

Exploring Gender Differences: Socially Interactive Technology Use/Abuse Among Dating Teens

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored gender differences in socially interactive technology (SIT) use/abuse among dating teens from Michigan ($N = 23$). Focus group transcripts were coded using three categories: (1) type of SIT (e.g., social networking); (2) abusive action (e.g., monitoring); and (3) consequence (e.g., jealousy). Texting and social networking were the most commonly used types of SIT. Spying/monitoring, sexting, and password sharing/account access were the most common abusive actions. Distrust and jealousy were the most frequent consequences. Young men and women differed in their conceptualization of SIT abuse. Most participants agreed that some abusive actions were typical parts of adolescent dating experiences.

Keywords

qualitative research, socially interactive technologies, teen dating, relationships, psychological abuse, gender differences

Introduction

As socially interactive technologies (SITs) quickly pervade and expand the landscape of teen communication, growing concern has developed among scholars, educators, and prevention workers regarding the potential for teens to misuse technology to threaten, demean, or control teen dating partners. Little academic research has explored the prevalence and etiology of these behaviors. Private foundations and large corporations have primarily led the charge to better understand how teens are experiencing and/or are affected by cyberbullying and SIT-driven dating abuse. Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted one of the first surveys to examine teens' use of SIT and found that of social network users, 39% reported being bullied, compared with 22% of online teens who do not

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use social networks (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin Macgill, & Smith, 2007). This same study found that 15% of youth had received explicit pictures from a peer. Another survey conducted by Liz Claiborne Inc. found that 25% of participating youth reported experiencing teen dating violence (TDV) facilitated by technology (Picard, 2007). Following suit, an online survey conducted by MTV and the Associated Press found nearly half (47%) of randomly recruited 14- to 17-year-olds ($N = 1,355$) reported that they consider digital abuse to be a serious problem for people of their age (Associated Press & MTV, 2011).

Experts define SITs as technologies including social networking, texting, sexting, instant messaging, or video chatting (Pierce, 2009), and SIT dating abuse is defined as using any form of SIT to threaten, stalk, demean, or control one's dating partner. SIT abuse among dating partners is punctuated by coercive and controlling behaviors commonly discussed as psychological abuse (Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu, & MacFadden, 2011; Teten, Ball, Valle, Noonan, & Rosenbluth, 2009). The Centers for Disease Control (2012) describes psychological abuse as verbal remarks that diminish the receiver's sense of self-worth. Teens appear to be using SITs to engage in psychologically abusive behaviors in dating relationships but evidence is not yet clear as to how or why teens might be engaging in SIT abuse in their dating relationships or what role gender plays. To this end, we describe qualitative research that explores how teens perceive the potential risks and benefits of SIT in their dating relationships as well as the extent to which these perceptions vary by gender. We begin by reviewing the scarce literature on technology and TDV, with special attention to gender differences in technology use and in dating conflicts.

SIT Behavior Among Teens

As recently as 2011, 77% of U.S. teens aged 12 to 17 owned cell phones and almost one fourth of teens owned a smartphone (Lenhart, 2012). Teen males and females tend to own cell phones at approximately the same rate. These data also suggest that teens use texting as the primary mode of communication where the median number of texts exchanged on a daily basis is 60. In 2011, approximately two thirds of teens texted daily to communicate with their peers, while 39% talked to their peers via cell phone daily. Internet use among teens is even more widespread than cell phone use. An estimated 95% of U.S. teens use the Internet and 80% of those use social networking sites, such as Facebook. In the last decade, there has been an upsurge of studies documenting the increasing prevalence of electronic aggression, online harassment, and cyberbullying among teens (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Holfeld & Grabe, 2012; Lenhart et al., 2007). However, there is relatively little research that focuses on SIT use and abuse within teen dating relationships.

