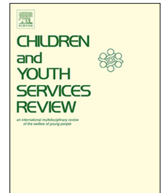
Children and Youth Services Review 108 (2020) 104607

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth



Name-calling, jealousy, and break-ups: Teen girls' and boys' worst experiences of digital dating

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Dating violence
Cyber abuse
Adolescents
Social media
Digital dating abuse

ABSTRACT

As the use of social media and mobile phones increase, scholars and practitioners have become concerned about the role these media might play in dating abuse among adolescents. However, less is known about teens' perceptions of various types of digital dating experiences. The current study sought to understand how teens conceptualized their "worst experiences" of digital dating and how they responded to these experiences. A sample of 262 high school students completed an online survey including an open-ended question asking them to write about their "worst" digital dating experience with follow-up questions about how they responded and whom they told about the incident. A content analysis of open-ended responses found that public insults, general insults, violations of privacy, rumors, break-ups, and pressure for sex/sexual photos were the most commonly reported worst digital dating experiences. Responses to digital dating experiences varied by gender, and girls were more likely than boys to cry or be upset. Teens were more likely to tell their peers than trusted adults about their worst digital dating experiences. The implications of these findings for understanding dating abuse is discussed to better inform educators and practitioners working with teens.

1. Introduction

Dating abuse has been defined as a repeated pattern of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and relational aggression such as controlling behaviors and jealousy among adolescents and young adults (Brown & Hegarty, 2018). As the use of digital media (mobile phones and social media) among adolescents increase, so has the risk that such media might be used as a context and tool for dating abuse. Traditional and digital forms of abuse are strongly positively correlated (Borrajo, Gamez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2015; Choi, Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016; Doucette et al., 2018; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2016; Stonard, 2018; Zweig, Lachman, Yahner, & Dank, 2013) and experiencing physical dating abuse predicted online dating abuse one year later (Temple et al., 2015). Overall, adult researchers, practitioners, and educators have driven the conceptualization of digital forms of dating abuse and less is known about how teens perceive various digital dating experiences. As the predominantly quantitative literature emerges on digital forms of dating abuse, it is important to explore how adolescents describe their experiences in their own words. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to examine how adolescents define their "worst experiences" of digital dating and how they responded to these behaviors.

1.1. Digital dating and abuse

The use of digital media is common among youth, with 95% of teens reporting access to a smartphone and ubiquitous use of the Internet (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Digital dating abuse (DDA) is a repeated pattern of digital media use to threaten, harass, pressure, monitor, control, or coerce a dating partner (Futures Without Violence, 2009; Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2017). In the emerging literature, one study reported that 48.1% of 14–20 years old adolescents experienced DDA in the past 2 months (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014), and another report found that 46% of high school students had perpetrated DDA (Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Boyd, & Lenhart, 2013). As with more traditional forms of dating abuse, research shows that there is a strong positive correlation between DDA victimization and perpetration (Marganski & Melander, 2015; Reed et al., 2017).

DDA is an umbrella term that describes several potentially harmful digital behaviors within a dating relationship context. In previous research with adolescents, potentially harmful digital dating behaviors have most commonly been categorized into types such as monitoring/control, direct aggression/hostility/degradation, and sexual coercion/abuse (Brown & Hegarty, 2018), although most measures exclude digital sexual abuse (see Reed et al., 2017; Zweig et al., 2013 for exceptions). Other research on college students has differentiated between

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104607
Received 15 July 2019; Received in revised form 8 November 2019; Accepted 8 November 2019
Available online 04 December 2019
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minor and severe cyber abuse (Leisring & Giumetti, 2014). Monitoring/control behaviors, including behaviors such as accessing a partner's phone without permission and tracking a partner's whereabouts using digital media, are the most commonly reported type of DDA (Borrajo et al., 2015; Lucero, Weisz, Smith-Darden, & Lucero, 2014; Reed et al., 2017).

With the widespread presence of digital media in the everyday lives of teens, harmful digital dating can have a profound impact on those who experience it. Experiences with this type of abuse can bring depression, anxiety, and fear for victims (Lindsay, Booth, Messing, & Thaller, 2016; Sargent, Krauss, Jouriles, & Mcdonald, 2016). In addition to causing emotional distress, digital dating victimization has been associated with sexual risk experiences including reproductive coercion and a lower likelihood to use contraception (Dick et al., 2014). There is also little known about if and when teens report DDA experiences to peers and trusted adults. The broader dating abuse literature finds teens are more likely to tell friends about their abuse experiences and are reluctant to report to parents, trusted adults, school resources, or law enforcement (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Weisz, 2008; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Weisz, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders, & Black, 2007). Does this trend also exist for reporting digital forms of abuse? Insight into when and to whom teens report DDA is helpful for ensuring that teens are protected from abuse and receive adequate support.

