“I’ve Been Silenced for so Long”: Relational Engagement and Empowerment in a Digital Storytelling Project With Young Women Exposed to Dating Violence

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Abstract
Despite decades of research identifying the myriad causes and consequences, young women continue to be exposed to a variety of abuses in their dating relationships. Those who experience such violence often feel shame and isolation and hesitate to reach out for support for fear that their stories will not be heard, respected, or garner appropriate responses. Such abuse often results in grave consequences to well-being and quality of life, with the risk of exposure to one incident of abuse potentially leading to a cycle where young women may be repeatedly drawn to abusive relationships. Finding new ways to expose and disrupt this cycle of abuse in intimate relationships is critical. This article highlights the methods used, specifically an adapted version of digital storytelling as a potential empowerment research methodology with a small group of young women exposed to dating violence. Implementation of this methodology occurred in four phases: providing methodological context, preparing (setting the stage), implementing (constructing and sharing digital stories), and evaluating (experience and impact). Each phase of the methodology is described along with lessons learned to advance the innovative use of digital storytelling in anti-violence research.

Keywords
arts-based methods, methods in qualitative inquiry, feminist research, emancipatory research, ethical inquiry

Incidents of a variety of interpersonal abuses and a general attitude of objectification of women continue to be commonplace experiences for young women. Widely publicized news stories on such issues have spurred conversation and controversy in traditional and social media about the prevalence and impact of violence against young women. These stories have highlighted the inadequacy of current responses for preventing young women from experiencing violence and the challenges associated with addressing their suffering.

This article highlights the digital storytelling methodology used with a small group of young women exposed to violence in their dating relationships. Digital storytelling is an innovative and empowering research method that at once generated knowledge about participants’ experience and mobilized that knowledge through the stories they created and shared. Four methodological phases are described: providing methodological context, preparing (setting the stage), implementing (constructing and sharing digital stories), and evaluating (experience and impact). Each phase is described along with lessons learned. Approval was received by the host institution’s Behavioral Sciences Research Ethics Board during the preparation phase, prior to participant recruitment and engagement.

Providing Methodological Context
Examining current prevalence and impact of dating violence and considering the power of social media as both a detrimental and positive force in interrupting patterns of violence in early dating relationships provided important knowledge for grounding this methodology in an important area of social justice.

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research. We carefully examined the use of digital storytelling as a research method and articulated our theoretical lens and rationale for this work.

Prevalence and Impact of Dating Violence

Dating violence is generally understood as a dyadic interaction that involves the perpetration or threat of an act of psychological, physical or sexual violence by at least one member of an unmarried dyad on the other within the context of the dating process…and excludes married and divorced couples. (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989, p. 454).

Ismail, Berman, and Ward-Griffin (2007) contend that young women experience tremendous pressure to invest in intimate relationships and that their limited repertoire of experience and deeply entrenched gender inequalities within North America compound their vulnerability to dating violence. Exposure to one incident of abuse can also create a cycle where young women may be repeatedly drawn to relationships that include abuse (Black, Sussman, & Unger, 2010; Few & Rosen, 2005; Olsen, Parra, & Benet, 2010) and recovery can be challenging (Mulford & Giordano, 2008; Reynolds & Shepherd, 2011).

A growing and compelling body of research demonstrates that women who are victims of intimate partner violence are found to be at higher risk than that of nonvictimized women for substance abuse, pregnancy, unhealthy weight control techniques, and suicide (Dodge, 2015; Glass, Fredland, Campbell, Yonas, & Sharps, 2003; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). They are also vulnerable to developing a range of psychological disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (Nixon, Resick, & Nishith, 2004), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Briscoe-Smith & Hinshaw, 2006), depression (Calvete, Corral, & Estevéz, 2007; Campbell, 2002), eating disorders (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002), and physical illnesses later in life (Rothbaum, Foa, Riggs, Murdock, & Walsh, 1992; Wai-gandt, Wallance, Phelps, & Miller, 1990). The central Canadian prairies, where this project took place, have the highest rates of interpersonal violence and abuse, family violence, dating violence, and child and youth violent victimization in Canada. The majority of the perpetrators are men; girls and women are most often the victims (Statistics Canada, 2013). This situation is not improving, and there is a growing population of young women at risk of experiencing violence in their dating relationships.

