Digital dating abuse perpetration and impact: The importance of gender

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ABSTRACT

Although measurement and prevalence of digital dating abuse (DDA) in young people’s relationships is of growing research interest, youth perceptions of the behaviours and the impact on victims are yet to be fully understood. This study explored thirty-eight (16–24 year old) youth’s perceptions of DDA behaviours and descriptors of the emotional impact of the behaviours on victims. A predominant theme of gender differences emerged, with five subthemes: (a) men tend to engage in sexual-related behaviours, (b) men and women undertake different controlling and monitoring behaviours, (c) the role of reputation shapes the impact on men, (d) serious negative emotions characterise the impact on women, and (e) some men misconceive the severity of the impact on women. Findings move discussions beyond DDA prevalence and frequency to reveal that young people perceive DDA to have significant emotional consequences for victims and that there are gender differences in the perpetration and impact of DDA. These perspectives provide a valuable contribution to the development of gender-sensitive DDA measures, DDA prevention initiatives and support programmes for youth experiencing DDA.

Comprising a broad range of technology-facilitated behaviours, digital dating abuse (DDA) is a widespread problem in young people’s dating relationships (Caridade, Braga, and Borrajo 2019; Fernet et al. 2019). Ambiguity exists around the terms and definitions used for the phenomenon (Brown and Hegarty 2018; Dragiewicz et al. 2018; Fernet et al. 2019) and the gendered influences on how DDA is experienced and perpetrated (Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2017; Reed et al. 2018). A critical review of DDA measures reveals scholars are yet to determine which behaviours are abusive and/or harmful and what impact they have (Brown and Hegarty 2018). We will use the term DDA in this paper to describe a range of abusive and harmful technology-facilitated behaviours in relationships, including monitoring and controlling, humiliation, sexual coercion, (Jaen-Cortés et al. 2017; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2017), rumour spreading (Marganski and Melander 2015) and threats (Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2016).

Review studies report DDA victimisation rates ranging from <1% to 91% (Brown and Hegarty 2018; Fernet et al. 2019), and perpetration rates ranging from 3% to 94%
Evidence suggests DDA perpetration and victimisation may differ by gender although the nature of these differences remains unclear (Rodríguez Domínguez, Pérez-Moreno, and Durán 2020). Reviews have identified considerable inconsistency across studies, finding that DDA victimisation could be more frequent for young women, or young men or it may be gender symmetrical (Caridade, Braga, and Borrajo 2019; Rodríguez Domínguez, Pérez-Moreno, and Durán 2020). The reviews also found considerable gender inconsistencies across perpetration rates (Caridade, Braga, and Borrajo 2019; Rodríguez Domínguez, Pérez-Moreno, and Durán 2020). These gender findings across victimisation and perpetration are thought to result from theoretical and empirical variability across the studies, including the types of DDA under investigation, definitional inconsistencies, and the robustness and variety of assessment tools (Brown and Hegarty 2018; Caridade, Braga, and Borrajo 2019; Rodríguez Domínguez, Pérez-Moreno, and Durán 2020).

Similarly, inconsistencies in relation to gender are found in studies of dating violence victimisation and perpetration. Some studies find gender symmetries or even that young women perpetrate more dating violence than young men (Taylor and Mumford 2016; Wincentak, Connolly, and Card 2017), while others find that young women experience greater victimisation than young men (Hamby, Finkelhor, and Turner 2012). In contrast, reviews of experiences of sexual abuse (Wincentak, Connolly, and Card 2017) and sexual aggression (Krahé et al. 2014) consistently report that young women are more likely to be victims than young men.