SIT Use and Abuse Among Teen Dating Partners

With widespread use of the Internet, cell phones, and social networking sites among teens, SIT abuse has become pervasive among teen dating partners; one in four teens report having been the victim of some form of cyber aggression in their dating relationship (Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lackman, 2013). The Liz Claiborne Inc. study found one in three teens who were in a relationship received more than 10 text messages per hour from their dating partner inquiring about their whereabouts, who they are with, or what they are doing (Picard, 2007). This same study found 25% of teens had a partner who insistently contacted them via SITs despite their resistance, and 1 in 10 teens in relationships reported being physically threatened via SITs (e.g., e-mail, text, chat, instant message, social networking, etc.). SITs provide potential constant contact that increases opportunities for behaviors considered by many adults to be psychological abuse (Mishna et al., 2011). The frequently hidden nature of SIT abuse compounds this increased opportunity for psychologically abusive behaviors; half of teens in the Liz Claiborne study agreed that new SITs make it more likely for abuse to occur and easier to keep secret (Picard, 2007).

Teens may engage in SIT abuse in a dating relationship by controlling a partner's social networking friends list and/or online interactions, constantly monitoring their partners through Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites, sending partners threatening text messages, demeaning a partner via status updates or comments, pressuring a partner to share sexually explicit pictures, demanding that partners immediately respond to texts, and accessing partners' accounts and cell phones to monitor their interactions (Is this Abuse?, 2012). While teens may not necessarily conceptualize these to be acts of abuse, practitioners in the field of TDV consider these acts to be psychologically abusive (Weisz & Black, 2009). In an effort to delineate between psychological abuse and more normative relationship conflict, one qualitative study explored teens' views about the purposes of electronic aggression and SIT use in their dating relationships (Draucker & Matsolf, 2010). Cell phones, text messaging, social networking, instant messaging, and e-mailing were used for specific purposes in teen dating relationships. These included different ways to make a stronger connection with partners as well as ways of expressing anger and seeking help.

Baker and Helm (2010) analyzed focus group transcripts on TDV from 51 Pacific Islander youth. Their research indicated that teens conceptualize TDV in terms of thresholds (e.g., the level of violence that constitutes actual TDV). They found teens generally agree that physical and sexual violence is unequivocally serious, but they define some forms of emotional abuse and cyber control as irritating rather than serious. The teens in these focus groups identified social networking as a vehicle for relationship problems, such as jealousy, cheating, rumor spreading, and fighting. They also discussed the insidious use of cell phones to monitor, harass, stalk, and control dating partners. Although some teens cogently discuss the problematic implications of SIT abuse, they often describe many SIT behaviors as nothing more than irritating aspects of dating relationships.

The Role of Gender

Feminist theory, consistent with ecological theory, suggests that the differing social positions of young women and young men will lead them to handle dating conflicts differently (Ismail, Berman, & Ward-Griffin, 2007). Families and communities convey different values and expectations to teens according to their gender, and these values affect their dating behaviors (Chung, 2007). While feminist theory has sometimes been applied to TDV, it has not yet been used to help clarify potential gender differences in SIT abuse. Given the socioemotional differences between young men and young women, there may be gender differences in how SITs are used in dating relationships. Young men tend to be more aggressive and impulsive (Perry & Pauletti, 2011). Young women tend to be more hesitant to demonstrate outward aggression, but when they can anonymously or collectively show aggression, their level of aggression is thought by some to approximate that of males (Hyde, 2005).

There is debate in the literature regarding the extent to which males and females equally perpetrate various types of violence, and space does not permit an extensive discussion. A meta-analytic study (Archer, 2000) provides some concise evidence. The meta-analysis, focused on studies of adults and teens, found that women, especially young women, were somewhat more likely than men to use physical aggression but men were more likely to cause an injury. Within the category of those injured by a partner, women were the majority (62%). Some research suggests young women are more likely than young men to perpetrate psychological abuse toward their dating partner (Hokoda, Del Campo, & Ulloa, 2012; Orpinas, Nahapetyan, Song, McNicholas, & Reeves, 2012), while young men are more likely than young women to perpetrate sexual abuse in their dating relationships (Young, Grey, & Boyd, 2009). SITs may provide the context for young women to engage in indirect aggression. Text messages punctuated by power and control are far less direct than physical acts of violence, so females might prefer SITs as vehicles to perpetrate forms of psychological abuse. In support of this theory, one study found young women in dating relationships perpetrate nonsexual cyber abuse more often, while young men perpetrate sexual cyber abuse more often (Zweigt

et al., 2013). This evidence suggests that young women may engage in SIT abuse for different reasons than young men.