The Power of Social Media

Access to and use of an expanding variety of social media have become an aspect of everyday life for young women. Unfortunately, social media facilitates and promotes rampant exposure to images of violence and abuse, thereby potentially extending victims’ trauma. Victims of dating violence can be exponentially stigmatized, shamed, and silenced when their stories are revealed without their consent and control (Boux & Daum, 2015; Powell, 2010); bystanders can become accomplices and often believe that their desire and efforts to intervene are futile in the face of a media frenzy (Dodge, 2015). But, social media also holds the power to connect those who feel isolated and propel significant positive messages about healthy relationships (Dodge, 2015; Gubrium & DiFulvio, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2011; Salter, 2013). In fact, digital storytelling emerged as an aspect of human rights–based education, serving as a form of data collection, political organizing, and raising awareness and critical consciousness (de Jager, Fogarty, Tweson, Lenette, & Boudell, 2017; Lambert, 2013).

Digital Storytelling as a Research Method

Digital storytelling is one of the many art genres that have been increasingly adapted for use in a variety of research contexts (de Jager et al., 2017). However, to date, there has been no research that explores digital storytelling as an empowerment research method with young women who have experienced dating violence. Digital storytelling is rooted in community arts and oral history traditions and is an emerging method which holds exciting possibilities for multimodal representation, shared authorship, and interactivity across a range of disciplines (Gubrium & DiFulvio, 2011; Gubrium & Nat Turner, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2011; Lambert, 2013; Ohler, 2013). Common themes in the literature on digital storytelling are the importance of the story, authors narrating in the unique rhythm of their own voice which allows for authoritative self-representation, and authors’ choice in images and text which function as a connection point between the individual’s story and cultural context (Benmayor, 2008; Brushwood Rose, 2009; de Jager et al., 2017).

Digital storytelling originates from the work of the StoryCenter, Berkeley, CA (Lambert, 2013). As developed, digital storytelling takes place in a workshop setting where participants, as story authors, write a brief autobiographical script which they then narrate as voice-over paired with a synthesis of images, voice, text, and music (Gubrium, 2009; Lambert, 2013; Tucker, 2006). The end product is a 3- to 5-min visual narrative or digital story. Sandars, Murray, and Pellow (2008) suggest that digital stories can be easily created but recommend a step-by-step approach to the process. The intention of digital storytelling is to stimulate reflection, deeper learning, and perhaps transformation, not advance technical excellence in the production of the digital story. Importantly, digital stories are often cathartic for the individual and provide a vehicle to deliver a message to an audience, privately or more publicly. Although there is little written on digital storytelling as a research method (de Jager et al., 2017), emerging literature suggests that this art form holds potential to facilitate participant self-exploration, expression, and empowerment in research and practice (Brushwood Rose, 2009; Hull & Katz, 2006; StoryCenter, 2017).

Theoretical Lens and Significance

This project was situated within feminist, qualitative, and arts-based research: feminist because we aimed to give voice to a
silenced, marginalized, and potentially vulnerable population of young women exposed to dating violence (Hesse-Biber, 2013; Shields, 2008); qualitative because we needed to gather unique, subjective accounts of lived experience and meaning making in the form of stories (Reissman, 2008); and arts-based because we used digital storytelling as an arts-based, innovative methodology in anti-violence research, which at once served as data representation, knowledge mobilization, and research as intervention (Gubrium & DiFulvio, 2011; Lambert, 2013).

Digital storytelling works from participatory feminist principles as it blurs the line between the so-called expert researcher and participants by providing research participants a starring role in knowledge production (de Jager et al., 2017; Gubrium & Difulvio, 2011). It is also a creative activity that can preserve the anonymity of the storyteller, if they wish, which is an important ethical consideration for a project focused on a sensitive topic such as young women’s experience of dating violence. Digital storytelling used as an empowerment research methodology that directly engages participants in the knowledge generation–mobilization cycle has the potential to propel individual healing, connect participants through communicating about their shared experience, and deepen societal empathy and responsiveness.

Rationale and Purpose

Social media is often used as a tool to perpetuate the abuse of young women (Dodge, 2015). However, given their considerable comfort with and use of social media in their daily lives, we contend that researchers should expand their methodological repertoire to include such media in their efforts to identify the burden, promote healing, and design social interventions to curb incidents of dating violence in young women’s lives. Interrupting patterns of violence and abuse is complicated and requires multifaceted approaches and sustained effort over time. Studies also reinforce the importance of early education interventions to prevent victims of dating abuse from repeating these patterns in subsequent relationships (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007).

To date, there are no studies that leverage social media tools, digital storytelling in particular, as a potent interruptive intervention that can bring about change for victims and stem the tide of violence in early dating relationships. We aimed to create a space (digital storytelling workshop) where young women could learn digital storytelling skills to express and represent their experiences of dating violence and empower them to decide whether, with whom, and how their stories will be shared. We also explored, via a focus group, the impact of learning digital storytelling skills and the potential of this methodology as intervention to promote change and interrupt the cycle of abuse in young women’s lives.