Digital dating abuse measurement gives limited attention to the impact of abusive behaviours, despite this potentially providing a more nuanced understanding of the gendered nature and the measurement of DDA (Brown and Hegarty 2018; Dragiewicz et al. 2019; Duerksen and Woodin 2019; Hester et al. 2017). Existing studies suggest that young women are more likely to experience greater impact from DDA than young men (Aghtaie et al. 2018; Barter et al. 2017; Daskaluk 2016; Reed, Conn, and Wachter 2020; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2017; Stonard et al. 2015). These studies measured impact in varying ways including the assessment of anticipated impact (Bennett et al. 2011; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2016), various emotional responses (Barter et al. 2017; Duerksen and Woodin 2019; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2017) and in two examples a small number of DDA behaviours only (Barter et al. 2017; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2016). Notably, youth were not consulted during the development phase of these impact measures, hence the applicability of the impact measures to the relative populations is unknown.

Existing research exploring DDA has been predominantly quantitative and involved North American and European samples. While qualitative DDA research exists (Stonard et al. 2015; Stonard 2020) it has mostly examined specific forms of DDA such as sexting (Ringrose et al. 2012; Salter 2016; Setty 2020) and cyberstalking (Short et al. 2014; Worsley et al. 2017). Specifically, young Australians’ perceptions of DDA behaviours and descriptors regarding the impact of DDA behaviours on victims, have not been explored. A focused examination of young people’s perceptions of DDA is important to highlight possible dynamics and impacts of DDA. This can inform further research directly on victimisation and contribute to prevention and intervention initiatives (Adler-Baeder et al. 2007). Data on young people’s views of the behaviours that constitute digital dating abuse, and the dimensions of harm associated with these, can also be used to inform the design of more effective measurement instruments (Morgado et al. 2018). Thus, the
The aim of the current study is to qualitatively explore young Australians’ perceptions of DDA behaviours and descriptors of the impact of DDA.

**Method**

Data collection occurred via semi-structured discussion groups to explore and gain insights into this complex topic (Liampittong 2011) across a range of perspectives (Gallagher et al. 1993; Harvey and Holmes 2012).

**Participants**

Thirty-eight youth (23 women, 15 men) aged between 16 and 24 years (average age 18.4), from across Victoria were recruited via the University of Melbourne student portal, community youth organisations, a vocational education institution and Facebook. Each participant received a $30 gift voucher.

**Procedures**

Discussion groups consisted of two all-male (10 and 5 participants) and two all-female groups (12 and 11 participants), lasted 60 minutes, and were conducted by two experienced female facilitators at university or public library rooms. Each facilitator conducted a male and a female group. Participants did not know each other. Participants attended at the location that was most convenient to them. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality of the discussion was requested of all participants. Confidentiality of data was assured, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. Participants were requested to refrain from disclosing their personal experiences of DDA and from using names when discussing incidents involving someone else. Instead they were encouraged to speak about experiences they had observed in other youth, and youth experiences more generally, thus eliciting their perceptions of DDA. Two different participants started to speak about their own personal experience and themselves immediately realised and discontinued what they were saying. There was no need for the facilitators to address this.

After providing informed consent, participants were given relevant definitions to aid discussion. *Dating Relationships* were defined as ‘sexual or non-sexual, casual or serious, short-term or long-term, straight, gay, monogamous or open’. *Technology* was defined as ‘any form of modern-day technology/device … such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, notepads, computers, internet, social media, GPS devices, software, apps etc’. *Harmful Behaviours* were defined as ‘including (but not limited to) behaviours that are psychologically, emotionally, physically, or sexually harmful’. To avoid participant responses from being influenced by their own interpretations of what constitutes abuse, the researchers did not use the word *abuse* when communicating with participants, instead, using *harmful technology behaviours*.

Using a topic guide, participants were asked to describe and then write down (a) harmful technology behaviours they were aware of in young people’s dating relationships, and (b) ‘emotion’ words they would use to describe the impact of harmful technology behaviours – questions aimed at eliciting descriptive norms. The facilitators attached participant responses to a whiteboard and used verbal prompts to promote discussion.
Where the topic of gender did not arise spontaneously (2 groups), facilitators prompted the topic at the end of the discussion. One of the facilitators (the third author) was a supervisor of the first author, whilst the other was an external facilitator and less familiar with the project. This may have influenced the depth of the data obtained.

