“It depends on what the definition of domestic violence is”:

How young Australians conceptualise domestic violence and abuse

Dr Erin Carlisle, Dr Christine Coumarelos, Kate Minter and Dr Ben Lohmeyer

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA’S NATIONAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN’S SAFETY

to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

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Caution: Some people may find parts of this content confronting or distressing. Recommended support services include 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), Lifeline (13 11 14) and, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 13YARN (13 92 76).

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Key terms

Adultism	Adultism not only denotes discrimination against children and young people on the basis of age, but also the inherent and deep-seated bias towards adults and adult-derived systems of knowledge and meaning in society that reproduce and reinforce the dominant social positioning of adults relative to young people and children (Bettencourt, 2020; Corney et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2015). Adultism has received criticism from researchers adopting a critical youth studies approach (see Section 1.1).
Continuum of domestic abuse	A way to describe a pattern of violent and abusive behaviours of increasing intensity and harm within an intimate partner relationship. The continuum ranges from "low-level" abuse (e.g. insults) to increasingly higher levels of abuse (e.g. controlling and manipulating, isolating and threatening behaviour), escalating up to physical violence at the "extreme" end of the continuum. Though the behaviours are not expected to follow sequentially along the continuum, repeated low-level behaviours can accumulate to cause a similar level of harm to high-level behaviours (Kelly, 2011; Kelly & Westmorland, 2016; Leidig, 1992).
Critical youth studies	The theoretical or conceptual framework used in our study, which shaped the approach, method and interpretation of the research findings. In response to adultism in research and claims to knowledge, critical youth studies approaches investigate the social, cultural, structural and historical influences shaping young people's everyday lives (Best, 2007). A critical youth studies approach positions young people as capable social agents; centres young people's agency, insights and interests in the design and analysis of research; and decentres adultist assumptions. The critical youth studies approach is discussed further in Section 1.1 of this report.
Domestic violence and abuse	There is no single, universally agreed definition of domestic violence and abuse. A broad definition is used in this report to refer to acts of violence and abuse (including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and financial abuse) that occur between two people who are, or were, in an intimate relationship, including co-habiting and non-cohabiting partners (Cox, 2015; Sleep, 2019). In most cases the abusive behaviour is part of a range of tactics to exercise power and control, and can be both criminal and non-criminal. The definition of the term is discussed further in Section 1.2.1 of this report.
Gaslighting	A form of psychological abuse aimed at making the victimised person seem or feel "crazy", which can be rooted in social inequalities and gender stereotypes (Sweet, 2019), such as implying that women are hysterical, forgetful or malicious, and prone to exaggeration (Minter et al., 2021).
Gender	The socially learnt roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that any given society considers appropriate for men and women, as well as non-binary genders. Distinct from biological sex categories ("male" and "female"), gender is performed and reproduced through social interactions, institutions and structures (Anderson, 2005; Our Watch et al., 2015). Expectations regarding gender vary between cultures and change over time. When we refer to "women" in this report, we refer to people who 1) self-identify as women and/or 2) have lived or embodied experience as women.

Gender stereotypes and gender roles	Common and oversimplified beliefs or assumptions about the characteristics, skills, behaviours, preferences and roles that people should have or demonstrate based on assessments of their biological sex. Similarly, gender roles are the functions and responsibilities expected to be fulfilled by women and men, and girls and boys, in society (Our Watch, 2021a; Our Watch et al., 2015). Though stereotypes and expected gender roles are often perceived as natural or innate, they are the result of socialisation (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2019; Minter et al., 2021).
Gender-ignoring lens	A lens or framework through which the young people in our study conceptualised the gendered nature of domestic violence and abuse. The term "gender ignoring" was adapted from the revised *Change the Story* (Our Watch, 2021a). As described by Our Watch, a gender-ignoring approach (or a gender-neutral approach) is "often based on claims of being 'fair' by treating everyone the same" (2021, p. 74). A gender-ignoring lens "ignores gender norms, roles, relations, and gendered differences in opportunities and resource allocation" and often reinforces – rather than transforms – gender-based inequalities (Our Watch, 2021a, p. 74).
Gender-transformative approaches	An approach for conceptualising the gendered nature of violence against women. Primary prevention initiatives that take a gender-transformative approach actively "challenge and transform gender norms, roles, relations, power imbalances and their impacts" (Our Watch, 2021a, p. 74). Unlike a gender-ignoring lens, gender-transformative approaches aim to "address the underlying causes of gender-based inequities, and foster progressive changes in gendered power relationships" (Our Watch, 2021a, p. 74).
Gendered drivers of violence	Specific social conditions that predict, influence or drive higher levels of violence perpetrated against women and gender minorities. According to the evidence base, specific elements or gendered drivers of violence include attitudes condoning violence against women; men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life; rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity; and men's peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women. These four main drivers interact with a broader suite of institutional, social, economic, cultural, structural and organisational inequalities at the micro, macro and meso levels of society to create the context and conditions for gender-based violence to occur (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2019; Our Watch et al., 2015).
National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)	The NCAS is the world's longest running representative population-level survey of community attitudes of its kind. The NCAS explores community attitudes and knowledge among the Australian population regarding domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment and stalking. It has been conducted roughly every four years since 1995 and, in the 2017 iteration of the research, had more than 17,500 respondents (Webster et al., 2018).
Primary prevention of violence against women	As defined by Our Watch (2021, pp. 55–56), primary prevention refers to a social change strategy and whole-of-society approach that aims to stop violence against women before it starts by shifting and addressing the underlying systems, structures, norms, attitudes, practices and power imbalances that drive this gender-based violence.

Relationships	Defined in the current study as romantic relationships, as opposed to other intimate familial relationships or interpersonal relationships generally. Romantic relationships can involve two people of any gender and can be at any life stage (adolescent, dating, committed or married).
Representation of domestic violence	The way in which the term domestic violence is given meaning through language and images portrayed or represented in society, including through media, popular culture, public discourse, advertising, film, cultural practices, art, stories, law and politics (Hall, 1997).
Respectful relationships education (RRE)	Primary prevention work undertaken with children and young people in education and care settings to address the drivers of violence against women and to promote healthy, respectful interpersonal relationships, with the aim of creating a future free from gender-based violence. RRE is a central pillar of primary prevention to reduce and end violence against women (Council of Australian Governments, 2019; Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2019).
Social-ecological model (or social ecology)	A model for primary prevention which conceptualises violence and abuse as a product of multiple, interacting components and social factors. Following Our Watch, the gendered drivers of domestic violence and abuse manifest – and thus must be addressed – across each of the personal, community, institutional and social levels of the social ecology (Our Watch, 2021a, p. 34).
Victims and survivors	This report uses the term "victims and survivors" when referring to people who have been or are being subjected to domestic violence and abuse.
The young people	In this report, "the young people" refers to the research participants, who were aged 16 to 18 years at the time of interview. Definitions of youth and young people are discussed in Section 1.2.2 of this report.

Executive summary

Our mixed-methods study aimed to interrogate and clarify results from the 2017 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* (NCAS) regarding young people's understandings of domestic violence. The 2017 NCAS reported some "areas of concern" within young people's understandings despite a generally good overall understanding (Politoff et al., 2019). These "areas of concern" related to understandings of the forms of non-physical violence against women, the prevalence of domestic violence and the gendered nature of domestic violence. Our study took a critical youth studies approach to further explore young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence.

Although there has been extensive research into young people's *experiences and attitudes* about domestic and relationship violence, less attention has been paid to young people's *understandings* of such violence, especially in Australian research. In particular, exploratory qualitative research in Australia on young people's understandings of domestic violence and abuse remains lacking (Loney-Howes et al., 2021), especially in relation to how young people understand domestic violence as a gendered and common phenomenon in the community. Moreover, young people's conceptualisations of whether certain behaviours *always* or only *sometimes* constitute violence and abuse also warrant investigation, along with their rationalisations for when unhealthy relationship behaviours "cross the line" into domestic violence. Thus, little is known about *what* and *how* young Australians themselves conceptualise domestic violence, and *why* (Loney-Howes et al., 2021).

Aims

To appropriately design initiatives for young people and to upskill them as agents of change in the prevention of domestic violence, there is a need to explore what young people understand and how they come to these understandings – *on their own terms*. Adopting a critical youth studies framework, the study explored the following overarching questions:

1. According to young people, what constitutes domestic violence?
2. How do young people conceptualise or make sense of domestic violence?

To investigate these questions, the study examined young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse in terms of its distinctness from unhealthy relationship behaviours, its commonness in the community, and its gendered nature. The study adopted a broad scope for the term "domestic violence" and aimed for the young people to define this concept in their own terms. To this end, the study sought to explore young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence in terms of many different forms of violent or abusive behaviour within relationships, including, but not limited to, physical violence, emotional or psychological abuse, sexual abuse, social abuse, financial abuse and stalking.

Research design

The mixed-methods research design involved an online survey and online focus groups. The key activity in the focus groups was the discussion of 10 scenarios that each described a relationship behaviour between intimate partners. These behaviours included physical and non-physical forms of domestic violence and abuse, as well as other unhealthy relationship behaviours. Participants were also asked about their understanding of domestic violence more broadly. Prior to the focus groups, a short online survey was used to collect qualitative and quantitative data on a wider range (30) of relationship behaviours, including the 10 behaviours that were discussed in depth in the focus groups.

Our study focused on young people aged 16 to 18 years in order to directly inform primary prevention strategies with young people in schools and education-based institutions. Our sample comprised 80 young people (41 young women and 39 young men) from diverse backgrounds across Australia, including from different states and territories, metropolitan and rural areas, and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A purposive and convenience sampling strategy was used. We conducted seven focus groups with young women and seven focus groups with young men, each involving four to six participants. Ethics clearance for the project was provided by the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 2020/444).

Key findings

Quantitative findings: Ratings of fictional scenarios

Participants rated 30 fictional relationship scenarios on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "okay" to "sometimes okay" to "not okay". The young people generally rated the physical and non-physical forms of domestic violence and abuse, as well as the other unhealthy relationship behaviours, as "not okay". Virtually all participants (97–100%) rated the physically violent and sexually coercive behaviours as "not okay". In comparison, the non-physical domestic abuse scenarios – particularly those depicting technology-facilitated surveillance and harassment – were rated as "not okay" somewhat less often. This finding may reflect young people's ubiquitous use of and comfort with technology. Finally, there was considerable variation in the ratings of the other unhealthy relationship behaviours, with 100 per cent to less than 50 per cent (46–49%) of young people rating these behaviours as "not okay".

There were also some apparent gender differences (in raw terms of at least 10%) in the "not okay" ratings for three non-physical abuse scenarios and five unhealthy behaviour scenarios. These scenarios were rated as "not okay" by fewer young men than young women. The gender differences suggest that young men may be more likely to accept or normalise certain non-physically abusive or unhealthy relationship behaviours. These aspects of the quantitative findings were further explored in the qualitative component of the study.

Qualitative findings

Narrow representations of "explicit" domestic violence in public discourse

Physical violence, in particular, and sexual violence were characterised as *explicitly* domestic violence, because they are most commonly represented as constituting domestic violence within public discourse. The young people suggested media portrayals of domestic violence as mainly extreme or sensationalised physical violence result in a too-narrow definition about what counts as domestic violence held among the public.

"Subtle" forms of domestic violence and the "snowballing" process of abuse

In addition to the "explicit" forms of domestic violence, the young people also described "subtle" forms that are less represented in public discourse – namely, "mental" or emotional abuse, financial abuse, verbal abuse and control. Participants also conceptualised domestic violence as a "snowballing" process or pattern of multiple abusive and violent behaviours involving escalating harms that entrap the person experiencing it. The young people noted that subtle forms of *abuse* do not fit neatly within the term "domestic *violence*", given that "violence" commonly means the infliction of physical harm. In contrast, "domestic violence and abuse" was seen as a more accurate term that encompasses multiple, distinct forms of violence and abuse, which can co-occur as a pattern of behaviour.

The unhealthy "stepping stones" towards domestic violence and abuse

The young people also felt that some scenarios depicted behaviours that were unhealthy or toxic and harmful in themselves, but did not yet reach the *technical* threshold of domestic violence and abuse. Toxic relationship behaviours or "red flags" included acting without or against the other partner's consent, causing harm, dominating or treating the

other partner like a possession, and being manipulative. Notably, the young people pointed to consent or a lack thereof when discussing many scenarios depicting a range of domestic violence and abuse behaviours, not just those depicting sexual violence. They conceptualised these toxic behaviours as "stepping stones" that can escalate and lead to domestic violence and abuse. The young people thus appeared to incorporate toxic behaviours – such as manipulation, bullying and acting against or without consent – into an expanded continuum of relationship violence and abuse.

Normalised or understandable "stepping stones"

Some of the "stepping stones" were seen as common or normalised in relationships – particularly within *unhealthy* relationships. Behaviours most often seen as normal or commonplace in romantic relationships generally involved technology. Jealousy was seen as acceptable as a "natural" emotion, but problematic if acted upon in a toxic or abusive way. The young people argued that some of the "stepping stones" may be acceptable or understandable under certain circumstances: if they were motivated by care or concern for the partner's welfare; if the partner consented or reciprocated; or if there were suspicions of cheating.

Healthy behaviours and the importance of consent

The young people characterised communication, each person's independence or autonomy, trust, mutual respect, and affection or care as highly important in relationships. However, the young people often struggled to articulate how the healthy behaviour occurs *in practice* (such as what trust *looks like*). Additionally, the young people placed a high importance on consent in relationships generally – not just in relation to *sexual* consent. Rather, they conceptualised consent broadly in terms of autonomy and the capacity to make one's own decisions: as one young person put it, "Consent comes in all forms." (Felicity, YW1)

Gender and domestic violence and abuse: The gender-ignoring lens

The young people conceptualised domestic violence in gender-neutral terms through a gender-ignoring lens (Our Watch, 2021a), which was influenced by notions of what is "fair" as well as an idealised and abstract understanding of equality as the *uniform treatment of individuals*. Domestic violence and abuse was seen as *irreducible* to gender, as well as morally wrong *irrespective* of gender. Additionally, the young people argued that victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse are treated unequally on the basis of gender, and that men are unfairly represented as the main perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse in public discourse. The young people thus characterised gender as a driver of the *unequal societal response* to domestic violence and abuse, not as a *driver* of violence and abuse per se.

Gendered "conditioning" shaping understandings

Both young women and young men argued that women are "conditioned" by their parents and broader society (including through respectful relationships education; RRE) from a young age to be constantly vigilant about their own safety. There was a sense that young women, as a result of this "conditioning", are *more* aware of domestic violence and abuse and *more* attuned to potentially problematic behaviour.

Implications for policy and prevention

Our study underscores the value of promoting young people's voices in research, policy and practice design. By centring young people's voices, our findings give rise to important implications for policies and strategies aimed at preventing domestic violence and abuse and for respectful relationships initiatives for young people in Australia. These implications are highly relevant for policymakers, practice design decision-makers, practitioners, educators, youth workers and those working in RRE.

Correct sensationalised and narrow representations of domestic violence in public discourse

Media and public discourse play a key role in shaping ideas about what counts as domestic violence and abuse. Scepticism among young people and the general public about the realities and prevalence of domestic violence and abuse needs to be corrected. Reporting narratives that disproportionately focus on incident-based and severe domestic violence crimes, while overlooking patterns of coercive control, financial abuse and psychological abuse, should be changed. Quality media reporting of domestic violence should be victim-centred and trauma-informed, in adherence with guidelines such as *How to Report on Violence against Women and their Children* by Our Watch (2019).

Address inconsistent definitions of domestic violence and abuse across research, policy, prevention and public discourse

Inconsistent or non-specific definitions can hinder recognition of violence and abuse among the public, including by victims and survivors. Policy and prevention work should adopt a broader and more robust definition of domestic violence as *violence, abuse and control* within intimate relationships, and this robust definition should incorporate an understanding of the ongoing pattern of multiple forms of behaviour within its scope. The

terminology and definition of relationship *violence, abuse and control* should be nationally consistent, and implemented within RRE curricula, in action plans stemming from the new *National Plan* and in state and territory jurisdictional violence against women frameworks.

Target the "stepping stones" towards domestic violence and abuse through prevention initiatives

To address the continuum of toxic and "stepping stone" behaviours, respectful relationships initiatives should be expanded and incorporated into existing anti-bullying and consent modules within social and emotional wellbeing curricula for all age years. RRE should also equip young people with the knowledge and skills to identify "red flags" or warning signs for unhealthy relationships, and give them the skills to leave relationships safely and respectfully.

Address attitudes that normalise or rationalise unhealthy or abusive relationship behaviours

RRE and prevention initiatives should target rationalisations for abusive or problematic behaviour to correct minimising attitudes. Initiatives should equip young people and the broader population with skills and confidence to safely intervene in or "call out" problematic behaviour that they witness within their peer networks. Young people should also be equipped with skills to identify and healthily respond to jealousy and conflict in relationships.

Build young people's capacities and skills for healthy relationships

To prevent violence and abuse both in young people's early relationships and into the future, RRE should equip young people with healthy relationship skills, such as communication, trust and respect. Reforms to RRE and sexuality education, heeding calls to "Teach Us Consent" (2021), may benefit from adopting a wider and more holistic conception of consent in its "many forms". A holistic approach to consent in robust RRE programs should foster young people's skills in and respect for autonomy and freedom to make one's own decisions within relationships, *as well as* sexual consent.

Address the gender-ignoring lens and gender-neutral views on domestic violence and abuse

Gender-transformative frameworks should be adopted to target and address the gendered norms and drivers of gender-based *violence, abuse and control* at all levels of the social ecology. Understandings of substantive equality (as opposed to idealised individual equality) and the structural inequalities that create the conditions for violence, abuse and control should be increased. Misperceptions about the unequal treatment of victims and survivors need to be corrected, and any gendered stigmas or problematic attitudes hindering help-seeking must be challenged. Attitudes of backlash or resistance to understandings of the structural and gendered drivers of domestic violence and abuse must also be addressed.

Address gendered disparities in learning about domestic violence and abuse

Young women are unfairly burdened with the responsibility for learning about violence and abuse from a young age to maintain their safety through gendered "conditioning". This unfair burden should be redressed through robust, nationally consistent RRE, implemented across early years through to Year 12 across the public and private education sectors. RRE should be gender-transformative and include desegregated workshops where appropriate. Safe spaces for young women and gender-diverse young people should be created for them to share their stories of being "conditioned". Young men's critical consciousness should be expanded by encouraging them to reflect on their personal connections to and stake in preventing gender-based violence and abuse. Attitudes and norms that problematically place responsibility only on women to remain safe should be targeted, such as through campaigns that emphasise the whole community's responsibility for preventing and ending violence against women.

Introduction

Interviewer:	Would you say any of these scenarios are domestic violence?
Alec:	Pushing to the floor.
Travis:	Yeah, [that] one is probably the only domestic violence one.
Jeremiah:	Is domestic violence repeatedly, or is it just a one-time thing, because the pushing thing could only be a one-time thing but I'm not sure whether …
Alec:	Domestic violence is aggressive behaviour, I think.
Jeremiah:	Oh, then if it's just that then yeah, the pushing one would be.
Joel:	It depends on what the definition of domestic violence is, but if it's, like, a single thing then yeah, that could count as domestic violence …
Interviewer:	Does it have to be aggressive, Alec, to qualify as domestic violence?
Alec:	Well, no, in the word it says, "domestic violence", so it's violent, so yeah, that's what I think. (YM2)

Young people are considered a key group of interest to researchers, policymakers and practitioners working in the area of domestic violence prevention in Australia. Not only have young women been identified as most at risk of experiencing violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017, 2021), but young men are increasingly identified as a key group perpetrating violence against women – especially sexual violence (Davis et al., 2018). Young people's ready availability across many institutional settings (e.g. schools and organised sport and social activities), together with their burgeoning knowledge and attitudes towards violence, mean they are ripe for early intervention to prevent violence (Flood & Kendrick, 2012; Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Messinger et al., 2014; Politoff et al., 2019; Struthers et al., 2017). In this context, young people are constructed as agents of potential positive generational change: it has been argued that improving young people's attitudes and understandings regarding violence would bring about the long-term prevention and eradication of domestic violence in Australia (Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Politoff et al., 2019; Struthers et al., 2019).

However, much of the existing research and intervention work in the area of domestic violence has been driven by and privileged adult reasoning, and has failed to engage young people as active agents and valuable contributors to knowledge (Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Noble-Carr et al., 2019; Tagesson & Gallo, 2021). Young people's exclusion from meaningful participation in research and initiatives about and for them reflects a broader culture of "adultism", which privileges adult power and maintains negative stereotypes of young people as passive, naïve, unknowing, risk-taking and irresponsible – thus requiring both protection and correction (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021; Best, 2007; Bettencourt, 2020; Corney et al., 2021;

France & Threadgold, 2015; Sercombe, 2010; Wyn & White, 1997). In line with this adultist culture, research with young people has typically been observational rather than truly participatory and has neglected simply "asking young people what they think" (Lombard, 2016, p. 244). Consequently, little is known about *how* young Australians themselves conceptualise domestic violence and *what* they understand about domestic violence without recourse to adult-derived frameworks or definitions (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). To appropriately design initiatives for young people and to upskill them as agents of change in the prevention of domestic violence, there is a need to explore what young people understand and how they come to these understandings *on their own terms*.

The exchange between the young people quoted above took place in one of the focus groups in our study. Viewing this exchange with an adultist lens may suggest that young people's understandings of domestic violence are lacking. The 2017 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* (NCAS) results for young people, which provided the impetus for our study, similarly concluded that young people have poorer understanding of domestic violence – particularly regarding their understandings of the non-physical forms of violence, the gendered nature of domestic violence and the prevalence of violence against women (Politoff et al., 2019). However, if adultist biases are dispelled, a closer inspection of the exchange quoted above reveals the young people's attempts to navigate a range of competing definitions and narratives about "what counts" as domestic violence. Our study thus attempted to centre young people's voices and knowledge of domestic violence by taking a critical youth studies approach (Corney et al., 2021). We sought not only to learn *what* young people understand, but also to learn *from* young people about *how* they conceptualise domestic violence.

Our mixed-methods research with young Australians employed a short survey and focus group discussions to explore two key questions from a critical youth studies perspective:

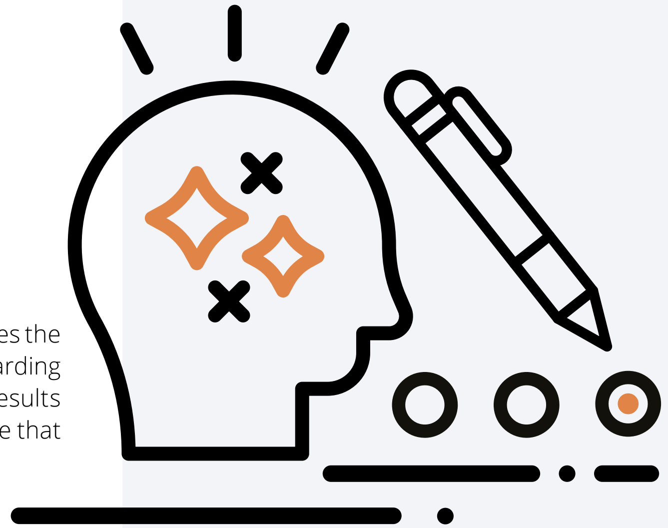
- According to young people, what constitutes domestic violence?
- How do young people conceptualise or make sense of domestic violence?

In particular, we explored young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence in terms of its distinctness from unhealthy relationship behaviours, as common or uncommon in the community, and as a gendered phenomenon. The study's primarily qualitative, exploratory and youth-centred focus filled an important gap in Australian research in the area of domestic violence (Loney-Howes, et al., 2021). Moreover, our research heeded recent calls for greater engagement *with* young people in shaping interventions and prevention initiatives *for* young people, instead of simply translating adult-centric knowledge for youth contexts (Hill et al., 2021; Struthers et al., 2019).

Structure of the report

This report contains four main chapters. Chapter 1 situates the study by outlining the research approach, key concepts driving the study, and the existing research context. Chapter 2 outlines the study's research design. Chapter 3 outlines the study's findings. After introducing the young people who participated in our study, the quantitative findings from the online survey are detailed. Next, the qualitative findings are outlined in two main subsections, focusing on what young people conceptualise as constituting domestic violence, and how young people conceptualise domestic violence as a gendered phenomenon. Finally, Chapter 4 discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature and outlines the implications of the results both for future research and for policy and prevention. The strengths and limitations of the study are noted at the end of Chapter 4.

1. Situating the research: Approach, concepts and context



This chapter discusses the parameters that informed our study. It outlines the critical youth studies approach; the lack of definitional consensus regarding the key concepts of "domestic violence" and "youth"; the 2017 NCAS results which prompted our investigation; and the gaps in the existing literature that our study sought to address.

1.1. Research approach: A critical youth studies research framework

The critical youth studies approach used in our study centres on two key principles, which should be kept in mind when reading the report and interpreting the findings. The first principle is methodological: it involves prioritising and centring young people's agency, interests and viewpoints in research design, implementation and analysis. Borrowing broadly from participatory action research, critical youth studies approaches do not just *involve* young people. Rather, such approaches foster young people's co-construction of knowledge by prioritising their perspectives on topics of importance to them and providing opportunities for their perspectives to shape or drive research (Allen, 2009; Best, 2007; Hart, 1992). Prioritising young people in this way provides more robust and nuanced insights into their worlds than is possible through adult-centred approaches and more appropriate foundations for designing intervention strategies (Best, 2007). Our study was committed to this youth-centred approach, in so far as this was possible within the limits of an adult-centric wider research program and the boundaries of research ethics obligations (Barter & Lombard, 2018).

The second guiding principle of critical youth studies approaches is epistemological and political, relating to ideas about both knowledge and power. Critical youth studies research begins from the assumption that young people hold a subordinated and disenfranchised social position in contrast to the dominant social position of adults (Best, 2007; Corney et al., 2021; France & Threadgold, 2015; Sercombe, 2010; Wyn & White, 1997). Critical youth studies approaches acknowledge and challenge these power differentials which privilege adult-centred hierarchies and dynamics of knowledge and power that operate within institutions and practices, including within the research process (Best, 2007; Corney et al., 2021). In order to learn *from* young people in their *own terms*, critical youth studies research requires the researchers to reflexively "decentre" adult-derived categories. Failure to appropriately decentre adult frameworks both reinforces adult claims to knowledge *about* young people and results in deficit-based, bad faith or "adultist" misrepresentations of young people's knowledge and experiences (Noble-Carr et al., 2019; Raby, 2007; Teo, 2010).

1.2. Research concepts: Domestic violence and young people

This section highlights the lack of consensus in the literature about the definitions of "domestic violence" and "young people", before outlining the definitions of these concepts adopted in our study.

1.2.1. Defining "domestic violence"

There is no single or universally accepted definition of domestic violence used in research or policy, in Australia and elsewhere. While "domestic violence" is commonly used in research, policy and prevention work, this term is not used across the board. Acknowledging this challenge, it is on this basis that the newly drafted *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* highlights the need for consistent definitions across Australia to ensure shared understanding in policy and prevention (Department of Social Services, 2022).

National and state and territory prevention policies in Australia to date have used varying definitions and terminology to describe domestic violence (Council of Australian Governments, 2019; Nancarrow, 2019; Our Watch, 2021a). Additionally, research and scholarly debate often utilise inconsistent theories about the nature and content of domestic violence (Graham et al., 2020), which means defining and measuring domestic violence "in a meaningful way is fraught with difficulty" (Bender, 2017, p. 1383; see also Myhill & Kelly, 2019). Most commonly, to date, Australian policy and research employs the term "domestic violence" or, increasingly, "domestic and family violence" (e.g. Council of Australian Governments, 2011, 2019; Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, 2019; Morris et al., 2020; Our Watch, 2021a; Our Watch et al., 2015). Unlike recent shifts in the United Kingdom (e.g. Aldridge, 2021; Cairns, 2020), the term "domestic violence and abuse" is rarely used in Australian policy or research, even though Australian definitions of "domestic violence" and "domestic and family violence" include behaviours described as types of "abuse" (Council of Australian Governments, 2019; Our Watch, 2021a; Our Watch et al., 2015). Indeed, as White (2009, p. 2) notes, the terms violence and abuse are used "loosely in discussions of aggression in interpersonal relationships" by researchers, policymakers and practitioners alike. Other terms commonly – and sometimes interchangeably – used to describe violence and abuse between domestic or intimate partners include "intimate partner violence" (Department of Social Services, 2022; World Health Organization, 2010), "domestic abuse" (Lombard & Whiting, 2017), "family violence" (Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, 2019), "dating violence" (Shorey et al., 2008) and "violence against women" more broadly (Our Watch, 2021a).