Preparing: Setting the Stage

Several methodological considerations during Phase 2 were important to setting the stage for working with potentially vulnerable young women who had experienced dating violence in a digital storytelling context. We established a research team with appropriate expertise in research on sensitive topics, obtained formal training in digital storytelling, emphasized nuanced ethical considerations, and developed a sensitive protocol for participant recruitment, engagement, and continued care.

The Team

All team members were mental health professionals and/or social science and health researchers with experience working therapeutically with women who had experienced violence and abuse. All were attuned to professional and research ethics on sensitive topics with vulnerable and marginalized populations and consulted regularly throughout project implementation.

During this phase, additional technical, academic, and professional supports were identified and secured. Specifically, the Social Sciences Research Laboratory at the host university was consulted regarding their ability to assist with individual interview and focus group transcription and the provision of appropriate space with technical capacity for hosting the digital storytelling workshop. A licensed counselor was also contracted via a local community service agency that focused on providing counseling services to victims of a variety of abuses, to be involved in the 2-day intensive digital storytelling workshop. Her role was to serve as a participant observer and monitor participants’ reactions, respond to their emotional needs, and provide or arrange for appropriate pullout or follow-up support if and when necessary. Ultimately, no pullout or follow-up support was required by any participants. This was a critical element of caring and responsive research practice (Gubrium, Hill, & Flicker, 2013) designed to respect and respond to participants’ well-being while enabling Martin and McLean to focus on project goals and digital storytelling activities.

Our research assistant (McLean) had appropriate background (academic and personal interest) and was able to commit to the full, 2-year project cycle. She was the primary and continuous contact person for participants and also maintained a project journal, containing important project documentation, time lines, and reflexive notes (Ahern, 1999; Haverkamp, 2005). Methodological and ethical considerations and decisions were carefully discussed, monitored, and noted throughout the project (Haverkamp, 2005).

Training in Digital Storytelling Processes and Techniques

Our aim was to remain as faithful as possible to the digital storytelling process and procedures outlined by Lambert (2013) and employed at the StoryCenter. Prior to the project, Martin attended the 3-day standard workshop at the StoryCenter and experienced, firsthand, the processes involved in creating a digital story and the personal impact of the experience. Possible methodological implications this art form might have
for prevention and intervention in the area of dating violence were considered.

Prior to participant recruitment, McLean also attended the StoryCenter to complete the 3-day standard workshop, followed immediately by the 4-day master class. For McLean, learning digital storytelling, participating in story circles, and being immersed in this learning experience was professionally and personally transformative. The ability to add personally meaningful imagery, music, and other forms of media, including her own voice, helped capture the emotional tone of personal stories resulting in profound satisfaction, enhanced emotional processing, catharsis, and closure related to the stories she created and shared. She was surrounded and guided by StoryCenter staff and fellow workshop participants and felt supported in engaging with what was an emotionally, cognitively, creatively, and technically challenging storytelling process. Firsthand experience with digital storytelling increased McLean’s understanding of the impact it can have; having been through this allowed her to deeply empathize with and provide support to our participants as they experienced the vulnerability inherent to this methodology. We learned that it would not have been possible for us to adequately and ethically facilitate our digital storytelling workshop with young women exposed to dating violence without having first engaged in the process ourselves.

**Ethical Considerations**

Preparing the application for ethical approval was an arduous process, as all three phases of the project required direct contact with participants and needed to be addressed in one application. The application was conceptualized as “above minimal risk,” given the topic area and the potential risk that the very act of considering, constructing, and sharing digital stories (Gubrium et al., 2013) about dating violence had the potential to trigger and retraumatize participants. Our research protocol ensured maximum respect and support for participants’ and McLean’s well-being.

All project activities and interactions with team members and participants were grounded by an ethic of relational care (Haverkamp, 2005; Noddings, 2013). We carefully monitored participant reactions and engaged in an ongoing process of consent at each phase of the project to increase participants’ feelings of safety, dignity, and right to decide. Additional safeguards included the unique backgrounds of Martin and Woods as registered mental health professionals with training, research, and practical experience working with sensitive topics; Martin and McLean having direct experience with and training in digital storytelling and therefore appreciating the evocative nature of this art form; having an extended team available to provide debriefing for Martin and McLean; developing a careful screening procedure so that young women in crisis or, for whatever reason, were not able to commit to a significant participation requirement were not included (although they were provided with contact numbers for counseling services and thanked for their interest in the project as an aspect of the screening process); and hiring a professional counselor to attend the 2-day intensive digital storytelling workshop, so that participants’ needs for support were fully noted and responded to during and after the digital storytelling workshop experience, thereby enabling Martin and McLean to focus on project activities while avoiding dual roles. We also provided nutrition and refreshments throughout the workshop and a C$100.00 honoraria at the end of project activities, to recognize the extensive contribution (over 17 hours) participants invested in project activities. All participants who completed all phases of the project received their honoraria. Importantly, participants also left the workshop with their own digital story to use and/or share as per their choice. Those who only completed the interview were provided with a copy of their transcribed interview and a list of community resources; they were able to clarify that they were not ready to engage in the intensive digital storytelling workshop or to commit the significant time required. All appreciated the opportunity to share their stories within the open-ended narrative interview with McLean.

