guy. Because I didn’t want to be with him, and he didn’t handle that rejection.” As a result, Becca talked about her ongoing struggles with any conflict that might cause the other person to feel rejected. Becca also described the emails from her ex-partner as focused on how he felt she had wronged him, even simply by being afraid of him:

And then he’d write me these emails about how unfair it was and how he has a right to not be told that someone is afraid of him. I was like ‘and I have a right to not be afraid.’ .

. . . When I made complaints about him, [he felt that] I was committing an offence to him.

**Perceived Role of the Partner’s Mental Health and Concern for His Future Actions: “He Sunk Right Into It”**

It feels important to note as a precursor to this section that self-harm, suicidality, drug use, and mental health concerns, despite their perceived contributions to the victimization of our participants, are not themselves causes of intimate partner violence. Many people struggle with these experiences without ever using them for coercion, control, or violence.
Rachel and Mallory both dealt with concerns around their former partner’s mental health; one of the ways Rachel’s partner manipulated her was by threatening suicide and sending her pictures of his self-injuries. This added to her concern for his safety, and her sense of isolation: “he sent me pictures of self-harm that he did. So, it made me feel like him killing himself was more of a possibility and at the time other people didn’t really understand.”

Neither Rachel or Mallory disclosed if their partners had formal psychological assessments or diagnoses, though Mallory personally suspected schizophrenia could have played a role in her partner’s dissociations, delusions, and hallucinations. As well as the previously mentioned dissociation that seemed to occur before he was physically violent with her, Mallory described worsening delusions that contributed to her partner’s fears that she might leave him; she also believed these symptoms were impacted by his drug use increasing. She stated that He wasn’t doing anything to help his mental health, that’s for sure. Then by the end it was like it didn’t really matter. It was like he couldn’t control the craziness anymore; even when he let me go [during his final assault on her]. It was back right away, like he couldn’t stop it anymore. He sunk right into it, kind of.

As previously mentioned, after this final assault, Mallory was hospitalized for her injuries, while her former partner was eventually caught and arrested. Mallory described letters that he wrote about her while he was in jail, and the circumstances of his death by suicide:

I still have [the letters] and he’s very apologetic and very aware of what he’s done. But still even then he’s like, ‘I’ll always fucking love her and I’ll always fucking need her,’ and then he died. . .

A few participants described a sense of responsibility and/or concern for what their former partner may go on to do. Robin expressed that due to her “lack of regard” for herself but
also due to her strength, she felt that it was better that she experienced her partner’s abuse than it would be for someone else to experience it. Rachel described her ex-partner explicitly treating one of her friends the same way he had treated her, as well as her struggles letting go of a sense of responsibility for his actions:

I feel like if I am not there to stop him, he will abuse someone else. At one point, he talked to one of my friends and he did do the same thing to her, threatening to kill himself. Even today she is still scared to see him. I do not want that for anyone else. I know it is not my responsibility, but it is very hard to accept that.

Becca wanted to take part in our study in part because she felt that, though her experience did not include direct physical violence, her ex-partner could be capable of escalating to that point in a future relationship. She wanted to use her experience as a warning, and an urge for individuals and institutions to take dating violence and stalking seriously:

I realize that this is probably only scratching the surface of what someone might experience. But I also feel like it's something that could be the beginning of something much worse. . . And I think that it was never taken seriously enough by anyone involved and I feel like he could very likely go on to commit far worse acts of violence against other people.

Becca also believed that the possibility of her former partner going on to cause further harm was exacerbated by their university not intervening further in his stalking behaviours. She shared that her former institution allowed her ex-partner to finish his degree and move into a supervisory role where he could have power over younger women, even though the institution was fully aware of Becca’s complaints.
Remembering and Mourning the Good: “I Was in Love with This Person and I Miss This Person”

Participants spoke not only of the dangerous, frightening, or violent aspects of their relationships, but also of experiences of happiness, and of grieving the lost relationship. Taylor spoke of the positive aspects of dating her older ex-partner, including freedom, travel together, and the wisdom of his experience; Becca spoke of the fun, lighthearted times in her relationship before breaking up with her ex-partner and experiencing his stalking; Mallory shared the love and grief she felt for her ex-partner after his death. Positive memories were tarnished by the abuse, as Becca stated that “If it wasn’t for all of the subsequent horribleness, I would look back on that time with fondness. . . I feel really sad that he’s taken that away from me. But now when I think of him, I have to shudder instead of smiling.”

In describing the good times in her relationship, Mallory referenced her ex-partner not being bothered by her past (which included often stigmatized experiences such as sex work), saying that “he just thought I was the greatest person and that’s how he made me feel all the time.” She stated that this acceptance was new to her, as was her partner being involved in family life with her and her son. Mallory also attributed much of her ex-partner’s violence to his mental illness, substance use, and seeming to disassociate; this may have allowed her memories of his positive qualities to persist more due to their apparent separation from his violence.

Mallory also described the complexity of grieving her partner’s death while surrounded by her loved ones who were relieved that he was no longer present to hurt her:

The second I was sober for like half a day I would just start crying so hard that I couldn’t breathe. . . I had my family around me and people that loved me. They were like pretty happy that he died, really. I mean, if you look at it from their point of view, it was
fucking great. . . ‘She’s fine, he’s gone, this is ideal.’ In my mind that is in no way what was happening, and I didn’t have anyone that I could communicate that to, that could understand. Nobody in my immediate circle was willing to in any way entertain the fact that I was in love with this person, and I miss this person and I’m fucking devastated that they died regardless of everything that happened.

**Outside Responses & Systemic Barriers: “They Could’ve Helped Me and They Didn’t”**

The third overarching theme considers the young women’s experiences seeking outside help. Women in our study faced barriers in seeking support, from institutions, from loved ones, and from strangers. They also experienced support from both formal and informal sources. Their experiences offer important insights for bystander intervention and further research. Subthemes included here are Family of Origin Abuse and Other Earlier Life Experiences; Minimization, Victim Blaming, and Isolation; Losing Trust; and Supports.

**Family of Origin Abuse and Other Earlier Life Experiences: “I Don’t Really Know What I Would Be Like If I Haven’t Experienced Abuse”**

Most of this overarching theme deals with encounters young women had during or after their abusive relationships; however, first, we turn to the family contexts that participants were shaped by prior to as well as during their abusive dating relationships, and how these contexts interacted with their experiences of dating violence. Multiple participants described ways in which their expectations and standards for relationships were shaped by earlier life experiences either with parents or with prior dating partners. Rachel’s father’s abuse continued through to the time of our interview and played a key role in how Rachel’s partner manipulated her. Rachel discussed the experience of abuse as being part of her identity:
... because my father has also abused me, so I have been experiencing that since I was a child, so I don’t really know what I would be like if I haven’t experienced abuse. I guess I feel like I am meant to be abused because I have had so many experiences like this that it is the normal. I don’t really know what my life is like without it.

Similarly, Robin spoke about her relationship with her mother, stating “[My mom] was super mean to me too. I just have the whole series of unfortunate relationships. My mom always tells me, ‘I’m so sorry that everybody that you love is mean to you.’” Robin also spoke about the role of conflict in her family of origin, and how that conflict contributed to her not caring about herself or regarding herself the way that she might another person. Robin drew a direct link between these family of origin experiences, how she perceives herself, and normalizing the violence she experienced in her relationship. Robin also spoke of her parents’ awareness of the dating violence she was experiencing, stating that though she made attempts to hide and lie about the visible physical injuries she sustained, she still felt that her parents must have known.

Finally, Mallory spoke about getting involved with drugs and dating drug dealers as a teenager and expressed a feeling of inevitability around the trajectory of her early experiences to the violence she ultimately survived:

I started getting caught up in this shit when I was 17, so it wasn’t like it was brand new when [her ex-partner] came along. The foundation had been laid earlier in life, that that’s what’s going to happen.

Though Mallory acknowledged that her story is too complex to have a clear moral, she did state that she often warns younger women against dating drug dealers when given the opportunity.

**Minimization, Victim Blaming, and Isolation: “Everything That He Did It Feels Kind of Insulting . . . to Have It Be Reduced to Drama”**
Women in our study experienced social isolation, but also sought help from various sources while experiencing dating violence. Supportive sources will be discussed later; first we turn to the dismissive, hurtful, and potentially unsafe reactions participants touched upon. Rachel experienced minimization and blame both from a friend and from a counsellor. The friend betrayed Rachel’s trust and told her abusive partner about their conversation. Rachel reflected on how this impacted her: “. . . that made me feel unsafe . . and she also called the abuse drama. . . everything that he did it feels kind of insulting almost to have it be reduced to drama.” Rachel described others saying that she “brought this on” herself by not treating her partner “well enough.” She also described her partner acting very differently around other people than he did around her, being well-liked, and lying to others about her, thus colouring their perceptions of anything she might say. Rachel also described how the counsellor she spoke to did not seem to understand the gravity of what she was experiencing:

I tried to get a counselor involved, but he didn’t understand that this was abuse. He thought that this was a problem where we were on equal standing with each other. He told me not to tell anyone else what was happening. He told me not to fight against him so much, things like that.

Becca described a similar experience of being treated as having equal standing with her former partner, who was stalking her:

. . . I felt like the university just treated us as though we were both guilty parties in a dispute between two students. It was never that one of us was the victim and one of us was the perpetrator.
Becca also described judgement from others at her university, with a peer describing Becca’s experience as “humiliating;” as well, a higher up in Becca’s department empathized with Becca’s ex-partner to her, stating that “he’s very hurt and you should probably apologize to him.”

As Becca navigated trying to report and file complaints about her ex-partner’s stalking behaviour, she encountered repeated resistance. Becca used the term “victim blaming” to describe her experience and stated that “I really felt like every time I made another complaint there was this kind of silent eye rolling like ‘here we go again…’” She felt that some who she disclosed her experiences to expressed genuine concern and empathy for what she was going through, but that no matter who she spoke to, her case always went back to one member of staff. Becca felt that this person dismissed her, saw her as at fault in the situation, was “not interested in helping [her]” and may have discouraged others from trying to help her.