Regardless of the term used, existing definitions of domestic violence usually describe both the relationship context of the violence and the different forms that it can take. Domestic violence is generally defined as occurring in the context of intimate relationships between cohabitating or non-cohabitating current or ex-partners, within married, de-facto or dating relationships (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2021a; Cox, 2015; Nancarrow, 2019). The concept of domestic or intimate partner violence mostly refers to violence taking place within serious or ongoing intimate relationships between adults, thereby excluding violence in relationships between young people, teens or adolescents (see Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, 2019; Teten et al., 2009).[1] Some researchers have adopted terms that may more accurately describe the nature of young people's relationships, such as "dating violence", "adolescent dating violence" and "teen dating violence" (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Barter, 2009; Brown et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2011; Chung, 2005; Deans & Bhogal, 2019; Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2016; Rothman et al., 2012; Senior et al., 2017; Shorey et al., 2008; Stonard et al., 2017; Tagesson & Gallo, 2021; Taylor et al., 2017; Tolman et al., 2003; Ustunel, 2021; Velonis, 2016; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999; Zych et al., 2021).

The scope of our study covered violence within romantic or intimate relationships, which include both dating relationships and more established relationships such as cohabiting partner and married relationships. Thus, our study did not focus on violence within broader "domestic" or "familial" relationships, which are often covered by the wider definitions of "family violence" and "domestic or family violence", such as violence involving parents, siblings, extended family, broader kin, "family-like" networks (such as LGBTQ chosen or created families), carers and dependents (Gray et al., 2020; Hailey et al., 2020; Our Watch, 2021a).

There is also no standardised or universally accepted definition of the specific forms of behaviour that constitute domestic violence, in Australia or internationally. A review of Australian prevention and policy frameworks conducted by the research team found that the forms of violent behaviour identified within definitions of domestic violence varied across national, state and territory contexts (ACT Government, 2019; Council of Australian Governments, 2011, 2019; Government of South Australia Office for

1 Notably, however, the United Kingdom's definition of domestic violence has recently been expanded to include 16- and 17–year-olds in order to address violence and abuse in teenage relationships (Sundaram, 2013).

Women, 2019; Government of Western Australia, 2020; Northern Territory Government, 2018; NSW Government, 2014; Queensland Government, 2019; Tasmanian Government, 2021; Victoria State Government, 2018). However, existing policy and prevention frameworks in Australia do share an understanding that domestic violence is not limited to physical violence only. Rather, these frameworks conceptualise domestic violence as potentially manifesting in many different forms of violent or abusive behaviour, including, but not limited to, physical violence, emotional or psychological abuse, sexual abuse, social abuse, financial abuse, spiritual abuse and stalking. From the Australian policy and prevention frameworks cited above, domestic violence is conceptualised as a repeated and ongoing pattern of violent or abusive behaviour enacted by the perpetrator to control their partner and gain or maintain power, through intimidation, coercion or threats designed to humiliate, undermine or isolate. Additionally, definitions typically refer to the severe consequences that can be experienced by the victim, including psychological, emotional, physical and sexual harm, as well as isolation. The violence, moreover, is described as limiting the victim's freedom to think and act, and causing them to live in fear and insecurity.

Consistent with the 2017 NCAS and the broader Australian policy and research context, our study used the term "domestic violence" (in a broad and open-ended sense) in the initial design and implementation of the research, which is reflected in the introductory and method chapters of this report. However, "domestic violence and abuse" is subsequently used in the findings and discussion chapters because the young people in our study felt that the term "domestic violence and abuse" more accurately describes the phenomenon as an escalating pattern of multiple and co-occurring violent *and* abusive behaviours. As used in this report, both "domestic violence" and "domestic violence and abuse" similarly refer to physical and non-physical forms of violence or abuse within intimate partner relationships.

1.2.2. Defining "young people"

There is no consensus about the age range defining "youth" or "young people". The United Nations (2013) defines youth as people aged 15 to 24 years, while some international policy marks the end of youth as late as 40 years of age (Krauss et al., 2012). In Australian policy and research, including in the area of domestic violence, "youth" and "young people" are categories typically assigned to people between the ages of 12 and 24 years (Department for Human Services, 2020; Department of Health, 2019). It is important to note that this broad age range covers a significant diversity of experiences, needs and capacities, from both biological and developmental perspectives (Weiten, 2004). In addition, from a sociological perspective, youth is a social and political phenomenon in which the experience of being young and having access to the rights and responsibilities of adulthood varies significantly across social, political and cultural contexts (France et al., 2020; White & Wyn, 2011; Wyn & White, 1997).

Research concerning domestic violence often focuses on more discrete age groups and, in particular, on the life stages of young people, such as certain stages of school or university study (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Burke et al., 2011; Chung, 2005; Deans & Bhogal, 2019; Flood & Kendrick, 2012; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Iyer, 2019; Joelsson & Bruno, 2020; Stonard et al., 2017; Ustunel, 2021) . It is also useful to note that much of the leading research on domestic violence is conducted with children younger than 12 years of age (Barter & Lombard, 2018; McCarry & Lombard, 2016; Noble-Carr et al., 2019).

The 2017 NCAS, which provided the impetus for our study, defined young people as respondents aged 16 to 24 years. As discussed above, there are important differences among these age cohorts in relation to education, developmental stages, life experiences and social and political capital. As such, a decision was made to explore the understandings held by young people between the ages of 16 and 18 years in our study, so the results were indicative of an age cohort at a roughly similar educational stage. Moreover, focusing on this specific age scope of 16 to 18 years enables our findings to directly inform primary prevention strategies with young people in schools and education-based institutions (such as those found in Flood et al., 2009; Flood & Kendrick, 2012; Struthers et al., 2019).

1.3. Research context: The NCAS

The NCAS is the world's longest running representative population-level survey of community attitudes of its kind, with more than 17,500 respondents in 2017 (Webster et al., 2018). The NCAS benchmarks Australians' knowledge and attitudes regarding violence against women and gender equality, while also tracking changes over time in community knowledge and attitudes. It focuses on domestic and family violence and sexual violence, and also examines stalking and sexual harassment.

In addition to the report on the whole Australian population (Webster et al., 2018), a report was produced on the 2017 NCAS findings for young people aged 16 to 24 (Politoff et al., 2019). The *Young Australians' Attitudes to Violence against Women and Gender Equality* report showed that most young people held *attitudes* that reject violence against women and support gender equality (Politoff et al., 2019). Further, the report showed that young people had a good *overall understanding* of the nature of violence against women and this overall understanding had improved over time.

However, the report also concluded that there were some "areas of concern" within young people's understandings. As discussed in the following sections, the NCAS results highlighted a need to further explore young people's understandings of:

- the forms of non-physical violence against women
- the prevalence of domestic violence
- the gendered nature of domestic violence.

1.3.1. Understandings of the different forms of violence against women

The 2017 NCAS measured understanding of both physical and non-physical forms of violence against women. Like older age groups, young people aged 16 to 24 years had a high understanding of physical forms of domestic violence. Four NCAS items examined understanding of physical forms of domestic violence. As shown in Table 1, at least 95 per cent of young women and young men agreed that each of these physical behaviours constitutes domestic violence "sometimes", "usually" or "always" (i.e. slapping or pushing to cause harm or fear, forcing sex, threatening to hurt family members, throwing or smashing objects to frighten or threaten; see Politoff et al., 2019, p. 19).

However, the 2017 NCAS highlighted some apparent gaps in young people's understanding of the non-physical forms of violence, despite an increase in this understanding over time (Politoff et al., 2019). In 2017, six NCAS items measured understanding of non-physical forms of violence, including coercive control, harassment through technology and stalking. These six items together comprise the Understanding Violence against Women Scale (UVAWS), which measures the *overall* understanding of non-physical forms of violence by calculating a scale score for each respondent based on these items. The majority of young people recognised the non-physical behaviours as constituting violence against women at least "sometimes". However, the NCAS results showed:

- Young people had lower recognition of non-physical forms of violence. For example, while at least 95 per cent of young people agreed that each physical behaviour is violence at least "sometimes", this proportion dropped to 76 and 86 per cent, respectively, for financial abuse (Item DV2m) and technology-facilitated stalking (DV10m; see Table 1).
- Compared to young women, young men had a notably lower recognition of five of the six non-physical forms of violence (see Table 1).

Young people's overall understanding of non-physical forms of violence, as measured by the UVAWS, was lower than that of older age groups. Only 22 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds had a UVAWS score in the highest quartile of scores for the sample (indicating a relatively high overall understanding), compared with 36 and 34 per cent for each the older age groups respectively (see Table 2).

Table 1: 16- to 24-year-olds' understanding of behaviours constituting domestic violence or violence against women, 2017 NCAS

Item no.	Item	% agreeing behaviour constitutes violence, always, usually or sometimes:		
Physical forms of violence		**All**	**Young men**	**Young women**
DV2a	Slaps or pushes to cause harm or fear	98	97	99
DV2c	Forces the other partner to have sex^	95	95	96
DV2e	Tries to scare/control by threatening to hurt other family members^	99	98	100
DV2i	Throws or smashes objects to frighten or threaten^	96	96	97
Non-physical forms of violence		**All**	**Young men**	**Young women**
DV2g	Repeatedly criticises to make partner feel bad or useless†	90	88	93
DV2k	Controls social life by preventing partner from seeing family/friends†	91	86*	96
DV2m	Controls the other partner by denying them money	76	70*	83
DV10	Repeatedly keeps track of location, calls or activities through mobile phone or other devices without consent^	86	79*	93
SV1a	Stalking by repeatedly following/watching at home/work	90	87*	94
SV2c	Harassment by repeated emails, text messages†	89	84*	94

Note: The table is reproduced from Table 4-1 in Politoff et al. (2019, p. 19).
^ Item asked of a quarter of the sample.[2]
† Item asked of half the sample.
* Difference between men and women is statistically significant, p ≤0.01 and reaches the 0.2 Cohen's threshold.

Table 2: Overall understanding of non-physical violence against women according to the UVAWS by age, 2017 NCAS

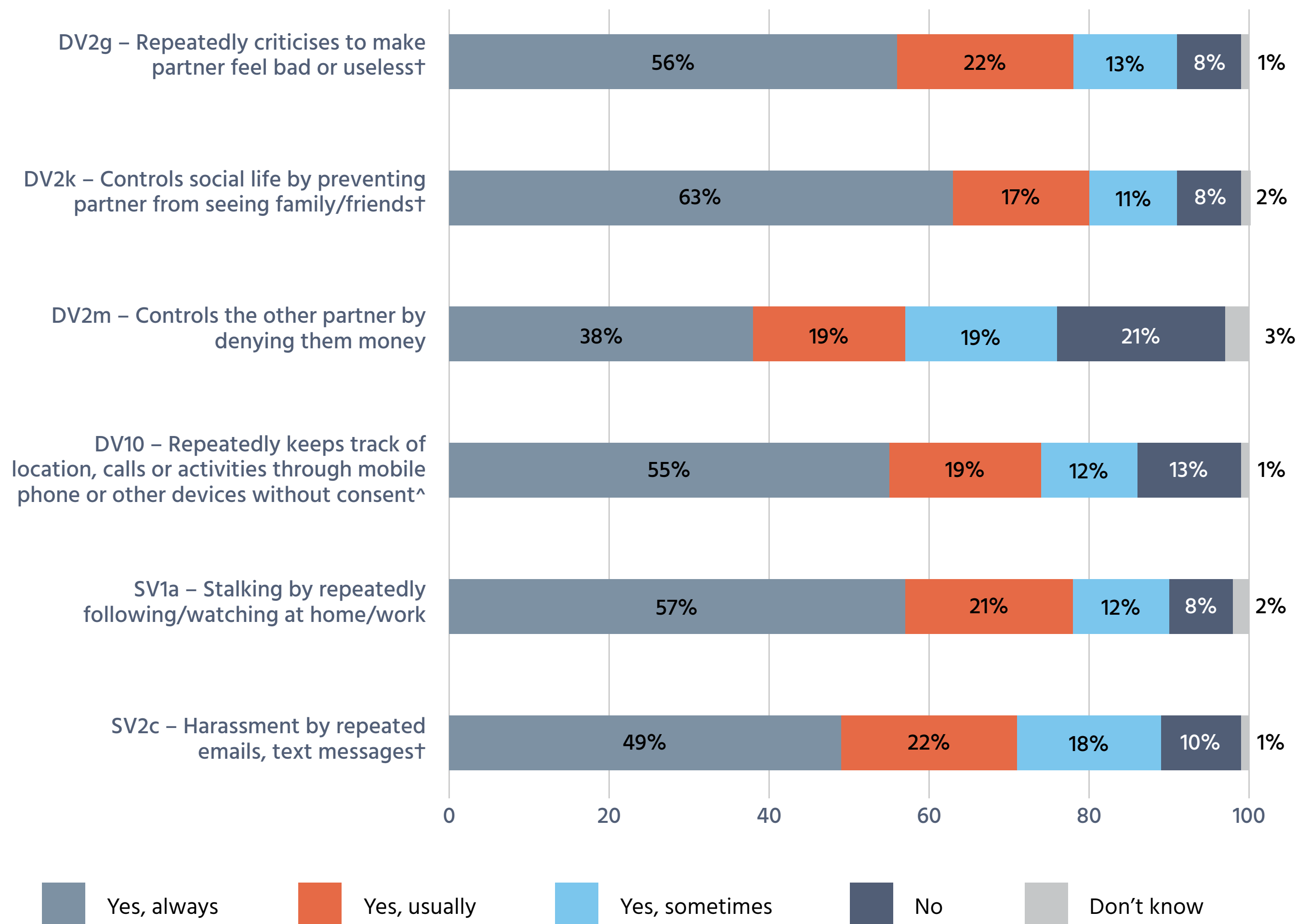
Age	Highest understanding: % of respondents with a UVAWS score in top quartile	Lowest understanding: % of respondents with a UVAWS score in bottom quartile
16-24 years (n=1,761)	22	33
25-64 years (n=10,810)	36*	24
65+ years (n=5,162)	34*	23

Note: The table is reproduced from Figure 4-8 in Politoff et al. (2019, p. 35).
* Difference between this age group and young people aged 16 to 24 years is statistically significant, p≤0.01 and reaches the 0.2 Cohen's threshold.

As already discussed, sizeable proportions of young people *disagreed* that some of the non-physical behaviours constituted violence (see Table 1). In addition, many of the young people who *agreed* that the non-physical behaviours may represent violence did not see these behaviours as "always" constituting violence (see Figure 1). Notably, only 38 per cent of young people agreed that financial abuse against a partner (Item DV2) was "always" domestic violence, whereas 19 per cent saw it as only "usually" violence and another 19 per cent saw it as violence only "sometimes". Similarly, only 49 per cent agreed that harassment via technology (Item SV2c) was "always" violence, while another 40 per cent answered that it was violence only "usually" or "sometimes". In fact, for each non-physical behaviour in Figure 1, around one in 10 young people thought the behaviour constitutes violence

2 Some 2017 NCAS questions were only asked of half or a quarter of the sample to maximise the content that could be covered while keeping the survey length relatively short (i.e. 20 minutes).

Figure 1: 16- to 24-year-olds' understanding of behaviours constituting non-physical violence against women, 2017 NCAS



Note: The figure is based on unpublished 2017 NCAS data. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.
^ Item asked of a quarter of the sample.
† Item asked of half the sample.

only "sometimes" and about a further two in 10 thought that the behaviour "usually" constitutes violence. These findings from the 2017 NCAS suggest that young people's conceptualisations of which behaviours constitute violence are far from clear-cut.[3] Thus, the possible explanations for why non-physically violent behaviours are not "always" conceptualised as domestic violence by young people warrant investigation.

1.3.2. Understandings of the prevalence of violence against women

The 2017 NCAS asked participants whether they think that violence against women is common in the community. The high prevalence of violence against women in the Australian community has been established by national survey and crime victimisation data: for example, the 2016 *Personal Safety Survey* estimated that one in four women have experienced intimate partner violence and nearly one in five women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The 2017 NCAS indicated that young men's understanding of the high prevalence of violence against women was significantly lower than young women's understanding. Specifically, 78 per cent of young women, but only 57 per cent of young men, agreed that violence against women is common in the community (see Table 3). This stark difference between young men's and young women's levels of understanding of the high prevalence of violence against women was also evident in the 2009 and 2013 waves of the survey and warrants further exploration.

3 Note also that similar proportions of young men and young women categorised the non-physical behaviours as violence only "sometimes" or "usually" rather than "always".

1.3.3. Understandings of the gendered nature of domestic violence

The 2017 NCAS also included questions exploring whether the community understands the gendered nature of domestic violence – namely, that most domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Carlson & Jones, 2010; Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020; Johnson, 2008; Johnson et al., 2014; Victoria State Government, 2016). These NCAS questions explored whether participants understood that men are more likely to commit domestic violence and that women are more likely to suffer physical harm and fear from domestic violence, in line with evidence from Australian crime victimisation and health impact surveys (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019).

In the 2017 NCAS, although the majority of young women and young men recognised the gendered nature of domestic violence, there were a few notable findings that warrant explanation. Firstly, young men had significantly less understanding than young women that men are the main perpetrators of domestic violence. Sixty-seven per cent of young women but only 52 per cent of young men recognised that domestic violence was mainly perpetrated by men (Politoff et al., 2019). There was no difference, however, in young women's and young men's understanding that women are more likely to suffer physical and psychological harm from domestic violence (Politoff et al., 2019).

Secondly, as shown in Figure 2, the 2017 NCAS results reveal a decrease over time in young people's understanding of the gendered nature of domestic violence. There were significant decreases between 2009 and 2017 in the proportion of young people who:

- indicated that men are more often the perpetrators
- indicated that women are more likely to suffer physical harm
- indicated that women are more likely to experience a greater level of fear.

These findings suggest that young people are increasingly conceptualising domestic violence in gender-neutral terms. The underlying reasons for these shifts in young people's understanding have not yet been explored and thus warrant investigation.

1.4. Research context: Existing and emerging literature

Like the 2017 NCAS, the broader literature reveals areas within young people's understandings of domestic violence that warrant further investigation. This section outlines the relevant literature and highlights key research gaps which could be addressed to elucidate young people's understandings of domestic violence more fully. The literature review is structured into two main sections. The first relates to young people's understandings, as established largely through research on their experiences and attitudes. The second relates to research more specifically on young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence as a gendered phenomenon. The aims of our study are then outlined.

1.4.1. Young people's understandings of domestic violence

Research on young people's understandings of domestic and relationship violence has largely assessed *what* young people know: namely, the extent to which they recognise particular behaviours as violence. Much of this research has used quantitative rather than qualitative methods and has estimated young people's understandings by capturing their *experiences* and *attitudes* regarding domestic violence. As Sundaram (2013, p. 890) notes, "only little research has been conducted to understand what young people

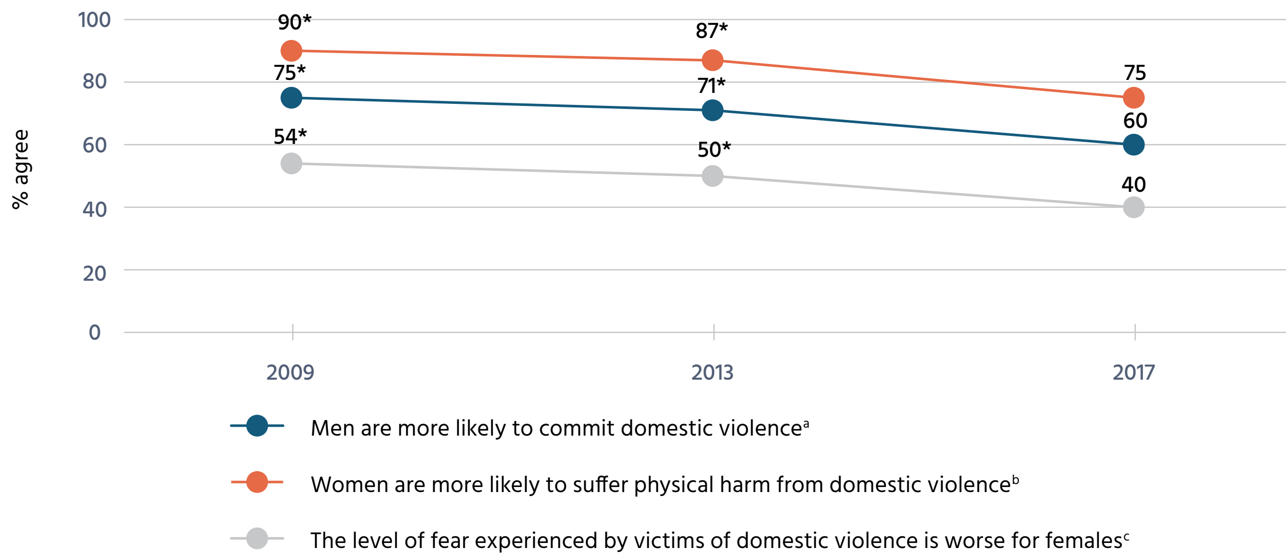
Table 3: 16- to 24-year-olds' agreement with 2017 NCAS item that "violence against women is common in our community", by gender and over time

	All % agree	Young men % agree	Young women % agree
2009	64	49*	81
2013	60	50*	70
2017	67	57*	78

Note: The table is based on unpublished 2017 NCAS data. This question was asked of one quarter of the sample in 2017. "Agree" comprises "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree". There was no significant difference (p <.01) between years.

* Difference between genders for that year is statistically significant, p≤0.05 and reaches the 0.2 Cohen's threshold.

Figure 2: 16- to 24-year-olds' understanding of the gendered nature of domestic violence over time, 2009 to 2017 NCAS



Note: The figure is based on unpublished NCAS data. All three items were asked of one quarter of the sample in 2017.

* Difference between this year and 2017 is significant at p<.01.

[a] Denotes the percentage who answered "men" or "men more often" to the item, "Do you think it is mainly men, mainly women, or both men and women that commit acts of domestic violence?"

[b] Denotes the percentage who answered "women" to the item, "Do you think that men or women would be more likely to suffer physical harm as a result of domestic violence?"

[c] Denotes the percentage who answered "females" to the item, "Thinking about both male and female victims of domestic violence, would you say the level of fear experienced is worse for males, worse for females or equally bad for both?"

themselves actually view as constituting violence". That is, young people's perceptions of relationship violence remain largely talked about and researched in an "adult way" (Tagesson & Gallo, 2021). Additionally, much of this research has been conducted outside of Australia, particularly in the United Kingdom (Abbott et al., 2020; Aghtaie et al., 2018; Deans & Bhogal, 2019; Iyer, 2019; McCarry & Lombard, 2016; Stonard et al., 2017; Sundaram, 2014). Thus, exploratory, youth-centred and qualitative research with young people in Australia about what they conceptualise as domestic violence and why warrants further development (Loney-Howes et al., 2021).

Assessing understandings through experiences

A large body of research has examined young people's experiences of dating, relationships, violence and witnessing domestic violence in order to establish whether young people recognise these behaviours as constituting domestic violence (Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020; Noble-Carr et al., 2019). Importantly, this research has highlighted differences between young people's and adults' relationships, which can affect how relationship violence is understood. Young people's relationships have been identified as varying from older people's relationships in that they may be more "ambiguous" and not necessarily a "formal" relationship, such as "friends with benefits" arrangements (Abbott et al., 2020; Barter, 2009). Young people in relationships may also be less likely to live together or share their finances (Shorey et al., 2008). The less formal nature of young people's relationships may result in these relationships and the violence within them being perceived as less serious, by both young people themselves and older people, including researchers, policymakers and practitioners (Khan & Rogers, 2014; Khubchandani et al., 2012; Shorey et al., 2008; Weisz et al., 2007).

This large body of research has also established differences between young people's and adults' relationships with respect to the forms of violence and the frequency of violence in young people's relationships. To assess the forms of violence experienced by young people compared with adults, Messinger et al. (2014) adapted Johnson's (2008) landmark typology of intimate partner violence, seeking to align it with young people's unique lived experiences of violence. The study found that young people's experiences of domestic violence differed substantially from those of older age groups. Specifically, the authors found that situational couple violence and mutual couple violence were more prevalent in their sample of young people compared to the estimated rate for adults. The mutuality of violence in adolescent relationships has also been found in other research with young people (Courtain & Glowacz, 2018; Daff et al., 2018). Messinger et al. (2014, p. 952) also found that a "relationship in which one partner uses low controlling violence and the other partner uses non-violence regardless of the level of controlling behaviours" was the most common form of intimate partner violence among their sample of young people. This form of violence was not included in Johnson's original typology. Messinger

et al. (2014, p. 966) thus argued their findings underscore the need for policymakers and practitioners to "remember that adolescent interpersonal violence comes in numerous forms requiring different preventative and intervention strategies". These findings also suggest that adult frameworks for the identification of domestic violence may not accurately reflect the experiences of young people.

Importantly, research into young people's experiences of violence also suggest that young people do not necessarily consider particular behaviours as constituting relationship violence, compared with adults. Early research with young people from the United Kingdom about their experiences of violence and abuse found that young people are "less likely than adults to recognise psychological victimisation in their relationships" (Barter, 2009, p. 217). A qualitative Australian study with young women aged 15 to 19 years, which explored their experiences of dating, violence and abuse, found that participants struggled to recognise their own experiences of violence or abuse, particularly when the violence was non-physical (Chung, 2005). Other Australian and international research on young people's experiences of violence has produced similar findings, suggesting that verbal abuse, surveillance and controlling behaviours are seen as expected in relationships (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Øverlien et al., 2020; Senior et al., 2017). Additionally, studies have identified that technology-facilitated abuse is prominent in young people's relationships, such as seeking social media passwords, excessive checking-in, reading instant messages and other forms of "cyberstalking" (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Burke et al., 2011; Kirkman et al., 2021; Marcum et al., 2017; Stonard et al., 2017). These studies suggest that while young people have experienced these forms of technology-facilitated abuse, they do not necessarily recognise them as forms of domestic or relationship violence and abuse (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Kirkman et al., 2021). Another prominent form of violence within young people's relationships is sexual coercion (for example, to engage in intercourse or "sexting"), which has been found to be widely normalised in early relationships (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2016; Renold, 2003), often under the pretence that young women have to "prove their love" to their partners (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). In a qualitative study of young women's experience of violence, Kirkman et al. (2021) found that many young women did not label their experience of sexual assault as rape,[4] as also found in sexual assault research with college populations in the United States (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Khan et al., 2018; Littleton et al., 2018). Relatedly, this research indicates perpetrators may also not recognise a non-consensual sexual encounter as rape or sexual assault (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2019). Another qualitative study from the United States found that violence was highly normalised in early adolescent relationships, and that sexual harassment was "expected and accepted by both boys and girls as simply part of the school day" (Tolman et al., 2003, p. 166).

Importantly, these findings have highlighted the prevalence and particular realities of violence within young people's early relationships. However, the focus on *experiences* may not provide the full picture about what young people understand and recognise as violence or abuse, or the underlying influences upon these understandings (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). The focus on young people's direct experiences means the research is unable to provide insight into whether and how young people proactively recognise certain relationship behaviours as domestic violence without having experienced them, which may limit the applicability of research findings for violence prevention.