**Engaging With Participants**

Young women who had been exposed to dating violence and had an interest in digital storytelling were recruited to participate in this project. A unique project e-mail address and phone number were established. We began recruitment via the distribution of posters at the host university’s student health and counseling services, relevant departments on campus (i.e., education, women and gender studies), populous common areas on campus, and later, at a local counseling agency that specialized in working with survivors of violence and abuse. We originally began with posters in counseling centers because we hoped to engage participants who were already involved in counseling and would have processed their experiences to some extent. However, the response to these initial posters was insufficient so we opted, with ethical approval, to post a recruitment bulletin on the university’s website. Although not all participants mentioned where they had seen recruitment information, those who did were most likely to mention the university website posting. In fact, within 2 weeks of the website posting, over 20 women responded with interest and wanted to learn more about the project. All potential participants had stories to tell; fewer were able to commit to extensive project activities and/or were emotionally ready to work in a group context focused on using digital storytelling to tell such stories.

Prior to meeting in person or committing to the project, a telephone screening interview was arranged between McLean and potential participants. Within the screening interview, women were asked about their comfort level talking about difficult experiences, whether they had attended counseling, and whether they were currently experiencing undue stress or crisis which would make it difficult for them to participate. We were satisfied that selected participants who initially learned about the study through noncounseling settings would not be subject to harm through their participation. Nonetheless, print
information on referrals for counseling support were available to participants throughout the project. A purposeful sample (Reissman, 2008) was sought to ensure that the young women recruited for participation were over the age of 18, had experienced violence in a dating relationship within the last 2 years, were not in a current state of physical or emotional crisis, were able and willing to reflect on and talk about their experiences in a group context, and anticipated remaining committed to attending all project activities. Project activities also required that participants were fluent in English.

Participation requirements were significant and included attendance at (1) an individual research interview; (2) a follow-up interview to review transcripts of audio-recorded interviews and a document consisting of selected transcript excerpts that McLean felt were particularly impactful and/or representative of participants’ experiences; (3) a 2-day digital storytelling workshop where they learned digital storytelling skills and created a digital story, including participating in a sharing circle at the beginning of the workshop; and (4) a focus group designed to elicit participants’ feedback on the impact of the experience, the feasibility, and utility of using digital storytelling to explore and express issues related to dating violence, and their ideas about with whom and where they would like to share their stories.

Although participants were required to spend about 17 hours on project activities, some flexibility was granted for participants who had scheduling conflicts (e.g., one participant completed a tutorial in advance of the workshop due to having to miss the first day of the 2-day workshop). Our aim was to accommodate such conflicts while striving to ensure continuity and adequate time and support for all participants. Although there was significant interest in the project, only 10 potential participants met criteria and were interviewed; of these, only 6 were able to commit to the entire project cycle.

All participants who completed all phases of the project identified as students who responded to the university website bulletin. To increase participants’ anonymity, specific participant demographic information was not collected beyond establishing that they met inclusion criteria.

Implementing: Constructing and Sharing Digital Stories

During Phase 3 of the project, a number of engagement opportunities were planned to build rapport with participants and assist them with sharing stories of experience. Specific components of this phase of the project included completing individual interviews (first interview), providing participants with their interview transcripts and excerpts (second interview), providing preparatory information about the digital storytelling workshop, and having participants attend digital storytelling workshop.

Individual Interviews

Due to the sensitivity of the topic of dating violence and the potential for digital storytelling activities to trigger or retraumatize participants, narrative telling of personal stories occurred before the digital storytelling workshop. This was a deviation from traditional digital storytelling as practiced via the StoryCenter, wherein digital storytellers are typically prompted to draft a 250-word story script prior to or early during the digital storytelling workshop.

The pre-workshop interviews with McLean provided each participant with a private forum to share her story about experiencing dating violence; for some participants, this was the first time they shared their stories. McLean created, through an attitude of respect, compassion, and caring curiosity, a comfortable space for the young women to share their stories (Finlay, 2005; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Haverkamp, 2005). The interviews began with a broad question about the experience and impact of dating violence. Only minimal probes were used to facilitate as fulsome a telling of stories as possible (see Appendix A). Again, an ethic of care was consistently practiced (Noddings, 2013), and careful attention was paid to avoid retraumatizing participants while creating a conducive space to promote reflection on the personal meanings participants constructed about their experiences, so that they could use their transcribed accounts to create their short story scripts prior to the digital storytelling workshop.