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Melbourne. Prior to research commencement, the first and third authors discussed ethical issues such as confidentiality, distress and withdrawal from participation. Accordingly, a distress and disclosure protocol was established in the event that a participant became distressed or made personal disclosures of victimisation or traumatic experiences during the discussion. Facilitators, who were both female, were appropriately skilled to provide immediate support, and advice regarding ongoing support if required.

Participant’s perspectives are likely to reflect complex and shifting combinations of interpreted personal experience, repetition of wider social perceptions and norms, and the interactions of the discussion groups themselves. Although participants were requested not to refer directly to their own experiences, it is likely that they drew on these in constructing their accounts, and also on available cultural narratives thus tapping into gender norms and broader social norms.

**Data analysis**

The discussion groups were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Thematic analysis (undertaken manually) using a six-step inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) allowed research findings to originate from the significant, frequent or dominant themes inherent in the raw data without the restraints of structured methodologies (Thomas 2006). The first author initially undertook multiple readings of all transcripts searching for patterns and meaning, from which initial codes were formed. Through further readings, reflexive journaling, mind-mapping and memo writing, the codes were refined and data extracts were organised into meaningful groups. This formed part of an iterative process involving multiple cross-checks and discussions with the third author about the codes, and how they might group together, from which overarching themes emerged. These themes were reviewed and further refined by the first and third authors jointly, sub-themes were identified, and data extracts were grouped accordingly. Finally, the themes were defined and named.

**Findings**

The predominant theme was one of gender influencing young people’s perceptions of harmful technological behaviours and their impact.

> I think there is … a certain extent of gender bias, in a sense of what activities each sex would probably be doing. (M6)

> It’s just an easier application of what we see in day to day life when it comes to gender violence, or gender discrimination, or abuse. It’s just easier to do it online … (F8)

> … it seems very gendered … many of these activities are kind of related to a certain gender … (M6)
… females are most likely to be targeted for nudes and stuff, I suppose … yeah, males are probably more likely to be the perpetrator in those situations. (M12)

… generally, people would consider the females to be the victims and males being predators. (M12)

There was one female participant however, who held the view that the behaviours of the genders were similar in relation to the harmful use of technology.

I feel like there is, in these situations, there is a lot of equality between genders in we are both as bad as one another. (F21)

Beyond this overriding theme, five gendered subthemes emerged: (a) men tend to engage in sexual related behaviours including sharing of nude images of women, (b) both men and women engage in controlling and monitoring behaviours but in different ways, (c) the role of reputation shapes the impact on men, (d) serious negative emotions characterise the impact on women, and (e) some men misconceive the severity of the impact on women. In presenting the findings we will refer to relevant literature to contextualise the themes identified.

**Digital dating abuse is perpetrated differently by young men and women**

Participants’ descriptions of DDA suggested there may be differences in the behaviours undertaken by men and women.

**Men engage in sexual related behaviours and share nudes of women**

Male participants readily discussed men’s acquisition and use of women’s nude images to gain status and positive acknowledgement from others.

… guys will try and get girls to send nudes of themselves via Snapchat and then sometimes they screenshot it … and then use it as like prizes, to see how many nudes that they could get. (M3)

Like a status symbol. Yeah, so it was like prizes of how many nudes you could get. (M10)

These findings support scholarship reporting that young women are more likely to experience the pressured, unwelcome or non-consensual transfer of sexual/nude images than young men (Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2017) and that young men are more likely to perpetrate sexual DDA behaviours than young women (Henry, Flynn, and Powell 2019a; Reed, Conn, and Wachter 2020; Reed et al. 2018; Zweig et al. 2013).