Study Purpose

Although SIT abuse appears to be prevalent among teens, there is little empirical research that explores this phenomenon. While teens tend to minimize the seriousness of SIT abuse (Baker & Helm, 2010), research indicates that SIT abuse is occurring at high rates (Picard, 2007; Zweig et al., 2013) and leading to increased problems for youth (Draucker & Martsof, 2010). Our study aims to contribute to the knowledge base on SIT abuse as well as provide a context, language, and understanding from a teen perspective to inform future research in this area. Given that research on this topic is only just emerging, we aimed to explore how teens conceptualize SIT use and abuse in dating relationships and how these conceptualizations may vary by gender. To explore this topic, we posed the following research questions: (1) What type(s) of SITs do teens use in their dating relationships? (2) What are the common actions associated with SIT use in teen dating relationships? (3) What are the consequences of these actions in teen dating relationships? and finally, (4) What role does gender play in SIT use and abuse in teen dating relationships?

Method

Study Background

The current study is a qualitative pilot study focusing on how teens understand and define various forms of TDV (physical, sexual, psychological, and SIT). As the data were transcribed, we noted that a good portion of the transcription focused on SIT aspects of teen dating behaviors and thus provided rich enough data for analysis.

We conducted focus groups in two neighboring schools in a large metropolitan area during the Spring of 2010. We selected two high schools as data collection sites based on the racial and socioeconomic diversity of students as well as the school administrators' agreement to participate. After receiving approval from the university's institutional review board, we sent a study description and recruitment mailing to parents of all 10th grade students (approximately 200 students at each school). The response rate to the letters was approximately 20% over the course of 4 weeks. From both schools, we invited the first 15 male students and the first 15 female students who returned signed parental consent forms to participate in the focus groups, with the expectation we would have a final sample of 60. Telephone reminders were conducted the evening before each focus group to remind students of the focus group and confirm their participation. Regardless of telephone prompts, some invited participants did not attend.

Our final sample consisted of 10 male and 13 female high school sophomores who were assigned to two female groups and two male groups. The participants came from diverse backgrounds (6 Latino, 4 African American, 3 Middle Eastern, and 10 white students). The demographic composition of the focus groups closely approximated the student body of each respective school. Gender-specific focus groups were used to encourage more open dialogue. Ethnically diverse graduate students, of the same gender as participants, conducted the groups immediately after school in predetermined classrooms. Because all student participants were from the 10th grade in the same school, participants were at least familiar with each other. Students signed assent forms prior to focus group administration and confidentiality was discussed. Students were provided with a referral sheet and opportunity to follow-up with the focus group moderators to protect against psychological risks. Students received a US\$10 gift card as a thank-you for their participation.

The focus group discussion guide was developed based on previous work from one of the authors (Black et al., 2009) and a review of the literature. The guide included identical questions and discussion prompts for both male and female focus groups in order to allow a gendered comparison of results. The level of participant engagement, however, varied between groups and the types of follow-up questions that naturally followed participant responses also varied between each group. The semistructured focus group guide included questions such as, "What do you think TDV is?" "How do you and your friends show jealousy and control in relationships?" and "Have you or your friends' dating partners ever constantly checked up on you using text messages, Facebook, or other ways? What do you think about that?"