1.2. The role of gender in problematic digital dating

Mirroring the broader dating abuse literature, previous research has found gender differences in the frequency of DDA (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2016, 2017; Stonard, Bowen, Walker, & Price, 2015). Emerging digital dating research finds that boys are more likely to perpetrate sexual DDA than girls (Reed et al., 2017; Zweig et al., 2013). For non-sexual forms of DDA, some research reports no gender differences (Korchmaros et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2017) and others find that girls are more likely to perpetrate monitoring, possessive and hostile behaviors (Lucero et al., 2014; Zweig et al., 2013). Research on college students also shows that boys may be more likely to report both victimization and perpetration of severe forms of DDA (Leisring & Giumetti, 2014).

To fully understand the gender dynamics in DDA, the *motivations* and *consequences* of digital dating experiences are relevant and important. A study of 703 high school students found that girls reported being more upset than boys by all types of DDA victimization (Reed et al., 2017). Girls in this study reported digital monitoring as the least upsetting form of DDA and boys reported sexual coercion as the least upsetting form. Girls were also more likely to report negative emotional and behavioral reactions to DDA victimization than boys. These findings are supported by another study of adolescents, in which boys reported that digital forms of abuse are less harmful than traditional in-person dating abuse and girls reported that digital forms of abuse were more harmful because of its public nature and the difficulty of escaping from digital messages (Stonard et al., 2015). These studies of context around digital dating warrant further research on how teens of all genders experience DDA, and an investigation of which experiences might have the most impact on their relationships and well-being.

1.3. Incorporating teen perspectives on DDA

To ensure that teens' voices inform this developing field of study, there is a need for a variety of research methods including qualitative methods. Thus far, digital dating abuse research has focused on the most common, rather than the most meaningful, digital dating experiences. Some research indicates that behaviors categorized as dating abuse by the research literature are not defined as abuse by teens themselves (Baker & Helm, 2010). In fact, "teens often minimize or deny the seriousness of behaviors that adults would categorize as quite serious" (Lucero et al., 2014, p. 9).

To further illuminate which digital dating behaviors might be most meaningful and/or harmful for teens, a study of DDA among college students assessed whether DDA victimization experiences occurred in the context of jealousy, as a joke, as a reaction to something they did to their partner, or because their partner was angry or wanted to bother or annoy the victim (Borrajo et al., 2015). This study found that participants most often reported (51.4%) that DDA occurred in the context of jealousy and 26.1% reported it was just "a joke." Therefore, as has been discussed in face-to-face dating abuse (Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2007), some behaviors captured by current quantitative measures may be identifying "joking" behaviors that teens may not perceive as serious rather than a pattern of power and control that researchers might recognize as abuse.

1.4. Current study

The current study used multiple methods to examine teens' perceptions of their worst digital dating experiences by analyzing responses to an open-ended survey question and several quantitative follow-up questions about this experience. Four research questions guided the analysis: (1) What categories of "worst" digital dating experiences were reported?, (2) Were there gendered patterns in reports of worst digital dating experiences?, (3) Did teens' responses to their worst digital dating experiences differ by gender?, and (4) Who did teens tell, if anyone, about these worst digital dating experiences? Did disclosure differ by gender?

The first three research questions are exploratory, as we sought to categorize teens' worst digital dating experiences in their own words and how they responded to these behaviors. For research question four, we expected that similar to other forms of face-to-face dating abuse, teens would be more likely to tell friends and peers about their worst digital dating experiences more often than adults, parents, or teachers.

2. Method

2.1. Study design and procedure

The original study was conducted in 2013 and 2014 as part of a larger cross-sectional survey study of high school students at a large Midwestern suburban high school campus. The data was collected by surveying students from various grade levels who were enrolled in both required core curriculum courses and elective courses and this research was approved by a university institutional review board for ethical research practices. Parent/guardian consent forms were distributed to participants under 18 years of age. Consent and assent forms were distributed to all students in participating classrooms, with a 67.28% response rate for returned forms. Participation was both voluntary and anonymous, and a $5 gift card was awarded to students as compensation. Students were asked to complete the survey using school computers under the supervision of the research team.

2.2. Sample

Data from 262 survey participants was used for the current analysis. In the larger study, 947 students were surveyed. Three cases were removed because they lacked an ID code and demographic info. Of the resulting 944 students, 703 reported previous dating experience. Of these 703 cases, we selected for those who responded to the open-ended question about the "worst experience with digital dating abuse that happened to them or someone they know" ($N = 553$). Then, we further selected for those who responded to the item "Did the incident you described happen to you or someone you know?" with the response "me" rather than "someone you know." This process resulted in a final sample of 262 participants who had dating experience, who responded to the open-ended item, and who indicated that the digital dating experience happened to them rather than someone else.

Table 1
Digital dating abuse victimization experiences in current or most recent relationship by gender (N = 262).