Similarly, young men in other studies have also reported sharing intimate images of young women to brag to their male peers (Henry, Flynn, and Powell 2019b) and to get ‘ratings’ from peers which at the cultural level is believed to strengthen normalised sexism (Ringrose et al. 2012, 2013; Stonard 2018). Such ratings contribute to the sexual double standards that characterise young men’s requests for sexual images and their subsequent judgement of young women as ‘sluts’ for doing so (Ravn, Coffey, and Roberts 2019; Ringrose et al. 2012; Ringrose et al. 2013). These cultural norms may act as enablers for young men to pressure women for intimate images and to share them non-consensually, constituting a form of gendered dating abuse (Stonard 2018). Further, the perception in the current study that technology is used to uphold male reputation and bolster masculine social standing suggests that masculinity is important to the workings of DDA. Despite
contrasting reports that neither men’s victimisation nor perpetration associates with masculine gender norms (Villora, Yubero, and Navarro 2019), these behaviours may constitute modern day techniques young men use to establish and maintain their masculine honour (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Rudman 2010; Vandello and Bosson 2013).

Female participants expressed an awareness of young men sharing female nude images both generally and for peer acknowledgement, and they perceived a level of cultural acceptance of such behaviours.

The harmful part of that is you’re sending a photo, maybe explicit photo of yourself, to a partner or someone that you like … they might share that without your consent. (F21)

… but I think it is more accepted amongst male groups to show photos of women. That’s not seen as really … that’s wrong. It’s almost like American college rape culture. You know how you kind of brag about that stuff? (F6)

Male participants thought that women also non-consensually share nude images of men with other women. However, they suggested that women treat the images light-heartedly rather than as a way of elevating social standing.

… with the nude thing. Women do that as well. It’s very well known that guys do it, but women do it as well, but it’s more in a mocking way. They’ll do screenshots, and like ‘This guy sent me this picture of his arse, and, like, his penis,’ and then they’ll show it in their group chats, and then they’ll just be laughing about it, whereas with guys it’s like, ‘Look what I scored’ … (M1)

Female participants suggested women did not tend to share their partner’s sexual images. This supports observations that young women display lower rates of sexual aggression perpetration than young men (Wincentak, Connolly, and Card 2017). Female participants also condemned the non-consensual sharing of a partner’s intimate images by men, based on the hurtfulness of the behaviours and the inherently private nature of intimate images within relationships. Further, they noted the role of gender stereotypes in discouraging women’s participation in such behaviour, thus endorsing the view that gendered social norms render these behaviours more acceptable for young men than young women (Ringrose et al. 2012; Salter 2016; Stonard 2020).

I’m sure most of us wouldn’t go and say, ‘Here’s a picture that my boyfriend sent me, or this guy sent me … Isn’t he great?’ Maybe we feel like it happens to us, and we know how that feels, and we’re not taught to be sexually domineering or sexually open, like men are. (F8)

… wouldn’t do it, I just wouldn’t share that kind of … It’s a private relationship. I wouldn’t share that photo with anyone. (F7)

… This chick sent me a picture. ‘Do you want … ’ and then sending it around or putting it on Facebook … harmful to someone’s reputation, to their social life, to their family life (F21)

*Men and women engage in controlling and monitoring behaviours but in different ways*

Female and male participants deemed that women undertake monitoring and controlling behaviours via technology, in both a forthright manner and with a degree of stealth.

I’ve been blocked by boys I don’t even know just because their girlfriends blocked me … Things like that. Boys don’t say, ‘Don’t talk to that boy’ or things like that. Girls do things like that. (F15)
It’s more common for the female to want to know the male’s passwords and stuff. (M11)

…the girlfriend will have the boyfriend’s password and he doesn’t know … then she starts messaging anyone he’s messaging. (F19)

One female participant thought that women undertook harmful technology monitoring and control behaviours in a more covert manner than men.

As far as it goes for women being more upfront, I totally disagree with that. I’m someone who’s dated both genders… I’ve found more often than not a male will be more upfront with me and say, ‘I don’t like you doing this. I don’t want you doing this’, as opposed to a female … we are sneaky … I can be quite sneaky. I know that I have the power in a relationship online to be manipulative. (F21)

These findings mirror reports that young women engage in monitoring and controlling behaviours (Burke et al. 2011; Doucette et al. 2018) and normalise frequent digital monitoring behaviours (Baker and Carreño 2016; Harris and Woodlock 2019; Lucero et al. 2014). Young women have also interpreted some forms of DDA as romantic behaviour (Aghtaie et al. 2018; Flores and Browne 2017; Sánchez-Hernández, Herrera-Enríquez, and Expósito 2020; Stonard 2018, 2020) and employed technology as a way of asserting control (Howard, Debnam, and Strausser 2017).