When Becca’s university did try to intervene in her ex-partner’s stalking, it was largely by placing restrictions upon both Becca and her ex-partner, e.g., around sharing laboratory space. She also described going to supervisors at the university about behaviours of her ex-partner’s which made her uncomfortable, only for them to suggest she modify her behaviour: “So I felt really restricted, you know, like when your movements are restricted. His movement’s not, but yours are.”

Becca discussed the ongoing impact of all these minimizing reactions in how she values her own experiences, and stands up for her perspective in times of conflict:

. . . not being believed is a really big deal. After everything I went through at the university and having people say, ‘it's probably not as bad as you think’ – that’s a really big deal . . . I was there! . . . Don’t tell me that I'm not . . . a reasonable eyewitness to my own experience.”
Robin spoke about being secretive about her experiences of dating violence with friends and family and talked about being uncertain about how much her parents knew. She recalled that they would ask her what had happened when she had visible injuries, and she would lie about the most severe injuries. Robin also stated that she had told her parents that she was an adult and they had to accept her relationship. Additionally, Robin reflected on having to push herself to reach out to friends about the abuse, stating that “if the only person you have to question it is yourself and your boyfriend, how are you ever going to get another opinion? Because you guys think it’s normal.” Perhaps due to the isolation she experienced, when asked what she wanted others to know about her experience of dating violence, Robin focused on wanting victims to know that they are not alone in their experiences: “. . . I want other women to know that there’s more people like you, even if they're not saying it out loud.”

**Losing Trust: “They Could’ve Helped Me and They Didn’t”**

Women in our study spoke to the long-lasting disillusionment of seeking help only to face barriers. Robin described situations in which others witnessed violence against her and did not intervene, while Becca spoke of the ongoing stress of navigating her university’s policies and unsatisfactory interventions. Both expressed a loss of trust and shift in perspective in how they saw those who could have intervened but did not.

Robin spoke of a violent incident while her ex-partner’s brother was in the room and did not help her despite her “scream-crying.” She also described walking down a busy street after the last physical fight she had with her ex-partner, crying and covered in blood:

And then I was all crying and bleeding and I walked down [name of major street] by myself at two o’clock in the morning, covered in blood. . . I walked to the [convenience] store. All the way at the other end of [street name] and I just cleaned myself up and
nobody even asked me what happened to me. And nobody helped me. And I called my friends, and my friends couldn't come get me. . . I just waited and I just sat there for a while, and I cried. . . that was the last bad fight and I'll remember that forever because you think people want to help you when something like that happens but honestly nobody cares. Nobody cares.

Robin had previous experiences of violence in public, which contributed to her feeling that no one would help:

. . . that's not the only time that I've been bloody in front of other people. There's been other times where. . . I'm getting my butt kicked outside and nobody even looks or helps you. They just keep on walking. They don't care. You can see a girl getting her ass kicked in the car and nobody's going to help. You can see a girl getting ass kicked outside and nobody's going to help.

Though Becca did receive some help from her university and local police, she described a lack of recognition of the abusive nature of her ex-partner’s stalking, vague promises of consequences for her ex-partner breaking rules set forth, and a lack of enforcement. A mediator brought in by the university warned Becca after meeting with her ex-partner:

. . . [The mediator] met with the other party . . . and said [to Becca’s supervisor] ‘no, this is not going to be an effective mediation. This guy is way too angry. It's not a good idea.’ And then he came to me separately and he said, ‘you should be very careful.’ And I was like ‘what does that even mean? . . what am I supposed to do with that information?’

When the university did tell Becca’s ex-partner to stop following her, Becca asked for clearly outlined consequences, which the university never provided. Becca’s experience with her
ex-partner was that of him going as far as he could without facing consequences, backing off, then starting again. The vagueness of the university’s action seemed to contribute to this pattern: . . . they spoke to him, and they said ‘stop following her’ . . . so, for example, ‘stop going into her lab. You don’t need to go in there. Stop going in there.’ And I said ‘okay, so if he goes in there, what happens?’ Like ‘oh, there’ll be consequences.’ . . . And so then of course he would start again, start following me, start coming into my lab. . . . I complained. . . And they said, ‘okay we’ll talk to him.’ I was like ‘no, I don’t want you to talk to him. I want you to remove him. I feel unsafe.’ And this was continuously the thing that I came up against.

Similarly, Becca described a particularly unsafe seeming space which she needed for her work; despite Becca’s efforts, the university only limited she and her ex-partner’s access to the room, and did not enforce consequences when he broke the restrictions upon him:

. . . it's enclosed, there's no windows, you can't see in from the outside and it's probably pretty soundproof. . . And that was one room that I was really frightened of being in with him, but . . . all of my work was in there. So, I had to use the room, he had rights to use the room. . . I said, ‘this is a particularly scary room, I don’t want to be in here.’ [The university] said ‘okay, you can use the room [on alternating designated days] . . . And that’s fair.’ I was like ‘but I'm the victim!’ . . . They're like ‘but this will make you feel safe.’ No, it won't. . . and then of course one day I was in there on my designated day, and he came in. And I was like snap a quick photo. . . And I went to the university, and I said, ‘he was there.’ And they said ‘okay, we’ll talk to him.’ Like ‘nooo, nooo. That’s not enough!’
Becca talked about how, at least at the time, there was “no process in place for stalking,” stating that her situation did not fall under the university’s criteria for bullying or harassment. She outlined the various university officials she dealt with, including counsellors, her advocacy service, her department, and a risk management officer. Ultimately, she felt angrier at these officials and other would-be helpers than she did at her ex-partner himself:

And so, on the one hand, yes, I'm angry at this guy for putting me through that, but he's messed up right? Like he needs to be taken care of, he needs psychological help, and I'm not angry at him. I'm frightened of him, but I'm not angry at him. I'm angry at all the people in positions where they could’ve helped me, and they didn’t.

Becca also expressed feeling that it was luck that stopped the situation from becoming more violent, rather than any of the university’s attempted interventions: “. . . I think that, obviously I'm very lucky that it never became more violent, but. . . I think [the university is] very lucky that it never became more violent.”

As well as the university, Becca tried to seek help from her local police. She got an intervention order, limiting how close her ex-partner could come to her or her home, but described police not taking these orders seriously, and how this impacted her: “So you know it was a long period of just generally feeling unsafe. And it only ended when I left the country and came here.” Reflecting on the whole experience, Becca described a sense of desperation, being silenced and restricted, and not knowing how to make her ex-partner go away:

. . . the ongoing, the length of it, and the inability to get help. . . and not only the inability to get help, but I was gagged, and I was told ‘don’t talk about it,’ . . . I was like sobbing and my husband was holding me . . . I was talking about how do I get rid of him? How do
I commit a murder of this person and get away with it? . . . I didn’t know how else to make it end.

Becca still deals with psychological effects of her experiences – not only from the stalking itself, but from how she was treated by those in positions of authority.

**Supports: “Everybody in My Life Rallied Around to be a Buffer For [My Son]”**

Women in our study largely reported that friends were the most helpful sources of support in their lives, with some mention of family and support groups. Robin talked about how her friends responded to her disclosure of abuse and navigated spending time with her and her ex-partner during their relationship:

My friends always just said, ‘Well that’s not good what's happening. . .but we love you so we're going to have to be okay with it.’ . . . they were very still nice to [my boyfriend] even though they know that he is a piece of shit. So, I'm really happy about my friends that I have.

Rachel mentioned how common the experience of dating violence was for her peer group:

Almost all of my friends have been involved in an abusive relationship so they understand what it’s like and we can talk about it together. I don’t want them to be abused, but it’s good to be able to share with someone.

Friendships continued to provide invaluable support in the aftermath of dating violence; Becca talked about the importance of friendships she has made since moving to Canada which are centred around feminism, and the validation of these outside perspectives. Mallory spoke about the role of family and friends in supporting her and her son after her hospitalization and the death of her partner:
. . . [her son] knew that I was okay and that someone was looking after me. . . He didn’t really see a whole lot of like the aftermath . . . His dad said to him . . . ‘[Mallory’s ex-partner] was really bad and he really hurt your mom. She’s going to be okay.’ Even then everybody in my life rallied around to be a buffer for [her son], or just to be extra help so he didn’t feel neglected or lost or anything.

Mallory also spoke about how her friendships had changed after her experiences of violence and recovery from substance abuse, with friends checking in more frequently than they used to if they didn’t hear from her. Finally, Mallory spoke to the benefit and sense of safety she has found from Narcotics Anonymous groups:

. . . knowing that I have a safe place to go because there’s an NA meeting every single day of the week. . . I can get there and sit there for an hour, and nothing can happen to me at all, nothing.

Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence: “It Completely Changed Everything About Me”

The final overarching theme in this study focuses inward, on the participants’ internal experiences both during their abusive relationships and as they recovered and moved forward with their lives. It builds on the experiences of dating violence described in the first theme, as well as experiences with the women’s partners and the outside world described in the second and third themes. Participants spoke to long-lasting changes to their self-perceptions, mental health, values, and goals; some of these changes involved growth and activism, while others led to relationship, professional, and personal struggles. The subthemes presented in this section are: Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation; Safety, Fear, Anxiety, and Triggers;
Identity, Coping, and Integrating the Experience of Being Abused; and finally, Long-Term Impacts on Self and Relationships.

**Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation: “This Experience Has Drained a Lot Out of My Life”**

Our participants identified significant mental health challenges arising from their experiences of abuse, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicidal ideation. Rachel was formally diagnosed with PTSD; despite her young age, she described feeling “like this experience has drained a lot out of my life.” She opened up about the stress she felt during her relationship, as well as the ongoing mental and physical effects, and how this impacted her staying in contact with her abusive ex-boyfriend.

I felt like I could never let my guard down because if I did, he would do something. I felt really stressed all the time. I was suicidal at one point because I couldn’t deal with how he was treating me. . . I felt a lot of despair, like there wasn’t any point to what I was doing anyways. I felt that this is what my life will be like forever. I don’t deserve any better than that. I think that is one of the reasons I have kept talking to him.