	Overall victimization	Girls' victimization	Boys' victimization
Digital Sexual Abuse	42.7%		
Pressured me to "sext"	29.6%	33.8%	23.6%
Sent a sexual or naked photo of himself/herself to me that I did not want	16.5%	17.6%	14.4%
Sent a sexual or naked photo or video of me to others without my permission	3.8%	2.7%	**4.5%****
Pressured me to have sex or do other sexual activities	28.2%	33.6%	20.7%
Digital Direct Aggression	59.2%		
Shared an embarrassing photo or video of me without my permission	27.7%	27.0%	29.1%
Sent me a mean or hurtful private message	32.6%	35.1%	28.8%
Posted a mean or hurtful public message	14.7%	11.6%	19.1%
Spread a rumor about me	19.9%	16.9%	24.3%
Sent me a threatening message	10.5%	9.6%	12.0%
Threatened to harm me physically	6.2%	5.5%	7.3%
Used my cell phone or online account to pretend to be me	12.7%	10.7%	14.7%
Used information from my social networking site(s) to tease me or put me down	16.5%	18.9%	25.2%
Digital Monitoring/Control	66.4%		
Pressured me to respond quickly to calls, texts, or other messages	41.9%	38.5%	45.5%
Sent me so many messages that it made me uncomfortable	24.9%	26.2%	23.6%
Pressured me for passwords to access my cell phone or online accounts	16.2%	15.5%	16.5%
Monitored my whereabouts and activities	35.4%	36.5%	32.7%
Monitored who I talk to/are friends with	41.9%	42.2%	40.4%
Looked at my private information to check up on me without my permission	21.8%	18.9%	25.2%

Note. Chi-square analyses conducted to show gender differences. Significant gender differences shown in bold.
** $p < .01$.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographics

The survey instrument included questions about demographic information such as age, gender identification, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and participation in a free or reduced lunch program (as proxy for socioeconomic status).

2.3.2. Digital dating abuse victimization and perpetration

A 36-item measure assessed digital dating abuse victimization and perpetration in participants' current or most recent dating relationship (Reed et al., 2017). Subscales included: Digital Direct Aggression Victimization (8 items, α = 0.80), Digital Direct Aggression Perpetration (8 items, α = 0.76). Digital Monitoring/Control Victimization (6 items, α = 0.80), Digital Monitoring/Control Perpetration (6 items, α = 0.71), Digital Sexual Abuse Victimization (4 items, α = 0.70), and Digital Sexual Abuse Perpetration (α = 0.67). Responses ranged from a 4-point scale that ranged from "0" indicating "Never" to "3" indicating "Very often." See Table 1 for items within each victimization subscale.

2.3.3. Worst digital dating experiences

An open-ended survey question asked participants to write briefly about their worst digital experience with a dating partner. The wording of the "worst" experience ensured that teens would not write about benign or annoying behaviors, but incidents that stood out to them as particularly impactful. The question about worst experiences of digital dating included the following prompt: "Sometimes people have negative experiences on the Internet or using cell phones because a dating partner does something that is mean or hurtful. Please think of the WORST THING that a dating partner has DONE TO YOU on the Internet or by using a cell phone. Please write a few sentences briefly describing what happened. If you have never had a dating partner do anything negative to you using the Internet or a cell phone, please write about something that has happened to a FRIEND or SOMEONE YOU KNOW." Participants responded describing an incident. Then, participants were asked several multiple-choice follow-up questions.

As previously mentioned, the first follow-up question was "Did the incident you described happen to you or someone you know?" with response options including, "me" or "someone I know." The next follow-up question was "Who initiated this incident?" with the response options of "my dating partner, me, someone else, and I don't know." The third question was "How old were you when this happened? (In years, for example, "14")." The fourth question was "How did you respond to this incident?" and responses included "I laughed," "I cried," "I blocked my dating partner on a social networking site," "I deleted or blocked their number," "I ignored it," "I tried to talk to them about it," "I 'got back at them' by doing something mean to them using the internet or a cell phone," " I was sad or upset," "I avoided them in person," "I yelled at them or argued with them," "I ended the relationship," and "other". Participants could select any emotional responses they wish, and could select as many options as they wanted. Each behavior was coded with a "1" if they did exhibit the behavior and a "0" if they did not. The next question was "Who did you tell about this incident?" Responses included "a friend," "teacher," "school counselor," "school administrator," "another kind of counselor," "my parents," "other members of my family," "no one," and "other." Participants could select any person they had told and they had with the option to choose multiple. Each behavior was coded with a "1" if they told that person and a "0" if they did not.

2.4. Data analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches were employed. Descriptive analyses on participant demographic and the quantitative measure of digital dating abuse victimization and perpetration were run using SPSS software (Version 24). Independent sample t-tests examined gender differences in frequency of each type of DDA victimization and perpetration.

Qualitative data provided via open-field in the survey were analyzed using content analysis methods (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). Two researchers led the coding process in three phases. In the first phase, all 262 entries were shortened to include a specific behavior, maintaining the word choice of the participant as much as possible. The two coders discussed questions and discrepancies until they agreed on how to describe each reported behavior. A few entries contained descriptions of two distinct digital dating behaviors and these behaviors were separated into separate worst digital dating experiences responses. In the second phase, the summaries were further reduced to concisely describe each digital dating experience. In the third phase of coding, one researcher sorted the 275 total digital dating

experiences into piles that represented similarities of experience, which the second researcher then reviewed in detail. Several adjustments were made, such as the creation of two distinct "Rumor" categories (Sexual Rumors and Non-Sexual Rumors), to ensure the categories accurately reflected the dating experiences indicated by the respondents. Additional categories included "Not Sure" and "None." The Not Sure category was created for responses ($n = 14$) that the two coders agreed did not fit into any of the categories. These Not Sure responses were too vague to categorize or did not have enough in common with each other to create new categories.