Female participants thought that young men engaged in partner monitoring and surveillance behaviours.

… a partner can just install a GPS on someone’s phone without them knowing … so they can just track it … with the app on the phone. (F10)

… in terms of Facebook, you can check in somewhere … and that’s easily tracked … or you can have someone else who tags you with it … someone can track you that way. (F5)

They’re checking … just to double check them that nothing’s going on. (F23)

However, male participants did not themselves refer to these behaviours. This may be an example of men’s poorer recognition than women of non-physical forms of relationship violence such as electronic tracking (Webster et al. 2018).

Female participant’s perspectives accord with the findings of studies among adults, which suggest that male perpetrators use technology in ways that create a sense of omnipresence for women victims (Woodlock 2016) and might be reflective of technology-facilitated coercive control (Dragiewicz et al. 2018; Havard and Lefevre 2020; Messing et al. 2020). However, the meaning of these behaviours may bear greater complexity in young people’s relationships, with some scholars finding young men perpetrate technology-facilitated tracking more frequently than young women (Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, and Mitchell 2016), and others reporting young male and female victimisation at equal rates (Reed, Conn, and Wachter 2020).

**DDA impacts men and women differently**

Male and female participants perceived that DDA impacts the genders in different ways. While male participants described the impact of DDA in terms of reputation, female participants described it in terms of safety and security.
**Issues of reputation characterise the impact on men**

When discussing descriptors of impact of harmful technology behaviours, male participants used words such as ‘embarrassment’, ‘humiliation’ and ‘shame’ – emotions that imply an awareness of being observed by others and the propensity for impact on one’s social standing. Victimisation may be stigmatising in gendered ways for men. It may be perceived as contrary to normative expectations that men should be strong, invulnerable, and in control, as indicated by studies among male victims of intimate partner violence which find that shame is a common experience (De Puy, Abt, and Romain-Glassey 2017; Drijber, Reijnders, and Ceelen 2013). Other research also finds that, in general, men are more likely than women to report shame (Zimmerman, Morrison, and Heimberg 2015). ‘Jealousy’ and ‘insecurity’ were also identified by the male participants, as were various forms of anger including ‘annoyance’, ‘irritation’ and ‘frustration’. Notably, male participants suggested few emotions, that signalled feeling unsafe or personally threatened by harmful technology behaviours.

… I probably just don’t take much offence to much stuff. Stuff like that happened to me and I’ll just be like slightly annoyed. (M13)

One male participant preferred the word ‘damage’ to describe the impact of harmful technology behaviours because of his belief that it reflects enduring harm to one’s reputation.

… ‘distress’ implies that perhaps you don’t feel hurt has been done to your character or maybe your reputation as much, whereas ‘damage’ seems to imply that there was some sort of permanent mark left on you. (M8)

Another male participant considered the effects of such behaviours as provoking revengeful tendencies in the form of physical violence.

… because this happened to you, you get to take one back on them. To possibly physically hurt them or something like that because they did this to you. (M11)

Retribution. (M13)

This is a clear example of what scholarship has described as a tendency for men to express hostility and aggression to terminate vulnerable emotions such as shame (Jakupcak, Tull, and Roemer 2005). Studies among heterosexual men find that men who perceive shame and threats to their masculine reputation may respond with physical violence (Gebhard et al. 2019)

Of note, some male participants considered young women’s non-consensual sharing of their intimate conversations (as opposed to images), as one of the most harmful behaviours for young men.