These interviews were often emotionally charged for participants as they recollected and made sense of their lived experiences. During the interviews, McLean maintained a professional but intentionally gentle and empathetic demeanor, offering validation, positive feedback, reflection, and soothing techniques (such as deep breathing) when appropriate. Some participants disclosed traumatic stress–related diagnoses and/or symptoms, so these soothing methods facilitated feelings of comfort and safety during the interview process. As well, all interviews ended with questions about what the participants would like other young women exposed to dating violence to know, and how the experience of telling their own story had been for them. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive and hopeful; all participants indicated a desire to help others, do anti-violence work themselves, and/or make new meaning of their own experiences. It appeared that no matter how dark or difficult participants’ experiences had been, all were actively engaged in shaping their experiences into something significant and cohesive with who they wanted to be, in the present and the future. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim via the Social Sciences Research Laboratory.

The trust and familiarity established in these interviews was ultimately evident within the digital storytelling workshop and most appreciated by the participants. In fact, the sense of emotional safety and relationality (Haverkamp, 2005) cultivated between McLean and the participants facilitated the vulnerability required of participants within the story circle, positioned early in the digital storytelling workshop. This mutual relationality also afforded McLean the ability to notice any concerns regarding participants’ retraumatization during the workshop and increased our ability to be sensitive and responsive to their needs.
This deviation from standard StoryCenter protocol, where workshop participants tell their stories for the first time in each other’s presence, may have changed the group dynamic. However, the digital storytelling workshop environment is unique relative to traditional therapeutic or psychoeducational groups. Within the digital storytelling workshop, much time is devoted to individual work; group cohesion is arguably less emphasized within the digital storytelling workshop context than in psychotherapeutic groups, despite the similar level of vulnerability. Essentially, workshop participants work on individual projects within a group context, with considerable one-on-one support from group facilitators, making this methodology appealing for researchers interested in learning about and empowering marginalized and vulnerable populations (de Jager et al., 2017).

**Transcribed Interviews and Transcript Excerpts**

It was originally intended that Martin and McLean would apply descriptive thematic analysis to each individual transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006) after which McLean would share the results of this analysis with participants, in the form of a short summary, at a brief follow-up individual interview scheduled approximately 3 weeks after the initial interview. This procedure was anticipated to assist participants in refining their story, so that when they arrived at the digital storytelling workshop, they would be readily able to generate a short story script as a basis for their multimedia digital story. We wanted to be sensitive to how culture, ability, sexual orientation, and other diversity variables influenced participants’ stories, but we did not want to alter their stories via our analytic process (Fraser & Jarldom, 2015). At this point, a critical decision was made to not analyze participants’ transcribed stories; instead, based on her close contact with each participant, and with McLean being a listener and witness to each story, we opted to pull particularly poignant excerpts from each participants’ transcribed interview (e.g., see Appendix C) and share these excerpts with each participant to facilitate the development of their short story scripts.

Participants were articulate and vulnerable while sharing their stories with McLean. When we reviewed the transcripts, we decided that losing any of that original expression in the process of creating a summary would obscure rather than emphasize the meaning the participants had already expressed. The excerpts were presented to each participant along with their complete verbatim transcripts and presented transparently as aspects of the participants’ stories that seemed poignant. Participants were encouraged to use these documents as they prepared their short story scripts, if they wished. The excerpts provided an empathic outsider perspective without assuming a positivist or expert stance on what was perceived as valuable or significant either to our study or to each participants’ digital story.

Several participants commented on the value of their individual interviews in prompting their reflection on difficult circumstances and noted that it may not have been possible for them to generate such rich and evocative story scripts without this interview. Preparing for and telling their stories during the interview helped them think about their experiences, what they felt might be important to share, and to make sense of their experiences. They appreciated receiving copies of their full interview transcripts and the selected excerpts/quotations as starting points for crafting their short digital stories. One particularly quiet participant quoted her own transcript directly throughout her digital story script.

**Digital Storytelling Workshop**

After narrative interviews were completed and transcribed and poignant excerpts highlighted, each woman took this information away to generate a short digital story script in preparation for the 2-day digital storytelling workshop, which was held over a weekend approximately 2 months after most of the individual interviews were completed. Each day of the workshop ran from approximately 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; coffee, lunch, and snacks were provided each day. The first day consisted of sharing our agenda (see Appendix D), introductions, discussing and securing informed consent, a didactic approach to teaching the process of digital storytelling, and, later in the day, technical aspects of using WeVideo software. The official workshop began with the story circle followed by independent but supported time to work on writing story scripts and opportunities to record voice-over narrations. The second day consisted of further technical tutorials, independent work time, screenings of the completed digital stories, and a focus group which served as a form of debriefing for both researchers and participants.