Rachel talked about difficulty with sleep, concentration, fatigue, and increased difficulty bouncing back from physical illness. She also spoke about the impact of her struggles with concentration on her schoolwork; as a result, she was afraid she would not be able to graduate from high school on time. She described her current experience of PTSD as follows:

I have PTSD, it is a very big part of my life. It is hard to get out of bed sometimes, just don’t want to do anything. It is hard to concentrate. I just have a very low self-esteem. It does trigger anxiety, so my body does feel tired from that. I feel really exhausted all the time because I feel like I have to be on guard for anything that could happen.
Particularly of note is her description of needing to be on guard for any possible dangers, and how this feeling persisted from when she was dating her ex-boyfriend. Finally, Rachel did still encounter her ex-partner at the time of our interview, and spoke to how deeply seeing him continued to affect her:

I always feel frozen, and I dissociate if I see him, and it is really hard to shake off that feeling when I have seen him. . . I feel like I am just stuck there. . . I feel separated from myself. . . it might also bring on a flashback.

Mallory also touched on symptoms associated with PTSD, though she has not been formally diagnosed, stating that “. . . I have – not an official diagnosis for PTSD, but everything that happens to PTSD people happens to me.” Her symptoms included panic attacks and nightmares. As well, both Rachel and Mallory disclosed they had engaged in non-suicidal self-harm. Taylor did not disclose any formal diagnosis, but detailed her struggles with depression and suicidal ideation, which she identified as out of character for her:

I’ve always been a happy person, positive person. Even if things go wrong, I always think one day things will be better. In this period, after all these fights . . . I started to think about that; why am I living? Why am I here? Maybe things would be better if I didn’t exist. I started to have some kind [of] suicidal thoughts about that.

Taylor spoke about her confusion, self-doubt, lack of interest in her life or friends, and difficulty leaving bed, eating, or drinking water, as well as unintended weight loss. As well as these physical aspects of depression, Taylor recalled feeling concerned about who she was as a person, if she had worth, and what her life or future would hold. She described emptiness and lack of feeling, despite previously enjoying her studies:
I was trying to recover myself . . . I had a lot of suicidal thoughts. How can I kill myself; I will do this today. I even wrote suicidal letters . . I think I was really . . . desperate is the word. I was really mad, really confused. It was too much, too much pressure . . .

Taylor attributed her getting through this difficult time to her best friend, saying that “October was the first time I really tried to kill myself and I’m really glad that I didn’t, and my friend really helped me. The [same] friend [my ex-boyfriend] tried to punch.” She described talking to her best friend, and slowly regaining hope that things could get better by trying to get through just one more day.

**Safety, Fear, Anxiety, and Triggers: “Paralyzed by Fear”**

Women in our study spoke about the impact of abuse on their sense of safety, experiences of acute fear, and ongoing anxiety. They also shared that anxiety and flashbacks continued to be triggered by specific sights and sounds they encountered in daily life, in ways they would not have expected prior to their experiences of abuse. First, I will touch on experiences of fear during our participants’ abusive relationships. Mallory spoke to intense fear after she was released from hospital after her former partner’s last assault on her: “when I was at home, for the first while, they hadn’t caught him, and he was on the run . . . I was fucking paralyzed by fear.” She described losing the feeling of safety she had previously taken for granted:

When I was so scared after it was the weirdest thing because I said to my cousin, I said, ‘You know, you don’t realize that you feel safe until you don’t.’ Like you don’t even realize that that’s something that you’re feeling all the time until it’s not there anymore.

Becca also described the years she experienced her ex-partner’s stalking as “a long period of just generally feeling unsafe;” she described “heightened anxiety” and “constantly looking over [her]
shoulder.” Though she was able to maintain a sense of safety within her home due to security measures, she felt fear at the idea of encountering her ex-partner:

. . . I like running and I felt like I couldn’t go running by myself around my neighbourhood because – I don’t even know if I had thought he might do this thing to me, I just, I didn’t want to be alone and see him. . . I guess I was anxious that I didn’t know what would happen. If he approached me, I didn’t know what he would say to me, I didn’t know what I would do to him, I didn’t know what the outcome would be and that made me afraid.

Further, Becca spoke about the impact of her frustrations in seeking help on how she views the world in terms of safety: “I feel like I was very naïve. . . expecting the world to be safe and to have people around me support and help me with that safety.” As well as this disillusionment, Becca shared that she struggled with anger and anxiety around this aspect of her experience. She shared that she was currently taking medication for anxiety, noting that while her experience being stalked was not the only cause of her anxiety, it contributed significantly.

Mallory continued to experience panic attacks linked to her abuse and described them as “the overwhelming sense that I am not safe,” as well as stating that “it comes and goes pretty quickly, but it’s a pretty awful feeling.” She noted that the panic attacks had decreased in frequency, and that though she did experience nightmares, they seemed to have stopped recently. Mallory also described the types of stimuli that could trigger a panic attack for her:

. . . stupid things trigger it. With me a lot of it is auditory. Lots of different sounds will trigger it. . . I think often it’s because my glasses would get knocked off right away. So, I never could see anything . . . I could hear my ribs breaking when he was stomping on me. So, anything that replicates that . . . almost gets stuck in a loop.
Robin also spoke to the unexpected nature of her triggers – she identified struggling with apartment gym rooms, and the sight of the same type of car her ex-partner used to drive:

. . . in order to avoid our fights in the apartment, because we didn’t want his mom to see, we would always go into the gym room. . . If he told me that we were going there, I right away knew what was going to happen. . . Now, even to this day, I still don't like to go into apartment gyms because it reminds me of getting my ass kicked . . . a little tiny gym really freaks me out. Even, he used to drive a silver [car model]. And every time I see a silver [car model] driving down the street I literally panic. Even to this day. I haven't seen him in a [car model] for three years. So, it's still kind of crazy how something like that can change you about simple things.

Finally, Becca shared how, despite having moved to Canada from her home country, she felt tension and a rush of adrenaline anytime she saw a person resembling her ex-partner, or a car that looked like his. She described comforting herself with reminders that he is far away.

Identity, Coping, and Integrating the Experience of Being Abused: “It Completely Changed Everything About Me”

Women in this study spoke to the impact of their experiences of abuse on their self-perceptions during their relationships, as well as who they felt they were at the time of our interview. They also described growth and meaning-making, concern about the future, and things they have had to make peace with. Taylor talked about the role of self-doubt in her experience of depression in the aftermath of her emotionally abusive relationship:

I felt really bad, I felt lost, I started to doubt about my personality. Who am I? Am I a bitch? Am I crazy? Am I dumb? Am I interesting, why? Who am I? Did I want to be this
person I am right now? I am not happy right now, I don’t want to be me. . . My personality, my identity, I was lost for a moment.

She also described how receiving a scholarship to university in Canada helped her to feel important again, saying “somebody thinks I am interesting because they want me here. They think I am smart, so I am going to try.” She also described validation from others about the difficulties of dating violence, which helped her stop blaming herself.

Rachel identified the significant role that dealing with her PTSD played in her day-to-day life and stated that due to her father’s abuse and the abuse of her ex-partner, she felt she did not know who she would be if she had not experienced abuse. She talked about ongoing uncertainty about her future, in terms of school and career, as well as in terms of the role of her ex-boyfriend, and shared “I find it really hard to imagine a future where he is not involved somehow.”

Mallory was in her mid-thirties at the time of our interview; she had a more established life and career than the younger participants, and noted how significantly the abuse changed her values and identity from what they had been before:

Sometimes it feels like an eternity and sometimes it only feels like a second. I’ve been on the earth for almost 36 years, so three really isn’t that many out of all of them. It completely changed everything about me. Everything about who I am as a person, everything about how I feel about life and like every single thing about me has changed from it.

Mallory described her earlier life being more focused on material things and things she felt she was supposed to do, rather than what she was passionate about, stating that now “. . . it just feels like I am doing what I am actually supposed to be doing”. She went on to elaborate:
You need to fit into the machine and fuckin’ do the things, right. And that’s all I ever did before . . . you need the money so you can be the things, so you can look a certain way, so you can – you know, all of that shit. And all that’s gone.

Mallory also acknowledged that between the abuse and her struggles with addiction, she’s lost the feeling of deserving things that she once had, which she described as a somewhat negative impact. And she spoke to the difficulty of coping with the impact of the abuse on her “mom self”:

That was the hardest, I guess, amend that I had to make was with myself, with my ‘mom’ self. All of the things that happened didn’t mean I was a garbage mom. . . nothing happened to [her son]. He ate, he went to preschool, he had friends, he went on activities, he was never neglected in any way. I made a complete disaster of my own life, but I for sure buffered it from him as much as I could.

Mallory also reflected on a meaningful conversation with her former partner’s family member, which touched upon the positive elements of their relationship:

[His family member said he] was very sick and he was very lost . . . but at least for almost the last three years of his life, she said, ‘at least he got to like feel love and be loved by someone and go and do things that he’d never done before.’ I don’t think it makes what happened to me right, or worth it or anything, but it was crazy how fast it could all happen. That I just got so fucking caught up in this life that I just didn’t even know what was going on anymore.

Becca spoke to the distinction she felt between her professional self and the self who was experiencing stalking at the time that it was occurring:
I felt like I was two people: I was the one person that was running around being my professional self and being awesome and like living my life and kicking my goals and being good at my life. And the other person was this like hiding, cowering creature that was constantly looking over my shoulder, constantly waiting for him to do something more.

She also described her professional self as a “high-output, highly performing, person” but expressed fear around the implications continuing to work in the same field as her ex-partner could have:

. . . I really want this career to work, but I also definitely feel like . . . If I fly too high in this job, then I become a target for him to find me and I have no doubt that he still has a desire to cut me down. You know, if I'm giving a talk at a conference, is he going to be there in the audience? . . . The easiest way to get around that is just to not . . . have this career, you know?

Finally, Becca spoke to her experience of being stalked contributing to the strong connection she developed to feminism and fighting against rape culture, stating that “. . . I do think that all of these people that could’ve helped me, didn’t. And I think that that really contributes to rape culture”.

Robin spoke to the role of her abusive relationship in defining her, and how she felt she could leave physical violence behind her:

I think I'm still going to be forever easy to abuse. That's just the way that I am. . . However, I would never be in another relationship where I was getting beaten. . . That is something that I can leave for myself that already happened. And I think it made me who I am now.
Robin and Becca both shared a desire to have others know what they have been through and how it shaped their needs and behaviours; Robin stated that:

I feel like it defines me a little bit and people kind of think I'm weird sometimes . . . at a certain point it's kind of like I have to say something because people don't understand why I'm like this.