Analytic Strategy

The focus groups were audiorecorded and transcribed. Codes were developed using a grounded theory, constant comparison approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); and NVivo software was used to analyze the data. Two of the authors read the transcripts, took extensive notes on emergent themes and potential ways of organizing the data, and developed a coding rubric in collaboration. The final rubric was developed utilizing an iterative process of inspecting the data, collaboratively narrowing our codes, and testing our coding scheme for interrater agreement. In keeping with our research questions, the final coding rubric coded the data by "type of SIT," "action," and "consequence." In order to decipher whether these actions and consequences seemed to be occurring more for particular types of SITs (e.g., texting, social networking, etc.), we developed a "type" code.

Using the final rubric, two of the authors independently coded the data, compared coding, and reached an agreement by consensus when necessary. Interrater agreement was high (>.90). We coded transcripts line by line and assigned a type of SIT code (e.g., texting, social networking, emailing, etc.) to each statement. Within the larger code of type of SIT, most participant responses received an "action" code. For example, if an individual said that he knew a friend who asked his girlfriend to send him a naked picture, the statement would receive a type of SIT code of "sexting" and an action code of "soliciting pictures." Not all participant statements received a consequence code. In the previously mentioned example regarding soliciting pictures, the teens did not discuss any consequences. However, if participants said they knew people in their school who constantly texted their boyfriends, and when they did not respond immediately, they became suspicious about what they were doing, the statement would have received a type of SIT code of "texting," an action code of "constant messaging," and a consequence code of "jealousy." With this coding scheme, we were able to develop an understanding of which consequences were most often linked to specific actions or specific types of SITs.

Results

Emergent Themes

As stated previously, coders examined each participant's statement for three types of codes: type of SIT, action, and consequence. Subsequently, we explain how often these codes were identified in the data. Our count data indicates the frequency with which each type of code was identified in separate statements or in statements of agreement among focus group participants. For example, if an individual noted, "I get texts from my boyfriend in the middle of the night and his texts are always asking who I'm with," then the statement would have received just one type of SIT code count of texting despite the word "text" being mentioned twice.

Type of SIT. Although focus group guides were open ended in discussing various forms of SIT use among teens, the only types of SIT participants discussed were social networking (e.g. Facebook and MySpace) and cell phones (e.g. sexting, texting, and calling). Each of the four groups indicated that the term sexting is never used among their peers. With unanimous group agreement, one participant noted “I think that’s what adults call it on the news. I think people do it, but they don’t actually [say] like, ‘Oh, I’m gonna go sext somebody right now.’” For clarity in this discussion, however, we will continue to use the term to describe the sharing of text messages (either text or picture) of a sexually explicit nature.

Across all four groups, social networking was the most frequent type of SIT discussed. In total, social networking was referenced 81 times. Sexting was referenced 41 times and texting was referenced 31 times. Participants mentioned cell phone calling far less often (10 times) than social networking, sexting, and texting. Despite prompts, participants did not discuss other forms of SIT (e.g., instant messaging, video chatting, e-mailing, or blogging).

Action. Participants mentioned these actions most often: password sharing/account access (45 times), spying/monitoring (33 times), sending sexually explicit pictures (21 times), soliciting sexually explicit pictures (12 times), and constant contact (12 times). When comparing actions by type of SIT, we found that social networking was the primary tool for spying/monitoring and password sharing/account access. Text messaging was the primary way for teens to maintain constant contact. The teens reported that they sexted by sending and soliciting pictures over the phone but not over the Internet.

Consequence. The teens referenced these consequences of SIT actions most often: trust or distrust of one’s partner (18 times), jealousy (12 times), and damage to the relationship (12 times). When comparing consequences by action, we found that they were most likely to discuss damage to the relationship within the context of constant contact. Further, we found that respondents often described how spying/monitoring and password sharing/account access led to consequences of trust/distrust and jealousy.

Gender Differences

SIT monitoring among young women. We compared how young men and women conceptualized the use of SITs as a means of monitoring one’s partner. Young women discussed constant monitoring as a necessary component of relationships and, in some cases, described going to great lengths to monitor their partners’ SIT lives. Young women reported that it is fairly common to create fake social networking profiles to monitor their boyfriends’ “pictures, e-mails, inbox, all of that [to] see when they’re talking to girls and everything” ($n = 7$). In other cases, this same type of monitoring was described as being “too overprotective or controlling of [one’s partner]” ($n = 6$).