Our agenda followed the format of StoryCenter public workshops as closely as possible; this format allowed for a great deal of freedom for participants, moving between more interactive discussion and learning and hands-on, reflective, and creative work. The story circle is a vital part of the digital storytelling process, where participants have the floor, one at a time, to talk about what they have experienced and their plans for their digital story. This time is presented as a respectful space for participants to share, and all participants are reminded to be supportive during the process. Positive feedback on developing stories is greatly encouraged, with any constructive feedback expressed gently through the framework of, “If this were my story, I might do this with it…”

Within this workshop, participants introduced themselves through a series of ice-breaking activities and learned how to document their personal stories using visual and auditory images found via their personal computing devices/laptop computers. Founded on the work of the StoryCenter, the workshop integrated Lambert’s (2013) “seven steps of digital storytelling” (p. 53): (a) owning your insights, (b) owning your emotions, (c) finding the moment, (d) seeing your story, (e) hearing your story, (f) assembling your story, and (g) sharing your story. A structured approach to the creation of digital stories was essential to amplifying its potential as an empowering reflective learning tool that may impact personal and
social change (Lambert, 2013); however, the intention of digital storytelling is to stimulate reflection and deeper learning, not technical excellence in the production of the digital story (de Jager et al., 2017; Sandars, Murray, & Pellow, 2008). Although each participant had her own unique story, the process of creating a digital story among others also emphasized connection to a community of other young women who had experienced violence in dating relationships. Hence, the workshop functioned as a site of group bonding and growth as women created and ultimately shared their stories with one another (Gubrium, 2009).

Due to our addition of the individual interviews prior to the workshop, participants arrived to the first day of the workshop at somewhat differing levels of readiness to engage in the digital storytelling process; most participants had not drafted their script at all, one had a completed script, and others had written out some ideas. This allowed for some flexibility in terms of the facilitators being available to help those who needed further guidance, while those farther on in creating their digital stories worked independently. However, toward the end of the workshop, some participants had already completed their digital stories, while others would have benefited from more time to work. This somewhat staggered approach to digital storytelling was consistent with what happens at the StoryCenter and is perhaps inevitable when dealing with such an individual and creative form of artistic expression about such a sensitive, personal topic.

Over the course of the workshop, participants all tried varying, innovative forms of self-expression such as finding echoing (empty) hallways to record their voice-overs on their smartphones, adding a unique and resonant sound to their voices. A couple of participants used screenshots or quotations of threatening or aggressive text and e-mail messages from their abusive ex-partners as visuals in their digital stories; most used personal photographs mixed with media images (e.g., pictures of Bonnie and Clyde, public domain artwork, and stock photography). Songs from artists such as Tom Waits and the Smashing Pumpkins served as evocative background music in some digital stories; others did not use music and relied solely on the sound of their own voice. During the workshop, we checked-in with participants as they were working; we provided technical support, viewed stories-in-progress, and provided support and guidance when needed.

We acknowledged the emotionally intense nature of the digital storytelling process and encouraged participants to talk to the on-site counselor as needed or engage in whatever form of self-care they deemed most appropriate. Some participants reported working on their digital story during the evening between the first and second day, while others intentionally rested. Particularly on the second day, which consisted of much independent work time, participants spread out within our workshop space and other nearby places in the campus building which we utilized. This was consistent with the environment at StoryCenter; again, we encouraged this depth of creative focus while being available to support participants as needed. Participants were also able to turn to each other for support on logistical as well as emotional levels. These independent work times had a deeply meaningful quality, particularly as women explored their own stories, using their own strengths and unique creative voices within a supportive environment with other women who had similar but unique experiences.

In keeping with Lambert’s (2013) structure, the final phase of the digital storytelling workshop required participants to gather and share their individual digital stories. All participants gathered at our table, as each took turns providing a preamble commentary on what it was like to share their stories and what they wanted to highlight, and then turned “on” their multimedia for a shared viewing of their personal digital stories about dating violence.

Due to the time-limited nature of our workshop, not all digital stories were fully complete, but all were screened and even the works in progress were rich and evocative. A focus on having a digital story to screen even if not perfectly polished is consistent with StoryCenter’s process and highlights the emotion of the story over technical perfection. Regardless of their state of readiness for review, the women’s stories all revealed their vulnerability and strength and were profoundly moving and emotionally intense. Their stories were works of art which highlighted a variety of aspects of participants’ experiences including grief, fear, emotional volatility, excitement, hope, and healing. The energy in the workshop space while screening the stories was one of respect, compassion, and empathy. All involved seemed to honor each other’s experiences and share in them together. We were privileged to have been so deeply involved in hearing the participants’ narratives and supporting them in shaping their stories in their own ways.