Recognising and defining behaviours as violence

Much of the existing research focuses on what behaviours young people recognise or classify as constituting domestic violence. This research is important because the ability to "distinguish normal conflict from behaviour that is controlling and abusive" is a key element of prevention and education initiatives (Webster et al., 2018, p. 45). By and large, these studies on young people's recognition of domestic violence behaviours, particularly in the Australian context, have involved quantitative surveys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Loney-Howes et al., 2021; Politoff et al., 2019). In their recent scoping review of Australian research into young people's understandings and attitudes about domestic violence, Loney-Howes et al. (2021) concluded that Australian young men and women continue to define physical violence as domestic violence, whereas sexual coercion, non-physical violence and coercive control are "still not completely appreciated as constituting domestic and family violence" by young people. In contrast to these Australian studies, a small survey conducted with Glaswegian young people (*n*=77) found that they identified a "range of abusive behaviours including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well as financial control" as domestic violence and abuse (McCarry, 2009). Furthermore, quantitative methods remain limited in their ability to contextualise and interrogate young people's explanations (Barter, 2009). Thus, it remains unclear from

4 Instances where unwanted sex meets the legal definition of rape or sexual assault but is not acknowledged as rape by the victim and survivor is termed "unacknowledged rape" in the literature. It has been estimated that unacknowledged rape may be highly prevalent in the community. A recent meta-analysis of research drawn primarily from college student populations in the United States as well as older adult populations suggested a high incidence (60%) of unacknowledged rape among victims and survivors (Wilson & Miller, 2016). However, the use of the term unacknowledged rape is contested, as people who experience non-consensual sex should be in control of determining whether and how they label their own lived experiences as sexual assault (Gavey, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020).

Australian-based quantitative research *why* young people may categorise these behaviours as constituting violence or not.

Emerging qualitative studies, mainly from the United Kingdom and the greater Global North, have captured the complexity in how children and young people conceptualise or define different behaviours as constituting violence (Abbott et al., 2020; Home Office, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017). These studies indicate complexities relating to young people's interpretations of the action and intent of the perpetrator and the impact of violence upon the victim. In their study with African American teens (*n*=38), Storer et al. (2020) found that scenarios depicting physical violence or overtly manipulative or coercive behaviours were defined as "definitely" dating violence, while emotional harm was less likely to be defined as dating violence by the young people. Additionally, in their qualitative study in the United States, Taylor et al. (2017) found that their 14- to 19-year-old participants defined domestic violence through action-based and emotionally oriented phrases rather than through the kind of technical language found in scholarly or professional work. Young people's use of action-based and emotionally oriented descriptions of violence is also evident in qualitative studies from the United Kingdom with young people aged between 11 to 18 years (Lombard, 2015, 2016; McCarry, 2009, 2010; Sundaram, 2013, 2014). Other studies similarly indicate that young people and children can interpret domestic violence to mean conflict or fighting, or just violence within the family (Bell & Stanley, 2006; Mullender et al., 2002).

These international studies have shed some light on the varying explanations given by young people about when a behaviour is "definitely" domestic violence, including the gender of the perpetrator or the victim, their imagined relationship and "the assumed dynamic of the violence" as one-off, repeated or escalating (Sundaram, 2013, p. 896). There is room to build on these overseas studies to explore the different rationales that young people may employ in their classifications of certain behaviours as "always" or only "sometimes" domestic violence, as revealed in the 2017 NCAS results (see Section 1.3). Further, exploratory qualitative research could examine how young people define domestic violence by distinguishing it from other healthy and unhealthy or toxic relationship behaviours – a topic which remains less explored in the existing literature, outside of RRE evaluations (Bell & Stanley, 2006).

Evaluations of RRE and primary prevention programs also provide insight into young people's identification of particular behaviours as violence. A recent review conducted by ANROWS found that RRE initiatives improve knowledge about sexual assault and dating violence in the short term, but uncertainty remains about the long-term retention of this knowledge by young people (Rose & Coates, 2022). Additionally, a scoping review that included evaluations of RRE programs in Australia similarly reported some uncertainty among young people regarding when behaviours constitute violence (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). For example, one of these evaluations found that although 14- to 16-year-olds were more likely to describe some non-physical behaviours as domestic violence following the program, they also were "less likely to describe as 'domestic violence' such behaviours as threatening to hit, throwing objects, and slapping or punching occasionally" after the program (Flood & Kendrick, 2012, p. 5). Relatedly, an evaluation commissioned by Our Watch found that one third of the young people in the study *disagreed* that exerting control over someone else is a form of violence (Our Watch, 2015, p. 18). Together, these evaluations suggest inconsistencies in how young people define or do not define particular physical and non-physical behaviours as constituting violence which warrant further exploration in qualitative research.

Rationalising, normalising and "distancing" domestic violence

A large body of mostly qualitative international research has established how young people rationalise and normalise violence in relationships, particularly non-physical violence (Abbott et al., 2020; Aghtaie et al., 2018; Barter, 2009; Barter & Lombard, 2018; Joelsson & Bruno, 2020; McCarry & Lombard, 2016; Senior et al., 2017; Sundaram, 2014; Tolman et al., 2003). This research draws on both young people's direct *experiences* of violence as well as their *attitudes* more broadly. Barter's review (2009, p. 216) of international research on young people's *experiences* and *attitudes* of violence concluded that there is "widespread acceptance of forced sex, reflecting related work on young people's tolerance of relationship violence generally". For example, an Australian qualitative study with Indigenous young people in regional and remote northern Australia (*n*=88) found that these young people accepted violence, including sexual violence, as a normal part of their relationships (Senior et al., 2017). Additionally, focus group research with young people aged 13 to 18 years in the United Kingdom found that the young people rationalised coercive and controlling behaviours as being indicative of their partner's love, care and protection (Abbott et al., 2020). Abbott et al. (2020, p. 305) concluded that young people's rationalisations or normalisation of violence are particularly prominent for non-physical forms of domestic violence, where coercive and controlling behaviours are understood as simply "part and parcel" of intimate heterosexual relationships. Findings from a large qualitative study (*n*=91) with young people aged 13 to 18 years across five countries similarly found that young people rationalised controlling and surveillance relationship behaviours on the basis of love, care and protection (Aghtaie et al., 2018). Both studies point to the idea that attitudes which normalise

violent and abusive relationship behaviours are influenced by "prevailing heteronormative models of femininity and masculinity" and gender stereotypes of women as weak and men as strong and protective (Aghtaie et al., 2018, p. 293).

Research on young people's *understandings* of violence and abuse outside intimate or romantic relationships also provides some useful insights on their understandings and rationalisations of domestic violence more specifically. International studies suggest that young people often frame and explain violence in terms of individual-level factors or biological explanations, rather than in terms of systemic or gendered inequalities (Sundaram, 2013; Taylor et al., 2017). In their qualitative study, Taylor et al. (2017) found gender differences in the young people's individual-level explanations for dating violence. The young men tended to frame risk factors for dating violence *perpetration* in terms of substance use, financial or employment stress, and anger or conflict, and cited men's inability to express their emotions healthily (Taylor et al., 2017). In contrast, the young women framed risk factors for *victimisation* in terms of family factors, such as "having a difficult family life, experiencing child abuse, and witnessing family violence" (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 458). Additionally, Sundaram (2013, 2014) and McCarry (2009, 2010) each found that young people "naturalised" violence through biological explanations about men's natural inclination toward aggression.

Relatedly, some international studies have suggested young people sometimes rationalise violence by classifying it as "unreal". According to Barter and Lombard (2018), early attitudinal research in the 1990s and 2000s with children and young people on domestic violence showed that young people tolerate and anticipate violence in relationships. Reanalysing their earlier mixed-methods research with young people aged between 11 and 17 years, Barter and Lombard reported that in addition to normalising certain violent behaviour, young people also distinguished between what they perceived as "real" versus "unreal" (i.e. not real) forms of violence. The young people in Lombard's study (2013a, 2015) suggested that "real" violence involves two or more men engaging in physical violence in a public setting, where injury qualifies the "realness" of the violence (Lombard, 2013a). In contrast, they classified "unreal" violence as actions that do not fit the definition of "real" violence – such as pretend fighting among peers, siblings and other young people (2013a). This conceptualisation of "unreal" violence was similarly found in Joelsson and Bruno's (2020) recent ethnographic study of gender-based violence in primary and secondary schools in Sweden: the young people deemed physical fighting between siblings or friends at school or at home as "play" and thus not *real* violence. In both studies, the young people distanced themselves from "real" violence both temporally – by constructing "real" violence as occurring between *adults*, not young people – and spatially, by constructing it as occurring in *public*, not at home or at school (Joelsson & Bruno, 2020; Lombard, 2013a, 2015). As a result, the young people perceived the violence they themselves experienced in their own or other young people's relationships as "unreal", thus normalising and minimising violence (Joelsson & Bruno, 2020; Lombard, 2013a, 2015).

Attitudes which rationalise and normalise domestic violence are relevant to young people's broader ability to identify and recognise behaviours as unhealthy or as domestic violence. While research has demonstrated that young people rationalise, normalise and distance some violent relationship behaviours, further investigation is needed – particularly in Australian research – to more clearly elucidate how such rationalisations shape and interact with young people's *understandings* of what behaviours constitute domestic violence. For example, the NCAS finding that young people, particularly young men, underestimate the commonness of violence against women may be related to young people's rationalisations that certain violent behaviours are "normal" relationship behaviours or are "unreal" rather than "real" violence. Exploring reasons young people use to normalise and rationalise domestic violence would help to clarify the "grey areas" in young people's understandings of domestic violence, where some behaviours may be perceived to be violence only sometimes, rather than always.

1.4.2. Young people's understandings of gender and domestic violence

Young people, gender stereotypes and violence

An emerging body of literature, primarily from the United Kingdom, has focused on the ways young people conceptualise domestic violence or violence more generally by constructing it as gendered behaviour. These studies highlight the role of gender stereotypes in shaping young people's assumptions about who perpetrates and is subjected to violence, and thus their thinking about how domestic violence is gendered.

International studies with young people (ranging broadly between 12 to 18 years), for example, have shown how they construct violence – especially physical violence – as linked to expressions of masculinity (Lombard, 2015, 2016; McCarry, 2009, 2010; McCarry & Lombard, 2016; Sundaram, 2013, 2014). Lombard (2015), McCarry (2009, 2010) and Sundaram (2013, 2014) all found that their young participants drew on biological discourses to characterise men as more "naturally" inclined toward violence or aggression. Relatedly, Abbott et al. (2020) reported that their young participants perceived boys to be "sexually dominant", again in line with naturalistic or biological

explanations for men's stereotypical sexually motivated behaviour. Sundaram (2013, p. 900), moreover, found the young people in her study described men's violence as "serious" and "harmful and severe", whereas women's use of violence was contrastingly constructed as more trivial. A qualitative study with 13- to 18-year-olds in five European countries similarly found that young men quickly rejected their young women partners' controlling behaviours as "ridiculous" (Aghtaie et al., 2018, p. 304).

In a similar vein, this body of literature has also evidenced how young people define women's and girls' use of violence in line with traditional stereotypes of femininity and, in particular, women's emotionality. In these studies, young participants imagined women as more "possessive, controlling, demanding and jealous" and thus constructed women as more likely to perpetrate emotional or verbal abuse, or engage in manipulative behaviour more broadly (Abbott et al., 2020, p. 310; see also McCarry, 2009; Sundaram, 2013, 2014; Yonas et al., 2005). Similarly, another study found that young people aged 12 to 15 years felt women are "the main instigators of controlling behaviours" using technology because "girls were seen as more obsessive in the relationship" (Stonard et al., 2017, p. 2098). Importantly, this growing field of study demonstrates how young people construct violence as gendered, chiefly by articulating commonly held assumptions or attitudes about men's and women's respective gender roles.

A much larger pool of existing research has examined the influence of gender stereotypes and gender norms on young people's attitudes and behaviours more broadly (Kamke et al., 2021; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Xenos & Smith, 2016). Within this field, international studies have explored young people's socialisation into gender expectations and the role of institutions in this socialisation process such as the media, school, parents and peers (Basu et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2019; Kågesten et al., 2016; Landry et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2017; Mmari et al., 2018; Nelson & Brown, 2018; Seabrook et al., 2017; ter Bogt et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2022). Relatedly, a recent systematic review of research between 1984 and 2014 conducted with young adolescents (aged 10 to 14 years) from 29 countries suggested that although the socialisation process occurs differently for young girls and young boys across different cultural contexts, young adolescents nonetheless commonly express stereotypical and inequitable gender attitudes and endorse norms that reproduce gender inequalities (Kågesten et al., 2016). This review suggests that young people have already internalised social expectations about gender and inequitable gender attitudes by the time they reach young adolescence.

Gender attitudes held by young people, especially young men, have also been widely researched as predictors of controlling, violent or aggressive behaviour. For example, an international scoping review of empirical research on the perpetration of dating violence by young men (aged 10 to 14 years) found that gender inequitable attitudes and masculine entitlement were associated with power imbalances and violence perpetration, as well as negative health outcomes (Malhi et al., 2020). Similarly, a systematic review of recent (2005 to 2018) English and Portuguese research with young people aged between 10 and 19 years found that young people with sexist attitudes held more positive views towards intimate partner violence, were more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours and were more likely to have poorer relationship outcomes (Ramiro-Sánchez et al., 2018). Other studies indicate that hostile sexist beliefs and traditional gender role attitudes are a risk factor for sexting and adolescent dating violence perpetration (Morelli et al., 2016; Reyes et al., 2016), while young people's perpetration of forms of digital dating abuse have been shown to reflect gender role expectations (such as controlling femininity and hostile masculinity; Cava et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2018).

Together, these bodies of research have examined the ways gendered norms and structures shape young people's attitudes about (and potential perpetration of) violence. Qualitative evidence from overseas studies is emerging about the ways young people conceptualise violence as a gendered phenomenon, however this evidence is less well developed in Australia.

De-gendering domestic violence

How young people push back on the gendered narrative to "de-gender" domestic violence has rarely been treated as a research topic of investigation in its own right, although this de-gendering has sometimes been revealed in research findings (McCarry, 2009). Some studies, for example, have revealed that young people de-gender domestic violence via strategies such as the diversion of attention from men's responsibility for violence and the distortion of women's perpetration of violence (Berns, 2001; Berns & Schweingruber, 2007; Johnson, 2015). In her qualitative research with secondary school students in Glasgow, McCarry (2009, p. 332) argued that while participants were aware that domestic violence was predominantly perpetrated by men, they nonetheless had "misgivings of the construction of domestic abuse as gendered". In a similar vein, a recent English qualitative study with 18- to 25-year-old men demonstrated their use of a range of defensive strategies to disassociate themselves from the realities of men's violence against women, which included shifting focus from men's perpetration to the "invisible" issue of men's victimisation (Burrell, 2021).

Additionally, young women in research commissioned by Our Watch distanced or disassociated themselves from the idea of the "female victim" evident in the prevalence statistics and media coverage on domestic violence (2015,

p. 15). Other studies – with young people as well as with men of all ages – have similarly found that participants de-gender the discourse around domestic violence to shift attention away from men as perpetrators (Burrell, 2021; Cavanagh et al., 2001; Durfee, 2011; McCarry, 2010; Our Watch, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017; Venäläinen, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). These findings are echoed in an evaluation of a domestic violence prevention program in the United Kingdom, where school-aged participants (aged 10 to 11, and 13 to 14 years) labelled the program "sexist" and criticised its "greater emphasis on male perpetrators than on female perpetrators" (Fox et al., 2014, p. 35). In rejecting or struggling against the realities of men's violence against women, participants in these studies relied on and indeed constructed counternarratives that de-gender domestic violence, naturalise men's use of violence, shift responsibility to the victims and survivors and position women as "just as responsible for perpetrating domestic abuse as men" (McCarry, 2009, p. 336; see also Lombard, 2015; McCarry & Lombard, 2016).

These few studies highlight some of the strategies people use to de-gender domestic violence and detract from gender-based arguments surrounding domestic violence. Further research would benefit from exploring how young people negotiate understandings of domestic violence as gendered and the reasons why they may de-gender violence. Such exploratory research with young people on these topics has not been undertaken in Australia to date (Loney-Howes et al., 2021).

While the above studies have provided evidence of the de-gendering trend, the factors influencing or driving this trend have not yet been fully explored. Several explanations for the de-gendering trend have been hypothesised in the broader literature, including attempts to recognise victims and survivors who do not conform to the gender binary (Kuskoff & Parsell, 2021), resistance or "backlash" to gender equality (Dragiewicz, 2011; Flood et al., 2021), and passive policy constructions which hide the gender of perpetrators and "obfuscate the effect of men's violence against women" (Aldridge, 2021; see also Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Kuskoff & Parsell, 2021). Others have argued that the process of de-gendering domestic violence has occurred in the context of thinning or eroded references to gender-based analyses of power and patriarchy in violence against women discourse, as well as the simultaneous shift toward individualised and gender-neutral framings of violence (Baker & Stein, 2016).

1.5. Aims

The 2017 NCAS findings, together with a review of the broader literature, highlight a need for Australian qualitative research that elucidates young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). Our study seeks to build upon the emerging international literature to explicate young people's understanding of domestic violence more fully, by addressing the following areas.

Firstly, although there has been extensive qualitative research on young people's *experiences of and attitudes* about domestic and relationship violence, less attention has been paid to young people's *understandings* of such violence – especially in Australian research.

Secondly, while emerging international qualitative research has examined *what* young people understand about domestic violence, few qualitative studies have adopted a critical youth studies approach or employed a broader scope to explore *how* young people themselves conceptualise domestic violence or *why* they hold their particular views.

Thirdly, Australian and international research suggests complexities and inconsistencies in young people's conceptualisations of domestic violence, including whether certain behaviours as are seen as "always" or only "sometimes" violence. These complexities in how domestic violence is conceptualised, as well as how it is distinguished from other relationship behaviours, have not been fully elucidated, particularly not in Australian qualitative research.

Fourthly, the 2017 NCAS and emerging international qualitative research has pointed to young people's resistance to, or rejection of, the gendered nature of domestic violence. However, there is limited qualitative research, especially in Australia, about how young people conceptualise domestic violence as gendered and the underlying drivers for their ostensible de-gendering of domestic violence.

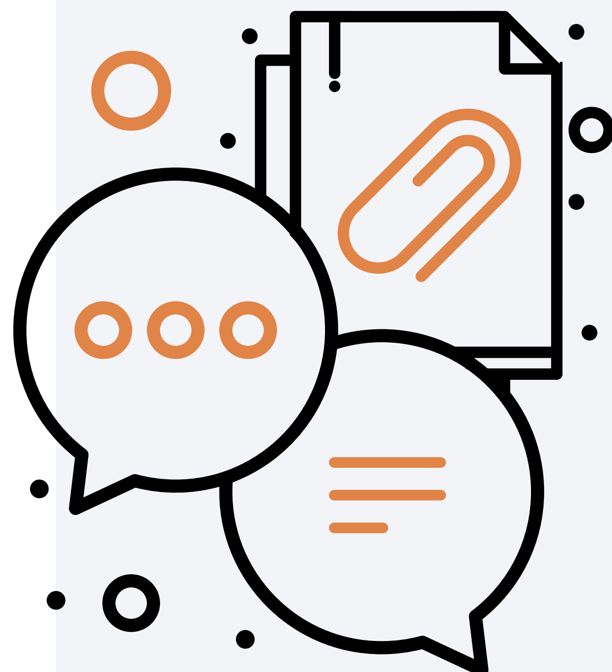
Finally, while the 2017 NCAS showed that, compared with young women, the commonness of violence against women was less well understood by young men, little qualitative research has considered young people's perceptions of domestic violence as common within the community or as a broader social phenomenon. Considering these research gaps, our study adopted a critical youth studies approach to investigate the following overarching questions:

1. According to young people, what constitutes domestic violence?
2. How do young people conceptualise or make sense of domestic violence?

To investigate these questions, the study examined how young people conceptualise domestic violence in terms of:

- its distinctness from unhealthy relationship behaviours
- its commonness in the community
- its gendered nature.

2. Research design



Our study adopted a mixed-methods, online research design.[5] Semi-structured online focus group discussions were the primary method of data collection. The key activity in the focus groups was the discussion of 10 scenarios that each described a relationship behaviour between intimate partners, including behaviours constituting domestic violence. Participants were also asked about their understanding of domestic violence more broadly. Prior to the focus groups, a short online survey was used to explore a wider range of relationship behaviours than was possible in the focus group format. The survey collected qualitative and quantitative data on 30 different relationship scenarios, including the 10 behaviours that were subsequently discussed in depth in the focus groups.

The study received ethics clearance from the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 2020/444). A panel of experts and an advisory group provided advice on the research design, preliminary findings and the implications of the research for policy and primary prevention (see Appendix A). Our study is one of three projects within a broader NCAS research program and these advisory bodies were formed to provide advice on all three studies throughout the life of the program.[6]

The research design underwent cognitive testing with several ANROWS staff not involved in the study to assess the comprehensibility and clarity of the interview questions and online survey content. Based on this testing, minor modifications were made to the focus group procedure and to the online survey to address small issues with technical administration and ease of understanding. Careful monitoring of the first few focus groups with young people suggested that no further amendments to the focus group method were required.

2.1. Implementing the critical youth studies approach

Two key methodological processes were implemented in light of the critical youth studies approach taken in our study (see Section 1.1). Both processes served to prioritise young people's agency and knowledge, to neutralise the power imbalance between the adult researchers and the young participants, and to de-emphasise adultist frameworks of understanding.

The first process was reflexive "decentring". This process involves rejecting and suspending adult-driven concepts and frameworks through "sustained and rigorous reflection" (Best, 2007, p. 12; see also Bertrand et al., 2020; Corney et al., 2021; Raby, 2007) in order to re-centre the young people's contributions to knowledge. This decentring process is typically an ongoing

5 Limitations of the research design are briefly mentioned in this chapter and are more extensively discussed in Section 4.8.

6 The NCAS Research Program also includes the 2021 iteration of the NCAS representative population survey and another qualitative study that explored Australians' mistrust in women's reports of sexual assault (Minter et al., 2021).

process that occurs across the study including research design, implementation, analysis and interpretations of findings for publication. Through this decentring process, critical youth researchers are "open to the possibilities that participants and their context present" (Raby, 2007, p. 53), without being limited by adult-derived categories and biases. For example, in the data analysis phase of our study, we reflexively decentred adult-derived definitions of domestic violence when coding and analysing the young people's contributions about what counts as domestic violence.

Secondly, in our role as researchers, we adopted the "least-adult role" (Mandell, 1988). The least-adult role aims to neutralise the power imbalance between adult researchers and young participants in order to prioritise young people's agency and contributions to knowledge construction (Barter, 2009; Billett, 2019; France & Threadgold, 2015; Ravn, 2019). Specifically, the least-adult role means refusing to invoke one's power as an adult or as an expert on the topic (Gold Hadley, 2007; Raby, 2007). We assumed the least-adult role and prioritised young people's knowledge contributions in several ways. The role was established at the forefront of the focus groups as the moderator established that the young people would play a central role in guiding the group discussions, and that the adult moderator would act as a more passive facilitator. The moderator built rapport with the young people through trust-generating discussion and by repeatedly reaffirming that the adults conducting the study hoped to learn *from* them. For example, when some participants asked the moderator for definitions of key terms (such as domestic violence), the moderator emphasised that the research aimed to learn *from* them about what these key terms mean and prompted them to elaborate upon their ideas accordingly. It was reinforced throughout the focus groups that their contributions were important for the design of RRE programs that would be appropriate and effective for young people, thereby emphasising the importance of their voices for broader social good.

2.2. Recruitment

As noted in Section 1.2.2, our study focused on young people aged 16 to 18 years. The aim was to recruit a sufficiently large and robust sample in this age group to provide rich and valid information about the understandings of this age group across the general Australian population, including young people from a range of diverse backgrounds. To achieve a sample with broad coverage of the general community, a decision was made to recruit outside of institutional settings such as schools and universities (which are common recruitment sites for research with young people; Abrams, 2010).

A third-party recruitment company was engaged to maximise recruitment uptake. The recruitment company, Qualitative Research Australia (QRA), used purposive and convenience sampling strategies (primarily panel recruitment approaches) to ensure a diverse sample of young people from different backgrounds across Australia, including young people from different states and territories, metropolitan and rural areas, and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Potential participants were drawn from QRA's lists of contacts who had previously agreed to be emailed or telephoned about opportunities to participate in relevant research. These contact lists were used in accordance with national and research codes regarding consent, privacy and confidentiality. QRA shared a short invitation with potential participants that briefly noted recruitment requirements (relating to age, gender, geographical location and proficiency in online technology) and noted that the discussion would involve "sharing opinions and attitudes surrounding what is healthy and unhealthy in a relationship, and attitudes about domestic violence as an issue in Australia". Those who expressed interest in participating were then screened to ensure they met age requirements and to confirm their state or territory of residence. After screening, prospective participants were provided with the Participant Information Statement and Participant Consent Form via email. The topic of discussion was provided in the initial contact information and the Participant Information Statement to ensure informed consent regarding participation, in line with ethical principles of safety, respect, transparency and beneficence (National Human and Medical Research Council, 2018). Participation was voluntary and methods of active, opt-in consent were used through recruitment. Young people who agreed to participate were invited to electronically sign the consent form. In line with guidelines from the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, a parent or guardian was also required to confirm their consent for those participants under the age of 18 years.[7]

A total of 80 young people participated in our study, including 41 young women and 39 young men. (The sample is described further in Chapter 3.) Participants were reimbursed with a $70 e-voucher for their participation. Two recruits withdrew from the study. One did not attend without notification (i.e. was a "no show"), while the other withdrew after taking a "timeout" from the group discussion, following the ethical protocols for our study (see Section 2.5).

7 See Section 3.5 for further discussion of this ethical requirement.

2.3. Data collection

2.3.1. Fictional scenarios or vignettes

Short fictional scenarios or vignettes were the key tools for collecting data within both the quantitative and qualitative modes of the research design. Thirty fictional scenarios (of one to three sentences in length) were developed using simple language to capture young people's perspectives on a range of relationship behaviours, including healthy, and abusive or violent, behaviours (see Appendix B). The scenarios were deliberately written without labelling the behaviours as healthy or abusive, using gender-neutral character names and with limited background detail so that they would be open to the young people's interpretation. By focusing on such simple descriptions of behaviours with limited context, the scenarios enabled participants to consider and provide their *own* understandings of which behaviours are abusive or violent, as well as the factors shaping their understandings (Lombard, 2016; Sundaram, 2014).

The use of gender-neutral names aimed to capture participants' pre-existing and immediate assumptions about the gendered nature of the violent and abusive behaviour – that is, whether the participants inherently construct violent or abusive behaviour as typically masculine, feminine, or neither. In this way, the gender-neutral names offered a "blank slate" for young people's own interpretations, free from any adult biases introduced through gendered names or depictions of strictly heterosexual relationships. This blank slate allowed investigation of how and why the young people gendered or de-gendered the perpetrators and victims in the scenarios, as well as how this gendering or de-gendering interplayed with their understandings of the gendered nature of domestic violence (McCarry, 2009). Additionally, the use of gender-neutral names was consistent with the critical youth studies approach taken in our study to facilitate the young people's *own* interpretations and *own* assumptions, and to ensure that their contributions were not pre-determined or prescribed by the adult researchers. This offers a fresh perspective for research on young people's understandings of the gendered nature of domestic violence, where other research has largely used gendered vignettes depicting domestic violence behaviour (see e.g. Lombard, 2016; Sundaram, 2014). The use of gender-neutral names also meant aspects of the research were designed in such a way that disrupts – rather than assumes – binary genders (Our Watch, 2021a). Finally, the use of gender-neutral names aimed to foster young men's comfort and participation. This methodological design therefore attempted to mitigate any possibility that the young men "turn off" from discussion, should the content appear to represent only men as perpetrators of violence (as has been noted in some RRE program evaluations; see Flood & Kendrick, 2012; Fox et al., 2014; Struthers et al., 2019).

The scenarios mostly depicted examples of physical and non-physical violence or abuse. Nineteen of the 30 scenarios were developed from items in the knowledge component of the 2017 NCAS (Webster et al., 2018).[8] Six of these 19 scenarios depicted physical forms of violence, while the majority (13) depicted non-physical forms of violence. A greater number of scenarios depicted non-physical forms of violence because these were less well recognised by young people in the 2017 NCAS results as always constituting violence (see Politoff et al., 2019, as well as Section 1.3). The 11 scenarios that were not based on NCAS items were developed through deep reflection on the literature. They aimed to portray a few healthy behaviours (e.g. "agreeing to disagree") and many unhealthy behaviours that are not typically classed as violent or abusive (e.g. jealousy or gaslighting; see Appendix B). These healthy and unhealthy behaviours were included to minimise acquiescence and social desirability bias, where research participants tend to agree with statements or provide answers that they think will be viewed favourably instead of providing answers that truly reflect their own views.