SIT monitoring among young men. Unlike the young women who discussed their own monitoring behaviors, male teens discussed how their girlfriends monitor them. Young men unanimously agreed that their girlfriends constantly check on them using texting and social networking. One male said:

I’ll lock my MySpace account so she can’t go on. There’s nothing on it. I don’t trust other people, but like I’ll let her go on and look at my messages. I’ll delete some of my text messages ‘cause I’ll text other girls sometimes just to talk to them’ cause I’m good friends with them. But if she sees those, she gets really mad. So I just delete them. Either that or I put them on lock, but if I put them on lock she’ll be like ‘why do you have these locked?’

Another young man, in discussing constant monitoring, said:

You'll be in the car with your friends going to get like a slurpy or something and she'll be like, 'where are you?' And then she'll be like, 'who are you with?' and I'll say, and then she'll be like 'no you're not, there's a girl in the car isn't there?' I'll be like, 'no, no, I'm just going to get a slurpy.'

Young men discussed issues of jealousy as it relates to monitoring each other's text messaging. One male said, "I'll steal my girlfriend's phone or she'll steal mine once in a while and look and see a text from another girl." All young men agreed that if their girlfriend was texting another friend, they might be a little jealous, but their jealousy would dramatically increase if she was texting another male. Some males ($n = 4$) agreed that it was fairly common to steal their girlfriends' phones in order to "text the guy [while I] act as my girlfriend and see what he says back." A number of males ($n = 3$) stated that they had caught their girlfriends deleting text messages, presumably to avoid their boyfriend's jealousy regarding their text message inbox.

Password sharing among young women. In order to more closely monitor their partners and likewise allow their dating partners to monitor them, participants discussed sharing their account passwords or allowing their partners to access their SIT communications (e.g., text message inbox and outbox, e-mails, and social networking private messages). There were mixed results regarding password sharing/account access. A large proportion of females ($n = 10$) agreed that sharing passwords and allowing their boyfriends to access their text message log or social networking accounts were not an issue of concern.

For these females, password sharing was a symbol of trust—a sign of a healthy, committed relationship. For example, one female said "If he give[s] it to you, no problem, then you have nothing to worry about. If you don't give it to him, then he will worry." Another young woman agreed, "If you have a good one [boyfriend], he'll just give it to you." There was unanimous agreement in one female focus group that password sharing was a representation of trust. Another young woman added, "I think when you give them the password that it shows you have nothing to hide, but that doesn't mean that they go on it. Just to have it, that shows that they have nothing to hide and they're not like talking to anyone else or anything like that." More than half of young women in the focus groups agreed that password sharing (both sharing and receiving one's partner's password) was both a display of trust and a catalyst for relationship problems. Relative to the consequences of password sharing, one female said, "... if you know your girlfriend has your password or you have your boyfriend's password, they might delete your messages before you could get on, and they might change their password and then you don't know it."

Female participants clearly discussed the potential problems that may arise from password sharing; however, they consistently spoke of password sharing as an act of trust. When participants acknowledged the juxtaposition of trust and the relationship "drama" that springs from displaying trust through password sharing, the discussion shifted from more serious relationship problems to a narrative that downplayed the serious consequences and/or motivations for password sharing. The female group unanimously agreed that account monitoring extended through password sharing might just be a way to fulfill one's curiosity. One female said, "They get tempted and just wanna, just wanna find out." Interestingly in this same group, hacking (accessing another person's password-protected accounts without permission) accounts to monitor one's partner was only something one did "because they're stupid jealous." In other words, having permission to monitor one's partner's SIT life is acceptable and even adaptive. If one does not have permission to monitor, then it is the opposite, an act of jealousy.