Similarly, Becca said “. . .I just wish I could carry a little sign that says, ‘I'm not crazy, I've just had this really shitty experience.’”

**Long-Term Impacts on Self and Relationships: “I Want to Set My Own Boundaries, But I Don’t Know How”**

As well as the impacts to mental health and identity explored through earlier subthemes, participants in this study experienced longer term effects on relationships, both romantic and otherwise. Some of these difficulties were due to trouble trusting others; others were due to the challenges of a partner who has not been through dating violence understanding its effects.

Robin spoke to learning relationship norms all over again, stating that “it's still really hard for me since I was not able to talk to anybody or have guy friends or anything like that for years.”

Similarly, Becca described learning to set boundaries around intimacy in her marriage: “I want to set my own boundaries, but I don’t know how. And so, I'm uncomfortable. . . being intimate. . . I just think it's changed a lot how I feel about those things.”

Taylor described learning to control her emotions more after her ex-partner criticized her emotionality, but did not know if this was necessarily a good thing:

. . . Maybe it is just a defence because I felt really bad, and I do not want to be like this again. So, now I think I am more critical, more cautious, and I have been hanging out
with a guy here and he said that I am really cold . . . I am not cold, maybe it is just a
defence. I am afraid to share my feelings again with someone.

Robin described similar caution, and an assumption that new people in her life will use or abuse
her in some way:

. . . I just feel like I can't talk to people or connect with people because I feel like they're
just going to abuse me right away. . . And I have time and time again tried to trust people
. . . but my initial fear always comes out anyways and people still do usually use me. So
now I just don't even associate with almost anyone because I know that they're just going
to use me.

Rachel and Mallory both described difficulties in their current romantic relationships caused by
their PTSD symptoms; Rachel shared that physical intimacy can trigger flashbacks, while
Mallory expressed the difficulty of sharing her traumatic past with a romantic partner, as well as
challenges from her partner not understanding PTSD-like symptoms and behaviours.

As well as Becca’s concerns about setting boundaries in her marriage, she detailed the
impact of a more recent instance of sexual harassment, and how it has interacted with the
aftereffects of experiencing stalking. She described herself as being “incredibly sensitive to
people invading my personal space;” when an older male colleague acted inappropriately with
her, Becca described freezing and worrying about any consequences of rejecting him. Further,
she did not report this incident, saying that “. . .maybe I should’ve said something, but I didn’t. I
didn’t want to be that girl.” Finally, Becca talked about an unexpected physical effect of these
experiences, which again comes back to trying to establish a sense of safety:
I think I've put on weight to avoid men’s attention. . . if I fit that stereotypical what society deems as sexually appealing, then I put myself in danger. . . if I fit that description a little bit less, then maybe I'm a little bit safer.

Summary

In summation, this chapter has explored the experiences and impact of dating violence on the five participants in the present study, as reflected in the transcripts of their narrative interviews. After careful thematic analysis of the data, four overarching themes were found: Experiences of Dating Violence, Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship, Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers, and Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence. Within each overarching theme are numerous subthemes detailing the complex and rich nature of participants’ narratives. Together, these themes and the data extracts within present a picture of visceral and traumatic experiences as well as the resilience, resourcefulness, and determination of the women who experienced them.
Chapter 5 – Discussion

Summary of the Present Study and Integration with Literature

The present study used thematic analysis to explore the narratives of five young women exposed to dating violence; through this analysis, four overarching themes were found (Experiences of Dating Violence, Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship, Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers, and Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence). Each overarching theme consisted of several subthemes including Lies, Threats, Control, and Insidious Abuse; Social Media and Online Communication; Sexual Coercion, Abuse, and Health; Hope for Change, Turning Points, and Ending the Relationship; Reflections on the Relationship; Perceived Role of the Partner’s Mental Health and Concern for His Future Actions; Remembering and Mourning the Good; Family of Origin Abuse and Other Earlier Life Experiences; Minimization, Victim Blaming, and Isolation; Supports; Safety, Fear, Anxiety and Triggers; and Identity, Coping, and Integrating the Experience of Being Abused. The following chapter will integrate the overarching themes and selected subthemes with relevant literature in the field of dating and intimate partner violence, as well as exploring strengths and limitations of the study and implications for future research and for service providers.

Experiences of Dating Violence

The overarching theme Experiences of Dating Violence is the broadest theme in this study as it details concrete aspects of the participants’ narratives. This section of the chapter will focus on discussion of the following selected subthemes: Lies, Threats, Control, and Insidious Abuse; Social Media and Online Communication; Sexual Coercion, Abuse, and Health; and
Hope for Change, Turning Points, and Ending the Relationship. Focusing on these subthemes allows for a meaningful exploration of the literature within the scope of this thesis.

Overall, the participants’ experiences of dating violence were consistent with common experiences described in the literature on dating violence as well as on adult IPV. The central, pervasive role of the abusive partner’s control over our participants is particularly of note. Control is widely understood as an important facet of IPV, sometimes classified as a separate type of violence alongside distinct categories of physical violence and sexual violence (World Health Organization, 2012). A literature review of IPV typologies by Ali et al. (2016) highlights the critical role of control in characterizing commonly used typologies (e.g., Johnson’s classifications of Coercive Controlling Violence vs. Situational Couple Violence, which is not centered around control). Ali et al. (2016) suggest the importance of research continuing to look at coercive control not as a separate type or element of abusive behaviour but as its underlying foundation. This is consistent with a feminist understanding of IPV, wherein violence, threats, and isolation are all understood as purposeful attempts at achieving and maintaining patriarchal control (Chung, 2007; Ismail et al., 2007) rather than, for example, an inability to communicate or deal with anger in healthy ways (as proposed by Johnson’s typology of Situational Couple Violence; Kelly & Johnson, 2008).

Coercive control was also seen as central to young women’s experiences of abuse in numerous qualitative studies including that by Helm et al. (2017) in the form of monitoring behaviours and threats, Towns & Scott (2013) in what they termed “ownership behaviours”, as well as Ismail et al. (2007), Øverlien et al. (2020), and Toscano (2014). Like Robin’s experiences as described in the present study, this control included who the young women were allowed to spend time with, what they were allowed to wear, and their availability to their abusive partner,
both generally and in terms of sexual access. In our study as well as in prior literature, this level of control was typically established gradually as the relationship progressed and presented by the abusive partner as a sign of caring or of normalized jealousy (Ismail et al., 2007; Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011; Towns & Scott, 2013). As well, threats of self-harm and suicide, as experienced by Rachel, were described as a way abusive partners tried to keep young women from ending the relationship (Helm et al., 2017; Toscano, 2014).

Sexual control and pressure in the context of dating violence has also been a significant area of study, meriting separate discussion. Our participants did not identify experiences of sexual coercion as rape during our interviews but did describe unwanted sex which would meet a common definition of rape and/or sexual assault. Some participants in Toscano (2014) did name rape as part of their experience of dating violence, but also expressed ambivalence around using that term; other participants in that study did not identify their experiences as rape. Similarly, participants in Øverlien et al. (2020) described many acts that would meet the definition of rape (e.g., being forced to have sex in order to leave a situation, agreeing to have sex only after physical violence was used, and “giving up resisting” – p 809 – 810) but did not use that term. Importantly, Øverlien et al. (2020) also discussed whether true consent could be possible in a context where violence and the threat of violence has become a consistent and expected part of the relationship.

In the present study, sexual coercion and abuse was recounted by both Rachel and Robin; both reported their ex-partners manipulating them into unwanted sexual acts, in Rachel’s case by using passive-aggression, and in Robin’s case, by threatening to go outside the relationship for sex. Further, Robin detailed painful and unwanted acts of anal sex and fisting; she described engaging in certain sexual acts as being proof that sexual abuse was present in her relationship,
as she described them as “weird” and believed that they were outside of what would be typically desired by young women her age. Though it is important to destigmatize consensual non-conventional sexual behaviour, this phrasing was reminiscent of Øverlien (2013)’s description of (non-sexual) “bizarre acts” in households where patriarchal terrorism (a type of domestic violence) was present. In both contexts, the shame associated with these situations could serve to further isolate and silence the victims experiencing them.

Robin also described being shamed and beaten by her ex-partner for feeling “looser” than usual during sex; she later found out she was pregnant and attributed this physical change to the pregnancy. She went on to get an abortion; participants in Ismail et al. (2007) also experienced unwanted pregnancies during their abusive relationships, all of which were terminated. In Ismail et al. (2007), encountering healthcare providers while treating sexual health issues was seen as a possible entry point for young women experiencing abuse to be offered formal support, though this support was not offered in those cases or (as far as was mentioned) during Robin’s experience of pregnancy or abortion.

Both Robin and Rachel described ongoing difficulties in their current, non-abusive sexual relationships, with intimacy triggering PTSD symptoms for Rachel, and Robin struggling to know what “normal” sexual desire looks like and becoming sexually aggressive in her current relationship. Øverlien et al. (2020) also mentioned the role of inexperience in relationships and with sexuality as impacting what is interpreted as “normal” for young women experiencing dating violence; further, Offman and Matheson (2004) found that women who had experienced abuse reported more negative sexual self-perceptions (including shame around sexuality). Robin and Rachel’s experiences appear consistent with the findings of both studies and show the
importance in addressing the role of abuse when helping support young women to have healthy and fulfilling relationships and sexual lives.

The body of literature exploring the use of social media and technology in youth relationships and dating violence is becoming increasingly robust and utilizes a variety of terminology including techno vigilance (Toscano, 2014), electronic communication technology or ECT (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Stonard et al., 2017), and technology-assisted adolescent dating violence and abuse (TAADVA) (Stonard et al., 2017). Much of the ECT / social or digital media use described in these studies points to technology as another way for abusive partners to exert control, demand constant contact and accessibility from their partners, and otherwise enact abuse (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Øverlien et al., 2020; Toscano, 2014; Towns & Scott, 2013).