Responses that received a "Clearly not Digital" ($n = 3$), "Not a Dating Partner" ($n = 16$), and/or "Happened to a Friend" code ($n = 4$) were excluded from content analyses but were included in quantitative follow-up analyses. These cases were included in quantitative follow-up analyses because they fit in the inclusion criteria (participants with dating experience who gave a response to the open-ended question and indicated via follow-up item that this experience happened to them) but because of their content they were not included in content analyses of worst digital dating behaviors. They were not deleted from the sample for quantitative analyses because they indicated in follow-up responses that this experience happened to them, so we did not feel confident in deleting cases that met our inclusion criteria.

The frequency of reporting each category of worst digital dating experience was determined by counting the individual responses within each category and recording them in a spreadsheet. Descriptive analyses were run in SPSS to indicate frequency of digital dating abuse victimization and perpetration, who initiated the worst digital dating experience, how participants responded, and who participants told (if anyone). T-test analyses were conducted to determine gender differences in DDA victimization and perpetration. Chi-square analyses were conducted to look at gender differences for each of the possible responses to worst digital dating experiences, who initiated the worst digital dating experience, and who teens told about their worst digital dating experience.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics

The sample of 262 participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old. The gender breakdown of the sample consisted of 57.1% female, 42.5% male, and 0.4% other gender identification. Of the sample, 7.8% of students in the survey identified as gay or bisexual. About three-fourths (76.1%) of participants were White, 5.8% were Black, 2.3% were Latino/Hispanic, 4.6% were Asian, 4.6% were Middle Eastern, 0.4% were Native American, 5.0% were Multi-racial, and 1.2% reported "Other." A portion (13.7%) of the sample participated in a free/reduced lunch program. We also compared the demographics of the participants who had dating experience and responded to the open-ended "worst digital dating abuse" question, and the participants who had dating experience but did not respond to this question. There were some significant differences between groups, such that the participants who responded to the question (Group 1) reported more frequent digital direct aggression victimization ($M = 0.22$) than those who did not respond (Group 2, $M = 0.14$), t(269.38) = 2.66, $p = .008$. Cross-tab analyses of categorical demographic information found that Group 1 had a significantly higher percentage of girls (57%) than Group 2 (45%), χ^2 (2, $N = 702$) = 7.03, $p = .030$.

3.2. Digital dating abuse victimization and perpetration

Digital Monitoring/Control was the most frequently reported type of digital dating abuse victimization (66.4%) and perpetration (53.6%) in this sample according to the quantiative DDA measure. Almost half of the sample reported Digital Sexual Abuse (42.7% victimization and 29.1% perpetration) and over half of the sample experienced Digital Direct Aggression (59.2% victimization and 48.3% perpetration). See Table 1 for the frequency and gender differences in individual digital dating abuse victimization items. After correcting for multiple tests by setting the p-value to 0.01 to minimize Type II error, we found that only one of the individual DDA victimization items differed significantly by gender: Boys (4.5%) were more likely than girls (2.7%) to report that their partner sent a sexual or naked photo of them to others without permission, χ^2 (2, $N = 261$) = 12.22, $p = .002$. We also conducted t-tests, with similarly restricted p-values, to determine gender differences in the frequency of reporting victimization and perpetration within each DDA subscale. The only significant gender difference across victimization and perpetration subscales was that boys ($M = 0.29$) were more likely than girls ($M = 0.10$) to perpetrate Digital Sexual Abuse, t (257) = -4.01, $p < .000$.

3.3. Worst digital dating experiences

The content analysis produced 13 salient categories of teens' worst digital dating experiences: Excessive Texting, Threats, Violations of Privacy, Cheating, Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos, Sending/Sharing Nude Photos, Non-Sexual Photo Sharing, Non-Sexual Rumors, Sexual Rumors, General Insults, Private Insults, Public Insults, and Break-Ups. Out of the 253 valid worst digital dating experiences reported, the most common types were Public Insults ($n = 27$), Violations of Privacy ($n = 26$), General Insults ($n = 25$), Break-Ups ($n = 24$), Non-Sexual Rumors ($n = 20$), and Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos ($n = 19$). Table 2 provides descriptions, examples, and frequencies of each category.

Worst digital dating responses were also analyzed by gender. Overall, we received more worst digital dating responses from girls ($n = 143$) than boys ($n = 89$). For every category except Non-sexual Rumors and Break-Ups, girls reported more responses than boys. Girls and boys reported the same amount of responses in the categories Threats ($n = 8$, respectively) and Excessive Texting ($n = 2$, respectively). Boys were particularly likely to report Break-Ups as their worst digital dating experience, and specifically, breaking up via text message.