Some female participants did not acknowledge the harmful consequences of this type of surveillance (whether with or without permission). One female said, "I see people just take them and look at their phones, they don't really get mad, but everyone deletes their text messages now." Other females ($n = 8$) agreed that deleting text messages was common practice in order to "avoid the

drama.” While these teens did not believe SIT monitoring of this nature was very serious, they were still taking measures to ensure it was less likely to happen. On the other hand, some females ($n = 3$) expressed confusion over why teens would share their passwords:

Participant 1: Like, you know – like I don’t get it, you give each other your passwords . . .

Participant 2: Oh, yeah . . . I’ve seen couples do that and it just destroys them . . .

Participant 3: Yeah, people do that all the time.

Participant 2: It’s a really bad idea because there might be something in your inbox, say on MySpace, you got like the messaging- and it might be from like a year back . . . like you might be talking to a girlfriend or something about how cute this one guy was and they’ll start getting jealous like off the wazoo and it was like a year ago!

Another young woman expressed disagreement with the acceptability of password sharing:

It’s like I don’t want your password ‘cause I kinda don’t want you to have mine. ‘Cause then they get into even more personal stuff like your inbox, and if there are like other guys and they’re just friends and the guy is like overbearing or gets jealous quickly, he’ll take it the wrong way, and then he’ll check your stuff and then he’ll ask you about somebody and then you will be looking like “Who are you talking about?” and then he’ll be like “Now you think I’m stupid. I don’t need a ho [whore].”

This particular focus group participant details the chain of events that can occur when password sharing takes place. First, one’s privacy is invaded (whether with permission or without), then one has to defend his or her previous SIT communications with members of the opposite sex, then one’s partner has an inevitable jealous reaction, possibly involving psychologically abusive tactics and finally, the relationship is harmed or ended. Another young woman acknowledged, “. . . if you’re with someone, like you’re dating, you should already trust them enough. You shouldn’t have to go see what they’re doing on the computer. Like you should just know that they’re not going to do anything.” In agreement, another female participant noted, “I think if you’re like dating someone, you guys still have separate lives, so you don’t have to give him your password and show him everything you do all day. Like, you guys have different lives; you don’t have to be in each other’s business all the time.”

Password sharing among young men. Male teens tended to discuss password sharing with more caution than did females. For example, the majority of males ($n = 7$) agreed that supervised SIT monitoring was appropriate. One young man said, “Um, most of the time I will let her come over and I’ll type it in. Cause I don’t like giving out my password, because what happens if you break up with them, and then that’s just bad.” Another young man discussed password sharing as if it was not problematic, stating, “The only reason it gets logged on is because she logs on it. She has my password, so she just goes on both [his and her MySpace accounts].” Although males did not discuss password sharing at length like females, they did agree that sharing your passwords or granting access to your accounts was something you did only when you had built trust.

Public Nature of Social Networking

Teens discussed how social networking sites (Facebook in particular) tended to create “drama” in dating relationships. Regarding the accessibility of relationship status and information on social networking sites, one male said, “Yeah, and it’s like OK. Well, that’s to the point where the relationship is put on display for everyone to see.” Another male stated, “. . . like the whole Facebook and Twitter, I think it’s kinda too personal—things that happen, you know in a relationship, and someone goes and ‘oh, blah blah blah.’ They say it on there. And then it puts other people into it.” Male participants agreed that this is often the beginning of teen dating problems as they relate to SIT. Regarding

the element of relationship display that Facebook fosters, one male stated, "... that's how more conflict starts." Another male said, "anything that goes on the Internet just stays on the Internet." In agreement, young men discussed the accessibility of social networking sites as a way their dating partners could monitor their past and present relationships with other girls.