**Evaluating: Experience and Impact**

The last phase of the project involved gathering participants for a focus group discussion. The 2-day digital storytelling workshop required intense, focused labor on part of all parties. Particularly noted was the emotional labor participants invested in revisiting painful aspects of their stories and deciding how to shape them in keeping with their current identities and hopes for their futures. Therefore, in recognition of this dynamic and to reduce participant burden and attrition, the focus group was scheduled for the afternoon of the second day of the 2-day workshop (see Appendix D). This schedule facilitated immediate recall of the process and impact of the digital storytelling experience.

The focus group lasted 1.5 hours, and Martin assumed the lead in posing open-ended questions about the overall impact of the project and the utility and feasibility of using digital storytelling as a healing and knowledge-generating tool for young women exposed to dating violence (see Appendix E). Some questions included: What was it like for you to learn about digital storytelling? What was it like for you to apply digital storytelling to your own experience of abuse in intimate relationships? Has this process been helpful to your own well-being? If so, in what ways? Has being involved in this project shaped your understanding about intimate partnerships? If so,
in what ways? What was hard or challenging about the digital storytelling process? What was fun or engaging about the digital storytelling process? What are your thoughts about how we might use digital storytelling to create individual and social change related to abuse in early intimate partnerships? What else would you like to comment on about your experience of being involved in this project? Participants were all well engaged in the conversation; their responses were audi-taped and transcribed via the Social Sciences Research Laboratory to be analyzed at a later date.

After the workshop and focus group, participants and our professional counselor gathered their things and prepared to leave—there was a wanting to leave because I’m emotionally exhausted, but wanting to stay because this is a safe, caring, and thoughtful space quality to the atmosphere. Martin and McLean remained in the room for some time, quietly consid-ering and reflecting upon their experiences of supporting and witnessing the women’s creation and sharing of their digital stories. We were both viscerally moved by the experience, felt proud of the women for their tremendous courage and resil-ience, and imagined the potential for future work using digital storytelling with women exposed to violence and abuse.

Conclusion

Herein, we provided an example of using digital storytelling as an empowerment research method with young women exposed to dating violence. Although the structure of our digital stor-ytelling workshop was based on the StoryCenter’s approach, some adaptations were made to facilitate full and ethical engagement of participants who were ready to tell their stories. Specifically, a pre-workshop interview was included to support women’s thinking about and sharing their stories. Particularly poignant excerpts were highlighted, and both transcribed inter-views and excerpts were provided to each woman to use as they wished as they prepared their short story scripts prior to the digital storytelling workshop. This significant departure from StoryCenter’s approach opened access to digital storytelling to young women whose voices have been particularly silenced; many commented that it would not have been possible for them to generate a short story script or even engage in the workshop without the support provided via the pre-workshop interview. Another adaptation of StoryCenter’s method was scheduling the workshop over 2 rather than 3 days and adding a focus group interview to evaluate project impact and provide an opportunity for debriefing at the end of the second day. Finally, we included a professional counselor to monitor participants’ well-being during the workshop, which provided a valuable support to both participants and facilitators/researchers.

Consistent with our expectations, the creative aspect of digital storytelling allowed for enhanced processing of lived experience and meaning making in the context of a supportive atmosphere for all participants. Participants were clearly pas-sionate about finding ways to represent their stories and empower other young women, both in the group and beyond, who have been exposed to, or are living with, dating violence; all regarded being involved in the project as a meaningful, although emotionally challenging, and personally and poten-tially socially impactful activity.

It was evident that digital storytelling applied as a research methodology has the potential to positively impact the quality of life of young women by bringing them directly into the research process, recognizing them as experts in their own experience with the power to make a difference for themselves and others. Participants commented that digital storytelling resulted in therapeutic benefits and provided an avenue for social connection which was consistent with de Jager et al.’s (2017) findings. Garnering the personal insights of these young women opened prospects for increasing the scope and impact of this innovative approach to research in the broader area of violence and abuse, particularly with marginalized girls and women who struggle to not only tell their stories, but to have them heard. Although our project began prior to the widespread adoption of the #MeToo movement, it was consistent with the spirit of this activism. Digital stories have the potential to be used in virtual education and/or social justice movements, especially due to their utility in allowing marginalized individ-uals to tell their own stories in their own ways. As Meadows (2003) states, “if we will only learn the skills of Digital Story-telling then we can, quite literally, ‘take the power back’” (p. 192).