Screenshoting of messages and sharing that with … some girls like to talk with their girlfriend and share the messages they’ve had with their boyfriend … (M7)

Males’ view of non-consensual sharing of intimate conversations as particularly harmful may reflect notions of intimate disclosures to a female partner as making them vulnerable, contrary to hegemonic masculine norms of emotional control and power in relationships (McQueen 2017). This perceived reputational impact on men, combined with the ensuing potential for aggressive or violent retaliation toward women, elevates the need for greater understanding of the impacts of DDA on male victims.
Serious negative emotions characterise the impact on women

When female participants discussed descriptors of the impact of harmful technology behaviours, their responses included ‘fear’, ‘anxiety’, ‘isolation’ and ‘distress’. They also described victims feeling ‘traumatized’, ‘anxious’ and ‘vulnerable’.

Female participants described heightened feelings of exposure resulting from the multiple modes and types of behaviour enabled by technology, including unwanted contact and non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

… there’s no barrier, whereas in real life … just take away all technology … you can be like, ‘No, I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to meet up with you.’ Yeah, whereas in technology, there’s so many modes that people can contact you through and you don’t have that much control of being like, ‘No!’ (F5)

… it’s a … breach of privacy … I know they say that once you press that send button, anyone can view it. You’d still think people have that moral sort of idea not to pass something like that on. You just can’t know what people are like once something turns sort of pear-shaped, how they’re going to react. (F20)

These findings echo earlier study results among female victims of DDA (Barter et al. 2017; Bennett et al. 2011; Reed, Tolman, and Ward 2016; Zweig et al. 2013) and more broadly, those of female victims of other forms of dating abuse (Choi, Weston, and Temple 2016; Evans et al. 2014). Further, the finding is particularly important in light of Henry and Powell’s (2015) description of the multifaceted and embodied harms among female victims of technology-facilitated sexual violence, and Stonard et al.’s (2015) observation that compared with in-person dating abuse, young women perceived DDA to be more constant, inescapable, and difficult to distance oneself from.

Some men misconceive the severity of impact on women

Male participants seemed to misconstrue the perceived impact of harmful technology behaviours on women. Some male participants thought that the threat or act of sharing of women’s nude images would result in women feeling trapped, isolated, angry, insecure or anxious. While this identifies the impact as negative, it neglects women’s experiences of fear.

Behaviours that involve blackmail would definitely make someone feel trapped and isolated or lonely or really by themselves. (M1)

[Sending sexual pictures to someone else would make people feel] ” … anger.” (M4)

They’d feel very insecure, I guess. They’d probably be having sleepless nights, thinking this photo’s circulating. ‘I don’t know where it’s got to. I don’t know who’s seen it.’ They’d be very on edge about that. (M12)

In contrast and more striking, was that some male participants thought women would be positively impacted by non-consensual sharing of their naked images, highlighting an even further disparity between men’s and women’s perceptions of the impact.

They could feel flattered. (M15)

Well, I’m sure some people out there would feel, like, nice about, ‘Have a look at this. She’s hot. Have a look at that’. (M13)
They’d probably just feel proud or something. (M11)

Two men felt unable to see how technology could be used to gain control or power over a partner or former partner.

… I think it’s quite hard to control people through technology. I guess the only way you get control … is by being able to see everything someone does, so they feel controlled by the threat of your judgement. (M8)

Another young man expressed a similar view:

… someone I knew … they’d broken up … the bloke in that former relationship was still very domineering over her and wouldn’t let her talk to guys … I remember hearing this story and just thinking, ‘Why would you listen to him? You’re not dating anymore, so just do what you want.’ … it’s weird … you think, ‘You’ve got nothing to do with each other anymore, so leave it’”. (M14)

The above perceptions illustrate stark gender differences between young men’s and women’s perceptions of technology use in dating relationships. Young men’s relative underestimation of the perceived harmful impact of DDA on female victims may overlap with their understandings and motivations for perpetration. Young men’s motivations for perpetrating electronic aggression were reported as more likely than young women’s to include humour, suggesting a minimising of its potential harms (Kellerman et al. 2013). Gender differences in perceptions of violence victimisation have been documented in other Australian research, with a national survey finding for example that men have lesser understanding than women of women’s difficulties in leaving a violent relationship (Webster et al. 2018). More widely, men in Australia are less likely than women to see gender inequality as a continuing problem (Haussegger and Evans 2018).