Sexting

Both young men and women discussed sexting; however, the male focus group discussion focused more heavily on the topic. Young women unanimously agreed that sexting occurs in relationships (and outside of relationships) but that it is generally very private. Young men discussed sexting in a different context. All males agreed that sexting "happens a lot." One male noted that a girl he knew "sent a picture to her boyfriend, and as soon as he got the picture he broke up with her and sent it to a whole bunch of people." All young men agreed that there was nothing wrong with sending nude pictures to each other, but it was inappropriate to forward the pictures. Young men discussed how common it was for other young men to share sexts they had received from their girlfriends; yet young women stressed the private nature of sexting.

Discussion

The findings from our exploratory study augment the literature by providing details and a feminist perspective on gender differences in teens' perspectives of SIT in dating relationships. Regarding our research questions concerning the type, action, and consequence of SIT use in dating relationships, we found that teens discussed social networking, password sharing, and jealousy or distrust most often. The participants did not typically describe the actions and consequences as "dating abuse," so the concept of thresholds (Baker & Helm, 2010) enables us to examine when teens view SIT behavior as serious enough to be considered abuse. Comparing our findings to the literature on psychological abuse (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004) as well as the widely used Teen Power and Control Wheel suggests that the threshold for adults to label a behavior as abusive is much lower than it is for a teen to label that behavior as abusive. In fact, some of the very behaviors that experts list as warning signs of abuse are those that teens in our study seemed to accept as common, non-serious SIT dating behaviors (e.g., spying/monitoring, constant contact, etc.). Our findings are similar to other studies reporting on teens' attitudes and definitions of dating violence (Foshee et al, 2011; Miller, 2008). These studies find that teens often minimize or deny the seriousness of behaviors that adults would categorize as quite serious.

Regarding our fourth research question, our study found some notable differences by gender in terms of the teens' chosen discussion topics and their interpretations of SIT dating behaviors. Young men's focus group discussions underscored the dynamics of sexting—emphasizing the appropriateness or normative nature of sexting within relationship bounds. On the other hand, the subject of password sharing and account access dominated the female focus group discussion, with group consensus that password sharing and account access was appropriate within relationship bounds. Participants indicated that these two behaviors were only problematic when they occurred outside of dating relationships (e.g., a sexually explicit picture is shared in person or by forwarding to others, or one's previous partner hacks into one's Facebook account without the implicit consent of the account owner).

Although TDV prevention educators speak frequently of the importance of boundaries in relationships (Is this Abuse?, 2012; Weisz & Black, 2009), our findings show that teens often believe that it is fine to supersede dating partners' boundaries with SITs. Young women, in particular, found monitoring of partners to be very acceptable while males believed sharing sexually explicit pictures was acceptable. This acceptance of boundary violations is supported by media, such as the

very popular *Twilight Series* books and movies that romanticize such behavior (Collins & Carmody, 2011).

Dating violence is heavily influenced by dominant norms of masculinity and femininity (Black & Weisz, 2003; Feldman & Gowen, 1998). The feminist perspective suggests dating violence occurs in a social context that is dominated by males and perpetuated by socialization into traditional gender roles (Prospero, 2007; for a full review of this perspective, see Collins & Carmody, 2011). According to this framework, young men are socialized to use dating violence as a means to control young women. The scant literature that exists on SIT abuse suggests young men and women are equal perpetrators of SIT abuse (Zweig et al., 2013), but rates of perpetration vary by type of violence. Based on our findings regarding gender differences about the acceptability of monitoring, we suggest that young men and women may engage in SIT abuse for different reasons. The young women in our study might have been more insecure about their partners' trustworthiness because of long-held stereotypes that males are likely to be sexual predators (Sears, Byers, & Price, 2007; Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche, 2003).

Additionally, young men might accept girls' jealousy because of their endorsement of the same belief about themselves as predators (Tolman et al., 2003). Young women may not perceive their monitoring behaviors as abusive but rather as a means to safeguard their relationships. Perhaps the young women had a stronger orientation toward maintaining constant connection while the young men were more focused on independence (Chung, 2005; Letendre, 2007). This would be consistent with research on gender differences in adolescence and adulthood (Chodorow, 1978; Weisz, & Black, 2002). Similarly, research suggests that young women may increase their use of psychological abuse as teens because of their awareness that there are increasing physical differences between them and young men (Sears et al., 2007). In addition, as the less valued gender group, they may have been trained to hide their own wants and needs, resulting in attempts to gain power through indirect or psychological aggression (Letendre, 2007).