2.3.2. Pre-focus group survey

Participants self-completed a 10-minute survey in the days leading up to their focus group interview via the online survey platform Alchemer (formerly SurveyGizmo). The survey enabled the researchers to gather data on a wider range of relationship behaviours than would have been possible in an online focus group alone. The survey comprised quantitative and qualitative questions about the 30 short fictional relationship scenarios (see Appendix D for the survey instrument). Young people were prompted to indicate, using a three-point Likert scale, whether they felt the behaviour of the character in each scenario was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay".

The online survey was presented in six "pages", with each page showing five scenarios. Out of the five scenarios displayed on each page, participants were then asked to select one scenario that they felt most strongly about and were prompted to explain their rating (of "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay") for the scenario using free text. The short qualitative questions thus provided space for young people to explain why the scenario was or was not okay (Lombard, 2016). Including such qualitative items in the survey enabled further rich insights to be obtained, which could be further clarified or debated in the focus group discussions (Braun et al., 2020).

8 See Appendix C for the item text for the NCAS items used to develop these fictional scenarios.

2.3.3. Focus group discussions

COVID-19-related social distancing and travel restrictions were in place at the time of fieldwork. As a result, online audiovisual focus groups were used as the key mode of data collection as a highly suitable alternative to face-to-face focus groups (Archibald et al., 2019; Howlett, 2021; Lobe et al., 2020; Woodyatt et al., 2016). Online methods have been said to be valuable tools for research with "tech savvy" young people who may prefer online or electronic communication (Brown et al., 2021), although online methods may prevent some young people from participating due a lack of access to online technologies (Fox et al., 2007). Online focus groups may also be perceived as less threatening for young people and as providing comfort through greater anonymity and "emotional distance" from the topics under discussion (Boydell et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2021; Reisner et al., 2017).

Fourteen single-gender online focus groups, comprising seven groups of young women and seven groups of young men and involving four to six participants per group, were conducted and audiovisually recorded using Zoom videoconferencing software.[9] Participants were asked to identify their gender during the screening process of recruitment (see Section 2.2) and in the pre-focus group online survey. Participants were sorted into young women-only or young men-only groups accordingly. (No young people in the sample identified as non-binary genders.) The focus group interviews ran for approximately 90 minutes each and were held in December 2020 and January 2021. Fourteen focus groups met the threshold for data and meaning saturation, given that similar themes and responses were recurring by the tenth focus group (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021; Hennink et al., 2016; Hennink et al., 2019).

The gender of the moderator was matched with the gender of the focus groups, with two members of the research team acting as focus group moderators.[10] Several factors informed the decision to run single-gender focus groups with gender-matched moderators. Firstly, greater levels of homogeneity within focus groups have been shown to provide a more comfortable, safer space for participants to discuss sensitive issues, particularly in relation to sex and violence (Frith, 2000; Gunby et al., 2012; Wellings et al., 2000), and to help reduce any perceived power imbalance due to the interviewer being a different gender (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). Secondly, single-gender focus groups enabled the researchers to probe participants' perceptions about how young people of other genders would perceive the scenarios and respond to the questions. Thirdly, this approach aimed to facilitate young men's engagement in the research, as young men are often underrepresented in research about domestic violence and women's safety, as well as in relationship and gender-based violence education initiatives (Fox et al., 2014; Struthers et al., 2019).

Another member of the research team acted as the assistant moderator for all interviews. The assistant moderator was introduced to the group at the commencement of the interview. The young people were advised that the assistant moderator was available via Zoom's private message function to assist with administration (such as any technical issues), as well as to monitor and provide support in the event they appeared at all uncomfortable with the content under discussion. The assistant moderator's video was turned off during the focus group in order to provide a text-only and perceivably less confronting support option for participants seeking support (Evans et al., 2013) and to mitigate any distraction created by having an additional visible adult researcher in the group who was not contributing to the discussion.

The focus group size of four to six participants is considered conducive to producing many unique and relevant ideas from online focus groups (Lobe & Morgan, 2021), while also remaining easily manageable and enabling all participants to contribute to the group discussion (Archibald et al., 2019; Woodyatt et al., 2016). The young people's comfort in using Zoom helped to mitigate the possibility of some participants dominating the group discussion. Participants often responded in turn to the moderator's questions and to views contributed by other participants. In addition, the moderators used several subtle strategies to ensure equal opportunity for participation, at the same time as being mindful of participants' confidence levels to ensure they did not feel "picked on". These strategies included directing questions to participants who had not yet contributed to a topic and inviting single participants in turn to share their initial thoughts about a scenario before opening discussion to the wider group.

Semi-structured interview guide and task-based activity

The focus groups were administered using a semi-structured discussion guide, designed to facilitate group dialogue about participants' understandings of unhealthy and violent relationship behaviours, the gendered pattern of domestic violence and domestic violence as a problem in Australia. Following best practice techniques for

9 See Appendix E for the focus group interview guide.

10 Dr Erin Carlisle (author) facilitated the focus groups with young women, while Dr Ben Lohmeyer (author) moderated the focus groups with young men. Both focus group facilitators have expertise in qualitative research with young people. Kate Minter (author) acted as assistant moderator and wrote detailed field notes during the online focus group interviews.

interviewing young people, the discussion guide primarily included "what" or "how" questions to facilitate ease and confidence in answering the question, as opposed to more cognitively complex "why" questions or closed yes/no prompts (Adler et al., 2019). Prompts such as "tell me more", "do others have different thoughts" or "how interesting" were used to generate discussion, facilitate confidence and build rapport (Adler et al., 2019). The focus group interview guide is outlined in Appendix E.

The focus groups commenced with icebreaker questions to help spark discussion and build confidence and rapport (Adler et al., 2019). The task-based activity was then conducted, involving in-depth group discussion about participants' interpretations of 10 of the 30 relationship behaviour scenarios from the online survey. The activity facilitated effective group dynamics in the online format (Archibald et al., 2019; Howlett, 2021; Topping et al., 2021). It promoted group rapport and comfortable conversation through the group's shared purpose of discussing and categorising each relationship behaviour as "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay". The activity also aimed to mitigate any perceived pressure on young people to give a quick or "correct" answer to the interviewer (Punch, 2002), while providing an ethically safe approach to discussing violent relationship behaviours (McCarry, 2009; Punch, 2002). The activity was adapted from Punch's (2002) task-based "ranking exercise" and was also inspired by similar activities used in RRE and primary prevention programs with young people (as seen in e.g. Flood et al., 2009; Our Watch, 2015; Struthers et al., 2019).

All but one of the 10 scenarios used in the group discussion were based on 2017 NCAS items that indicated either lower understanding among young people compared to other age groups or lower understanding among young men compared to young women (see Table 4). The remaining scenario discussed in the focus groups (Survey item 27 in Table 4) was considered thematically important for analysis of young people's understandings of technology and control.

The online collaboration program, Miro, was used for the task-based activity to enable the researchers to interactively engage the participants while using the Zoom screen-share function to display the scenarios on the screen as prompts for discussion. Each scenario was displayed on an individual, coloured "Post-it" on the Miro board, with the name of the fictional character engaging in the unhealthy relationship behaviour bolded and underlined to facilitate clarity (see Figure 3).

The scenarios were then discussed one at a time, with Miro being used to zoom in to the relevant Post-it. After sharing their thoughts about the scenario through prompts from the moderator, the group was asked to decide and explain whether the behaviour described in each scenario was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay". The assistant moderator then drew on the Miro board to mark the group's decision, with a tick (✓) for "okay", an S symbol for "sometimes okay", a cross (×) for "not okay" or a question mark (?) if the group could not decide on a categorisation.

Once all the 10 scenarios were individually discussed and categorised, a zoomed-out view of the Miro board was shown so that the participants could see all scenarios collectively. The moderator then asked several questions about the set of scenarios and about domestic violence more broadly (see Appendix E).

Figure 3: Example Miro board with example ratings for the 10 scenarios used in the task-based activity

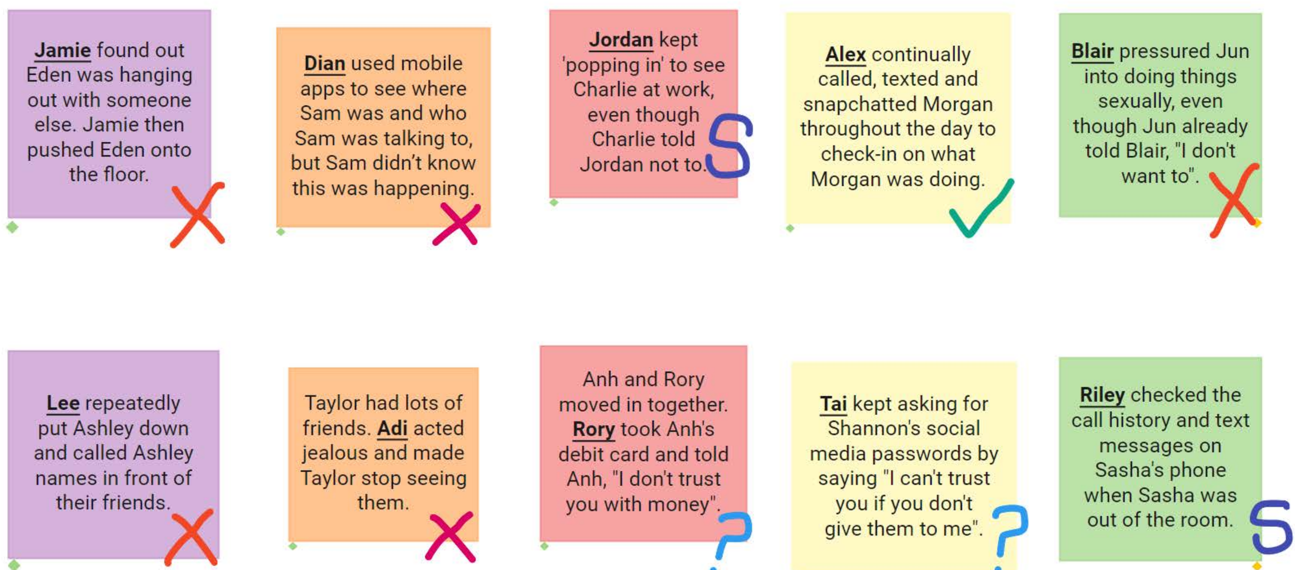


Table 4: Survey scenarios discussed in focus groups, listed in order of discussion

Order discussed in focus groups	Post-it colour	Theme	Scenario text	Survey item no.	NCAS item
1	Purple	Physical harm	**Jamie** found out Eden was hanging out with someone else. Jamie then pushed Eden onto the floor	5	DV2a
2	Orange	Technology-facilitated surveillance	**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening	13	DV10
3	Red	Stalking	**Jordan** kept "popping in" to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to	23	SV1a
4	Yellow	Technology-facilitated surveillance	**Alex** continually called, texted and Snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing	1	SV2c
5	Green	Coerced sex	**Blair** pressured Jun into doing things sexually, even though Jun already told Blair, "I don't want to"	28	DV2c
6	Purple	Social abuse	**Lee** repeatedly put Ashley down and called Ashley names in front of their friends	18	DV2g
7	Orange	Social abuse	Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them	22	DV2k
8	Red	Financial control	Anh and Rory moved in together. **Rory** took Anh's debit card and told Anh, "I don't trust you with money"	25	DV2m
9	Yellow	Technology-facilitated surveillance	**Tai** kept asking for Shannon's social media passwords by saying "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me"	27	–
10	Green	Technology-facilitated surveillance	**Riley** checked the call history and text messages on Sasha's phone when Sasha was out of the room	19	DV10

Following the task-based activity, the focus group discussions concluded with a more general conversation about the nature of domestic violence. The moderator shared some of the practice definitions of domestic violence behaviours and the established statistics about domestic violence in Australia, then asked young people to reflect on the discussion and whether their views evolved over the course of the group interview.

2.4. Data analysis

2.4.1. Quantitative survey data

Descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data from the online survey was conducted in Microsoft Excel. The data was cleaned, and unique participant number codes were used to remove any duplicate responses from participants. For each of the 30 scenario items, univariate analysis was conducted to determine the proportion of respondents who selected each response frame option ("okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay"). Missing responses were excluded from the proportion calculations. Bivariate analysis was also conducted to summarise the results for each gender. Tests of statistical significance were not conducted as the sample was relatively small (n=80) and was not a random representative sample.

For the 19 of the 30 scenarios based on 2017 NCAS items (see Appendix C), the results from our online survey were also compared to the results for the population-level NCAS sample where appropriate using descriptive statistics. Tests of statistical significance between the results for the two samples were not conducted, given the scenarios and response frames in our survey were not worded the same as the NCAS items, and given the differences in the sample methodologies for the two studies.

2.4.2. Qualitative survey and focus group data

Verbatim transcriptions of the audiovisual recordings of the focus group discussions were completed by a professional transcription service, Outscribe. The transcripts were quality checked for accuracy against the recordings by the research team and then uploaded to NVivo 12 qualitative software.

As outlined in Section 2.3.2, participants provided qualitative information in the online survey via free text on select scenario behaviours they rated in the online survey. This qualitative data was exported from the survey platform to Excel, cleaned, grouped according to each relevant survey item, saved in Word format and then imported into NVivo 12 qualitative software for analysis with the other qualitative data.

Prior to analysis, structural coding was applied to the qualitative data from both the survey and the focus groups. Structural coding involves categorising segments of data according to the specific research questions or topics investigated in sections of the interview or data set (Saldaña, 2013). This structural coding enabled easy identification of the comments from participants that were provided in response to each interview question, each fictional scenario discussed in the focus groups, and each thematic grouping of the scenarios (i.e. according to NCAS physical and non-physical violence themes, as well as unhealthy and healthy behaviours).

The researchers used reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This type of analysis was appropriate for two key reasons. Firstly, reflexive thematic analysis of latent themes takes a social constructivist approach, where themes reveal "socially produced and reproduced" meanings, as well as the sociocultural and structural contexts which shape these meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). Reflexive thematic analysis thus fostered a deeper investigation of *what* young people conceptualise as constituting domestic violence and *how* they conceptualise the phenomenon. Secondly, reflexive thematic analysis requires the researchers to make active, considered decisions through the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Trainor & Bundon, 2020), thereby acknowledging the important role of "the researcher's subjectivity" within the process of analysis itself as an "analytic *resource*" (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 330, emphasis in original). Importantly, this reflexive approach to analysis aligns with the priority of reflexivity of the critical youth studies approach taken in our study.

Analysis of the qualitative data was conducted predominantly at the thematic level. Possible gender differences in the qualitative data were also explored, given the 2017 NCAS conclusion that young men may have lower understanding than young women in some aspects. No further analyses by demographic factors were undertaken because our study sought to inform school-based initiatives suitable for the population of young Australians aged 16 to 18, regardless of their backgrounds.

Although there is no singular procedural approach to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021a) describe six flexible phases that guide this process. These phases are not necessarily linear; rather, the reflexive thematic analysis process is cyclical, moving back and forth between phases through coding and theme generation. The phases and the analytic process for our study are outlined below.

- Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data. Three researchers began making sense of the data through familiarisation strategies, by quality-checking transcripts against the recordings; re-listening to recordings while re-reading through the proofed transcripts; and active notetaking while reading the collated responses to each interview question, as coded through structural coding (as noted above).
- Phase 2: Generation of initial codes. One researcher undertook most of the initial code generation. Coding was inductive and data-driven, to align with the constructivist and exploratory research design. Several cycles of coding were completed. Line-by-line, open coding of semantic and latent data was completed on the whole qualitative data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2013), starting by coding each individual transcript followed by coding within the collated responses for each interview question. Data was also simultaneously coded where the data content suggested multiple meanings (Saldaña, 2013). Another cycle of latent coding was conducted to generate "process codes", to derive conceptual actions and dynamics from the data for exploration of *how* young people expressed and came to their ideas (Saldaña, 2013). The researcher conducting most of the coding maintained a detailed reflexive journal noting key coding and thematic decisions, as well as personal reflections on the data at varied stages (Nowell et al., 2017; Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Debriefings with other members of the research team were frequently conducted (daily or biweekly) during the coding process to assist with identifying and reflecting on the insights, gaps and inconsistencies emerging from the data analysis.
- Phase 3: Search for themes. Initial themes were generated from notes and "analytic memos" (Saldaña, 2013) written during the coding phases, and guided by the research questions. Initial themes were developed by refining and simplifying the generated codes (described above), then by creating thematic mind maps and tables from the refined codes. This resulted in the construction of five tentative or candidate themes, each with several subthemes. The main researcher conducting the analysis wrote detailed analytic memos on each candidate theme, which were then reviewed and revised based on feedback from the research team.
- Phase 4: Review of themes. The candidate themes were then reviewed in the context of coding extracts and at the level of the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b). By closely re-engaging with the data and returning to the aims of the study, the five candidate themes were refined: some candidate themes were omitted, while

others were split or amalgamated into other themes. This resulted in the development of three preliminary themes with several subthemes each. The refined themes were evaluated for referential accuracy against the coded data (Nowell et al., 2017; Trainor & Bundon, 2020). The main researcher again wrote detailed memos on the three revised themes, which were vetted by the research team.

- Phase 5: Definition and naming of themes. The three themes were defined through several cycles of analysis and team debriefings. The finalised theme names and definitions were then confirmed in consensus with the research team. The definitions of the themes and explanations of subthemes were elaborated in further written analyses. The final draft themes were presented to the study's panel of experts and advisory group for feedback, which prompted the research team to further refine some aspects of the thematic map before producing the report of results. The finalised thematic outline is shown in Table 5.
- Phase 6: Writing up the themes. After the themes were finalised, the thematic findings were written up into a report. The process of writing the report followed the Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) reporting guidelines (Booth et al., 2014) and the reflexive thematic analysis guidelines recently outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021b).

2.5. Ethical considerations

The study received ethics clearance from the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 2020/444). All members of the research team held valid working with children (WWC) clearances.

All participants voluntarily opted in to the study. Multiple methods of active, opt-in consent were used at various stages of the project, after young people had been informed that participation was entirely voluntary, and their responses would remain anonymous. After reviewing the participant information statement, participants (and a parent/guardian if the participant was under the age of 18) confirmed their consent by electronically signing a participant consent form. Signed participant consent documents were stored securely as a record of formal consent. Oral consent was further given and recorded at the commencement of the focus groups.

The researchers acknowledge the inherent tension between the youth-centred, critical youth studies approach taken in our study (see Section 1.1) and the inclusion of parental consent protocols for participants under the age of 18. The use of parental consent, *in addition to* the young person's own consent, was necessary for our study to comply with the guidelines set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and requirements of the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (guideline 4.2.7; National Human and Medical Research Council, 2018). While the study was deemed low risk, the topic of domestic violence was considered potentially sensitive (Sundaram, 2014); as such, it was considered best practice to inform caregivers through parental consent protocols that the young person planned to engage in the research. However, the continued influence of adult gatekeepers (including not only parents and caregivers, but also adult-driven institutional contexts) in research processes and outcomes involving young people continues to be widely debated (Best, 2007; Coyne, 2010; Heath et al., 2007; Leonard, 2007; McCarry, 2005). It is unclear whether the inclusion of parental consent in our study affected young people's participation.

Table 5: Thematic outline

Theme	Subtheme
The concept of domestic violence	A concept that is "represented" in public discourse
	Has a typology of "explicit" and "subtle" behaviours
	A snowballing pattern of abuse
Unhealthy behaviours as stepping stones to violence	"Stepping stones" versus abuse
	Components of healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviours
Gender	Outdated stereotypes and gendered representations
	"Gender ignoring" lens for domestic violence
	Gendered experiences shaping understandings

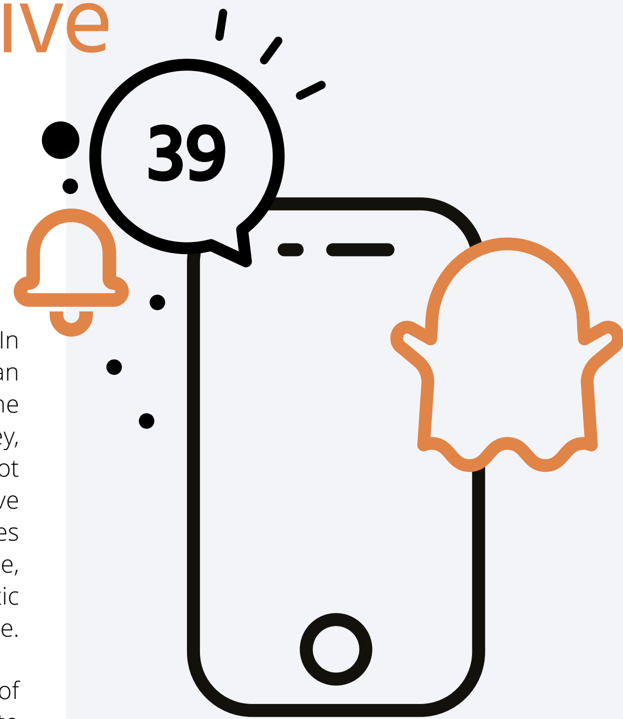
The main foreseeable risk to participants was the possibility of emotional distress due to the sensitive content of the topic of discussion. Several aspects of the ethics protocol were developed to mitigate and respond to this potential risk. All interview questions, relationship scenarios and the task-based activity emphasised hypothetical relationships in general rather than participants' own personal relationships. Participants were informed that they were welcome to take a "time out" if they felt uncomfortable with or upset by the content under discussion (Siller et al., 2021), and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also provided with contact details for relevant helplines and support services (e.g. Kids Helpline and 1800RESPECT), as well as the contact details for the researchers, in the participant information statement. Each page of the online survey also included the contact information for Kids Helpline and 1800RESPECT and a prompt for the young people to speak with these services or a trusted adult if the content raised any discomfort or distress for them (Siller et al., 2021). Finally, participants were reminded through the Zoom chat function throughout the focus groups that Kids Helpline and 1800RESPECT were available if the content raised any issues for them. The private chat function in Zoom also provided an opportunity for participants to privately notify the assistant moderator if they needed a time out because of potential discomfort. All these procedures aimed to facilitate participant comfort by providing participants with a means to ask for support information privately, rather than in front of the group.

As noted earlier, one young person withdrew partway through the focus group. Following the ethical protocol in place for our study, the participant privately notified the assistant moderator via the chat function in Zoom, simply stating that they wanted to "leave for a little". The assistant moderator implemented the approved ethics protocol by checking the participant was okay and providing the support materials in a private message to the participant. The participant did not return from the time out and withdrew from the study. The research team contacted the participant after the focus group to check on their welfare and once again offer the support materials, and the participant confirmed they were safe, not distressed and did not require any additional support.

An additional risk to participant comfort was the gendered nature of the topic of violence against women. As noted earlier, single-gender focus groups were used to provide a level of comfort by ensuring a safe space for both young women and young men. It was considered that young women may feel more comfortable speaking about violence against women if no young men were present, and that young men may feel more comfortable discussing violence against women without the potential feelings of blame or gendered guilt that may arise if young women were present (Flood & Kendrick, 2012; Fox et al., 2014; Struthers et al., 2019).

Young people's personal information was kept confidential through secure data transfer mechanisms (e.g. for the transcription service) and through de-identification processes. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants for data storage, analysis and reporting purposes to protect their identity and anonymity. Young people were given an opportunity to assign their own pseudonym; for those that did not nominate a pseudonym, one was assigned by the researchers. Identifiers in electronic data were removed through data cleaning and analysis. All direct quotes in this report refer to participants' pseudonyms and refer to the focus groups of young women and focus groups of young men as YW1 to YW7 and YM1 to YM7, respectively.

3. Findings: From young people's perspective



This chapter outlines the findings from our study in four main sections. In Section 3.1, we introduce the young people in our study and provide an overview of the dynamics of their discussions and engagement with the content. Section 3.2 outlines the quantitative findings from the survey, focusing on how the young people categorised the fictional scenarios as "not okay", "sometimes okay" or "okay". Sections 3.3 and 3.4 detail the qualitative findings from the focus groups and the online survey. Section 3.3 focuses on *what* the young people conceptualised as constituting domestic violence, while Section 3.4 deals with *how* the young people conceptualised domestic violence – particularly in relation to the gendered nature of domestic violence.

In keeping with our study's critical youth studies approach, the write-up of the findings aims to faithfully represent the young people's contributions to knowledge in their own terms and should be read from this perspective.

3.1. Introducing the young people

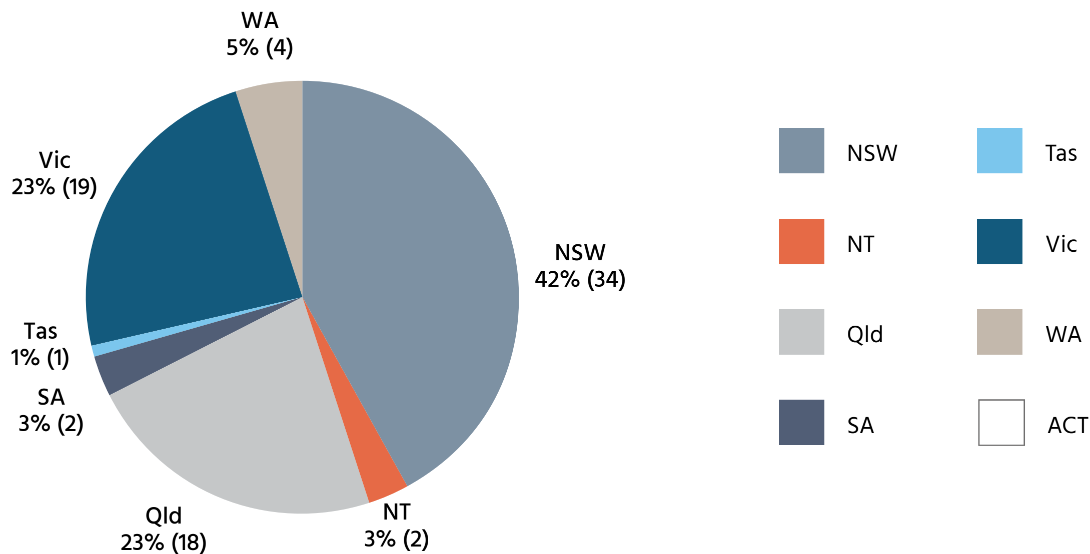
It is helpful to ground the findings by first introducing the participants and providing some context about their responses to and engagement with the content. We spoke with 80 young people aged 16 to 18 from across Australia, including 41 young women and 39 young men.[11] Figure 4 shows the proportion of participants from each state and territory. Thirty-nine per cent of our sample were aged 16 at the time of interview, 35 per cent were aged 17, and 26 per cent were aged 18. The majority (75%) lived in major cities, while the rest lived in regional and remote areas.[12] Ten per cent stated that they were born overseas and 31 per cent self-reported a family cultural background other than English, including Italian, Egyptian, Chinese, Lebanese and Indian cultural backgrounds, among others. One young person in the sample identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Most participants were currently in high school (76%), while smaller proportions were currently studying at university (9%) or at TAFE (6%) or were not studying or had just finished Year 12 (9%). Just under half of the participants reported they were engaged in part-time or casual work (45%).[13]

11 As noted in Methodology (Section 3.3.3), no young people in the sample reported a non-binary gender.

12 Remoteness was defined according to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Remoteness Structure (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

13 The socioeconomic status of participants was not estimated. Researchers have noted that many established indicators of socioeconomic status used for adult populations – such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (ABS SEIFA), which captures occupational status, educational attainment, home ownership and household composition, among other factors – are inappropriate for teenagers and young people (Dockery et al., 2016; Lim & Gemici, 2011). Further, there is no consensus about the most appropriate method for measuring socioeconomic status in research with children and young people without relying on parental information, although some studies indicate material markers may offer a useful alternative to conventional measures (Wilkinson & Andersson, 2018).