Interestingly, the adolescents in Stonard et al. (2017)’s focus group, who had not necessarily experienced dating violence themselves but were reflecting on norms among their peers, showed a gender disparity in their beliefs over the potential effects of dating violence via ECT. Young men in that study overall believed that hurtful messaging received over social media or texting would be easier to ignore and thus less impactful than face-to-face abuse, while young women expressed an inability to get away from such abuse and temptation to read and re-read emotionally harmful messages. Adolescents in Stonard et al. (2017) also reported that girls were more likely to enact control by demanding account and phone passwords and wanting constant communication from their partners. Narratives of participants in the present study were consistent with the finding that female survivors of dating violence found violence delivered via ECT to be as harmful as that experienced in person, but inconsistent with the idea that young women may be more likely to demand passwords or access to their partners’ social media when compared to young men. The women in our study largely experienced ECT as a way that their
abusive partners could access them at any time. Rachel described social media messaging as a key way that her partner threatened her, including late at night when they were not together in person. Taylor described her partner contacting her via social media to call her names after she’d left the scene of an argument, as well as describing him hacking into her Facebook profile after they had broken up (also described by a participant in Draucker & Martsolf, 2010), and Becca described the fear she felt upon receiving threatening emails in the middle of the night. The overall control that Robin’s partner had over her social media use is particularly of note, with him disallowing her from having male Facebook friends at all. This control is consistent with the overall ownership Robin’s partner displayed during their relationship, showing how social media and technology can further bolster already existing abuse and control.

Prior studies have also shown the potential for social media to act as a place where victims of abusive relationships can resist or shut down abuse, by blocking the partner or choosing to ignore their communications (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Draucker et al., 2016). Participants in this study did sometimes use social media in this way, with Rachel sharing her ongoing struggles with blocking her ex-partner and recognizing that to do so would be a significant step in moving on from him. Rachel also shared that she had first come across signs of abuse described in a blog and had recognized aspects of her own relationship in this description, helping her to see that her relationship was not healthy.

To wrap up this section, I will turn to the literature concerning young women ending and moving on from relationships in which they experienced violence. This is a common topic in IPV literature, unsurprisingly given the importance of empowering young women and supporting their safety when leaving these relationships. Draucker et al. (2016) looked at the narrative therapy concept of unique outcomes in the stories of survivors of dating violence and highlighted
moments in which participants accepted that their relationships were unhealthy, ended a relationship, and/or got their lives back on track; similarly, Helm et al. (2017) described the “getting out” stage of abusive relationships and discussed the support needed from friends and family during this challenging time. Toscano (2014) described the difficulties of breaking up, with multiple break-ups occurring before the relationship’s end, but also acknowledged circumstances such as moving for college as helping facilitate the breakup; finally, Reynolds and Shepherd (2011) described a combination of factors such as natural change during youth and young women encountering turning points where they faced the abusive nature of the relationship. These experiences were all consistent to some degree with the stories of participants in the present study; Taylor spoke of the importance of moving to Canada for school in helping her move on from her relationship, Rachel struggled to stop talking to her ex-partner but found graduating from their common high school helpful in creating distance, and Robin knew her relationship would naturally come to an end when her partner and his family moved to a different city. Additionally, prior to Robin’s ex-partner moving, she described a moment of clarity during an episode of physical violence where she decided it would be the last time her partner would beat her, like the types of unique outcomes described by Draucker et al. (2016). One can see the importance of highlighting this type of turning point when supporting and empowering someone trying to leave a violent relationship.

**Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship**

Subthemes included in Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship were Reflections on the Relationship, Perceived Role of the Partner’s Mental Health and Concern for His Future Actions and Remembering and Mourning the Good. This section will provide a brief discussion of noteworthy comparisons between the results of this study and relevant literature.
Of note is the relatively little self-blame expressed by our participants for their partner’s violence when reflecting on the relationship and causes of violence. Though Rachel and Robin each described a sense that they deserved to be abused or were accustomed to abuse because of their histories, and Rachel stated that she felt responsible for some of her partner’s actions during the relationship, most responsibility for violence was placed squarely on the partner perpetrating the violence. This contrasts with Chung’s (2007) study of adolescent women, both with and without direct experience of dating violence. The young women in Chung’s study overwhelmingly focused on individual traits of young female victims of dating violence (e.g., low self-esteem or being in love) rather than on the agency of the violent partner himself or on any social or gender constructs which perpetuate violence. Participants in the study by Ismail et al. (2007), young women who had directly experienced dating violence, also described self-blame, both for the actions of their partners and for staying in the relationship after violence occurred. A number of factors could be responsible for this difference in perspective, such as a cultural shift around views of gendered violence since both of the above studies were published in 2007, or any healing work engaged in by our participants since the end of their relationships which may have helped them placed responsibility for the violence on the abusive partner.

The perceived role of the abusive partner’s mental health in relation to his abusive behaviours was explored as part of this theme. It is important to emphasize that mental health disorders do not cause abuse and the belief that they might can contribute to stigma against those living with mental health concerns. Rather, I present the perceived role of mental illness in these violent relationships as part of a much larger picture and reiterate that mental illness does not remove responsibility from the perpetrators of IPV and other violence. As mentioned above, prior studies have described abusive partner’s threatening suicide as a manipulation tactic, such
as Helm et al (2017), Øverlien et al (2020), and Toscano (2014); within our study, Rachel disclosed similar experiences and how they led to her feeling responsible for keeping her partner from suicide daily. There is an opportunity, then, for health educators and mental health practitioners working with young people to focus on ensuring that youth know where to turn when faced with a partner or friend’s suicidality, regardless of if this suicidality is meant as manipulation or is a genuine expression of suffering. If youth like Rachel were able to gain outside support, this would take away the power of the abusive partner’s threats, and potentially start the abusive partner on a path towards mental health help and healthier communication and relationship strategies.

Also included in this overarching theme were reflections on the positive aspects of the abusive relationships; prior literature has often mentioned the impact of romantic love, loyalty, and attachment in keeping girls and women in abusive relationships. Participants in Toscano’s (2014) study described fantasies of getting married, Helm et al. (2017) featured youth describing their peers staying in bad relationships due to feeling committed and hoping for change, and Ismail et al. (2007) described participants staying in relationships so they could hold onto the romantic ideals they had inherited from popular culture and other sources. That said, none of these sources discussed concrete positive experiences from the relationships themselves; though it is important to not romanticize violent or abusive relationships, a fuller picture of the complexities of these relationships may be lost if participants do not feel comfortable acknowledging the nuance of their experiences. In the present study, Mallory recalled the isolation of grieving her deceased abusive partner while those in her life were glad he was gone; her description of this experience was consistent with disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2008).

**Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers**
The overarching theme Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers included subthemes regarding how participants interacted with the world outside of their relationships, including family, friends, and formal institutions. The subthemes were Family of Origin Abuse and Other Earlier Life Experiences; Minimization, Victim Blaming, and Isolation; Losing Trust; and Supports. This overarching theme carries important implications for service providers and educators who may interact with or wish to create programming for those potentially impacted by dating violence. In this section, I will touch upon literature relevant to the present study’s participants experiences of prior family violence, disclosing abuse, facing minimizing and dismissive responses, and dealing with systemic barriers, as well as highlighting areas where support was found.

Prior research has explored the role of exposure to family violence and early life adverse experiences in increasing young women’s vulnerability to dating violence (Cui et al., 2013; Manchikanti Gómez, 2011). Survivors of IPV have described already fractured and/or violent family contexts which they believed contributed to normalizing the violence in their intimate relationships (Ismail et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2011; Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011). In the present study, Rachel and Robin both discussed the role of parental abuse in shaping their identities and how they responded to and accepted dating violence, and Mallory attributed her early dating experiences and involvement with drugs to starting her on a path to further violence. It is evident that young women such as the ones in the present study must be offered support and early intervention such that they can be empowered to engage in healthy and fulfilling relationships in their adult lives.

Minimizing responses to dating violence disclosures were common in prior literature as well as the present study, as was the fear of being met with minimizing or dismissive responses
when disclosing. Many participants in prior research reported choosing not to disclose their experiences of violence at all due to fear of how others may respond. Participants in Ismail et al. (2007) expressed feelings of perceived dismissal when discussing disclosure to teachers or health professionals, believing that the adults in their lives would see the abuse as a normal part of dating and that these adults simply did not want to hear about dating violence. Though participants in the above study believed they might be dismissed in part due to their youth, similar fear of dismissal has also been reported in studies of adult women survivors of IPV (Wendt & Hornosty, 2010).

Participants in Øverlien et al (2020) received services from counsellors and psychologists but chose not to disclose that they were experiencing abuse, with one young woman stating that she expected the psychologist to tell her to leave the relationship and she did not want that reaction. Indeed, Edwards et al. (2012) found that being told to leave the relationship was among the responses to dating violence disclosure that participants found least helpful, where responding by listening, offering comfort, and offering a neutral perspective were perceived as helpful. Similarly, Kulkarni et al. (2012) described well-received IPV services as featuring empathy and supporting empowerment. In the present study, both Rachel and Becca disclosed their experiences (of emotional abuse and of stalking, respectively) to counsellors and university support staff only to be treated as if they were on equal footing in a simple conflict with their abuser; both were told to change their own behaviour to placate their abuser. The extent of Becca’s interactions with her local institutions including her university and police services, and the degree to which she faced barriers, was unique amongst the literature I reviewed. These experiences seem clearly indicative of the flawed system she was facing but may also indicate she went further in pursuing justice than many victims are able to, particularly given the number
of participants in prior literature who described keeping the violence they experienced completely secret at the time it was happening (Øverlien et al 2020; Toscano, 2014).

As opposed to facing the systemic barriers associated with formal institutions, most participants in Edwards et al. (2012) and Anderson et al. (2014) disclosed their experiences of abuse to informal supports such as family or friends. Chung (2007) reported a similar finding, stating that young women were unlikely to seek help from formal services and emphasizing the importance of ensuring that friends respond with non-judgement when receiving a disclosure of dating violence. Participants in the present study disclosed to both informal and formal sources of support, but experienced both helpful and unhelpful responses from each source. Robin was ignored by bystanders during and after public incidents of physical violence and was deeply impacted by her perception that no one cared. However, she also expressed gratitude for her friends, who navigated knowing about the violence in her relationship by expressing their concern but still treating her ex-partner with civility during the relationship. This seems to exemplify the non-judgement described by Chung (2007), and how this non-judgement can serve to prevent further alienating and isolating the person disclosing dating violence. In contrast, Rachel also disclosed to a friend, who then described the abuse as “drama,” a term Rachel found dismissive and hurtful. Interestingly, this term came up in Helm et al.’s (2017) study of adolescent descriptions of dating violence where it was used to describe ongoing, unhealthy, public conflict between couples, often over seemingly insignificant topics. “Drama,” then, may be a useful concept to explore in how younger people experience their relationships, communication, and conflict, and to assess for possible overlooked signs of abuse.