Prevention workers are concerned about jealousy as a risk factor for other forms of abuse (Glass, Fredland, Campbell, Yonas, Sharps, & Kub, 2003). Jealousy can lead to excessive power and control behaviors that border on stalking. However, teens in this study, as well as others (Fredland, Campbell, Yonas, Sharps, & Kub, 2005), seemed to view jealousy as normal or a positive sign of love (Chung, 2005) and were often "matter-of-fact" when jealousy led to other abuses in dating relationships (Fredland et al., 2005; Toscano, 2013). In addition, teens, especially girls, might view the quality of their romantic relationships as a reflection of their self-worth and might want to portray the relationship in a positive light no matter how jealous and controlling their partners' behaviors might be (Chung, 2007; Toscano, 2013). Therefore, SIT behaviors resulting from jealousy had to be extreme before these teens viewed them as threatening or serious.

Our findings suggest that social networking might offer a new form of public scrutiny. When teens present the details of their romantic relationships on social networking sites, there are some potential opportunities for public support as well as opportunities for abuse. A potential asset may be that if teens reveal details of abuse or power and control, others will become aware and may intervene, decreasing the social isolation that often accompanies partner abuse (Klein, 2004). However, this opportunity only exists if teens are honest in displaying dating problems on social networking sites.

Teens tend to enter into and exit out of romantic relationships frequently (Meier & Allen, 2009). Although our focus group participants deemed sexting and password sharing/account access as appropriate within the bounds of a romantic relationship, the ever changing nature of teen dating relationships does not lend itself to any sort of safety or security when one engages in these behaviors. Teen dating relationships can end quickly and sometimes with drama. If teens possess incriminating pictures, or have access to their former partners' accounts, psychological harm may ensue and consequences may exponentially multiply due to the viral nature of SITs.

Limitations

Despite the merits of our study, it suffers from a number of limitations. First, it is possible that individuals self-selected into our sample. However, they were not told the group would focus on SIT abuse specifically, so their attendance would not have been influenced by their interest or experiences with this subject but rather with TDV and relationships in general. Greater attendance or more focus groups would have enabled us to obtain a wider range of opinions. Our sample size was quite small, and thus we may not have reached saturation in our data. In addition, while group interviews allow teens to stimulate each other's thoughts to identify and discuss important issues, individual interviews might enable them to share deeper vulnerabilities and avoid posturing or other aspects of social desirability that may be inherent in a group of one's peers.

Future Directions and Practice Implications

Future work might more fully examine gender implications of the boundaries that teens draw around SIT behaviors in dating relationships. In addition, future work might examine group differences within gender. For example, it may be possible that SIT behaviors vary by race/ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and other demographic characteristics. The results of our study indicate that teens generally minimize the seriousness of SIT abuse. Future research should include teens' conceptualizations and definitions of SIT abuse in order to inform measure development, build theory, and guide prevention programming. Our study's finding that teens, particularly young women, find password sharing and spying/monitoring acceptable has implications for prevention work in this area. Prevention programming that deconstructs unhealthy/unsafe beliefs about the acceptability of these types of SIT behaviors may protect teens, especially young women, from perpetrating or being victimized by SIT abuse and its associated risks.

Conclusion

Our study focuses on the increasingly important role of socially interactive technologies in dating relationships and the potential for these technologies to be a medium for perpetrating abuse. Therefore, our study has the potential to help concerned adults and other practitioners to engage in meaningful discussions with teens about this important arena in their lives. Adults will be able to reach teens more effectively if they understand gender differences in teens' views on SIT use in dating, and adults can be alerted to the ways that teens often minimize the seriousness of SIT-based power and control behaviors in dating relationships.

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