Figure 4: Percentage and number of participants by state/territory



Our study began with the starting assumption that young people are reflective "agents of change" within the area of the prevention of violence against women (Struthers et al., 2019). Indeed, the young people we spoke with were reflective and engaged agents and contributed actively and in different ways. Their varied responses to the free-text questions in the online survey were detailed and thoughtful. Though the young people did not know each other, they quickly developed rapport with one another and with the researchers within the online focus group environment. Many of the young people were confident, passionate about the topic and eager to share their ideas. Others were shy and hung back slightly, waiting to be asked for their input. The young people probed each other's contributions, and offered thoughtful reflections on the topic and their contributions throughout the discussion, many of which were unprompted by the researchers. For example, they perceptively and spontaneously reflected on the gendered assumptions underlying their interpretations; reconsidered their individual responses to the survey in the context of the group discussions; and questioned the accuracy of the domestic violence statistics presented by the researchers.

By reflecting on the research and, at times, on their own experiences, the young people identified what they believed were the key messages from the study and identified potential areas for future prevention and education work. Throughout the discussions, young people told us that domestic violence is an important issue that needs more attention because, as one young person put it, "I don't think domestic violence is talked about enough" (Declan, YM1). Many also argued that the taboos surrounding domestic violence needed to be broken. They saw domestic violence as something that needs to be talked about more openly, by individuals and by society. Many participants, especially young women, spontaneously discussed pitfalls in the relationships education curriculum at school, and then offered suggestions for expanding the RRE curriculum. After noting that they had only learned about domestic violence incidentally through school subjects outside of relationships education classes or single-day seminars, one group asked, "If it's such a big issue, how come we're not learning about it straight on?" (Maisy, YW5) In particular, the young people in our study requested to learn more about:

- how to be in a healthy relationship, including key skills of communication and respect
- the "red flags" or warning signs for unhealthy relationships
- real stories of domestic violence and abuse from the perspectives of victims and survivors
- places that young people and adults can go for support if they are experiencing violence or abuse.

Echoing the findings from other research (Taylor et al., 2017), the young people in our study put great importance on robust and comprehensive RRE in schools, with an expanded focus beyond only sexual consent education. They highlighted the role of relationships education not only in increasing awareness about relationship violence and its forms, but also in equipping young people with skills for healthy relationships and for identifying unhealthy behaviours.

3.2. Quantitative survey findings: Rating behaviours

This section outlines the quantitative findings from the survey conducted prior to the focus groups. Our survey aimed to identify how young people responded to a range of relationship behaviours that had varied details and contexts, but also contained some consistent themes. The survey provided an initial picture of the relationship behaviours young people perceive as unhealthy, which could then be explored further via the focus group discussions. The survey asked participants to rate 30

fictional relationship scenarios on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from "okay" to "sometimes okay" to "not okay". Overwhelmingly, young people rated the unhealthy and abusive relationship behaviours in the survey scenarios as "not okay".

The results are presented according to the following groupings of scenarios: physical violence scenarios developed from items in the 2017 NCAS; non-physical violence scenarios developed from items in the 2017 NCAS; other unhealthy relationship scenarios; and healthy scenarios. Where relevant, comparisons have also been made with the 2017 NCAS results.[14] Given the small sample size, it is important to note that the results from our pre-focus group survey are not representative of the general population.

3.2.1. Scenarios depicting forms of physical violence

Table 6 presents the results for the physical violence scenarios developed from items in the 2017 NCAS.[15] Virtually all participants rated these scenarios as "not okay" (97–100%). Thus, young people consistently rated physically violent and sexually coercive behaviours as unacceptable in relationships. These findings are broadly in line with the 2017 NCAS results where the overwhelming majority of young people identified physical violence as constituting domestic violence (Politoff et al., 2019).

Table 6: Ratings for scenarios linked to physical violence items from 2017 NCAS knowledge component, grouped by theme

Theme	Survey item no.	Based on NCAS item	Scenario text	Not okay (%)	Sometimes okay (%)	Okay (%)
Physical harm	5	DV2a	**Jamie** found out Eden was hanging out with someone else. Jamie then pushed Eden onto the floor	100	0	0
	29	DV2a	**Alex** slapped Charlie. Alex then said to Charlie, "It's your fault I'm in a bad mood"	97	3	0
Threat of harm	3	DV2e	Dian tried to break up with Jordan. **Jordan** got upset and told Dian, "If you leave me, I'll hurt myself"	100	0	0
	20	DV2i	**Jun** smashed Rory's phone. Jun said to Rory, "I wouldn't have done that if you just listened to me"	100	0	0
Coerced sex	10	DV2c	**Shannon** guilt-tripped Ashley into having sex	100	0	0
	28	DV2c	**Blair** pressured Jun into doing things sexually, even though Jun already told Blair, "I don't want to"	100	0	0

Note: Participants were asked to rate the behaviour of the character in bolded, underlined font in the scenario.

14 However, it is important to be mindful that any differences between the two studies may reflect methodological differences between the present study and the NCAS in terms of the mode of administration (online versus telephone), sampling frame (non-random versus random population sample), sample size (80 versus 1,751), age of the sample (16 to 18 years versus 16 to 24 years), specific wording of the scenarios and items, and response frames (whether behaviours are okay versus whether behaviours are domestic violence or violence against women). In addition, tests of statistical significance between the present results and the NCAS results have not been conducted.

15 Although all 80 participants completed the survey, the results for each item are based on 76 to 80 participants because some items were not answered by all participants. The results for each item are expressed as a percentage of the participants who answered the item.

3.2.2. Scenarios depicting forms of non-physical violence

Table 7 presents the results for the scenarios on non-physical violence developed from the 2017 NCAS items. Compared to the physical violence scenarios, young people rated the non-physical violence scenarios as "not okay" somewhat less often. This finding from our survey is broadly consistent with the 2017 NCAS results, which indicated that non-physical forms of violence were less often endorsed by young people as constituting violence compared to the physical forms of violence.

As shown in Table 7, five of the non-physical violence scenarios depict "social abuse", with three of these social abuse scenarios depicting belittling one's partner (Scenarios 15, 18 and 27) and two depicting undermining the partner's social relationships (Scenarios 22 and 24). The majority of young people rated all five social abuse scenarios as "not okay" (79–100%). Consistent with our results for the social abuse scenarios, a majority of young people in the 2017 NCAS agreed that the corresponding items constituted domestic violence (90–91%; Politoff et al., 2019). However, sizeable proportions of young people in our study (17–22%) rated two of the three "belittling" scenarios (Scenarios 15 and 27) and one of the two "undermining" scenarios (Scenario 24) as "sometimes okay". This variation in young people's perceptions of the social abuse scenarios highlights an area for further exploration to understand young people's potentially complex interpretations of behaviours involving social abuse.

One non-physical violence scenario developed from the NCAS described financial control (Scenario 15). In our survey, the vast majority of young people rated this scenario as "not okay" (92%), which indicates an understanding among our participants that financial control is "not okay". This result differs from the 2017 NCAS results for the related item where only 76 per cent of young people indicated financial abuse is a form of domestic violence (Politoff et al., 2019).

Seven non-physical violence scenarios in our survey depicted stalking behaviours, developed from the 2017 NCAS. Our survey included two scenarios describing in-person stalking (Scenarios 23 and 26) and five scenarios describing online stalking or "technology-facilitated surveillance" (Scenarios 13, 19, 1, 11, 17). The two in-person stalking scenarios described "turning up" or "popping in" at a current or former partner's workplace or home (Scenarios 23 and 26, respectively). These scenarios were rated as "not okay" by 84 and 90 per cent of our participants. These results are similar to those from the relevant items in the 2017 NCAS, where 90 per cent of young people identified in-person stalking as a form of violence against women (Politoff et al., 2019).

Young people's responses to the five scenarios depicting technology-facilitated surveillance yielded the most variation in our survey. Two of the technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios were based on the same NCAS item and described monitoring one's partner without their knowledge or consent, via mobile apps or via their call history and text messages (Scenarios 13 and 19). In our survey, the majority of the young people rated these scenarios as "not okay" (90% and 81% for Scenarios 13 and 19, respectively). This finding is in line with the 2017 NCAS result for the corresponding item, where 86 per cent of young people agreed that this type of behaviour constitutes domestic violence (Politoff et al., 2019).

The remaining three technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios in our survey – Scenarios 1, 11 and 17 – depict harassment behaviours via repeated or continuous communication. However, these scenarios do not explicitly label these behaviours as "harassment", unlike the 2017 NCAS item used to develop these scenarios.[16] In our survey, young people's responses varied across the three scenarios. Scenario 17 was rated "not okay" by the majority of participants (76%) and as "sometimes okay" by a minority (23%). Similarly, a majority of young people (89%) agreed that the related 2017 NCAS item described violence against women. In contrast, only a minority of young people rated Scenarios 1 and 11 as "not okay" (14% and 24%, respectively), while a majority rated them as "sometimes okay" (68% and 74%, respectively). The results for Scenarios 1 and 11 may be indicative of young people's ubiquitous use of and comfort with technology (eSafety Commissioner, 2022; Rice et al., 2016). In addition, the different results across the three scenarios suggest that context may play a role in young people's views about the threshold where repeated contact becomes problematic. Young people's reasoning for why they conceptualise different instances of "technology-facilitated surveillance" as okay or not okay are investigated further through the qualitative component of our study (see Section 3.3.5).

3.2.3. Scenarios depicting unhealthy and healthy relationship behaviours

A further eight scenarios were included in our survey which described a broader range of unhealthy relationship behaviours, including controlling behaviour, gaslighting, jealous behaviour and giving the "silent treatment". Table 8 shows that there was considerable variation in whether the young people rated these broader unhealthy behaviours as "not okay", ranging from all (100%) participants to

16 The 2017 NCAS item reads, "Do you regard harassment via repeated emails, text messages and the like to be a form of violence against women?" (SV2c)

Table 7: Ratings for scenarios linked to non-physical violence items based on the 2017 NCAS knowledge component, grouped by theme

Theme	Survey item no.	Based on NCAS item	Scenario text	Not okay (%)	Sometimes okay (%)	Okay (%)
Social abuse	15	DV2g	**Morgan** made sexual jokes about Riley in front of their friends	78	22	0
	18	DV2g	**Lee** repeatedly put Ashley down and called Ashley names in front of their friends	100	0	0
	27	DV2g	**Sam** repeatedly called Dana names. When Dana asked Sam to stop, Sam said "I was just joking"	83	17	0
	22	DV2k	Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them	100	0	0
	24	DV2k	Whenever Alex planned to go out with friends, **Sasha** said, "You can't go without me"	79	21	0
Financial control	25	DV2m	Anh and Rory moved in together. **Rory** took Anh's debit card and told Anh, "I don't trust you with money"	92	6	1
In-person stalking	23	SV1a	**Jordan** kept "popping in" to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to	84	16	0
	26	SV1a	**Nakia** kept turning up at Jordan's house uninvited, even though they were broken up	90	10	0
Technology-facilitated surveillance	13	DV10	**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening	90	10	0
	19	DV10	**Riley** checked the call history and text messages on Sasha's phone when Sasha was out of the room	81	19	0
	1	SV2c	**Alex** continually called, texted and Snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing	14	68	19
	11	SV2c	**Taylor** kept calling and texting Lee, even though they were broken up	24	74	3
	17	SV2c	Jamie was out with friends. **Zain** texted and called Jamie over and over to find out where Jamie was and who Jamie was with. Zain was angry because Jamie didn't reply right away	76	23	1

less than half of the participants (46–49%). Scenario 8, for example, depicts one partner controlling the other partner's clothing choices; the majority of our participants stated this behaviour was "not okay" (85%). Additionally, three scenarios described "gaslighting", where one person seeks to manipulate the other so that they question their interpretation of a particular situation and are made to feel "crazy" (Scenarios 4, 16 and 21; Sweet, 2019). While almost all participants rated two of the gaslighting scenarios as "not okay" (94% and 100% for Scenarios 16 and 21, respectively), a lower proportion of young people rated the remaining gaslighting scenario as "not okay" (64%; Scenario 4). The two gaslighting scenarios that most young people rated as "not okay" both describe pressuring the other person into doing something (Scenarios 16 and 21). In contrast, the gaslighting scenario more often rated as "sometimes okay" (Scenario 4) describes one partner dismissing the other partner as too "emotional", without including any coercive undercurrents. The coercive elements within Scenarios 16 and 21 may explain why these scenarios were more often categorised as "not okay".

Two scenarios in our survey depicted jealousy as a kind of unhealthy relationship behaviour. Around half of young people rated these scenarios as "not okay" (49% and 58% for Scenarios 12 and 14, respectively), while sizeable portions of young people rated these two scenarios "sometimes okay" (51% and 38%, respectively). Unlike other scenarios, these two scenarios did not include elements of control or manipulation, which elsewhere resulted in majority ratings of "not okay". The different results for the two scenarios depicting jealousy were further explored through the qualitative component of our study.

Additionally, two scenarios in our survey depicted one partner giving the other partner the "silent treatment" by not speaking to them or ignoring their calls (Scenarios 2 and 6). The results for these two scenarios were quite different. While the scenario where one partner gives the other the silent treatment because they returned home late from a party was rated as "not okay" by only 46 per cent of participants (Scenario 2), the scenario where one partner "plays games" by ignoring the other partner's phone calls was rated as "not okay" by almost all participants (90%; Scenario 6). The differences in these results may again reflect young people's recognition and rejection of the intentional maliciousness or manipulative behaviour (of "playing games") depicted in Scenario 6. As shown later in Section 3.3.4, the qualitative results showed that the young people in our study were highly critical of manipulative behaviour in relationships.

Table 8: Ratings for scenarios based on unhealthy relationship behaviours not linked to NCAS items, grouped by theme

Theme	Survey item no.	Scenario text	Not okay (%)	Sometimes okay (%)	Okay (%)
Controlling behaviour	8	Morgan loved wearing a particular top. **Jamie** criticised how Morgan looked and told Morgan to change clothes	85	15	0
Gaslighting	4	Sam felt upset with **Adi**. When Sam tried to speak to Adi about it, Adi said to Sam, "I can't talk to you when you're so emotional"	64	33	3
	16	**Tai** kept asking for Shannon's social media passwords by saying, "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me"	94	6	0
	21	**Ashley** kept pressuring Sam into sending nudes by saying "Don't you love me?"	100	0	0
Jealous behaviour	12	**Sasha** constantly accused Anh of flirting with someone else	49	51	0
	14	**Nakia** got jealous and was suspicious whenever Alex made new friends	58	38	4
Silent treatment	2	**Shannon** gave Rory the silent treatment after Rory got home late from a party	46	49	5
	6	**Lee** played games with Dana by ignoring Dana's phone calls	90	10	0

Table 9: Ratings for scenarios based on healthy relationship behaviours not linked to NCAS items

Theme	Survey item no.	Scenario text	Not okay (%)	Sometimes okay (%)	Okay (%)
Healthy	7	**Zain** was away on holiday. Zain missed Blair, but had a great time anyway	0	6	94
	9	Jun broke up with Taylor. **Taylor** was upset, but stayed friends with Jun	1	23	76
	30	**Morgan** and Tai had a heated discussion. Morgan was frustrated, but agreed to disagree	14	26	60

Finally, three items in our survey described healthy relationship behaviours (see Table 9). Young people generally rated these as "okay". However, some young people indicated that the behaviours were only "sometimes okay". These variations suggest that even interpretations of healthy relationship behaviours may depend on the context of the situation.

3.2.4. Differences in "not okay" ratings by gender

A gender breakdown of the results for all 30 scenarios from our survey was also explored.[17] Because the sample size was small and the sample was not a random sample, tests of statistical significance were not conducted. The results for young women and young men were very similar for most scenarios. Notably, all of the *physical violence* scenarios were overwhelmingly rated "not okay" by both the young women and the young men. Even though statistical significance was not investigated, it is noteworthy that there were some apparent gender differences in raw terms for a number of the scenarios depicting *non-physical forms of violence* or *other unhealthy relationship behaviours*. These raw differences were only occasionally greater than a 20 per cent difference. This section focuses on gender differences of 10 per cent or more. Typically, these gender differences were in the direction of young men less often rating these particular scenarios as "not okay", compared with young women.

Key gender differences: Scenarios depicting non-physical forms of violence

The young women's and young men's ratings of the non-physical violence scenarios are shown in Figure 5. There was a gender difference of at least 10 per cent in "not okay" ratings for three of the non-physical violence scenarios. Of note, fewer young men than young women in our study rated the following "not okay":

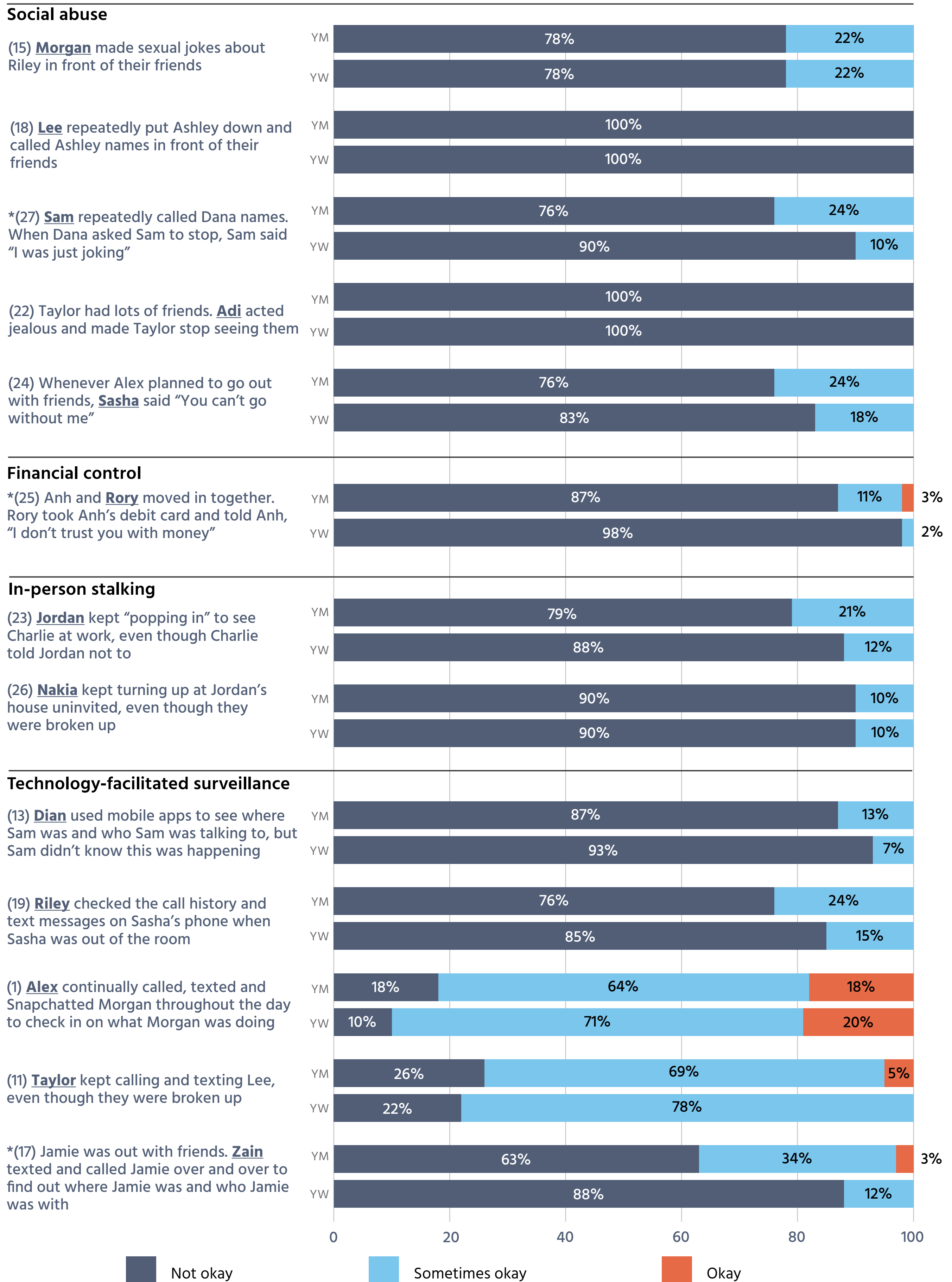
- Scenario 17: harassing contact via technology (63% compared with 88% of young women)
- Scenario 27: one partner belittling the other (76% compared with 90% of young women)
- Scenario 25: financial control (87% compared with 98% of young women).

While these results suggest some young men in our study were more accepting of *certain* non-physically violent behaviours than young women, the quantitative results cannot illuminate the reasons why the young men were less likely to rate these scenarios "not okay". Thus, young men's reasoning for why these scenarios may sometimes be okay were explored through the qualitative component of our study.

As noted earlier, although the majority of both young women and young men rated most of the non-physical violence scenarios as "not okay", Scenarios 1 and 11 were exceptions. These scenarios were rated "sometimes okay" by most young women and most young men. Interestingly, young men were slightly more likely to rate Scenario 1 as "not okay" compared with young women in raw terms (18% compared with 10%, respectively). The young people's "sometimes okay" ratings for these scenarios depicting technology-facilitated surveillance also warranted exploration in the qualitative component of our study.

17 As noted previously, no young people in the sample reported a non-binary gender.

Figure 5: Young women's and young men's ratings for non-physical violence items, grouped by theme



Note: "YW" denotes young women, while "YM" denotes young men. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.
* Denotes scenarios with a gender difference in "not okay" ratings of 10 per cent or more.

Key gender differences: Scenarios depicting unhealthy behaviours

There was a lot of variation among young people's ratings of the scenarios depicting unhealthy behaviours, such as gaslighting and jealous and controlling behaviour. Young women's and young men's ratings of these scenarios are shown in Figure 6. The young women were consistently more likely than young men to rate the unhealthy behaviours in our survey as "not okay" in raw terms. Five unhealthy scenarios had a gender difference in "not okay" ratings of more than 10 per cent. In particular, fewer young men rated the following scenarios "not okay":

- Scenario 4: gaslighting the other partner as "too emotional" (51% compared with 76% of young women)
- Scenario 8: control of clothing choices (74% compared with 95% of young women)
- Scenario 2: silent treatment (35% compared with 56% of young women)
- Scenario 14: jealous behaviour (50% compared with 66% of young women)
- Scenario 16: gaslighting to gain access to passwords (87% compared with 100% of young women).

These findings suggest that, compared with young women, some young men in our study may be more likely to normalise certain unhealthy relationship behaviours as more "okay". It may also be the case that the scenarios' "grey areas" led to varied interpretations about the potential context, explanation or acceptability of the situation. These quantitative findings thus raised interesting points for further exploration in the qualitative component of our study.

3.3. Qualitative findings: Making sense of domestic violence and abuse

Turning now to the qualitative findings from the focus groups and the online survey, we first present the thematic findings relevant to the study's first research question: "According to young people, what constitutes domestic violence?" The findings reveal how the young people in our study conceptualised what counts as domestic violence in terms of types of behaviours (Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2); a process of escalating or "snowballing" violence and abuse (Section 3.3.3); broader toxic behaviours that are "stepping stones" leading to domestic violence and abuse (Section 3.3.4); and behaviours that are normal or understandable as well as healthy in relationships (Sections 3.3.5 and 3.3.6). Each of the subheadings in the following should be read as sentences stating the key insight provided by the young people, beginning with: "Young people told us that …"

3.3.1. There is more to domestic violence than the "explicit" physical violence represented in public discourse

Through both the early parts of the focus group discussion and when reflecting upon the fictional scenarios, the young people described several forms of behaviour that, for them, constitute domestic violence. They described domestic violence behaviours in terms of two overarching categories: "explicit" and "subtle" forms of domestic violence. The young people distinguished between the two categories based on their estimates of how easily the behaviours are recognised as constituting domestic violence by society generally and victims and survivors more specifically. Importantly, the findings show how understandings of "what counts" as domestic violence are reinforced and reproduced by public discourse, including the media. While the young people in our study noted that portrayals of domestic violence as mainly physical violence shape immediate perceptions about the behaviours constituting domestic violence, they also argued that there is "more to" domestic violence than this narrow definition.

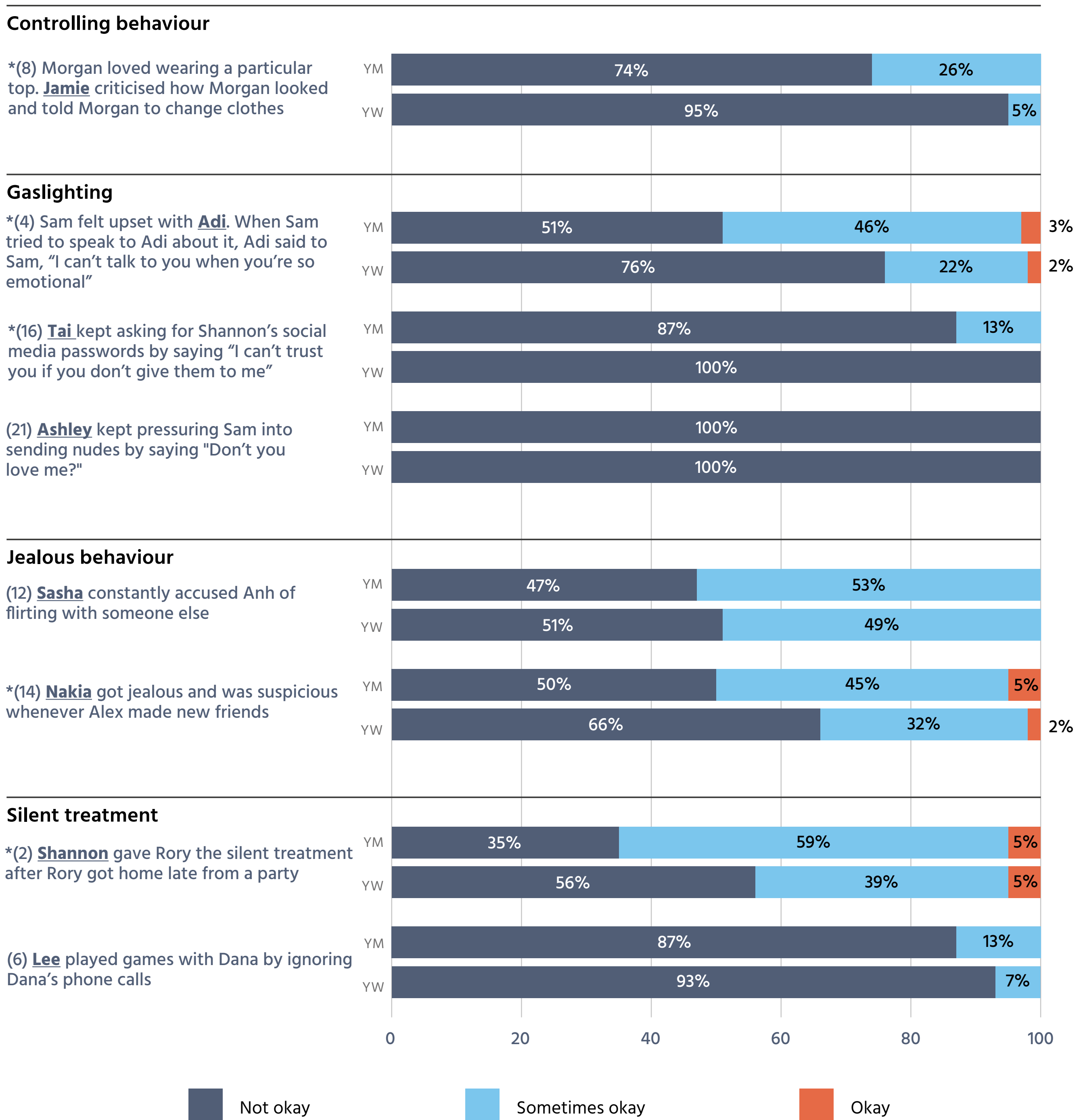
The young people described physical violence and, to a lesser extent, sexual violence as most *explicitly* constituting domestic violence or "100 per cent domestic violence" (Crystal, YW2). Physical violence, such as "hitting, pushing, slapping, kicking" (Clara, YW4), was most widely identified as constituting domestic violence by the young people. They described physical violence as "one of the easiest ones to recognise" (Eamon, YM7) as domestic violence in terms of the violent act itself and the resulting harms (e.g. bruising, injury). Physical violence was identified by the young people as explicitly constituting domestic violence both through the discussion generally and when pinpointing which fictional scenarios they felt depicted domestic violence.