Girls were particularly likely to report Public Insults ($n = 19$), General Insults ($n = 23$), Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos ($n = 18$), and Sending/Sharing Nude Photos ($n = 8$) as compared to the boys in this sample. Only one boy reported a behavior in the Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos category. Girls reported various ways in which they were pressured for sexual behaviors ("ask me for pics, only value me for sex," "tried to get me to sext and do things in person"). Girls who reported that Sending/Sharing Nude Photos was their worst digital dating experience reported that their partner shared nude photos of them, presumably without permission ("shared my nudes," "showed my nude picture to their best friend"). In the category of "General Insults," girls reported many more ($n = 23$) responses compared to boys ($n = 3$) and described varied insulting experiences that targeted their sexuality (e.g., "I get called a whore and other nicknames" and "called me a hoe after we broke up"), their appearance (e.g., "told me I was fat," "called me ugly") and called them bad names (e.g., "called me names," "harassed and insulted me"). Conversely, boys reported very few responses in this category of responses and responses centered around teasing ("got into a fight and started to tease me") and calling names (e.g. "called me an idiot"). In this particular category, the insults experienced by girls appeared more severe and involved their sexuality. A similar gendered pattern of results was found in the category Public Insults.

3.4. Initiation of worst digital dating experience

More than half (63.2%) of participants responded that their dating partner initiated their worst digital dating experience. Very few (5.4%) responded that they had initiated the incident. About a fifth of participants (19%) said "someone else" initiated the incident, and some

Table 2
Worst digital dating experience categories, frequencies, descriptions, and examples.

Category	Frequency	Description of Category	Example Responses
Public Insults	27	The use of public platforms to humiliate, mock, harass, insult, or offend, directly or indirectly, via posts or messages	"called me a whore on twitter," "indirectly tweeted hurtful messages about me," "bullied over Facebook"
Violations of Privacy	26	Violations of a partner's privacy (e.g., stalking, phone monitoring, sharing secrets, excessive jealousy)	"looked through my messages," "told me who to talk to," "told my big secret to everyone"
General Insults	25	Insults, name-calling, or use of words to hurt another person	"told me I was fat," "insulted my religion," "called me names"
Break-Up	24	Any actions associated with breaking up with a partner (e.g., over text, in public)	"broke up with me over text," "broke up with me Facebook chat," "called me to break up with me"
Non-Sexual Rumors	20	Spreading rumors about someone to harm their reputation, humiliate them, or upset them	"spread rumors about me," "lied and said we weren't dating"
Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos	19	Using coercion, threats, or other methods to pressure someone for sexual photos or to participate in sexual activities	"pressure me for naked pictures," "asked me to have sex," "pressured me to sext with him"
Non-Sexual Photo Sharing	18	Sharing photos (not sexual in nature) via text or social media, for the purpose of humiliation or mocking	"posted an embarrassing picture of me," "sent an ugly picture of me to an ex"
Cheating	17	Any action that involves cheating on a partner or insinuating infidelity	"cheated on me," "flirt with other girls online"
Private Insults	15	The use of private platforms (e.g., texting, direct message) to insult, mock, harass, or offend	"called me names over text," "sent me a mean message"
Threats	15	Using threatening language to get someone to do something or to scare them	"threatened physical violence to my family for sex," "repeated threats over phone after break up," "threatened to kill herself"
Sending/Sharing Nude Photos	12	The sharing of nude photos or photos sexual in nature via texting, social media, or in person.	"sent me nudes I didn't want," "guy showed all his friends a naked picture of a girl," "shared my nudes"
Sexual Rumors	5	Spreading false information that is sexual in nature about a partner to embarrass or hurt them	"spread a rumor that we have sex," "sexual rumor spread about me on Twitter"
Excessive Texting	4	Sending someone a lot of texts very often or within a short period of time	"blowing up my phone with messages all day," "texts me all the time"

(12.4%) participants said "I don't know." Crosstab analyses was conducted to examine gender differences in reporting who initiated their worst digital dating experience. There were no significant gender differences, χ^2 (6, N = 258) = 7.91, p = .245. The majority of both boys and girls reported that their worst digital dating experience was initiated by their dating partner.

3.5. Responses to worst digital dating experience

In response to their worst digital dating experience, 17% of teens in our sample reported that they laughed in response, 29% reported they cried, 14.7% stated they blocked partner on social media, and 16.6% deleted or blocked their partner's number. About a fourth (25.1%) ignored it, 32.4% tried to talk to their partner about the incident, and 5.8% tried to get back at them by doing something mean via phone or Internet. Almost half (47.1%) were sad or upset, 28.6% avoided them in person, 26.3% yelled at them or argued with them, 26.6% ended the relationship and 11.6% said "Other."

Girls (40.9%) were significantly more likely than boys (13%) to cry, χ^2 (2, N = 259) = 24.64, p = < 0.001. There was a marginally significant difference between boys (38.9%) and girls (53.0%) in reporting being sad or upset, with girls being more likely to have this response, χ^2 (2, N = 259) = 5.03, p = .081. See Table 3 for chi-square analyses of all response behaviors.

3.6. Who teens told about their worst digital dating experience

Most (70.8%) of participants reported telling a friend, 23.1% reported telling no one, while 20.8% reported telling their parents about their worst digital dating experience. Some students (14.2%) reported telling members of their family other than their parents. Very few reported telling a teacher (2.7%), a school counselor (3.5%), a school administrator (1.2%), another kind of counselor (3.1%), or other (5%). Crosstab analyses were conducted to examine whether there were gender differences in who girls and boys told about their worst digital dating experience. There were no significant gender differences found; the majority of both girls and boys told a friend about the incident.