Appendix A

Individual Interview Guiding Questions and Pre-Preparation Guidelines for Digital Storytelling Workshop

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

The interviewer will welcome the participant to the inter-view, 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; mini-mal 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 shar-ing 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

Closure—debriefing. 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 relationships?
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 their transcribed interview and pull-out poignant excerpts to generate a 300–500 word script (they will also have their audio 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).

If you can, bring something you’ve written. Hopefully, the transcript and excerpts from your one-on-one interview will be helpful in prompting your writing. Please take some time to work on a draft of your written script or write down your ideas for a story before you arrive on the first day. We encourage you to write honestly and simply, not like you are preparing a presentation or writing a report. Write about what happened, include details that make your story unique. Write as though you were in conversation with a friend. Including specific details and anecdotes…lines of dialogue…a description of a scene where your story takes place…rather than a list of this happened, then this happened, then this happened. Your final script will be around 300 words, so choose your words precisely and honestly.

You will get a lot of help during the workshop. We will support you in making sure your script authentically communicates the story you want to tell.

Images. Your script is not the only thing that will “tell” the story. You can provide detail through the images and music you choose…and more importantly, in how you use these materials. Most digital stories use about 15–20 photos, so bring at least 24–36 (in digital form) to choose from.

Bring photographs and/or short video clips that have a relationship to your story idea. The visuals you select may be evocative of, or an actual documentation of the experience, a place and time, of persons involved, and/or something you witnessed (place indeed might be where to start). As well, you might consider photographing or filming or scanning small material objects connected to your story.

While we want you to be open to what you decide to bring, make sure your visuals have variation: close-ups/portraits as well as landscapes, variable lighting and composition, old and/or new, figurative and/or abstract. We want you to explore your visual archive beforehand, bring what you think you will need to use explicitly, or even just for inspiration.

Quality matters. Photographs that are 1,280 × 720 at 72 pixels/in. or greater will offer you a quality video output. Photographs and video clips shot with today’s smart phones work really well. If you’re shooting video or images with your phone try to hold it in horizontal position as opposed to vertical.

Please think carefully about any images you may wish to use which include other people. Be respectful of the privacy of others. This is especially pertinent if you think you will wish to share your finished digital story beyond our workshop.

Music and sounds. While digital stories often include music, it is not necessary. Music can add to your story but it can also be a distraction. There are also issues around the use of licensed music. We will talk about the use of music and sound (ambient, sound effects, etc.).

Please bring.

• a first draft (however rough) of your script;
• a laptop or tablet with the free software we will use (WeVideo) installed (If you do not have a personal
laptop or tablet, please let us know as soon as possible and we will make arrangements;)
- 24–36 photos, preferably in digital form on your chosen device (but if you have artifacts to scan or otherwise digitize, bring them and we’ll figure it out!);
- your own headphones and/or earbuds; and
- a flash drive (at least 2 GB).

WeVideo software. If you can, please download WeVideo (the free version) at https://www.wevideo.com. We will do a brief tutorial on WeVideo during the workshop; however, if you feel like familiarizing yourself with the software in advance, go right ahead!

**Appendix C**

**Examples of Transcript Excerpts**

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 and I would have to try to distract him from that all the time. I would have to stay up very late so he wouldn’t do anything.

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.

And when I told the stories to my friends all my friends say ‘why are you with him?’ And I do not have an answer. 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.

I feel like I was very naïve. And not necessarily in terms of dating him, but in terms of expecting people around me— expecting the world to be safe and to have people around me support and help me with that safety. And so I feel disillusioned in terms of like the trust that I have in the systems around me and the people above me.

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. 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.

Not only did he emotionally and physically abuse me, he also sexually abused me. 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.’

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! Like what the fuck!’

**Appendix D**

**Workshop and Focus Group Schedule**

|                          | Saturday, October 21                  | Sunday, October 22                  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 8:45                     | Arrivals, get settled in             | Arrivals, get settled in            |
| 9:00                     | Introductions and informed consent   | Check-in                            |
| 9:30                     | Workshop overview/the seven steps of digital stories | WeVideo tutorial—transitions, music, Q&A |
| 10:30                    | Story circle                         | Editing digital stories             |
| 12:00                    | Lunch (provided)                     | Lunch (provided)                    |
| 12:30                    | Story script writing, reviewing, and editing | Continue editing digital stories |
| 2:00                     | Begin voice-over recordings          | Digital story screenings!           |
| 3:00                     | WeVideo tutorial/begin storyboarding| Focus group about digital storytelling experience/debrief |
| 4:00                     | Closure                              | Closure                             |

**Appendix E**

**Focus Group Interview Guide**

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 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.

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