Sexual violence was also identified as an explicit form of domestic violence, though to a lesser extent than physical violence. Instead, the young people more frequently labelled sexually violent behaviours with more discrete labels (such as rape, sexual assault or sexual coercion) and as violent behaviours in their own right, rather than as specifically referring to them as domestic violence per se. Sexual violence was only identified as a form of domestic violence when the young people were asked whether any of the fictional scenarios depicted domestic violence; sexual violence did not immediately come to their minds as a form of domestic violence without prompting.

The young people characterised physical violence in particular as *explicitly* domestic violence because these forms are most commonly represented as constituting domestic violence within public discourse:[18] for example,

18 The notion of public discourse relates to the idea that "in the popular imagination, domestic violence conjures up a particular public story" (Donovan & Hester, 2010, p. 281). These public stories or "representations" are then reproduced by institutions and through discourse and public "talk", which shape

Figure 6: Young women's and young men's ratings for unhealthy behaviour items, grouped by theme



Note: "YW" denotes young women, while "YM" denotes young men. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.
* Denotes scenarios with a gender difference in "not okay" ratings of 10 per cent or more.

"like on the TV, you see a woman is being bashed or something and then people associate that action with it" (Katja, YW5). Indeed, the young people regularly anchored their ideas about "what counts" as domestic violence by referring to its portrayal or representation in public discourse – as something that gets "talked about" and that they "hear about" via both formal and informal channels, including in media content (e.g. television or film, news, social media, advertising), statistics, the school curriculum and in general public "talk" about the issue.

The young people highlighted how the public discourse portrays domestic violence as predominantly physical violence that is sensationalised, extreme and disconnected from normal life. Some young people argued that the sensationalised representation of domestic violence as "a

how society understands and recognises domestic violence (Donovan & Hester, 2014).

really extreme situation" in the media and public discourse creates a general perception that domestic violence is "really far away and a disconnected concept" (Bethany, YW6) from everyday life. One young person for example told us:

> Sometimes when I hear it [i.e. "domestic violence"], it just sounds so far away. Obviously, we associate it with school, like we have White Ribbon and we have, we're so aware of it with media, but at the same time because we get such a consumption from media and social media, it feels very sensationalised, you know. Obviously, it's so serious but sometimes it's hard to … it feels far away. (Lin, YW2)

In this context, many of the young people argued there was "more to" domestic violence than the predominant and narrow representation of domestic violence as primarily physical violence in the media and public discourse. Some young people grappled with the "far away" and extreme forms of violence represented in public discourse, versus their suspicions that domestic violence is more common and occurs differently than is often portrayed. For example, the exchange below shows the young men attempting to reconcile these ideas in response to a question about how common they felt domestic violence is in Australia:

> Rahul: Well, like, you see lots of things on the news, like, there's the one in however many people get domestic violence and, but, I just, personally, I don't see it around me as much as people say it happens. Do you know what I mean? …
>
> Felix: The general idea of someone who's screaming at their spouse and punching them in the face is probably a minority of the actual, like, uh, abusive relationships that might actually be out there?
>
> Toby: Mmm. Like, there's a lot more that goes on than just the, like, major stuff that goes in the news. I feel like it's a lot more common …
>
> Rahul: Yeah … like, you don't hear people talking about their domestic violence, um, situations, but you only hear about the bad ones on the news and how badly it's gone and just what *can* happen instead of what *actually* happens … I guess, people don't really talk about it so you don't really hear about it, but then you see it on the news and then it makes you think, like, is it that bad or is it happening around me everywhere? (YM3, emphasis in interview)

The young people speculated that the media and public discourse may play a key role in reinforcing a narrow conception of domestic violence, with the result that domestic violence is generally understood among the general public primarily in terms of "the absolute extremes of domestic violence" (Carmen, YW5). As a consequence, participants noted that "some people don't actually understand" that domestic violence "can really be anything. It doesn't have to just be physical" (Claudia, YW4). Many of the young people thus felt the narrow representation of domestic violence in public discourse may keep domestic violence hidden by hindering public recognition of the full range of behaviours – both "explicit" and "subtle" – that constitute domestic violence.

3.3.2. The term "violence" makes less sense for the "subtle", non-physical forms of abuse

While the young people noted that physical violence is the most *explicit* or most straightforward to identify as domestic violence, they explained that domestic violence also involves other, more *subtle* forms of abuse. Many participants also described how domestic violence can involve violence *and* abuse. In response to the question posed early in the focus groups, "What do you think of when you hear the term 'domestic violence'?", the young people referred to many non-physical behaviours, or even multiple forms of abuse, generally: one young person responded, for example, "I think of all forms of abuse within a relationship." (Sana, YW1) The non-physical behaviours were characterised as "subtle" in the sense that they are less readily recognised by the community as constituting domestic violence: "When people are in it, they probably don't realise 'cause it is so subtle." (Pippa, YW2) This young person's description makes the distinction between the two categories of explicit and subtle violence clear:

> … physical abuse, um, it's the easiest for someone to identify … if you're being physically abused … like, you *know*. But financial abuse or emotional abuse, it's a lot harder to, like, identify it and say, like "I'm being abused", because it's not as plain and simple as just you've been physically abused. It could be through um, like, nasty words or it could be something that you're not even aware of if it's financial. (Aysha, YW1, emphasis in interview)

The forms of subtle abuse that the young people named included "mental" or emotional abuse, financial abuse, verbal abuse and control. The young people identified these subtle forms both when asked what comes to mind when they hear the term "domestic violence", and when reflecting on the fictional scenarios. Although the young people named these specific behaviours, there was often overlap in participants' descriptions of them.

Young people characterised mental or emotional abuse in terms of manipulation, "emotional blackmail" and gaslighting, and often included terms like "control" and "fear" in their descriptions. When asked what mental or emotional abuse looks like, they described it as "like getting into someone's head, making them feel worthless and useless" (Zara, YW3) and the abuser "just sort of stretch[ing] it around and get[ting] in your head about it" (Penelope,

YW1). Mental or emotional abuse was also often described in terms of damage to the victim's and survivor's mental health: "It's putting *you* down ... you're getting labelled, you're going to feel like that label ... If you call them garbage, they'll start feeling like garbage." (Vismay, YM1, emphasis in interview) Additionally, verbal abuse related to "a lot of yelling and screaming" (Chelsea, YW3), although young people also described it similarly to mental or emotional abuse by referring to put-downs. Finally, control was slightly more challenging for the young people to describe. Some noted what control involves, such as "you're not allowed to go out, um, and see your friends and stuff like that" (Declan, YM1). Some others noted the motives of the controlling partner, such as "someone using their power in a really bad way ... to really, not so much attack another person but to really just be in control" (Mischa, YW5).

Because these subtle forms of violence are less talked about or represented in public discourse, the young people characterised them as "hidden". Domestic violence was also seen to be hidden because of inconsistently held definitions across society for "what counts" as domestic violence. Participants noted that because people "don't actually realise that domestic violence isn't just physical" (Sabrina, YW1), many victims and survivors may not realise they are experiencing domestic violence. One young person noted for example that "a lot of people don't really know it's happening when it is, so I feel like that's why a lot of people are like 'oh no, it's not that common'" (Josie, YW2). Relatedly, the young people also noted that domestic violence is under-disclosed to family and friends and under-reported to police and within official statistics, often because social taboos or stigmas discourage people from talking about their victimisation. For example, participants noted that "it would happen a lot *more* than it's reported because people are scared to open up about it" (Oliver, YM4, emphasis in interview).

Although the young people named many "subtle" or non-physical behaviours when asked what they think of when they hear the term "domestic violence", they less often identified these types of subtle behaviours as forms of domestic violence when discussing the true-to-life scenarios. Many young people struggled to reconcile how the behaviours, which are considered forms of "abuse", fit within the term "domestic violence". Some outright questioned whether the term "domestic violence" was accurate for non-physical "abuse", while others noted how they immediately linked "domestic violence" with physical violence simply because of the word "violence". For example, one young person questioned this aspect of the term:

> Wait, does "domestic violence" also mean, just, like, I know that domestic violence, physical abuse can have, uh, psychological damage afterwards, but can domestic violence also count as *just* mental abuse? ... I would say it's a different type of abuse, because "domestic violence", like, "violence" sounds like more physical to me. (Clayton, YM3, emphasis in interview)

Relatedly, one young person noted that "verbal abuse ... lacks the terminology of 'violence'" (Archie, YM7), while another reflected at the end of the focus groups after hearing the definition of domestic violence, "I always thought of it as more physical. Like I knew it was emotional, verbal, but I definitely considered it as more physical than emotional and verbal." (Pritha, YW2) These young people's remarks suggest that, together with the representation of domestic violence in public discourse, the term "violence" may contribute to a narrow understanding of domestic violence as primarily physical violence.

In contrast to this commonplace interpretation of the term "violence", many young people felt that "domestic abuse" was a better and more encompassing term. As further detailed in the next section, "domestic abuse" more accurately includes multiple, distinct forms of violence *and* abuse, which can co-occur as a pattern of behaviour. As one young person described it:

> To me, domestic violence is when there is like physical violence, or the threat or like genuine fear of physical violence. But domestic abuse is any kind of abuse, including like blackmail, emotional abuse, like coercing someone into doing something, like, guilt-tripping them, just, like, all that sort of thing ... it starts with domestic abuse and escalates. So, like, domestic violence is part of domestic abuse, but like, before there's actually violence, there's mental stuff going on as well. (Faye, YW4)

Taking heed of the young people's insights, we will employ the broader term "domestic violence and abuse" in this report from here on.

3.3.3. Domestic violence and abuse occurs like a snowballing and inescapable process, on an escalating continuum

In addition to characterising domestic violence and abuse as involving multiple forms of "explicit" and "subtle" behaviours, the young people also conceptualised it as a snowballing process or pattern of multiple abusive and violent behaviours and escalating harms that entrap the person experiencing it. Their conceptualisation of the snowballing process of abuse aligns broadly with the continuum concept of domestic violence (Carlson & Jones, 2010; Kelly, 2011) in similarly emphasising the "commonalities and cumulative effects of seemingly distinct abusive behaviours" (DeKeseredy, 2021, p. 632). This concept of the snowballing process of domestic violence was more latent than their overt naming of particular explicit or subtle behaviours.

The young people predominantly conceptualised the snowballing process of abuse when reckoning whether the fictional scenarios constituted domestic violence or not, and when differentiating domestic violence and abuse from relationship conflict more generally. Their concept of snowballing domestic violence and abuse comprised four main aspects, which related to the repetitive, ongoing nature of the abuse; the escalating severity of abuse; the harms of the abuse; and the intentionality of the abuse.

Repetitive and ongoing abuse

Across the focus groups, young people conceptualised domestic violence and abuse as a process, in the sense of an interacting, cumulating series of behaviours and "polyvictimisations" (DeKeseredy et al., 2021; see also Marganski et al., 2021). The young people's descriptions of the process of domestic violence and abuse comprised a temporal element in the ongoing, repetitive, reoccurring nature of the violence or abuse. As one young person described it, "what differentiates … you know, something small to it being like domestic violence, I think, it's repetitive behaviour" (Crystal, YW2). Repetitive and reoccurring behaviours were seen as differentiating domestic violence and abuse from non-abusive behaviours (such as conflict) or unintentional actions. The young people described domestic violence and abuse as something that is "constantly reoccurring" which "never really comes to, like, you never come to a solution about it" (Campbell, YM5). Some young people also contrasted the recurring or ongoing nature of domestic violence and abuse against either fleeting or singular actions. Conflict was seen as "temporary" (Clayton, YM3), whereas the young people conceptualised domestic violence and abuse as "non-stop. It just doesn't stop. You feel like you can't get away from it" (Toby, YM3). Thus, they conceptualised the pervasiveness and all-encompassing pattern of domestic violence and abuse. These young people felt that "if it's just a one-off thing, it's probably not domestic violence" (Aysha, YW1) because the repetitive, ongoing pattern was central to their concept of snowballing, escalating domestic violence and abuse.

However, even though the young people largely conceptualised domestic violence and abuse as an ongoing phenomenon, some suggested that certain one-off behaviours *were* domestic violence if they were enacted in isolation. These mostly related to the "explicit" forms of physical and sexual violence. For example, "If you hit your partner, that's domestic violence even if you only do it once." (Kyle, YM1)

Escalating or "growing" abuse

As well as a recurring pattern of behaviour, the young people also described this pattern of violence and abuse as increasing in severity: as "growing", "escalating", "building up" or "snowballing". Domestic violence and abuse was conceptualised as starting from "small things" and snowballing into a more serious and severe form of abuse with bigger harms and ongoing tolls. The young people also conceptualised the "different levels of domestic violence" (Oliver, YM4) like a continuum, where there are multiple forms of violence or abuse with varied and increasing degrees or "levels" of severity. The following exchange shows how young people conceptualised domestic violence and abuse as a snowballing pattern with increasing "levels" of severity:

> Jeremiah: … like small things build up and lead from one thing to another. It may just be the little, small things that can cause a big reaction.
>
> Travis: Yeah, like … a small thing can have the snowball effect and it can eventually from a small little minute thing turn into this colossal issue.
>
> Alec: From little things, big things grow.
>
> Travis: Exactly.
>
> Stefan: … snowballing, little things big things grow, like it starts off something small then over time as things that add to it, it starts off becoming about the issue and transitions from domestic abuse to domestic violence. That's another thing you could say, it snowballs. From … like an argument every now and then leads up to domestic violence every night. (YM2)

As suggested in Stefan's comment above, the young people largely situated physical violence at the highest level of severity and potential harm, with other forms of abuse snowballing into physically violent behaviour. However, the young people did not conclusively decide exactly where different forms of domestic violence would sit on the hierarchy of levels of severity. Indeed, when some participants were pressed for clarification about what this was "leading" to, some characterised the process as leading or snowballing toward "a physically abusive and potentially life-threatening relationship" (Ebony, YW6). However, others clarified that it was not necessarily leading to physical violence but could also be leading to "mentally abusive" behaviour (Adelle, YW7). Similarly, some also characterised verbal abuse, emotional abuse and "being extremely controlling" (Sana, YW1) as severe and serious forms of domestic violence and abuse in and of themselves. For example:

> I think emotional [abuse] is just as impactful on a person as physical [violence]. So, I think they're both just as – I mean obviously physical, like you have scars and that from it, but emotional you are still going to carry it with you forever and I feel like emotional abuse is sometimes overlooked because you can't see physical scars and stuff. But I feel like it's just as important. (Katja, YW5)

Harms from abuse

The young people also described how the snowballing, escalating pattern of violence or abuse brings about increasing harms and entraps the victim and survivor. While both physical violence and non-physical abuse were characterised as harmful, many young people emphasised the longer term emotional damage resulting from the snowballing pattern of domestic violence and abuse. As one young person described it, "Physically [violent abuse] is, it's – it's – it's horrible, and you will get trauma, but psychological trauma: that plays in your head over and over and over." (Clara, YW4) Notably, there was a gender difference in the ways the harms were conceptualised. Young women more commonly described the entrapment or the inescapability of domestic violence and abuse, while young men somewhat more frequently described the emotional damage or toll from violence and abuse. Participants described a variety of consequences and harms of abuse, particularly the tolls of mental or emotional abuse and isolation, but also the tolls of fear and being controlled. Young people described how the subtler forms of abuse in particular "eventually gets in your mind and entraps you" (Ebony, YW6), thereby making the victim and survivor "feel trapped and not being able to change it" (Darcie, YW6). The inescapability of domestic violence and abuse was mostly discussed in the context of mental or emotional abuse, such as through manipulation and gaslighting. A handful of young people also mentioned that structural factors such as financial control and migrant status also shape victims' and survivors' feelings about the inescapability of violence and abuse.

Intentional abuse versus situational triggers

Finally, young people also conceptualised domestic violence and abuse as one partner's intentional act against the other. As one young person described it, "Domestic violence seems to be something that one person will, like, actively inflict on the other." (Cristo, YM4) A handful of young people went further to characterise it as an "abuse of power" (Mischa, YW5) or a "power play" where "the other person is getting a rise out of putting the other person down" (Bethany, YW6). Because of its intentionality, domestic violence and abuse was seen as conceptually distinct from conflict or jealousy. The focus groups of young men were probed to discuss the difference between domestic violence, conflict and jealousy in further detail than the groups of young women, in order to clarify some of the quantitative results for young men in relation to the scenarios depicting jealous behaviour. Conflict was characterised as something *between* two people on opposing sides, and as something resolvable and temporary, as well as potentially healthy within the relationship. As one young man stated, conflict "could be [that] you don't agree on a viewpoint. Yeah, where I feel more as domestic violence is more, um … defined as one person acting violence upon another" (Clayton, YM3). Similarly, jealousy was distinguished from domestic violence and abuse in that jealousy was seen as an internalised, mostly fleeting and ultimately natural emotion, whereas violence and abuse involved *taking an action*: "Being jealous isn't exactly, like, anything that's being *inflicted upon* anyone else yet." (Felix, YM3, emphasis in interview) In a similar vein, anger was also described as an internalised feeling. Both jealousy and anger were characterised by many young people, particularly young men, as problematic only if they are intentionally and harmfully acted upon:

> Easton: It's completely normal to have jealousy … but not to the point where you need to act on … I kind of feel like natural jealousy is kind of to the point where you go, "Oh, I wish that was me" … But if they do anything physically or verbally after that point, to act out on this jealousy, then I think that's toxic, and is wrong …
>
> Duncan: Yeah, I feel like with that idea of natural jealousy it's sort of that idea of – you can't really control how you feel, but you can control how you respond. (YM5)

Thus the young people suggested "natural jealousy" can be understandable and "sometimes okay", so long as the jealousy is not acted upon in a toxic manner. These remarks offer some insight into the quantitative findings from our study, where some scenarios depicting jealous behaviour were rated "sometimes okay" by sizeable proportions of young people (see Section 3.2.3). Nevertheless, some young people proclaimed that jealousy and anger can act as "the foundation which leads to domestic violence", in terms of being an "instigator for further harmful behaviour" (Meredith, YW2) or a potential warning sign for domestic violence if the person reacted aggressively in light of jealousy or anger.

Interestingly, the young people also often implied that domestic violence behaviours could be ignited by individual and situational triggers or risk factors, even though they saw domestic violence and abuse as ongoing, snowballing and intentional. Some young people in our study, for example, noted situational or contextual triggers such as alcohol consumption, family conflict or COVID-19 lockdowns. Others referred to emotional triggers, primarily anger, "in the heat of the moment" (Hasan, YM4), as well as jealousy, as noted above. Some also mentioned aspects of the perpetrator's personal history as contributing to violent behaviour, such as an abusive family upbringing or past relationships. Many of the triggers noted by the young people are consistent with existing literature on risk factors for violence and abuse (Capaldi et al., 2012; Gerino et al., 2018; Our Watch, 2021a), as well as findings from recent research on adolescent perceptions of dating violence (Taylor et al., 2017). These situational triggers

and contributing factors were mostly raised by the young people in passing and, by and large, were not used to excuse the violence. Rather, the young people referred to these situational factors to help build a picture for the context of violence and abuse.

3.3.4. Toxic and unhealthy behaviours can be "stepping stones" toward domestic violence and abuse

All but one of the 10 fictional scenarios discussed in the focus groups were designed to depict, in a true-to-life fashion, a behaviour defined as physical or non-physical violence in the 2017 NCAS. The remaining scenario depicted gaslighting behaviour (see Section 2.3.1). The scenarios aimed to portray how the behaviours may manifest in the context of relationships. The young people were asked to identify which scenarios they felt constituted domestic violence. In response, they confidently labelled the physical and sexual violence scenarios as domestic *violence*, in line with their understanding of "explicit" forms of domestic violence (see Section 3.3.1). However, as shown earlier in Sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3, the young people conceptualised domestic violence in terms of *domestic violence and abuse*, and in terms of a snowballing pattern of escalating abusive and violent behaviours. As such, the young people were more hesitant to apply the narrower label of domestic *violence* to many of the scenarios that, for them, constituted *abuse*. Moreover, the young people reckoned that the scenarios depicting non-physical behaviours may not constitute domestic violence and abuse per se because the actions may not have been a repeated, snowballing pattern of behaviour, or may not have been *intentionally* abusive. For example, "If it's just a one-off thing, it's probably not domestic violence; it might just be like a one-off thing that's not really a big deal." (Aysha, YW1) However, the scenarios depicting physical and sexual violence were seen as unacceptable even as singular events: "There is no going back from that." (Kajta, YW5)

Additionally, in discussing whether any scenarios constituted domestic violence, the young people also felt that some scenarios depicted behaviours that were unhealthy or toxic and harmful in themselves, but did not yet reach the *technical* threshold of domestic violence and abuse. In this line of thought, the young people conceptualised domestic violence and abuse within the context of a broader group of abusive and problematic relationship behaviours, such as bullying, being toxic or behaviours seen as red flags. From young people's shared reflections on the scenarios (both in the focus groups and in the qualitative component of our survey), actions that were described as toxic and "not okay" included acting without or against the other partner's consent, causing harm for the other partner, dominating or treating the other partner like a possession and being manipulative. Acting against or without consent and manipulative behaviour were seen as abusive in and of themselves; the other remaining themes were described as toxic and harmful, though not necessarily abusive or constituting domestic violence and abuse *yet*.

When discussing whether any scenarios constituted domestic violence, the young people instead conceptualised the unhealthy or toxic behaviours as "a stepping stone" (Carmen, YW5), "the gateway" (Ruby, YW4) or "the set-up phase for domestic abuse" (Lena, YW4). In this, they argued that domestic violence and abuse was "the next step" up (Manuel, YM6) from toxic and unhealthy behaviours: "There is no domestic violence *yet*." (Maisy, YW5, emphasis added) Following this line of analysis, unhealthy behaviours can act as the initial "stepping stones" toward more generally abusive behaviour, which can in turn further escalate toward more serious non-physical domestic abuse and, later, extreme forms of physical domestic violence. In this way, the young people appeared to incorporate toxic behaviours – such as manipulation, bullying and acting against or without consent – into an expanded continuum of relationship violence and abuse. More specifically, they positioned toxic "stepping stones" at the earliest end of the continuum and the most serious forms of abuse and violence, such as extreme physical violence, at the final end of the continuum. Even if the young people did not feel that the "stepping stones" constituted forms of domestic violence and abuse in and of themselves, they nonetheless saw them as toxic, harmful and wrong.

The themes developed from the young people's deliberations about whether and why the fictional scenarios were "not okay" are outlined in the following. Importantly, the themes highlight behaviours the young people conceptualised as not only unhealthy but also as potentially the "stepping stones" toward domestic violence and abuse. In their focus groups, the young people overwhelmingly rated the majority of the fictional scenarios as "not okay" (see Table 10). (Participants' rationalisations of some scenarios as "sometimes okay" are detailed in Section 3.3.5.) In assessing the scenarios, the young people thus weighed up whether the behaviour was wrong (i.e. "not okay") by interpreting the action itself, the possible implications or harms resulting from the action, the impact of the action and, implicitly, the intent of the wrongdoer. The groups of young women were, overall, more confident and unwavering in their ratings about whether the scenarios were not okay and why. Comparatively, some of the groups of young men were less confident or conclusive in articulating what exactly was wrong about the situation and why, or they spent more time contemplating the possible circumstances surrounding the scenario. As discussed further below, the key themes developed from the young people's shared reflections of the scenarios deemed "not okay" were acting without or against the other partner's

Table 10: Ratings by focus groups of each scenario as "not okay" or "sometimes okay"

Survey item no.	Order discussed in focus groups	NCAS item	Scenario text	No. of focus groups rating scenario as:		
				Not okay	Some-times okay	No decision
5	1st	DV2a	**Jamie** found out Eden was hanging out with someone else. Jamie then pushed Eden onto the floor	14	-	-
13	2nd	DV10	**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening	11	2 (1YW, 1YM)	1 (1YW)
23	3rd	SV1a	**Jordan** kept "popping in" to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to	8	4 (2YW, 2YM)	2 (1YW, 1YM)
1	4th	SV2c	**Alex** continually called, texted and Snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing	1 (1YW)	13	-
28	5th	DV2c	**Blair** pressured Jun into doing things sexually, even though Jun already told Blair, "I don't want to"	14	-	-
18	6th	DV2g	**Lee** repeatedly put Ashley down and called Ashley names in front of their friends	14	-	-
22	7th	DV2k	Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them	13	1 (1YM)	-
25	8th	DV2m	Anh and Rory moved in together. **Rory** took Anh's debit card and told Anh, "I don't trust you with money"	10	3 (3YM)	1 (1YM)
27	9th	-	**Tai** kept asking for Shannon's social media passwords by saying "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me"	14	-	-
19	10th	DV10	**Riley** checked the call history and text messages on Sasha's phone when Sasha was out of the room	11	1 (1YW)	2 (2YM)

Note: "YW" denotes a focus group of young women, while "YM" denotes a focus group of young men. None of the scenarios discussed in the focus groups were rated as "okay" by any focus group.

consent; causing harm for the other partner; dominating or treating the other partner like a possession; and being manipulative.

Acting without or against consent

The young people were highly critical of relationship behaviours enacted against or without one partner's consent. Consent was conceptualised very broadly and was not limited to just sexual consent. As one young person put it, "Consent comes in all forms." (Felicity, YW1) Notably, the young people pointed to consent or a lack thereof when discussing the full range of domestic violence and abuse behaviours; that is, the discussion of consent was not limited to the sexual violence scenarios only. For the young people, forcing or pressuring a partner to do something against their wishes, invading the other partner's personal privacy or boundaries, doing something without the other partner knowing or "behind their back", failing to respect their decisions or boundaries, or taking away the other partner's capacity to choose were all fundamentally not okay within relationships. These findings suggest the young people in our study placed a high importance on consent in relationships generally – not just in relation to *sexual* consent, specifically.

This theme of lack of consent was equally prominent in the young women's and young men's focus groups. This theme was most evident in the discussions of scenarios depicting technology-facilitated surveillance, financial control and coerced sex, and (albeit to a lesser extent) one

scenario depicting social abuse (Scenario 22). Although these scenarios described quite different behaviours, the young people's reflections were thematically similar in their emphasis on lack of consent and the removal or breach of the person's agency. For example, one young person remarked on the sexual violence scenario that "you never try to force somebody into doing something that they don't want to do" (Ruby, YW4), while another participant characterised the scenario on technology-facilitated surveillance as "a total lack of consent" (Penelope, YW1). In a similar vein, another participant criticised one of the social abuse scenarios (Scenario 22)[19] as follows:

> It's not like they're *asking*, it's like they've *made* them stop seeing them, and I just don't think that's okay. Because it's very … that comes back to one-sided relationships and stuff. It feels like they're controlling the other person … like, *forcing* them to do something, I don't think is right. Because that's one-sided and … like, you should trust them, and you should respect their choice to not do something … If you force someone, or control someone to do something, they don't have a say in the matter and I feel like with this scenario that person isn't having a say in the matter and it's forcing them to do something, and that's bad and I feel like that's just not okay. (Clayton, YM3, emphasis in interview)

In weighing up whether scenarios were "okay", the young people thus reflected on the *implication* of the behaviour, including whether the action was taken with or without the partner's consent, rather than solely on the particular *form* of the behaviour itself (e.g. physical violence, coerced sex or verbal abuse). Thus, in their assessments of whether the scenarios were "okay", the young people judged not only the specific form of the behaviour, but also considered what the surrounding context might be. By focusing on the implication of a lack of consent, the young people largely and immediately described these actions as "never okay" and having "no excuse".

Causing harm

The young people also focused on the potential harms or damaging consequences for the victim and survivor that might result from the actions depicted in the fictional scenarios. This theme was most prominent in the young people's reflections on the scenarios depicting social abuse, threats of harm, physical harm and coerced sex, but also somewhat evident in their discussions of the financial control and technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios.