Table 3
Gender differences in responses to worst digital dating experience (N = 259).

Behavior	Girls	Boys	χ^2	P value
I laughed	16.1%	17.6%	1.655	.437
I cried	**40.9%**	13%	24.644	.000*
I blocked them on social media	15.4%	13.9%	0.47	.792
I deleted their number/blocked them	17.4%	15.7%	0.53	.799
I ignored it	26.2%	23.1%	0.97	.616
I tried to talk to them about it	34.9%	28.7%	1.38	.501
I got back at them	5.4%	6.5%	0.27	.876
I was sad or upset	**53.0%**	38.9%	5.03	.081†
I avoided them in person	30.2%	25.9%	1.01	.602
I yelled at them or argued with them	28.9%	22.2%	2.01	.366
I ended the relationship	30.9%	21.3%	3.67	.160

Note. When gender differences are significant, the higher percentage is shown in bold.
* $p < .05$.
† $p < .10$.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how teens perceive and respond to their worst digital dating experiences. The most frequently reported categories of worst digital dating experiences were Public Insults, General Insults, Violations of Privacy, Rumors, Break-Ups, and Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos. There were gender differences in the categories reported, such that girls were more likely than boys to report a worst digital dating experience, and were more likely to report most categories of experiences. There were also gender differences in teens' responses to their worst digital dating experiences. Girls were more likely than boys to respond by crying or being upset. Finally, teens were more likely to tell their friends rather than trusted adults about these experiences.

This study was unique because it was the first to explore qualitative reports of digital dating experiences that teens found to be the *most* upsetting and investigated how they responded to these experiences. This study furthered our knowledge of the role of digital media in girls' and boys' dating relationships and provided a teen perspective on which behaviors they deem as the most problematic. Teens' evaluations

of digital dating experiences are important to consider as the field of digital dating abuse continues to develop.

In addition to asking participants to write about their worst digital dating experience, the current study asked participants to respond to a quantitative measure of digital dating abuse behaviors in their current/most recent relationship. It is important to differentiate between the full range of potentially problematic digital dating experiences as typically measured by quantitative surveys, and those experiences that teens themselves define as the most upsetting or problematic. A primary issue in the emerging field of digital dating abuse has been: how do we define and understand digital abuse and its role in larger issues of teen dating violence when most of digital dating interactions are highly subjective? As Reed et al. (2016) argued, some digital behaviors might be abusive only if repeated in a pattern of behaviors to exert power and control (e.g., texting a partner frequently and expecting quick replies) while other behaviors might be harmful if they occur only once (e.g., distributing a nude photo of your partner without their permission). The context of the digital interaction and how each experience is understood in the context of the relationship is essential to its impact. As researchers wrestle with how to define abuse in digital spaces, teen perspectives on digital dating should be considered.

This study included both qualitative and quantitative measures of digital dating experiences, allowing us to put the qualitative responses into context of reported frequency of digital dating abuse. Notably, in this study, using an existing measure of DDA victimization and perpetration, participants were most likely to report Digital Monitoring/Control as compared to the other types of DDA. This finding is consistent with the existing DDA literature (Borrajo et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2017). However, when asked to write about their worst digital dating experience, experiences that might reflect "monitoring and control" were not the most common experiences reported. For example, Violations of Privacy and Excessive Texting are both categories that arose from the coding of open-ended responses about teens' worst digital dating experiences. These categories are similar to items from the quantitative survey measure of the digital monitoring/control subscale. However, these were not among the most frequently reported worst digital dating experiences. Therefore, there seems to be a discrepancy between the most frequently reported DDA behaviors and what teens conceptualize as their worst digital dating experiences. Instead, the most common categories of worst digital dating experiences more closely resembled items from the Digital Direct Aggression subscale of the DDA measure.

One explanation for why teens might identify Digital Direct Aggression as worse than Digital Monitoring/Control, although Digital Monitoring/Control might be more common, might be that teens do not view these experiences to be abuse. As previously discussed, past research has identified a mismatch between the DDA behaviors that research measures and the behaviors that teens might identify as abuse (Baker & Helm, 2010). Teens may not view Digital Monitoring/Control as abuse, except for perhaps in the most extreme circumstances. In fact, some suggest that teens may view jealousy and controlling behaviors from their dating partner as a sign that their partner loves them (Williams, 2012). Because Digital Monitoring/Control behaviors happen with such frequency, perhaps they are seen as less serious or even a sign of a partner's devotion, especially as teens are more acclimated to a social media environment than adults and to publicly sharing their daily personal life and emotional experiences (e.g., Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009). Exploring the difference between the field's measurement of DDA and teens' perception of these behaviors is an important area to study to ensure that our measurement of DDA, and its gender dynamics, is more precise.