Overall, it is evident that regardless of whether it is a formal or informal support at hand, reactions to abuse play a critical role in disempowering or empowering victims of abuse.
Education can play a role, then, not just in teaching healthy dating behaviours directly but also in teaching helpful, compassionate, and appropriate ways for friends to respond when faced with disclosures of abuse. Further, similar education needs to be delivered not just to youth and their peers but at an institutional level for relevant professionals - though prior studies have noted barriers these professionals may face in dealing appropriately with dating violence disclosures which need to be addressed in turn (Edwards et al., 2020). Given how expectations of other’s responses acted to prevent young women in prior literature from disclosing at all, part of this education should focus on making sure those experiencing abuse know that they do have safe and non-judgmental people that they can turn to.

**Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence**

The final overarching theme in the present study is Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence; this section will touch on literature regarding the subthemes of Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation; Safety, Fear, Anxiety, and Triggers; and Identity, Coping, and Integrating the Experience of Being Abused, beginning with an overview of the deleterious effects associated with IPV. The varied and far-reaching harm caused by intimate partner violence and dating violence has been well-documented, with the World Health Organization emphasizing the importance of recognizing gender-based violence and IPV as public health issues and intervening appropriately (World Health Organization, 2012). Alongside the harm of physical injury and the dangers of intimate partner homicide, IPV has consistently been linked to ongoing chronic stress and associated health issues, depression, anxiety, PTSD, panic disorder, reproductive health issues, chronic pain, eating disorders, substance abuse, and more (Dutton et al., 2006; Filson et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2017; Moulding et al., 2021; Watkins et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2012). Participants in
Moulding et al. (2021) cited the role of coercive control and its resultant loss of freedom, identity, and other losses associated with IPV victimization as central to their distress during and after their abusive relationship. Similarly, Filson et al. (2010) found that powerlessness in relationships was associated with increased depression. Survivors of IPV have described the details of these impacts and experiences in qualitative studies such as Ismail et al. (2007), where participants recounted feeling physically and emotionally off balance and feeling sick from stress during their abusive relationships (p 467).

Participants in the present study reported ongoing symptoms consistent with those established in the literature: Taylor described depression, suicidality, and associated physical health effects such as unintended weight loss and eating difficulties, Rachel shared the day-to-day struggles of living with PTSD including flashbacks and dissociation, Mallory described flashbacks, self-harm, and nightmares, and Becca disclosed continuing struggles with anxiety which she continued to require medication for. The role of Taylor’s doubts regarding her identity and personal value in her depression were highly consistent with the loss of identity found by Moulding et al. (2021), as were Becca’s descriptions of herself as cowering and looking over her shoulder because of fear of her ex-partner. Participants in Moulding et al. (2021) also described an ongoing perception of the world as unsafe, describing panic attacks and hypervigilance like those described by Mallory in the present study.

Finally, I turn to literature regarding recovery and growth after IPV victimization. Making meaning, finding purpose, and/or structuring painful memories into a cohesive narrative are widely accepted bases for therapeutic intervention and healing which can be seen in trauma-focused literature as well as in the present study. Participants in Draucker et al. (2016), a study focused on the narrative therapy concept of unique outcomes in those who experienced dating
violence, described making changes in their lives after their experiences of teen dating violence. They reflected on what they would no longer tolerate in future dating relationships as well as how they re-prioritized school and friendship and described a sense that the abuse they had experienced contributed to their current sense of self. Participants in Reynolds and Shepherd (2011) described similar meaning and attributed their growth partially to their stage of life, pointing to youth as a source of resilience. In the present study, Mallory described her abusive relationship and the loss of her partner as changing everything about her and radically shifting her values; Robin stated that she would never tolerate another physically violent relationship but that her prior experiences of abuse had made her who she is; Taylor and Becca both felt drawn towards promoting gender equality because of their experiences. Rachel (the youngest participant in the study) shared that she was still learning about her own identity in the wake of abuse and the absence of her ex-partner. These reflections echoed those found in previous literature, while demonstrating the capacity of participants in the present study to reclaim their senses of selves and their stories.

**Strengths of the Study**

The primary strength of the present study is the rich, detailed, and vulnerable narratives told by the study’s participants. The women involved were willing and able to engage in the questions and prompts given in an articulate, raw manner that provides invaluable insight to experiences of intimate partner violence, a topic that is by its nature difficult to study from the inside (Snyder, 2019). As well, the participants in our study had wide ranging experiences of dating violence, including stalking, psychological and emotional abuse, and sexual and physical violence; though the qualitative nature of the study and the small sample means that
generalization is not possible, the study was able to capture a surprising cross-section of experiences.

Another strength of the present study is the amount of data generated; interviews ranged in length from 40 – 100 minutes, which resulted in 90 pages of transcribed text. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of thematic analysis, 263 unique codes were generated during initial analysis. The 17 final subthemes reflect a sometimes-challenging process of refining and reducing the data items of note; such an involved process could only result from such valuable, extensive, and detailed raw data.

The timing of this study can be seen as both a strength and a limitation, though I will argue that it is ultimately a strength. Our interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2017, just prior to the start of the massive #MeToo movement. It is impossible to know whether the response to our recruitment or the answers to our questions would have differed had they taken place even a few weeks later, as media and social media content regarding sexual assault and harassment hit a fever pitch. The data analysis and writing of this report has taken place over the few years following #MeToo, during which I have seen the public perception of gender-based violence and related issues change repeatedly. This cultural moment has been at times motivating, frustrating, and energizing, and has influenced and framed my analysis and engagement with the data in ways that are obvious and ways I am likely unaware of. Ultimately, I believe that this research is as timely now (as I complete writing in the summer of 2022, following the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the United States, and the highly publicized defamation trial in the wake of Amber Heard’s claims of domestic violence at the hands of her ex-husband, Johnny Depp) as it was in the early days of #MeToo, and serves as a reflection of the back-and-forth nature of change in feminism and anti-violence work.
Limitations of the Study

As a qualitative study, our sample was purposely small, and results cannot be expected to be generalizable as those from a large quantitative study might be. Further, though the participants’ narratives and themes found within are consistent with prior research into dating violence and intimate partner violence in general, there is much to learn about other demographic perspectives which were not explored in our study. Women who participated in our study were all connected to the university, primarily as students. Though we did place recruitment materials at a community agency serving survivors of IPV, participants largely reported finding out about the study through online advertising on the university website student portal (PAWS). Student participants are likely to be more educated and have more resources and access to support than a more marginalized population, thus it is crucial to seek out and amplify the voices of survivors of IPV who may face multiple barriers and oppressions not seen in our study. Further, our only gathering of demographic information was in the context of determining if participants met inclusion criteria for the study; we did not ask about race, ability, 2SLGBTQ community membership, religion, newcomer or immigrant status, or other possible aspects of identity which may have impacted the experiences of our participants. The open-ended nature of our interview prompts gave space for participants to self-identify any experiences that may have been relevant for them; however, upon reflection this may not have been enough to ensure that any BIPOC and/or queer voices were heard and amplified. This is particularly of note given the violence faced by Indigenous women in Canada and Saskatchewan specifically and given the barriers 2SLGBTQ people may face when experiencing IPV. Finally, our participants reflected deeply on their perceptions of their abusive partners’ behaviours and motivations; though these insights are valuable, we are obviously limited by not having access to the partners’ own perspectives. For
safety reasons, as well as the scope and focus of this study, this was a necessary limitation; however, one must emphasize that in terms of ending and preventing IPV, it is the abusive partner who must be understood as the onus and responsibility of ending violence belongs with them.

**Considerations for Future Research**

A number of the subthemes found in this study are rife with potential for future, focused research, including the use and impact of social media and online communication in dating violence, the use of sexual violence and coercion in abusive relationships, the potential for bystander intervention and role of institutional supports and barriers for those experiencing IPV, the role of grief and mourning in recovering from dating violence or IPV, the transitional nature of young adulthood as an opportunity and source of resilience in moving on from abuse, and how victims/survivors of IPV make meaning and integrate their experiences into their narrative identity and sense of self. As well, usage of the term “drama” to describe and minimize abuse in adolescent dating relationships may warrant further exploration. The body of research around dating violence and IPV has been growing rapidly particularly in the last ten years but given the breadth and complexity of experiences associated with them, there is no shortage of areas for future researchers to explore.

Given the prevalence of IPV in Saskatchewan, Canada, where this study took place, further research examining the cultural context of this province and how it interacts with IPV would provide significant value. It would be interesting see what beliefs about relationships, gender, and power are held by perpetrators of violence in Saskatchewan; as stated above, though it is crucial to understand the perspectives of victims/survivors of IPV in order to best know how to support them, improve their safety, and remove barriers to leaving violent relationships, the
responsibility for stopping violent behaviour lies with the perpetrator and thus they must be a focus of future research. Further, research specifically targeting those in marginalized demographics as discussed above is necessary to learn how best to support the people in our communities who may need it most.

**Considerations for Service Providers**

The contents of our participants’ narratives contain much valuable information for researchers as well as for mental health professionals, anti-violence workers, healthcare professionals, educators, and support staff in educational settings, particularly regarding bystander intervention. Though all participants described experiences of help-seeking in some form, Robin, Rachel, and Becca’s stories were particularly of note in showing the deleterious effects of negative responses to help-seeking. These stories can show us the importance of being responsive, compassionate, and recognizing the unique power dynamics of abusive situations. Both Rachel and Becca reported experiences in which someone in a helping role treated them as on equal footing as their abuser, which they experienced as dismissive; both were essentially silenced by these interactions and others. Further, Mallory reported a sense of isolation after the death of her abusive partner, as she was grieving while her loved ones were happy and relieved that her partner was gone. This can serve as an important reminder for mental health professionals of the complexity and inherent contradictions that can be found in the end of a violent relationship.