Participants described various potential harms to the victim and survivor, including not only physical injury, but also damage to their self-worth or mental health. Here, many young people labelled particular scenarios as bullying and in doing so, focused on the resulting harm from the repeated undermining of the character's self-worth: "Verbal bullying, not okay. You're putting someone down, negative energy, emotional, can lead to things: depression, anxiety, and as a result of that, suicide. So, not okay." (Joel, YM2) Additionally, the young people described how coerced sex "dehumanises people" (Crystal, YW1) and again emphasised the toll of the action: "It's mentally damaging if your partner's sitting there trying to make you do something you don't want to do." (Nolan, YM7) The young people also highlighted how the depicted behaviours would make the character "feel unsafe" (Violet, YW6), uncomfortable or fearful (for themselves or of their partner's future actions), as well as isolated or dependent. Some young people suggested such isolation may make the person feel "trapped" and unable to leave the relationship. For example, one young person interpreted a threat of harm scenario (Scenario 3) as "threatening" the character "into completely obeying" the other, which may make them "feel helpless about their situation while feeling fearful for their safety in this relationship" (Meredith, YW2). Finally, some young people described other wider consequences that may result from the scenario behaviours, including consequences because the behaviour was illegal (e.g. underage sexting)[20] or repercussions for the person's friendships.

This theme further reveals how the young people assessed the *implication* of the behaviour – causing harm – to determine that the situation was "not okay", rather than just focusing solely on the specific *form* of the behaviour. Importantly, these findings further suggest that the young people saw the "stepping stones" as harmful forms of behaviour in and of themselves, before they had escalated into domestic violence and abuse.

Dominating or treating like a possession

Additionally, the young people described relationships where one partner "owns", has "dominance over" (Oliver, YM4) or treats the other partner like a possession as problematic. This theme was most evident in young people's discussions of the scenarios depicting technology-facilitated surveillance, social abuse and stalking, and (albeit to a lesser extent) scenarios portraying financial control and coerced sex. Notably, compared with young men, young women more regularly described these scenarios in terms of one partner acting possessively; dominating the other; "basically stalking them" (Chelsea, YW3); or acting "obsessive" (Faye, YW4), overbearing or "clingy" (Florence,

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19 Scenario 22 text read: "Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them."

20 The fictional scenarios did not include the ages of the characters. Nevertheless, some of the participants interpreted the scenarios as occurring in teenaged relationships, while others firmly stated that the scenarios were between more "grown up" people.

YW7). Though this theme conceptually relates to controlling behaviour, the young people often found it challenging to articulate the idea of control: "It can be really, I don't know how to explain it, but it's just really, really overbearing I feel like." (Saskia, YW7) Instead, possessiveness, harassment or becoming "too much" was the language used by the young people to explain these scenarios. For example, when reflecting on one of the technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios (Scenario 1), one young person described it as possessiveness yet grappled with articulating why the scenario might not be okay on this basis:

> I feel like the word "continually" kind of changed it a little bit … it was just kind of possessive maybe a little bit. 'Cause it just, like, keeps going and going and going, and I don't know, something is just off, but I can't really put my finger on it. (Josie, YW2)

In this way, the young people emphasised the possessiveness or overbearingness of the action upon the victim, not the purpose of control. Some young people also emphasised how this dominance or possessiveness indicated the relationship was "one-sided" rather than mutual between two partners. This criticism of the one-sidedness of the relationship is consistent with the young people's view that individual autonomy and respect for agency were key components of healthy relationships (as discussed in Section 3.3.6). Participants remarked how these possessive actions may result in the partner becoming isolated or dependent. Moreover, a small number of young people suggested such possessive (or controlling) behaviours, if challenged, might act as a precursor to violence – thus acting as a "stepping stone" toward snowballing domestic violence and abuse:

> If they didn't answer it [the calls and texts], it could lead to, I guess, more, because like, next time they'd see each other, because one of them wouldn't have been … replying … I guess, it could lead to, when they see each other, violence maybe between them … angry, anger and stuff. (Eamon, YM7)

Despite their focus on the possessiveness of the behaviour depicted in the technology-facilitated surveillance scenario (Scenario 1), most focus groups nonetheless collectively rated this scenario as "sometimes okay". (Their rationalisations about this and other scenarios are discussed in Section 3.3.5)

Manipulation

Manipulation or "being manipulative" was also deemed a highly problematic behaviour in relationships, and was often described by participants as toxic or an "automatic red flag" in a relationship (Carmen, YW5) or, in some cases, "full-on abusive" (Felix, YM3). This theme was most present in participants' reflections on the scenarios depicting threats of harm, physical harm and coerced sex. Slightly more young women than young men described scenarios in terms of manipulation. Like consent, the young people had a very wide definition of manipulation. Alongside "manipulation" generally, the young people referred to "emotional blackmail" – that is, using manipulative tactics, such as pressure, coercion or threats, to make the other person do something for your own benefit – as well as guilt-tripping, playing games or giving ultimatums, and blaming the other partner for one's own actions. Although the young people rarely used the term "control", manipulating someone by definition involves influencing or controlling someone to do something or act in a certain way. For example, one young person responded to the scenario portraying threats of harm (Scenario 3) by arguing:

> No matter the circumstance, you should never guilt-trip or manipulate a person into doing something in favour of yourself, no matter what it is. Telling a person you know still cares about you that you will hurt yourself if they do a certain thing, manipulates them into doing what you want as they don't want you harmed, and that is not okay. (Saskia, YW7)

While the participants weighed up the *implications* of the behaviour in the acting against or without consent and causing harm themes, the theme of manipulation related to the behaviour itself and, implicitly, to the motives or intentions of the person engaging in the manipulative behaviour. Additionally, the young people were very forthright and categorical about the unacceptability of manipulative behaviours; they took this as a given rather than explaining why they are problematic. In this vein, the young people did not offer rationalisations where manipulation would be seen as "sometimes okay".

3.3.5. Though problematic, some of the unhealthy "stepping stone" behaviours are normal and understandable

Despite describing the non-physical scenarios as "stepping stones" to domestic violence and abuse, some of the young people saw them as common or normalised in relationships. As one young person noted, "They shouldn't happen, but they probably happen more than we realise." (Darcie, YW6) While the young people characterised a handful of the unhealthy behaviours in the scenarios as possibly expected or "typical" (Travis, YM2) behaviours in romantic relationships generally, many qualified that these behaviours are more commonplace in *unhealthy* or toxic relationships. The unhealthy behaviours most often seen as normalised in romantic relationships were not the explicit forms of physical domestic violence, but rather mostly related to behaviours involving technology-facilitated surveillance. Some young people also noted that financial control or forms of social abuse were also potentially normalised within relationships, though again

qualified that these things should not happen. Most concerning, one group of young men, who lived in different states and did not know each other, noted that they had heard of situations similar to the scenario depicting coerced sex (Scenario 28) and that such situations were common or normalised in their networks. It is important to underline that while they had heard of it happening, these young people argued that it should not happen. While discussing whether any of the scenarios were normal in relationships, they remarked:

Eamon: Yeah, the [coerced sex] one, like, even though it's, like, even though it might be one of the worst, maybe, but I feel like I've seen or like, not seen but I've heard about that more commonly than many of these other situations, so.

Lochlan: Yep, I've heard more about the [coerced sex] one, the sexual one …

Eamon: Yeah.

Lochlan: … it's just so common nowadays.

Eamon: Like, at school … because you're in school and everything's about gossip and stuff, so weekend after weekend you always hear about situations like the [coerced sex] one, I feel like most commonly come up and you're more likely to hear of them. (YM7)

As well as considering the normality of aspects of the fictional scenarios, the young people also hypothesised about the potential relationship contexts and proffered potential rationalisations for the characters' motivations. Just as context was seen to play a role in whether the scenarios were or were not domestic violence and abuse, context likewise played a role in perceptions that the unhealthy behaviour might have an explanation. The young people's efforts to "fill in" the gaps in the scenarios revealed three main rationalisations or explanations for why some of the "stepping stone" behaviours – that were generally seen as not okay – might *sometimes* be acceptable or understandable. The three rationalisations or explanations were care, consent and cheating. Notably, only the first two themes – behaviours motivated out of care for the partner's welfare and behaviours enacted with the partner's consent – were cited as potentially sometimes okay or acceptable depending on the context. Behaviours motivated by suspicions that the partner was cheating, the last theme, were not seen as okay or acceptable, but this motivation made the behaviour more *understandable*. Thus, the findings shed some light on the 2017 NCAS results in relation to the ways that context can introduce "grey areas", where behaviours may be considered forms of violence and abuse only "usually" or "sometimes" rather than "always" (see Section 1.3.1).

Interestingly, the young people's rationalisations in relation to themes of care and consent revealed an implicit gendering of the perpetrators as men. These reflections may have been based on gendered ideas of benevolent sexism, where men's actions are seen as *protecting* or *caring* for women and justified on this basis. (The young people's discussions of the gendered nature of domestic violence are outlined in Section 3.4.)

Care or concern

The most common theme from the young people's rationalisations related to a fictional character's motivations of care or concern for their partner's welfare. This theme was particularly evident for the scenarios concerning financial control, technology-facilitated surveillance, stalking and – to a lesser extent – social abuse. Young men were more likely than young women to cite care or concern for welfare as a reason the non-physical behaviours might sometimes be okay.

It is particularly noteworthy that many young people rationalised financial abuse – a form of coercive control – as "sometimes okay" by framing it as sometimes being a helpful action that was "for their [i.e. the partner's] own good". This finding contrasts with the young people's characterisations of physical and sexual violence as absolute moral wrongs (see Section 3.4.2). This finding instead indicates that some forms of non-physical forms of violence and abuse may be seen as more grey or less absolutely "wrong" if they can be rationalised or explained on the basis of care or concern.
The young people noted that some of the technology-facilitated abuse scenarios were normal forms of care in relationships. Scenario 1,[21] which depicted technology-facilitated surveillance, was the most widely noted as normal or common in intimate relationships. The perception that this scenario is normalised likely relates to the ubiquity of technology in young people's lives, their norms about chat-based or informal repeated daily contact, and their perceptions about expected behaviours in romantic relationships. Even though some felt it met the threshold of harassment, many saw the repeated contact throughout the day as expected: "I think that well, in a relationship you need to continuously text and check on each other, because that's what you do in a relationship." (Clara, YW4) One group went further to describe how "a lot of people would ignore forms of harassment because it's a romantic relationship" (Emmet, YM6), given the expectations about a higher rate of communication in romantic relationships compared to other relationships. Young people often rationalised Scenario 1 on the basis that the behaviour "could represent him caring about her" (Lin, YW2) and that repeated checking in "feels like 'oh, they care' … it's kind of nice" (Josie, YW2). Nevertheless, some young people felt

21 Scenario 1 read: "**Alex** continually called, texted and Snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing."

the repetitiveness of the behaviour meant it may exceed what was expected as normal in relationships. For example, one young person characterised Scenario 1 as "not okay" in light of her own experiences, where repeated contact as a kind of care felt like too much:

> With my, um, previous boyfriend he was a lot like this … He was very, like, "Text me throughout the day." And … it wasn't that I wasn't invested in the relationship, it was just that I *didn't* have time a lot of the time to text him back … [If] I put my phone down for a minute and walked away and came back, I'd have 50 messages saying, "Where are you? What are you doing? Why aren't you replying to me?" Like, "Are you there?" … Sometimes I didn't have time to sit there and have like an hour conversation with him. So, I feel like if *that's* the case [in this scenario], if they just don't have time … you just need to leave them alone for just a minute, let them breathe. Like, don't jump down their throat if they don't reply immediately, yeah. (Felicity, YW1, emphasis in interview)

In addition, behaviours seen as motivated by care or a concern for welfare were rationalised as sometimes okay if the actions were undertaken for the greater good, despite being done so without or against the partner's consent. For example, one of the technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios (Scenario 13)[22] was discussed as perhaps acceptable if the behaviour was "with a good intention, like to keep them safe" (Miles, YM1). Similarly, many young people felt financial control was potentially sometimes okay and "a source of looking out for them in the long run" (Darcie, YW6) if the character was imagined to possibly have a gambling or drug addiction, or was simply irresponsible with spending money. In these specific circumstances, some young people considered that financial control was "coming from a place of it being good for that person" (Felix, YM3) because "it might not be healthy for them to have control of their money" (Anton, YM1).

These findings highlight how coercive controlling behaviours, such as financial abuse and technology-facilitated abuse, can be justified and explained as expressions of care or actions taken "for their own good". Importantly, these findings also suggest that care or concern for welfare appeared to trump consent and the individual's autonomy to make their own decisions, which the young people otherwise characterised as important and healthy in relationships (see Section 3.3.6).

Consent

As noted earlier in Section 3.3.4, behaviours undertaken without or against the partner's consent were roundly deemed "not okay". Relatedly, young people also rationalised some of the scenarios as potentially "sometimes okay" or even "okay" if they perceived that the partner may have consented to, condoned or reciprocated the action. These themes were most prominent in the focus group discussions of one of the technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios (Scenario 1) and – to a much lesser extent – the scenarios depicting in-person stalking (Scenario 23) and social abuse (Scenario 18).[23] Despite their repeated affirmations that the behaviour would be okay if the other partner was fine with it, only a handful of young people considered the context of consent, such as coercion into accepting controlling behaviour (e.g. on the grounds of care or concern).

The young people often discussed the theme of consent in the context of shared boundary-setting and negotiations within the relationship. For example, "It really just depends on where each of their boundaries are and the discussion that they have about that together." (Florence, YW7) In this way, the young people pointed to the boundaries set by the people in the relationship as the marker of the healthiness or toxicity of the behaviour:

> As long as someone hasn't said … "No, it's not okay, and I don't want to do this anymore", then I guess that's where the line is, for me at least. (Campbell, YM5)

Thus, the young people saw consent and the communication of boundaries to be a key component of relationships, where mutual boundary-setting and reciprocated behaviours set and reaffirm what is acceptable in that relationship.

The young people judged whether the action was "one-sided" or mutual. For many participants, reciprocation, being aware of the behaviour, or the partner being "fine with it" meant that the behaviour "would be okay" (Stefan, YM2). For example, while discussing one of the technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios (Scenario 1), one young person deliberated that "if it's both ways then that's fine, but if it's one way, then calling, texting and Snapchatting, it just sounds a bit unnecessary" (Naomi, YW5), while another noted that if it "was against their wishes then that would not be okay" (Bethany, YW6).

Most young people discussed the partner's consent as the marker which determined the acceptability of the action. However, a minority of participants speculated about instances where breaching or assuming consent might be

22 Scenario 13 read: "**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening."

23 Scenario 1 read: "**Alex** continually called, texted and Snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing." Scenario 23 read: "**Jordan** kept 'popping in' to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to." Scenario 18 read: "**Lee** repeatedly put Ashley down and called Ashley names in front of their friends."

acceptable by "filling in" the gaps in the scenarios, thereby revealing a justification for control in relationships. Two examples demonstrate this point. It is notable that, in both cases, the participants gendered these scenarios, which revealed an implicit justification of *men's* control in relationships. One focus group for example constructed an explanation where breaching the partner's expressed wishes might be acceptable because perhaps the character implicitly *wanted* the behaviour to happen, based on gendered expectations that women may say one thing, yet still want something else to happen. Though the text in Scenario 23 read "even though Charlie told Jordan not to", this group speculated:

> She might have told him not to come in [to work] but she still might be happy when he comes in, you know. It still could be something that she likes, even though she told him not to … like when someone says "Oh, don't come to work, I look ugly" or whatever, "I don't like what I look like in my work clothes" or whatever. (Axel, YM7)

Although the group largely described Scenario 23 as "not okay", their speculations about the context introduced grey areas about the outright unacceptability of the action. Additionally, some participants suggested in relation to Scenario 1 that the victimised character should establish or reaffirm the boundaries of consent. For example:

> It's sometimes okay because she hasn't given him any orders not to do it. But he could be doing it because he's worried about her or just wants to know what she's doing. (Iman, YM4)

As the quote above shows, consent to controlling behaviour was sometimes assumed in the absence of being explicitly refused, revealing a reliance on negative rather than affirmative or mutual consent. This assumption of consent sits in contrast to the young people's arguments about other scenarios that acting against or without consent is a toxic behaviour and a "stepping stone" to abuse.

Cheating

Additionally, the young people suggested that the characters in some of the scenarios may have been motivated by suspicions the other partner was cheating. These explanations were given mostly for the scenarios depicting technology-facilitated surveillance (namely, Scenarios 19, 16 and 13). Suspicions of cheating changed the context of the scenario. For example, responding to one of the technology-facilitated surveillance scenarios (Scenario 13),[24] one young person remarked, "It's the wrong avenue to go about it and I still don't think it's justified but that might be a case in which I guess it's you know, semi okay." (Crystal, YW1) Some young people explained that the characters in these situations may have had a "build-up of paranoia" (Carmen, YW5) in suspecting the partner was cheating. Others pointed to the character's possible anxieties or insecurities, describing them as perhaps a "very overthinking person" (Lochlan, YM7). Though the young people explained these motivations as potentially *understandable*, they did not see the problematic behaviours as okay or *justifiable* because they were nonetheless invading the person's privacy and breaching their trust: "It's still not okay, but there could be reasons behind it." (Maisy, YW5)

3.3.6. It can be hard to explain what healthy relationship behaviours look like

In the context of considering what is not okay within relationships, the discussions also revealed the young people's conceptualisations of healthy relationship behaviours. The most dominant themes developed from their characterisations of healthy relationship behaviours were communication, each person's independence or autonomy, and trust (sometimes described as "loyalty"). Mutual respect and affection or care were minor themes. Young women and young men generally described these themes in equal measure. The one exception was mutual respect, where the young women referred to this healthy relationship expectation more often in the discussion.

These themes were developed from young people's reflections on "really good" relationship behaviours at the beginning of the focus groups, as well as from their remarks about the fictional scenarios. Notably, when directly asked to describe healthy relationship behaviours, the young people often struggled to go beyond simply naming the action (as "trust", for example) to articulate how the healthy behaviour appears or occurs in practice. In contrast, it was much easier for the young people to elaborate what toxic behaviour looks like and why this type of behaviour is problematic.

Communication

Open and honest communication was the most widely mentioned healthy relationship expectation. Put simply, "Communicating is really important in a relationship." (Franco, YM3) For the young people, the ability for partners to communicate about their feelings and expectations, to listen to each other, and to feel comfortable in communicating these was the sign of a healthy relationship. Communication was mentioned as a possible solution to most of the issues in the fictional scenarios. The theme was most prominent in the young people's discussions of the scenarios depicting physical harm, social abuse, financial control and technology-facilitated surveillance. For example, in response to a scenario depicting physical

24 Scenario 13 read: "**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening."

harm (Scenario 5), one young person stated, "A simple conversation might have just dissolved it a lot better than physically assaulting someone." (Carmen, YW5) The young people suggested that *not* communicating and instead acting in a toxic manner was not okay: "The mature thing to do is to use words to communicate. Not hurtful actions." (Molly, YW3) However, some young people also suggested that failed communication may sometimes justify potentially problematic behaviour. For example, in relation to the scenario depicting financial control (Scenario 25), one young person argued, "I don't think [the character's] first move should have been taking the credit card", but added "it should have been giving [the other character] advice on not to buy that stuff and then if that didn't help, then taking the card" (Sebastian, YM3).

Independence or autonomy

Individual autonomy was also seen as important in healthy relationships, particularly in relation to the agency to make one's own decisions, the setting of one's own boundaries and the entitlement to personal privacy, space and possessions in the relationship. Autonomy related to each person's life *outside* of the relationship: "You know, everyone's got to have their own lives." (Clayton, YM3) The importance of autonomy *within* the relationship was also noted: "You are entitled to your own privacy in a relationship. Just because you're together doesn't mean you have to share everything with your partner." (Sadie, YW3) The theme of autonomy outside and within the relationship was most evident in young people's reflections on the scenarios depicting financial control, social abuse, technology-facilitated surveillance and coerced sex, and also on one of the scenarios depicting healthy relationship behaviours. The young people often cited individual autonomy as the basis for their criticisms of controlling or possessive behaviour. This was clear in the young people's reflections on the financial control scenario (Scenario 25), for example: "This takes away the other person's independence in the relationship … everybody in a relationship has a right to access and use their own funds as they would like." (Bethany, YW6) This agency in decision-making also extended to bodily autonomy. For example, in relation to a fictional scenario portraying coerced sex (Scenario 28), one participant stated the action was "taking away someone's right to themselves", in terms of their bodily autonomy and capacity for choice, and added, "Trying to control them isn't fair." (Maisy, YW5)

Trust

Finally, the young people described trust (which they sometimes referred to as a sense of loyalty) as a key component of healthy relationships. Trust was often cited together with communication in the early part of the focus groups as "the two number one things in a relationship. If you don't have those, then technically you don't really have a relationship, do you?" (Claudia, YW4) Trust particularly informed young people's reflections on the fictional scenarios depicting technology-facilitated surveillance. They repeatedly suggested that the fictional scenarios exhibited a lack of trust between the partners or that some behaviours were a "breach" of trust.[25] Notably, many of the young people remarked that acting in ways that suggest a lack of trust indicated that the characters should not be in a relationship: "If it comes down to you having to track their social media and go through messages, then there's clearly no trust there, so there's no point in being together." (Brandon, YM1) For some young people, the underlying distrust evident in the relationship also creates the conditions for problematic relationship behaviour as it "builds into feelings of insecurities and … it creates space for potential overthinking" (Meredith, YW2). As one young person playfully described it, "I always think, a relationship without trust is like a phone with no Wi-Fi. What do you do? You just play games." (Adelle, YW7)

Minor themes on healthy relationship behaviours

In addition to the major themes of communication, independence and autonomy, and trust, the following minor themes emerged from the young people's discussions about healthy relationship behaviours: respect and affection or care. These minor themes were less remarked upon as expectations of healthy relationships in relation to the scenarios themselves. Rather, these were largely cited as examples of healthy behaviours at the start of the focus groups, with little explanation about what these behaviours look like in practice. The young people were also less descriptive about these minor themes compared to those detailed above, and often referred to respect and care within the same statement, for example, "respect, caring for them and yeah, respect, caring and having trust in them" (Lawson, YM6).

25 Many of the young people's remarks on trust were unprompted. However, some of their comments may have been influenced by the inclusion of the word "trust" in the wording of two scenarios. The character was quoted in Scenario 25 as saying, "I don't trust you with money", and "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me" in Scenario 16. Thus, the young people's reflections on trust with respect to these two scenarios may have been partly influenced by methodological design. Nevertheless, the young people naturally cited trust as an important healthy relationship expectation at the commencement of the interview and in reference to other fictional scenarios.

3.4. Qualitative findings: Making sense of the gendered nature of violence and abuse

This section deals with the second research question driving our study: "How do young people conceptualise or make sense of domestic violence?" The findings reveal how the young people largely conceptualised domestic violence in de-gendered or gender-neutral terms, which is described in *Change the Story* as a gender-ignoring lens (Our Watch, 2021a). A gender-ignoring lens focuses on being *fair*: treating all individuals the same, while ignoring "gender norms, roles, relations and gendered differences in opportunities and resource allocation" (Our Watch, 2021a, p. 74). The gender-ignoring lens was revealed in four ways in our findings: in the young people's focus on individuals (Section 3.4.1); in their focus on moral wrongs (Section 3.4.2); in their claims that men are unfairly stereotyped as perpetrators when they can also be victims and survivors (Section 3.4.3); and in their arguments that victims and survivors are treated unequally on the basis of gender (Section 3.4.4). As further detailed below, the young people had an idealised and abstract understanding of equality as manifesting in the *uniform treatment of individuals.* The findings outlined below suggest that, within their gender-ignoring lens, the young people broadly conceptualised domestic violence and abuse in terms of idealised individual *equality* and what is *fair*, rather than as shaped by gender or other structural *inequalities*. Notwithstanding the strength of this gender-ignoring lens in the young people's thinking, some participants – especially young women – nonetheless reflected on how gendered norms or "conditioning" may have shaped their own and their peers' conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse (Section 3.4.5).

3.4.1. The gender-ignoring lens: Violence and abuse occurs between individuals, not genders

Although the topic of gender was not entirely sidelined from discussion, the young people in our study regularly shifted focus away from gender as playing a role in domestic violence and abuse perpetration and victimisation, and as a broader social issue. Instead, they reframed the discussion by referring to individual "people" or "partners" involved in domestic violence and abuse, thereby de-gendering or removing gender from the discussion. In so doing, violent and abusive relationship behaviours were characterised as "not a gender-specific thing" (Anton, YM1). This de-gendering did not only occur in relation to the fictional scenarios, but throughout the focus group discussions and the online survey.[26] By and large, the vast majority of young people de-gendered their responses by using neutral pronouns such as "they" or "you" or by referring only to the characters' names in the scenarios.

The young people appeared to de-gender the scenarios due to two factors. Firstly, given the scenarios were presented in gender-neutral terms, the young people were often attempting to be gender-inclusive in their discussion by not wanting to assume gender. Even though they rarely referred to gender inclusivity explicitly, this may have influenced their sidelining of binary genders from the discussion and their use of gender-neutral "they" pronouns. Some young people imagined that some scenarios depicted relationships between people with diverse sexualities. Others noted that the stereotyped representation of domestic violence and abuse as men's perpetration against women did not apply for all relationships: "Obviously, with like same-sex relationships or stuff like that, you can never really say, 'Oh, it's the guy who is always the abuser.'" (Felicity, YW1)

Secondly, the much more prominent factor explaining their de-gendering was their focus on the *individual people* in the scenarios and in incidents of domestic violence and abuse more generally. In this, they removed gender from their analysis, noting, for example, "I'm kind of looking at it like it's kinda two people" (Aysha, YW1), and that they "sort of tried to take gender out of the context" (Penelope, YW1). When pressed for their thoughts about the role of gender in the scenarios, many young people responded that the behaviour was not "a gender-assigned situation" (Nolan, YM7). Their responses reveal the gender-ignoring lens, as they avoided gendering on the grounds that it is problematic to judge a situation based on gender stereotypes:

> Alec: I didn't give a gender to either of them.
>
> Jeremiah: Yeah, same.
>
> Stefan: It doesn't really matter what gender they are –
>
> Alec: Mmm. [Agreement]
>
> Stefan: – it's not really good to think of stereotypes. It should be just a "Person A" and "Person B" situation. (YM2)

This explanation for ignoring or sidelining gender was the most widespread in the young people's discussions. Notwithstanding this, gender often inadvertently crept

26 As noted later in Section 4.4, the young people's de-gendering may have been partly due to the methodology. All the scenarios in the survey and the focus groups were written with gender-neutral names and, in the focus groups, the participants were told that the characters could be of any gender. This aspect of the method may have primed the young people to de-gender the conversation to some extent. However, as the young people's de-gendering was very pervasive throughout the focus groups, it seems unlikely that their ideas were simply primed by the method.

into their thinking. Some young people for example noticed their inadvertent gendering and corrected their remarks to adopt gender-neutral language. For example, "Adi is isolating Taylor because maybe Adi, she – I said she – *they're* jealous and they're, maybe, insecure." (Erika, YW7, emphasis in interview; Scenario 22) When the young people were asked if they imagined a gender or when they inadvertently assigned genders to the characters in scenarios derived from NCAS items, they overwhelmingly positioned the perpetrating character as a man and the character subjected to abuse as a woman. The young people often interpreted almost all of the scenarios (including physical violence as well as non-physical violence and abuse) according to gender stereotypes that position men as perpetrators and women as victims, even though they argued that gender "doesn't matter" and that gender stereotyping is problematic (as in Stefan's quote above).[27] Some explained that they inadvertently gendered because the gender-neutral name reminded them of a friend with that name or was somehow associated with a particular gender for them. For example, "I didn't really gender them in my head before ... It was more just the names." (Kyle, YM1) Most, however, explained that they gendered the scenarios based on gender stereotypes and on the predominant representation of men as perpetrators in public discourse, which they viewed as unfair (discussed further in Section 3.4.3).

3.4.2. The gender-ignoring lens: Violent and abusive behaviour is morally wrong, irrespective of gender

Along with focusing on the irreducibility of violence between individuals to gender, the young people also emphasised the universal moral wrong of domestic violence and abuse. Here, the young people pointed to the unacceptability of domestic violence and abuse *irrespective* of gender. This focus contributed to their gender-ignoring lens as they prioritised the importance of treating individuals equally and fairly, no matter their gender.