Looking at the categories of worst digital dating experiences, some unexpected findings emerged. Public and General Insults as a worst digital dating experience was reported more frequently than expected. Descriptions of digital insults appear similar to quantitative items in the Digital Direct Aggression subscale of the DDA measure, which includes items about harmful and hurtful public or private messages from a dating partner. This direct aggression from a partner, both private and public, appears to be the most salient digital dating experience that teens would identify as harmful. Perhaps insults, from a teen point of view, are an example of a digital dating experience that is upsetting if it happens once or several times. This finding supports the unique impact of digital abuse – that whereas name-calling and insults are undoubtedly an important aspect of off-line psychological abuse (e.g., Molidor, 1995; Tolman, 1989), the nature of digital media communication as an ever-present and often public tool for humiliation and embarrassment warrants attention for its impact on victims of digital dating abuse. Furthermore, this finding has implications for the importance of psychological abuse overall; as previous research has indicated, psychological abuse has been reported by survivors as more harmful than physical abuse (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Murphy & Cascardi, 1999). The current study contributes to this literature by underscoring that emotional abuse online can also be harmful.

It was also unexpected that sexual digital dating experiences were not more frequently reported as participants' worst digital dating experience for girls. Previous literature finds that sexual digital dating abuse – pressure for sex and sexual photos, distributing sexual photos without permission, and unwanted sexual photos – was the most upsetting form of DDA for girls (Reed et al., 2017). It should be noted that 18 girls reported Pressure for Sex/Sexual Photos, which was almost as often as girls reported Public Insults ($N = 19$). However, 13 girls also reported that Non-Sexual Photo Sharing was their worst experience; it appears that nonconsensual photo sharing, whether or not it is sexual in nature, is an upsetting experience for girls. One explanation for why sexual digital dating experiences were not more frequently reported as a worst experience might lie in the different wording of the current study survey and that of previous research. In Reed et al. (2017), participants were asked whether they experienced sexual digital dating experiences and if so, how upset they were by this experience. In the current study, participants were asked to write about their "worst experience" with digital dating overall. It is presently unclear how participants interpreted the wording of their "worst experience," and not all participants who wrote about their worst experience have experienced sexual digital dating incidents.

Other categories of behaviors appeared more often as participants' worst digital dating experience than would be expected from previous research. For example, Non-sexual Photo Sharing is measured in some previous research on digital dating abuse, but tends to be an infrequently reported behavior (Reed et al., 2017; Reed, Ward, Tolman, Lippman, & Seabrook, 2018). However, some of the responses in this category were written in a way that downplays the severity of this experience, describing the photo sharing "as a joke" or saying "but it was funny." The casual, seemingly playful description of these behaviors contradicted its designation as a participants' worst experience of digital dating. The qualifiers of these experiences as less severe might indicate that these participants have not had a DDA experience that was more upsetting than the one they described, or they might be qualifying this experience to minimize its severity. For example, boys might be socially pressured to "act tough" and minimize problematic dating experiences. This finding supports that the context around a digital dating behavior—the motivation, experience, and impact, and its interaction with larger social factors – such as gender socialization and peer pressure, are just as important as examining the description of the behavior for ascertaining whether a digital dating experience might be abuse.

Another worst digital dating category that appeared frequently in the current study that does not appear in previous research on DDA was the category of Break-ups. Boys reported experiences in this category more often than girls. Previous measures of DDA do not assess digital media use surrounding break-ups, and qualitative studies of abusive digital behaviors do not mention that using digital media to break-up in itself might be perceived as harmful by teens (Borrajo et al., 2015;

Lucero et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2017; Zweig et al., 2013). The intimate partner violence literature has long identified that terminating or threatening to terminate a relationship is a time of increased risk for both physical and nonphysical abuse (Brownridge, 2006). However, breaking up with someone has not been considered a form of psychological abuse. Rather, breaking up is conceptualized as a normative, albeit often unpleasant and upsetting, aspect of romantic relationships (Bravo, Connolly, & McIsaac, 2017). However, break-ups have been associated with mental health issues like self-harm and risk of suicide (Price, Hides, Cockshaw, Staneva, & Stoyanov, 2016). Perhaps more information is needed, as it would be possible for a break-up to be particularly humiliating or hurtful in a way that is abusive.

The inclusion of Break-Ups as one of the most frequent worst digital dating categories could be interpreted in a few ways. First, in otherwise healthy and non-abusive dating relationships, a hurtful break-up via text message might be the most salient digital dating experience that has happened to a teen; especially for teens who might be sensitive to rejection. This finding might also indicate that despite teens' relative comfort with using digital media for everyday social and romantic interactions, ending a relationship using social media or text may remain a cultural taboo that is interpreted as hurtful and disrespectful. Baker and Carreño (2016) found that digital media may be used to signal an impending breakup, if one or both partners stop responding to each other's messages for a period of time. These authors discuss that when digital media is used to directly end a relationship, participants in their study described this practice as commonplace rather than taboo.