As well as opportunities for bystander intervention, service providers can be encouraged to seek out and foster turning points or (to use an intervention from narrative therapy) unique outcomes in the stories of those experiencing dating violence or IPV. For our participants, these turning points or unique outcomes came about in the context of life transitions and opportunities
and/or in changes in perspective. Prior research has shown that the adolescent and young adult age groups are rife with these opportunities for change, and narrative identity shift (Draucker et al., 2016); this, then, is something to be encouraged by clinicians.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present study adds rich, detailed, narrative accounts to the existing body of research on dating violence. The overarching themes of Experiences of Dating Violence; Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship; Outside Responses and Systemic Barriers; and Mental Health, Identity, and Long-Term Impacts of Dating Violence bolster existing research in these areas as well as highlighting areas worthy of further research and offering implications for mental health professionals. Strengths of the study include the timeliness and place of the research and the vulnerability and detail shared by the participants, though we did face limitations by engaging with a population with more dominant voices. Overall, this study has much to offer in exploring the depth and breadth of experiences, reflections, and perceptions of young women who have experienced dating violence, and how peers and professionals alike can act to support and empower survivors of intimate partner violence.
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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT POSTER

Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education
University of Saskatchewan

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH ON DATING VIOLENCE

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study
Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to take part in:

- An individual interview (approximately 60 – 90 minutes) and follow-up
- 2-day workshop to teach you how to create digital stories, and share them with other participants (6 hours per day)
- A focus group where your experience of preparing your digital story will be discussed (approximately 2 – 2.5 hours)

In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $100 honorarium after the focus group phase of the study. Lunch and refreshments will be provided throughout the project.

For more information, or to discuss your suitability for participation in this study, please contact:
Jessica Bauer-McLure (Research Assistant; MEd Student) at:

[phone number specifically for study] or
Email: [e-mail address specifically for study]

This study has been reviewed by, and received approval through, the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan.
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT (TELEPHONE DISCUSSION)

The research assistant (RA) will conduct brief telephone screening interviews with interested participants. The RA will ensure that these telephone calls are made from a private location to best protect the confidentiality of potential study participants. The RA will begin by asking potential participants if they are a) in a location where they feel safe and comfortable discussing their experiences of dating violence and b) able and interested in doing the screening at this time. Screening will either proceed, or be scheduled for another time. If interested participants initially contact the RA via email rather than telephone, email correspondence will be used to schedule the telephone screening at a mutually agreeable time.

Screening will include demographic questions, asking for name, birthdate/age, preferred contact information, occupation, and family information (e.g. marital status, if participant is a parent). This will help build rapport before asking more sensitive questions.

The RA will then ask:

- **When did your experience of dating violence occur?** (This will indicate if the inclusion criteria for the study, having experienced dating violence within the past 3 years, is met).
- **Have you sought counselling or other support for your experiences of dating violence?**
- **Are you experiencing any current, acute stress relating to your experience, such that being involved in this project could be too difficult?**
- **What would you like to share about your experience of dating violence?** (Broad narrative prompt allowing the potential participant to share their story to the degree they feel comfortable)
- **What do you hope to get out of your participation in this project?**

The RA will describe the project, the requirements for participation (e.g., participating in one narrative interview and follow-up; attending a 2-day workshop; participating in a 2.5-hour focus group), and encourage participants to ask any questions they may have. The RA will then ask:

- **Do you anticipate being able to make a reasonable commitment to complete the project requirements as described?**

Regardless of whether a participant is a ‘fit’ for the project, the RA will give referrals to counsellors through University of Saskatchewan Counselling Services, Family Service Saskatoon, Mental Health and Addictions Services, and/or the Saskatoon Sexual Assault and Information Centre, as relevant for each participant.
If the person is a ‘fit,’ a mutual time will be arranged to complete the narrative interview as soon as is mutually convenience.
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM for INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence

Researcher(s)
Principal Investigator: Stephanie Martin, PhD, RDPsyCh (Associate Professor, Educational Psychology & Special Education), (306) 966-5259, Stephanie.Martin@usask.ca.

Research Assistant: Jessica Bauer-McLure, (MEd Student, Educational Psychology & Special Education), empower.women@usask.ca

Purpose of the Research
This project is designed to: 1) articulate young women’s stories about dating violence, 2) use digital storytelling to generate and mobilize knowledge about their experiences, and 3) assess the potential for individual empowerment and social impact arising from the use of digital storytelling with young women exposed to dating violence.

Procedures
There are three parts to this project:

1) During the spring or summer 2017, you will share your story first in an audio-taped individual narrative interview lasting 60-90 minutes. The interviewer will take care to help you reflect on your experiences and meaning of these experiences in a safe, empowering manner. Your interview will be transcribed through the Social Sciences Research Laboratory, and the transcriptionist will sign an ‘Agreement to Confidentiality’ form. You will attend a brief follow-up individual interview to go over your anonymized transcribed interview and descriptive results in order to further explore your story of dating violence and how you might want to express it via digital storytelling. You will be asked if you would like to release your anonymized transcript to the researchers for a later cross-case analysis of young women’s experiences of dating violence, for Jessica Bauer-McLure’s Master’s thesis. If so, you will sign a Transcript Release Form. At this time, you will be provided with additional details about the digital storytelling workshop.

2) In the fall of 2017 you will attend a 2-day (6-hours per day) digital storytelling workshop during which you, alongside your fellow participants, will create your own digital story video by
writing a script and putting together personally meaningful imagery and audio. The workshop will close with a group sharing of each participants’ digital stories.

3) Shortly after the workshop, you will attend an audio-taped focus group to share your experience of constructing your story and discuss the utility of using this kind of approach to empower young women exposed to dating violence. The audio-taped record will be transcribed and identifying data deleted prior to analysis. (A separate consent form will be discussed and signed at the focus group interview).

This project will have up to 10 participants, all young women who have been exposed to dating violence. Project activities will require approximately 17 hours of your time. All project events will take place at the University of Saskatchewan, in private and comfortable spaces.

Funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Development Grant

There are no real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest foreseen by the researchers involved in this project.

Potential Risks

- Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of study, it is anticipated that you may experience emotional discomfort from revisiting past traumatic experiences; however, digital storytelling methodology and the nature of the workshop, group sharing and focus group are meant to empower participants. It is anticipated that the safeguards in place (e.g., the availability of a professional counsellor and the support of the group) will counterbalance any negative experiences and leave participants feeling autonomous, safe, and supported.
- Researchers have a duty to report imminent harm to participants or others if reported by participants (e.g. serious suicidal or homicidal ideation); we also have a duty to report if it comes to our attention that minors are at risk of harm. Should this situation arise, it will be approached with great respect, collaboration, and care.
- You can choose how widely you wish to disseminate your completed digital story; if you choose to share it widely, one cannot rule out the possibility of social repercussions. However, whether or not to share would be your choice, and considerations around sharing your digital story will be discussed during the focus group.

How are Risks Addressed?

- A professional counsellor will be available during and after the workshop and focus group
- The workshop will be concluded with a 2 – 2.5 hour focus group which will give all participants the opportunity to debrief their experiences.
- The PI and RA are both trained in counselling psychology and mindful of mitigating risk to participants however possible. The PI has been a Registered Doctoral Psychologist in Saskatchewan since 2002 and is an Associate Professor (Counselling Psychology) who teaches coursework on ethics, counselling skills and qualitative research, and who has completed and supervised a great deal of research with girls and women who have
experienced trauma. The RA is in the MEd in the School and Counselling Psychology program and has completed practicum terms at Family Service Saskatoon, with experience in group and individual counselling with survivors and perpetrators of intimate partner violence.

- The research team will emphasize creating safe spaces for participants, through displaying and modeling compassion and empathy.

Potential Benefits
- We anticipate (but cannot guarantee) that digital storytelling will yield both personal healing or therapeutic benefits for participants and provide a powerful educational tool for young people engaged in intimate relationships to express yourselves and explore your stories.
- The research community and society may benefit from further exposure to the voices of survivors of violence in dating relationships. The more the experiences of survivors are explored, the more awareness society has of the sequelae and trauma caused by dating violence; this awareness is necessary to draw societal attention to anti-violence work and the importance of education as early intervention.

Compensation
In order to offset the costs of your participation (i.e., child care, parking, etc.) and to recognize the significant time commitment required for this study, you will receive an honorarium in the amount of $100, after your participation in the focus group. You will also learn the art of how to tell digital stories.

Confidentiality
- Participation in this project is voluntary; you are free to withdraw from the research project at any time without any consequence of any sort. Due to the group setting of the digital storytelling workshop, confidentiality and anonymity is not possible. The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion, but cannot guarantee that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of discussions outside the group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality.
- Your digital story may include identifying information, if you wish. It is your choice as to how widely you wish to share this story, and your choice as to what to include within your story. During the focus group we will discuss potential known risks/benefits of sharing a story which includes identifying information.
- All data records, including audio-taped individual interviews, interview transcripts, audio-taped focus group, focus group transcript will include only de-identified information. Your name or other identifying information will never appear on any data record or in presentations or publications based on this data.

Storage of Data
- All consent forms will be stored separately from data records. All data (audio files and transcripts) will be kept securely (password protected, locked office and file cabinets) by
the Principle Investigator for a minimum of 5 years, at which point electronic and paper files will be appropriately destroyed.

- Your completed digital story is your property to share as you choose beyond this research project. However, in the focus group you can indicate if you want to release your anonymized digital story to the researchers for their use as exemplars for scholarly purposes.

**Right to Withdraw**

- Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research project at any point, for any reason before research results have been aggregated.
- If you choose withdraw, this will not affect your employment or professional standings in any way.
- Should you wish to withdraw, please e-mail or phone Stephanie or Jessica (see above).

**Follow up**

To obtain results from the study, please email Jessica Bauer-McLure (Research Assistant) at empower.women@usask.ca or Dr. Stephanie Martin (Principle Investigator) at Stephanie.martin@usask.ca. Results will available by Fall of 2018.