Discussion/Conclusion

This study reveals perceived gender pattern differences in the perpetration of DDA behaviours and their impact. Youth perceived that men tend to engage in sexual related behaviours, and that both men and women engage in controlling and monitoring behaviours. Regarding impact, youth perceived that the role of reputation shapes the impact on men, and that serious negative emotions characterise the impact on women. Finally, youth perceptions suggest that some men misconceive the severity of the impact on women. In most descriptions, DDA was seen as more a problem of men’s use of DDA against women than of the reverse, with a clear focus on heteronormative relationships. This aligns with community perceptions of intimate partner violence, although perceptions of intimate partner violence as gender-symmetrical are increasing over time (Webster et al. 2018). The perceived serious impacts on young women, and differences in impact on young men and women, align with the argument that abuse in relationships is gender asymmetrical (Walby and Towers 2018). Participant’s descriptors of impacts also provide a useful contribution to the scholarship of DDA measurement development.

The current research evokes questions about the complexities of gender and harm. One explanation for young men’s misconception about the seriousness of the impacts of some DDA behaviours on young women is that perhaps the experience of harm in young men is different from the experience of harm in young women. This may be
similar to how men and women differ in the way they form their emotional experiences (Pennebaker and Roberts 1992). Perhaps young men do not themselves perceive the impacts experienced by young women to be particularly harmful. This disparity is similar to that for perceptions of sexual harassment, where men are more likely than women to see sexually harassing behaviours as flattering (Runtz and O’Donnell 2003). Both may reflect men’s lesser likelihood of experiencing negative reactions to DDA and sexual harassment and a socialised view of themselves as sexual agents rather than sexual subjects (Runtz and O’Donnell 2003).

Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the perceived different impacts experienced by the genders are in some instances, equally harmful. For example, is a young man’s experience of shame and embarrassment as harmful as a young woman’s experience of fear and distress? Is a young man’s safety at stake when his masculine honour is under threat, in an equivalent way to which a young woman’s safety is at stake when she experiences fear? This may be the case for example when young men share images of their intimate body parts if the images fail to meet peers’ standards of hegemonic masculinity (Setty 2018). The function that masculinity threats brought about by humiliation have in some men’s suicidality has been described in the literature (O’Connor 2011; Pirkis et al. 2017), suggesting that men may react to perceived threats to masculinity in serious or even fatal ways. This possibility, and the notion that masculinity may play a role in driving men’s DDA behaviours raises valuable questions about both men’s and women’s experiences of DDA and highlights the need for further gender-specific research.

This study has several limitations. For reasons of convenience, the discussion groups were conducted by two facilitators (each conducting two groups) which despite the use of topic guides, may have resulted in systematic differences across the prompting of discussion and therefore participant responses. Further, participants in one of the male discussion groups were sourced from a single vocational training institution which may have also systematically impacted responses. While these two limitations bore no discernible differences, the possibility of their existence remains. Future research may benefit from utilising the same facilitator across all discussion groups and sourcing male participants from more varied backgrounds. Further, demographic details such as ethnicity and sexual orientation were not collected from participants and the study involved participants living in the state of Victoria only so a diverse range of views from Australian youth were not obtained. Finally, all but one participant referred to heterosexual relationships hence the findings do little to advance our understanding of LGBT+ youth’s perceptions of DDA.

This study contributes new insights into how young Australian’s perceive the act and impact of DDA, and importantly into the differentiating role of gender. Qualitative studies and data on young people’s perceptions of DDA can inform education initiatives needed for the effective prevention of relationship abuse (Adler-Baeder et al. 2007). The strong theme of gender differences permeating these findings highlights the importance of developing DDA measurement instruments that not only discern the different behaviours that young men and women experience and perpetrate, but that also consider the different impacts of these behaviours across gender. The development of validated instruments with these features will advance a more precise knowledge of the function and burden of the DDA phenomenon, assist the development of DDA prevention initiatives, and inform support programmes for youth as they navigate the difficult and ever-changing digital landscape in their lives and relationships.
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