Participants were also asked to report how they responded to their worst digital dating experience. Participants were most likely to report crying, being sad or upset, talking to their partner, or avoiding their partner in person. These responses are consistent with previous literature on responses to DDA victimization (Reed et al., 2017). It should also be noted that 17% of participants reported that they laughed in response their worst digital dating experience. This finding may indicate that participants did not deem this experience as harmful, despite identifying it as their "worst" experience, or perhaps they are laughing to minimize or make light of the situation. The current study also found that, consistent with our hypotheses, girls were more likely than boys to cry and feel sad or upset after their worst digital dating experiences. Previous research has shown gender differences in responses to DDA victimization (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Lucero et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2017). Some researchers have proposed that this difference arises from differential gender socialization that promotes girls being more emotional and more expressive of their emotion compared to boys (Lucero et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2017). The current study supports this assertion. However, contrary to expectations, boys were not more likely to report dismissive responses to their worst digital dating experiences as they did in past studies of responses to digital dating abuse (Reed et al., 2017). It is possible that because boys were reporting on their responses to their worst digital dating experience in the current study, rather than a broader category of potentially abusive behaviors, they might have been less likely to be dismissive of their *worst* digital dating experience. Boys might indeed by less affected by these experiences, and also might feel social desirability effects to avoid reporting negative emotional responses to these experiences. However, it is worth noting that gender differences did arise for strong negative emotional responses of crying and being upset, suggesting that girls are more impacted by digital dating experiences than boys. This is supported by previous research on DDA (Reed et al., 2017) and dating abuse more broadly (Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

Previous literature found that teens are not likely to report dating violence experiences, and when they do report, they are much more likely to tell their peers rather than an adult (Black et al., 2008; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Weisz et al., 2007). The current study replicated these findings for worst digital dating experiences. Consistent with our hypothesis, a significant portion of teens did not tell anyone about their worst digital dating experience (23.1%) and the majority told a friend or peer (70.8%). Some teens (20.8%) told their parents, but only a small number reported telling school staff or other professionals. It is possible that trusted adults are even less likely to ask teens about their digital dating experiences, as this is not as commonly recognized as in-person physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Teens themselves might not think that digital dating is serious enough to require adult intervention. It is also possible that social workers and educators have not created a climate that encourages teens to report these experiences and trust that they will receive support. This could include school or agency climates of victim blaming or zero tolerance, which may cause teens to be afraid of judgement or discipline.

4.1. Limitations

The current study makes a significant contribution to the literatures on digital dating abuse and the role of digital media in teen dating relationships by elevating teens' perceptions of their digital dating experiences. However, the findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations. The findings are not generalizable beyond this sample of predominantly white, suburban, mostly heterosexual, Midwestern teens, but as an exploratory endeavor hold promise for sharpening measurement and improving intervention and prevention efforts. Another limitation is that teens' responses might be influenced by social desirability when reporting abuse experiences and their responses to these experiences. Additionally, more than half the original study sample of 947 participants did not respond to the open-ended question asking them to describe their worst digital dating experience, which raises the potential issue for selection bias in who responded to this question. Another limitation is that we assumed that many behaviors were digital in nature, but it is possible that teens were not thinking exclusively about digital spaces when they responded. Many did not specify the platform in which the behavior occurred or specify that it was a dating partner who performed the behavior. Where it was not explicitly stated, we decided to rely on the context of the prompt and assume that they were reporting on digital behaviors. Finally, we do not know how participants chose to conceptualize their "worst" digital dating experience, other than the prompt provided specified that "worst" was "mean or hurtful." We know that some participants reported responding to their worst digital dating experience by laughing or ignoring it, and further research is needed to better understand how participants interpreted this prompt in light of their dating experiences.

4.2. Future directions and implications for practice

The findings in this study also provide opportunities for future research. Research should continue to incorporate teen perceptions of digital dating interactions to ensure that scholars' understanding of this issue evolve with teens' ever-changing digital norms. Further research should also consider the context and narrative around digital dating behaviors, especially behaviors that are framed "as a joke." Behaviors that are meant to be a joke might still be harmful, and teens might be reluctant to report behaviors if their partner claims it was meant to be a joke. Further qualitative research should investigate teens' perceptions of several types of digital dating behaviors to illuminate if, when, and under which circumstances these experiences might be abuse, including break-ups, cheating, and Digital Monitoring/Control behaviors.

This study has several important implications for practice and education. Teens' perceptions of their digital dating experiences are crucial for understanding how these experiences might impact youth, and how we might prevent these behaviors. Incorporating teen perspectives into DDA measurement in future research can improve the relevance of these tools for the lived experience of teens' lives. This study also supports service providers' use of peer education models for dating violence prevention including peer mentoring, near-peer education, and raising awareness among teens about how to talk to their peers about dating violence. Existing prevention programs have utilized

aspects of peer education and youth-led efforts (e.g., Connolly et al., 2014; Crooks, Jaffe, Dunlop, Kerry, & Exner-Cortens, 2019; Weisz & Black, 2010). Service providers and educators can also work to promote a school or agency climate that encourages teen disclosure of dating violence experiences, and a system that will provide affirming support in the case of disclosure. When disclosure does occur, service providers and educators should also pay particular attention to digital direct aggression for both boys and girls and digital sexual abuse for girls, as these experiences seem to be particularly harmful.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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

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