**Questions or Concerns**

Please contact the researchers using the information at the top of this Consent Form.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan (#17-43) and University of Regina Research (17-46) Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975 (out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975), or the University of Regina Research Ethics Office ethics.office@uregina.ca (306) 585-4775 (out of town participants may call collect).

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

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**Name of Participant**  
**Signature**  
**Date**

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**Researcher’s Signature**  
**Date**
A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
APPENDIX D: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS and PREPARATION GUIDELINES FOR DIGITAL STORYTELLING WORKSHOP

Upon participant’s arrival to the scheduled interview, the interviewer will attend to environmental issues (spacing of chairs, tables, audio-recording devices) to maximize participants’ comfort.

The interviewer will welcome the participant to the interview, review the consent form, address any questions they may have, and remind them of the purpose of the interview, namely to have them share and the interviewer genuinely listen to their stories about the abuse they have experienced in their dating relationships and how it has impacted them, in preparation for the Digital Storytelling Workshop.

In keeping with the purpose of narrative interviewing, which is to provide ‘space’ for a person to tell a story, the interview will be broadly open-ended and conversational in tone; minimal probes will be used to assist with as fulsome a telling of stories as possible, from the participants own perspectives.

(Opener - setting the stage)

*Thank you for your interest in sharing your story with us in preparation for the digital storytelling workshop... Our purpose today is to provide an opportunity for you to tell your story about being abused in your dating relationship(s) in as much detail as you feel comfortable. Before we get started, what drew you to being interested in participating?*

(Primary narrative question – telling the story)

*Please tell your story about being abused in your dating relationship(s).*

(Possible probes)

*How did the abuse start?*

*How would you describe the experience of being abused in your dating relationship(s)? How would you describe your thoughts and feelings regarding the experience?*

*What impact has the abuse had on you?*

- *Your self*
- *Your body, mind and health*
- *Your current and future relationships*
- *Your future*
Tell me a little bit about how it felt to share your story today.

What would you like other young women to know about being abused in dating relationship?

After the interview, the participants will be provided with a handout that describes what will happen in the Digital Storytelling Workshop, and what they will need to do in preparation for this workshop. Specifically, they will be:

1) instructed to use the thematic summary of their transcribed interview (generated from the RA’s analysis of the transcribed narrative interview and confirmed in a follow-up meeting with the participants) to generate a 300-500 word script (they will also have their full interviews to inform this process);

2) asked to select a variety of artifacts, memorabilia, photographic images, and even music that best represents aspects of their personal stories, and prepare to bring these to the Digital Storytelling Workshop; and

3) informed about some basic ethical considerations related to the production of digital stories (i.e., safeguarding others’ right to anonymity and reducing risk to third parties).
APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

Research Ethics Boards (Behavioural)
TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

Title: Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence

I, ____________________________, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Jessica Bauer-McLure. I hereby authorize the release of my anonymized transcript to Dr. Stephanie Martin, to be used to complete a cross-case narrative analysis of young women’s experience with dating violence. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

__________________________________________
Name of Participant

__________________________________________
Date

__________________________________________
Signature of Participant

__________________________________________
Signature of researcher
APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

After the digital workshop and story sharing, focused questions (focus group) will be posed to the participants that address the overall impact, utility, and feasibility of using digital storytelling as a healing and knowledge generation tool in the area of dating violence.

Anticipated questions that will be posed to participants include:

1. What was it like for you to learn about digital storytelling?
2. What was it like for you to apply digital storytelling to your own experience of abuse in intimate relationships?
3. Has this process been helpful to your well-being? If so, in what ways?
4. Has this process been unhelpful to your well-being? If so, in what ways?
5. Has being involved in this project shaped your understanding about intimate partnerships? If so, in what ways?
6. What was hard or challenging about the digital storytelling process?
7. What was fun or engaging about the digital storytelling process?
8. What are your thoughts about how we might use digital storytelling to create individual and social change related to abuse in early intimate partnerships?
9. Do you want to share your stories with others? If so, who, when, where, and how?
10. What else would you like to comment on about your experience of being involved in this digital storytelling process/project.
11. Please share any advice you think might help to us as we continue to use digital storytelling methodology in anti-violence work.
Title: Using Digital Storytelling to Empower Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence

I, ________________________________, have participated in the digital storytelling workshop and produced a video that represents my personal experience with dating violence. I have been briefed on the risks and benefits of sharing my video with others beyond the research process. After careful consideration, I hereby authorize the release of my anonymized (personal and third-party) digital story to Dr. Stephanie Martin, to be used for illustrative purposes at professional conferences and other appropriate audiences. I have received a copy of this Video Release Form for my own records.

_____________________________  ______________________________
Name of Participant                Date

_____________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Participant           Signature of researcher
APPENDIX H: REFLECTIVE DIGITAL STORY SCRIPT

The Personal Is Political, the Personal is Academic: A story of dating violence research

Summer thickness is in the air, itself rich with story. Young women respond to our recruitment poster. I'm the research assistant, the student, inhabiting this space to listen, provide comfort, and create a record to analyze. The interview room already feels full; myself and the woman across from me know what we are to discuss today.

When she is ready, I turn on my recorder.

Her narrative emerges, a creature released from its cage. She tells me of intimate partner violence, of loss, abuse, struggle, violation. Growth, resilience, making meaning. A boisterous laugh, a silent tear, fidgeting with a pen, focusing on the small lamp between us when she can't look at me directly. Sometimes it is a story she's never told before.

It is the summer of 2017; the MeToo movement is just beginning. The personal is political. The personal is professional. The personal is academic.

These stories are not mine to tell, not yet; but each story becomes a part of my story.

Sometimes I wonder how many stories like hers (and not like hers) I have heard over my still short career. Sometimes the stories have a familiar shape - what was thought to be love or friendship or fun turns soulcrushing, controlling, damaging, stifling. Joy turns to fear. Joy and fear blend together, as do love and loss; trust is broken; a turning point comes. Then another, another. Leaving, once, twice, 10 times. Relief and pain. Yet every person is unique - each specific indignity, each specific private resistance, reminds me of why we do this work.


As the author Neil Gaiman wrote - "As unoriginal as any other tale, as unique as any other life. Lives are snowflakes- forming patterns we have seen before . . . but still unique. . . Without individuals we see only numbers. . . With individual stories, the statistics become people- but even that is a lie, for the people continue to suffer in numbers that themselves are numbing and meaningless. . . We draw our lines around these moments of pain, remain upon our islands, and they cannot hurt us"

The personal is political. The personal is professional. The personal is academic.

These stories are told at first in a converted classroom on our prairie campus during summer storms and sunshine days through individual interviews; then during early, crisp fall mornings
with our laptops, huddled around coffee. This is what we've been working towards - a digital storytelling workshop. The participants learn a new language for old self-expression. Over the course of a weekend, the women meet, reunite, find comfort and encouragement in each other. The stories are told through songs, pictures, video, voiceovers, screenshots of texts and emails. Stories transform from clenched fists tightly held to fluid, changing, growing art.

As academics, as mental health professionals, we erase the lines between us. We find the common themes. Participants, students, researchers; we are all making meaning together, and the meaning we choose, in 2018, is one of speaking out. Of sharing stories. Of saying, ME TOO. Even when it hurts. With pain, comes growth. With truth, comes connection.

Research is personal. Research is political. Research is therapeutic. Research is poetry.
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<th>Overarching Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Codes</th>
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<td>Lies, Threats, Control, and Insidious Abuse: “If there's no consequence, he tries again”</td>
<td>Jealousy/possessiveness, Emotional manipulation / provoking guilt, Controlling her actions, Manipulating others against her, Pushing boundaries</td>
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<td>Alcohol and Substance Use: “I had to be extra nice when he was drunk”</td>
<td>Alcohol and driving, Drug dealing lifestyle, Addiction recovery, Relapse</td>
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<td>Social Media and Online Communication: “I was not allowed to have Facebook with guys on it for about a year”</td>
<td>Facebook and messaging, Emails, Tinder and jealousy, Control of communication, Blocking him</td>
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<td>Sexual Coercion, Abuse, and Health: &quot;I don't want to be doing this, but you're doing it anyways&quot;</td>
<td>Sexual assault, Sexual coercion, Pregnancy and abortion, Sexually Transmitted Infection</td>
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<td>Incidents of Physical Violence: “I Just Begged... For Him to Let Me Go”</td>
<td>Public conflicts / violence, Bilateral violence, Crying in public, Conflict out of nowhere</td>
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<td>Hope for Change, Turning Points, and Ending the Relationship: “This is going to be the last time he kicks my ass”</td>
<td>Hoping for change, Broken up and trying to move on, Getting away, Academic opportunities, Ending contact</td>
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<td>Trying to Understand the Partner and the Relationship: “He was hard to stop liking”</td>
<td>Reflections on the Relationship: “Try to fill his empty”, Blaming her, His self-awareness / guilt, His apologies, Rejection as his motivation, Fear of her leaving</td>
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<td>Perceived Role of the Partner’s Mental Health and Concern for His Future Actions: “He sunk right into it”</td>
<td>His cognitive state and violence, Partner threatening suicide, Perpetrator escalation, Feeling responsible for ex-partner’s behavior</td>
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<td>Family of Origin Abuse and Other Earlier Life Experiences: “I don’t really know what I would be like if I haven’t experienced abuse”</td>
<td>Normalization / Expectation of Abuse Personal history Comparing to other relationships</td>
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<td>“Not that bad” Limitations placed on victim Others’ judgement Hiding abuse from family Isolation from friends and community</td>
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<td>Losing Trust: “They Could’ve Helped Me and They Didn’t”</td>
<td>Told to keep quiet Systemic sexism Not taken seriously Not being believed No process in place</td>
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<td>Supports: “Everybody in my life rallied around to be a buffer for [my son]”</td>
<td>Friend support Family support Institutional support Friends’ experiences of abuse</td>
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<td>Post-Traumatic Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation: “This experience has drained a lot out of my life”</td>
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<td>Fear of abuser / of contact from abuser Boundaries / security Anxiety / hypervigilance Flashbacks Nightmares</td>
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<td>Love, sex, and dating after abuse Cautious in relationships Difficulty trusting See people more critically Not speaking up Impact on life path / future</td>
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