The young people used absolute "should" or "should not" statements to point to the moral wrongs of violent or abusive behaviour. Notably, these absolute statements were far more prominent in the scenarios depicting physical forms of violence (involving the themes of physical harm, threat of physical harm and coerced sex; Scenarios 5, 29, 3, 20, 10, 28) than in the scenarios depicting non-physical forms of violence and abuse. The absolute statements were more evident in the young people's responses to the online survey than in the focus groups, likely because fewer scenarios depicting physical forms of violence were discussed in the focus groups. Such absolute statements included, for example, "Someone should never physically harm someone over something" (Brandon, YM1) and "No one should be pressured to do anything, therefore it's not okay." (Mischa, YW5)

The "wrongs" were also pronounced in the discussions of the scenarios depicting non-physical forms of violence and abuse where a lack of consent was evident (particularly within the technology-facilitated surveillance and social abuse themes). The young people spoke in general terms about the unacceptability or wrongness of acting against or without consent in these scenarios, regardless of the gender of those involved. For example, "In all regards, it is still wrong, even if the gender roles were to be reversed" (Travis, YM2), because "it doesn't matter whatever gender you are, it's still wrong to your partner" (Maya, YW3).

These findings suggest that physical forms of violence (including coerced sex and threats of harm) and non-physical abusive behaviours enacted without consent were deemed moral wrongs. However, the young people rationalised and justified some non-physical forms of abuse – particularly in relation to controlling behaviours – in some instances (as shown in Section 3.3.5). These rationalisations indicate a more ambivalent interpretation of some non-physically abusive behaviours, in contrast to the young people's more forthright exclamations of the absolute wrongs of physical violence and acts without or against consent.

3.4.3. The gender-ignoring lens: Men are unfairly represented as perpetrators of violence and abuse given that they are also victims

The gender-ignoring lens was also revealed through the young people's arguments that public discourse unfairly represents men as the main perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse. While they noted that men might mainly be the perpetrators, the young people emphasised that men's victimisation is unfairly overlooked. Thus, the young people conceptualised domestic violence in balanced, gender-neutral terms by sidestepping and questioning the gendered analysis.

In discussing the representation of sensationalised physical domestic violence within public discourse (see Section 3.3.1), the young people also highlighted the gendered aspects of this representation. They noted that domestic violence is talked about and represented as chiefly men's violence against women. Again, many based their ideas on media content they viewed, advertising

27 There were two exceptions to this majority positioning. When the two "threat of harm" scenarios (Scenarios 3 and 20, which were only in the survey) were gendered, the gender attribution was evenly split: the victimised characters were designated equally often as women and as men.

they had seen, and statistics they heard or read about at school: "I've seen domestic violence brochures before … and it's normally saying that the man is doing it or a picture of a man or something like that." (Axel, YM7) The young people's discussion thus highlighted how public discourse representations shape both *what* counts as domestic violence and abuse (in terms of the types or forms of violence and abuse) as well as *who* counts as perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. For example, "It's just the way it's [domestic violence] just, like, portrayed. It's, even in like movies and TV shows, it shows the man, like, well, doing the violence and, yeah." (Julian, YM4)

Even though the young people largely described men as the main perpetrators of violence and abuse on the basis of the gendered representation in public discourse, they repeatedly qualified this claim with "but …". Most often, they questioned whether the predominant portrayal of men's perpetration was accurate by taking a "fair" or neutral position. For example: "I think mainly people assume it's mostly men but it's just I think there can be an even balance … I think it can be anyone." (Darcie, YW6) Notably, participants rarely explicitly described how men were stereotyped as aggressive or violent perpetrators. Rather, they spent far more time discussing why men's victimisation remains overlooked and whether the predominant representation of women being the main victims was legitimate or accurate. The young people implied that the gendered portrayal of men as *perpetrators* was unfair because it neglects that men can also be *victims*. Many participants signalled that women also perpetrate abuse, but that this abuse towards men goes largely unrecognised or unreported. Some young people, most of whom were young women, speculated that the official statistics may be inaccurate because of gendered expectations that prohibit men from speaking up about their abuse. The following exchange highlights each of these aspects within the young people's thinking. Asked who mostly *commits* domestic violence and abuse, these young people repeatedly took a neutral stance and pointed to reasons why it was unfair to cast men as mainly perpetrators, and not also as genuine victims:

Florence: The media portrays it's men against women, but it could be either way …

Adelle: I feel it can come from both men and women, but the media mostly shows that it comes mainly from men and that they find it quite odd if it comes from a woman …

Genevieve: I've also heard the statistics and stuff are more about women being the victim, but I'm not sure if that's just because men are less likely to come out about that kind of stuff. So, the statistics are saying that women are more likely the victim, but I'm not sure.

Florence: Yeah, if like a man was being abused by like his wife, he might write it off as not domestic violence … So, that might be why the statistics are weighed differently.

Erika: It could also be because, like masculinity, they don't want to be seen as weak and so, if they were to come out about it and tell somebody about it that could be seen that they're weak. (YW7)

As seen in the quote above, the young people in our study often spoke about the perpetration of violence and abuse in generalised terms. For example, men were described as "doing it". Even though many young people argued that women also perpetrate violence, they characterised this violence as "coming from" women or that "sometimes the woman is the one doing it" (Alec, YM2). This provides further evidence of the ways the young people in our study de-gendered the discussion, which contrasts with existing research that shows young people's highly gendered descriptions of violence and abuse perpetration (Lombard, 2015; McCarry, 2010; McCarry & Lombard, 2016).

Participants only rarely elaborated who perpetrates domestic violence and abuse and what this looks like along gendered lines. In these instances, they did so largely in line with traditional gender stereotypes and the gendered representation of domestic violence in public discourse. They described men as more likely to engage in those "explicit" physical forms of domestic violence: "I feel like when you picture men abuse [*sic*] … it's, you know, hitting and all that." (Josie, YW2) Meanwhile, women were regarded as more likely to use "subtle" forms of domestic violence and abuse, based on perceptions that "women can be more manipulative" (Leonie, YW1).

3.4.4. The gender-ignoring lens: Victims and survivors are treated unequally based on gender and outdated stereotypes

Relatedly, the young people also argued that victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse are treated unequally on the basis of gender. They noted that, because men victims and survivors are taken less seriously than women due to gender stereotypes, they are not provided with equal levels of, or access to, support. Though the young people here were directly engaging in an analysis of gender, this analysis nonetheless took place within their gender-ignoring lens as they emphasised "fairness" – the need to treat all individuals the same and to allocate resources in a uniform manner (Our Watch, 2021a). The young people thus characterised gender as a driver of the *unequal societal response to domestic violence*, not as a driver of *violence* per se.

Although the young people regularly referred to "stereotypes", they often found it challenging to articulate the meaning of this concept. For example, "Like … stereotypes are what society believes. It's not always what is true. It's not always what the stereotypes are. So … I mean, I'm not really sure." (Stefan, YM2) Broadly speaking, the young people's concept of gendered "stereotypes" related to socially held ideas about the roles and behaviours attributable to men and women. In describing gender stereotypes, two almost dichotomous themes were implicit in young people's descriptions of men: aggressive, strong or "macho" masculinity, where the man is both in control and independent; and caring or protective masculinity. Gender stereotypes relating to women or femininity were less remarked on, though again were dichotomous: women were described as manipulative, controlling and prone to jealousy, while also positioned as caring, fragile or victims.

While the young people often acknowledged that stereotypes influenced how they interpreted or inadvertently gendered the fictional scenarios, they told us that they themselves did not subscribe to these stereotypes. Instead, they cited stereotypes as wrongly influencing people's ideas. For example, when reflecting on her gendering of the perpetrating character as a man in one of the scenarios, one young person noted that "It's kind of wrong seeing it like that … but that's just how we're, like, almost programmed to see it." (Josie, YW2) Thus, the young people characterised gender stereotyping of behaviours as unfair, discriminatory and detrimental, particularly toward men: "So much of my ideas of domestic violence is about men … It's not right that that's my mentality … I think it's bad to generalise." (Penelope, YW1)

The young people, and notably more young women than young men, suggested that the prevailing stereotyped representation of domestic violence and abuse results in victims and survivors being treated unequally and taken more or less seriously based on their gender. Many young people discussed how the prevailing representation of men as perpetrators reinforces problematic gender stereotyping of men as *not* victims. The young people spoke at length about how gendered expectations of tough or "macho" masculinity – that is, expectations that men must not show weakness, cannot be subordinated or victimised by women and must "man up" or "get over it" – drive a silence and stigmas around men's victimisation. According to the young people, these stigmas discourage men from "speaking up" about their victimisation and result in men having less access to available assistance and support services. The exchange quoted below demonstrates these views:

> Anton: I feel like if it was a male to be domestically abused by a female, they'd feel quite emasculated and have quite a low, like, self-confidence … Because it's not going by like, the stereotypes of the man being the stronger person or whatever. If they're being made to feel weaker than their partner, it's an embarrassment on their, like, or an indictment of their lack of masculinity.
>
> Declan: Also, if a male is getting domestically abused, they're probably less likely to try and get help, to try and talk to someone else about it.
>
> Brandon: Yeah, so if it was to happen to a man, I reckon they'd just hold it in and sort it out themselves. Whereas a woman would probably go around, speak to their friends, and try get help and sort it out.
>
> Kyle: I think another aspect of that is that there are a lot more domestic violence shelters and resources out there that is designed to be for women and less that are for men, so they're more likely to seek help because they've got the resources available to them. (YM1)

In contrast to the lengthy discussions of men's victimisation, the young people spent little time discussing women's victimisation, possibly because women's victimisation is *expected* based on stereotyped positioning of women as passive or victims, whereas men's victimisation is more of a gender-role shock. When the young people did raise women's victimisation, they described it in passive terms, while also making the perpetrator and the act of violence invisible: it "happens to women", they "get affected by it" or they "deal with it". Because women are predominantly stereotyped as victims in public discourse, the young people saw women as more likely than men to disclose their victimisation, be believed, be taken seriously and have access to assistance. For example:

> I think that comes back to the portrayal of it all in the media because women are more, like, the awareness of abuse against women is more widespread, so people are more likely to believe them if they do come out as being abused. (Genevieve, YW7)

3.4.5. Gendered "conditioning" might play a role in how we think about domestic violence and abuse – especially for young women

When asked to consider how focus groups of the opposite gender would interpret the scenarios, some young people reflected that these interpretations may be shaped by their gendered "conditioning", rather than being based on broader stereotypes. This minority theme is noteworthy given that the young people otherwise de-gendered their discussions about domestic violence and abuse.

Both young women and men, albeit slightly fewer young men, pointed to the role of gender in shaping their own

and their peers' views and experiences. They noted that women would likely be more attuned to and thus more confident in identifying abusive behaviours than men because women are "conditioned" to be wary about domestic violence and sexual assault and to recognise potential red flags from an early age, as well as more likely to experience victimisation in their lifetime. Young women were particularly reflective throughout the focus group discussions about their experiences of being "conditioned", whereas young men more often pointed to the obvious "wrongs" of the scenario behaviours and the irrelevance of gender in categorising them. The young women also felt that understandings of domestic violence and abuse may be influenced by what they perceived as a gender disparity in relationships education – both within formal schooling and from parents – whereby young women receive more comprehensive relationships education than young men. The following excerpts from a long, unprompted exchange among one group of young women demonstrates all the above points:

Lena: And I think as a girl we've been a little bit more conditioned to be wary of these red flags and whatnot, because it is so prevalent. Like you've been told from a young age "Watch out for this and this and this", and I don't know if guys get the same thing …

Clara: Yeah, especially I – I haven't really heard of much schools or anything like telling guys that they could experience domestic violence, it's usually just the girls that they go, "Hey, men could hit you". They don't tell the guys, because you know, they think that females aren't as strong as them or anything, and …

Claudia: And it's not just the schools telling you, it's also like your own parents. They're consistently drumming into your head, "Oh, just make sure he doesn't do this, or make sure he doesn't do this", or like …

Freya: Yeah, like it's really stereotypical that girls have always been warned about guys, especially on the street, like stranger danger, and like, like human trafficking, all that, like we've been warned all the time, and like we're constantly – if girls are out walking at night – like, we constantly have to be looking over our shoulder all the time for guys …

Claudia: … because you've been told that most of your – most of your life by other people … you've got to be really wary, and you, honestly … it's just scary to walk out like alone at night, or just even during the day, you get so paranoid, and you're just, yeah, scared something's going to happen. Every car that is like driving slow by you, you're just like, "Oh, crap, what's going to happen?" …

Freya: You're like, preparing yourself for the worst, all the time …

Claudia: I feel like that's just a consistent thing that you – that girls have to go through. Not necessarily guys. Like there are obviously some situations where the roles are swapped, and it's the girl going for the guy. But from what I've seen and heard, it's more so the guy, and the girls have to be most wary …

Faye: I think it's because we have all these fears, and sure, like the guys have fears too, but we have this predominant fear of physical overpowerment [*sic*] …

Lena: And I don't think guys can always understand how scary it is for us … (YW4)

In this context, the young women were somewhat unsurprised by the impact of domestic violence and abuse on women, when prevalence, hospitalisation and death data was shared at the end of the focus group discussions: "I think I wasn't overly surprised, I think it was kind of what I was expecting to hear." (Bethany, YW6) Notably, the young women's lack of surprise about the prevalent impacts of domestic violence and abuse for *women* contrasts with their speculations earlier in the focus groups that statistics may not accurately represent *men's* victimisation (see Section 3.4.3).

Relatedly, some young men speculated that young women would describe the scenarios more negatively and as "not okay" because of young women's gendered experiences in the world. While these young men felt that the groups would generally rate the scenarios similarly across the groups, they also felt the young women would have different and more definitive reasoning behind labelling scenarios as "not okay". For example:

> I'm not taking words out of their mouth, but I'm guessing most of the guys in here would be thinking in the boots of a guy in the relationship, and the girls would be thinking in the shoes of a girl. Does that make sense? … I feel like they'd all agree with us that this stuff is wrong … but, um, I feel like they might have a real difference of opinion. Just, I don't know, 'cause of their personal experiences, because opinion comes from personal experiences. (Easton, YM5)

Some young men suggested women's increased likelihood of experiencing violence might influence young women to see the scenarios as "worse": "Since most instances of domestic abuse are perpetrated on women, they [the young women] might think of themselves more in that situation, causing them to judge it more harshly." (Kyle, YM1) Additionally, the perception that young women received more education about domestic violence was also raised as a reason by a few young men for why young women may

view the scenarios differently: they may "have a lot more to say because they have been taught about this more at school" (Alec, YM2).

Thus, there was a sense across the groups that young women were *more* aware of domestic violence and abuse and, as such, would be *more* attuned to potentially problematic behaviour. The implication here – which remained largely unsaid but is the implicit subtext – is that young men may be less attuned to or aware of domestic violence and abuse because they do not receive the same extensive gendered "conditioning" or precautions for safety as young women do. This is further evidenced in the young men's reactions when hearing the prevalence statistics on domestic violence and abuse in Australia at the end of the focus groups. Where the young women were not especially surprised (as noted above), the young men were shocked by the prevalence and hospitalisation data – even though the young men stated earlier in the focus groups that they felt domestic violence and abuse was common. For example, "That's a lot more than expected. I did not think it was that bad." (Jeremiah, YM2) Many young men remarked that they had not previously heard the hospitalisation or death statistics: "I didn't realise that people were getting killed." (Andre, YM6) One young man described the hospitalisation and death statistics as "pretty surprising and it's a bit scary", adding that "It's scary because it could be happening to your mates or your family members." (Brandon, YM1)

In considering the potential differences between gendered perceptions, one group suggested that the researchers should have conducted mixed-gender rather than single-gender focus groups. These young men appreciated the reasons why the groups were separated in our study, yet they discussed how mixed-gender groups might prompt deeper conversations or possibly even prompt realisations about their different experiences and ideas:

> Easton: Is any of them like, combined genders …?
>
> Interviewer: Yeah, we've deliberately separated them. What are your thoughts on that?
>
> Easton: See, I get the idea of having separate genders, but I also think that a few with half girls, half guys in one would be a good idea too …
>
> Cadyn: I agree … 'cause, um, like it's the opportunity for feedback to be relayed from one gender to another.
>
> Duncan: Yeah. I feel like it would be very interesting to see how that would turn out in terms of results, um, to see whether they do agree, but also to see whether, you know, the opinions of either the males or the females end up causing the other group to sort of change their opinions. (YM5)

Thus, even though the gender-ignoring lens was central to their conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse, many young people in our study contemplated how the gendered aspects of their experiences may also shape their own and their peers' understandings. These and other findings from our study are considered further in the next chapter.

4. Conceptualising domestic violence: Learnings for research, policy and prevention

Although young people are deemed a target group for policy and prevention of domestic violence, they are seldom afforded opportunities to voice their own ideas or drive the content of this work. Most research, policy and prevention practice in Australia and internationally remains "adult-centric".[28] In contrast, our study centred young people by taking a critical youth studies approach to elaborate their conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse in their own terms. Many of the young people in our study actively offered ideas, without prompting, about what they want to learn at school and through awareness campaigns. Our focus group discussions thus revealed how the young people felt they have a stake in preventing and ending violence against women. Consistent with other Australian research, the young people in our study valued education about respectful relationships and wanted more of it (Ezer et al., 2019; Ezer et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2016). Recognising the young people's stake in and ideas for prevention, our study underscores the value of including and promoting young people's voices in research, policy and practice design (Fox et al., 2014; Struthers et al., 2019). Research, prevention and policy initiatives should recognise young people as competent social and civic agents of change, and build their capacities and critical consciousness for prevention through education (Harris, 2015; Harris et al., 2007; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Sundaram, 2014).

The young people in our study generally had a solid understanding about what constitutes domestic violence and abuse. Nevertheless, our discussions with young people indicated that they learn about domestic violence and abuse in a scattered way through a range of institutions, especially the media, as well as via personal experiences of gendered "conditioning". This scattered learning can result in patchwork understandings about the gendered nature and different forms of domestic violence and abuse. Echoing recent Australian and international studies of respectful relationships and sexual education (Ezer et al., 2019; Ezer et al., 2020; Pound et al., 2015), the participants who mentioned learnings at school within our focus groups often noted the limitations of the curriculum – or noted that they had not learned about domestic violence and abuse at all. Further research, ideally with a representative sample, should examine the gaps in young Australians' respectful relationships and sexual education. Further, our findings suggest a task remains for RRE to educate young people about the structural inequalities that drive violence against women, and the realities and evidence on the gendered uses and experiences of violence. Primary prevention and policy initiatives must challenge the *gender-ignoring* lens and educate and upskill young people through properly *gender-transformative* approaches (Our Watch, 2021a).

28 A notable exception in Australia is R4Respect (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2019; Struthers et al., 2017; Struthers et al., 2019).

By centring young people's voices, our findings give rise to important implications for policies and strategies aimed at preventing domestic violence and abuse and for respectful relationships initiatives for young people in Australia. These implications are highly relevant for policymakers, practice design decision-makers, practitioners, educators, youth workers and those working in RRE. The findings provide important opportunities to inform a range of policy and prevention efforts already underway in Australia which aim to improve community understandings and to prevent domestic violence and abuse. In particular, the results and implications are relevant for:

- a national conversation about clear and consistent definitions of domestic violence and abuse, as cited in the newly drafted *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* (Department of Social Services, 2022)
- reforms to state and territory action plans and frameworks designed to address domestic violence and abuse
- national and jurisdictional taskforces, inquiries and committees tasked with clarifying definitions of domestic violence and abuse, including the recent Joint Select Committee on Coercive Control in New South Wales (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2021a) and the recent Family Violence Reforms Bill 2021 in Tasmania
- reforms to national, state and territory action plans for children and young people, including the successor plan to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children*
- national, state and territory action plans and prevention initiatives that target gender inequalities, such as the new *Queensland Women's Strategy* or initiatives arising from the refreshed *Change the Story* (Our Watch, 2021a)
- national and jurisdictional taskforces, inquiries and committees investigating sexual violence and understandings of consent, including the forthcoming Sexual Violence Strategy in Western Australia and the Commonwealth National Sexual Violence Taskforce
- national and jurisdictional committees on social media safety for young people and technology-facilitated abuse, such as the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety (2022)
- RRE initiatives, including the review of the Australian Curriculum (specifically the Health and Physical Education curriculum that addresses RRE) by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA); the Our Watch *Respectful Relationships Education Toolkit* (Our Watch, 2018); and the Respectful Relationships Reference Panel that has been tasked to review materials from the "Respect Matters" campaign by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Skills and Employment
- research on respectful relationships and gender attitudes among young people, which complements a recent ANROWS overview of reviews into the effectiveness of RRE programs (Rose & Coates, 2022) as well as ANROWS research underway on a program designed to build positive gender-related attitudes and respectful peer relationships in Australian schools[29]
- prevention programs that aim to upskill young people as instigators of change, including R4Respect (which was the subject of recent ANROWS research; Struthers et al. 2019)
- primary prevention initiatives that directly engage young men, such as Men4Respect or the Man Box (Irvine et al., 2018)
- public campaigns that aim to improve understandings of relationship violence and abuse, such as "The Line" campaign by Our Watch
- advocacy campaigns that aim to shift consent and relationships education initiatives in Australia, such as "Teach Us Consent" (2021)
- initiatives that translate technical language around domestic violence and abuse so they are accessible for diverse audiences to improve understanding and help-seeking, including posters developed by the Bangle Foundation, action research programs with culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Koleth et al., 2020) or ANROWS webinars (such as the 2021 webinar "'Sex Ed': Young people, consent and the Australian curriculum" which featured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth practitioners from Shine SA; Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2021b).

The following sections discuss the conclusions and implications of our study for future research, policy and prevention initiatives. For ease of access, the key implications for policy and prevention are also summarised in Table 11. The strengths and limitations of the study are also noted, prior to conclusion.

29 For more information on this research, please see the project page on the ANROWS website: https://www.anrows.org.au/project/respectful-relationships-education-in-secondary-schools-a-statistical-social-network-analysis-of-a-program-intervention-designed-to-build-positive-gender-related-attitudes-and-respectful-peer-relatio/

4.1. Narrow representations of "explicit" domestic violence in public discourse

Our participants argued that there is more to domestic violence and abuse than just the "explicit" forms of physical and sexual violence that are typically the focus in media and public discourse. Thus, our findings indicate that media and public discourse play a key role in promulgating an *overly narrow* understanding of domestic violence and abuse as extreme and isolated acts of physical violence. These findings support the existing literature on Australian mass media representations of domestic and family violence and sexual assault, which demonstrate a "disproportionate focus on the most severe crimes" while emotional and psychological abuse "remain largely invisible in media coverage" (Sutherland et al., 2016, p. 53; see also Carlyle et al., 2014; Cripps, 2021; Easteal et al., 2018; Hawley et al., 2018; Little, 2020; Nettleton, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2015). Although Australian media have improved in this respect over the past five years, recent research suggests there is considerable room for further improvement (Karageorgos & Boyle, 2021).

Our findings also suggest that the narrow and extreme concept of domestic violence within media may be driving the abstraction of domestic violence and abuse in the public consciousness as a "far away" concept, thereby shaping incorrect perceptions that this phenomenon is uncommon. This "far away" conceptualisation among our participants dovetails with the existing literature on young people's perceptions of "real" and "unreal" violence, by highlighting that "far away" violence may be seen as "unreal" (Joelsson & Bruno, 2020; Lombard, 2013a, 2015; Taylor et al., 2017).

The influence of media on perceptions of violence is not an unprecedented finding (Easteal et al., 2018; Lee & Wong, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2016). However, research often positions parents and schooling as the main sites of influence on young people's knowledge and attitudes, rather than media and popular culture (Ezer et al., 2020). Other authors have similarly indicated that popular culture and music both influence ideas about healthy relationship expectations, while also normalising coercive, dominating and submissive behaviours within relationships (Kulkarni et al., 2019; Mulvihill, 2021; Porter & Standing, 2020). Young people's wide uptake of popular culture and media, as suggested by our findings, also points to an innovative method for RRE to discuss unhealthy and toxic relationships (McAlister, 2018; Porter & Standing, 2020). More work is needed to explore how popular culture messages and media influence young people's understandings of relationship violence and abuse, including news, television and film, as well as social media such as TikTok (Gillespie, 2021; Sutherland et al., 2016). Such research could further determine whether these messages shape young people's actions and decision-making in their early romantic relationships.

To address sensationalised and narrow representations of domestic violence, initiatives and media should:

- conduct quality, victim-centred and trauma-informed reporting of violence against women in adherence with guidelines such as *How to Report on Violence against Women and Their Children* by Our Watch (2019) and those developed by private media organisations
- change reporting narratives that disproportionately focus on incident-based and severe domestic violence crimes, while overlooking patterns of coercive control, financial abuse and psychological abuse
- prioritise voices of victims and survivors and lived experience advocates over law enforcement or criminal justice perspectives
- correct scepticism among young people and the general public about the realities and prevalence of domestic violence
- incorporate critical media analysis tasks within RRE and other programs.

4.2. "Subtle" forms of domestic violence and the "snowballing" process of abuse

Alongside the "explicit" forms of domestic violence, our participants also argued that domestic violence includes the more "subtle" forms of "mental" or emotional abuse, financial abuse, verbal abuse and control. The young people argued these behaviours may be less easily recognisable as constituting domestic violence by society broadly and by victims and survivors specifically, because these forms of violence and abuse are less "talked about" or represented in public discourse. Additionally, the young people conceptualised domestic violence as a "snowballing" pattern or process of abusive behaviours which "entraps" the person experiencing it. The young people thus had a broad concept of domestic violence and abuse that included varied overlapping and escalating forms of abuse, as well as different levels, where physical violence is positioned at the most severe or extreme level. Their snowballing concept resembles the "continuum of domestic abuse" used by practitioners and support services, which denotes both the repeated pattern of domestic violence and abuse and the escalation of different behaviours of increasing severity (Hegarty et al., 2020; McGlynn et al., 2017; Robinson & Rowlands, 2009).

While the young people held a good understanding of the forms of domestic violence and abuse, its intentionality and its harms, they found it more difficult to conceptualise the inherent power dynamics at play in the abuser's attempts to control. Power and its role in controlling victims and survivors is a central component of feminist conceptualisations of domestic violence and most intervention and prevention programs (Mennicke, 2019; Wagers et al., 2020). However, this language may be too technical for many young people to understand or conceptualise in terms of real-life situations. Further research with young people and the general public more broadly could examine their understandings of power and control in relationships, particularly regarding the denigrating impacts of coercive control that were not fully explored in the present study.

The young people in our study used different language to conceptualise domestic violence and abuse than that found in more formal definitions, both in relation to various forms of violence and abuse and to the umbrella term of "domestic violence". For example, our participants used the terms of manipulation, "emotional blackmail" and "mental abuse" to denote what practitioners would classify as psychological abuse (Capezza et al., 2021; Johnson, 2008). These findings thus suggest that some technical terms may need to be changed or translated into more accessible language for young people and other diverse lay audiences (such as people from non-mainly-English-speaking backgrounds or people with cognitive or intellectual disability).

In line with the NCAS (which prompted our study) and much of the policy context in Australia, we used the umbrella term of "domestic violence" in our research design and fieldwork, but encouraged participants to define the concept in their own language. Our study revealed that the term "domestic violence" was not seen as the most accurate term by the young people. They felt that the "subtle" behaviours – which are named forms of *abuse* – did not fit within neatly with the term domestic *violence*. Further, some participants highlighted that the word "violence" implies the commonplace understanding of an act of *physical* force with the intent of physical injury or harm. Thus, many of the young people remarked that "domestic abuse" or "domestic violence and abuse" more accurately encompasses the multiple, distinct forms of violence and abuse that can co-occur as a pattern of behaviour within intimate relationships.

Additionally, some young people questioned whether the identifier "domestic" meant "domestic violence" could only occur within the home. The young people are not alone in navigating these definitional uncertainties. Other studies similarly suggest that the prevailing term of "domestic violence" and its implicit denotation of physical violence means that coercive control remains understood as a precursor to physical violence rather than as (non-physical) violence in its own right (Brennan et al., 2019; Crossman & Hardesty, 2018; Robinson et al., 2018; Stark & Hester, 2019), creating confusion in research, policy and intervention responses relating to non-physical forms of violence and coercive control (Mennicke, 2019). Future research could aim to clarify this definitional inconsistency by exploring whether victims and survivors describe their experiences in terms of "domestic violence and abuse" or use other language entirely.

Inconsistent or non-specific definitions can hinder recognition of violence and abuse among the public, as well as by victims and survivors specifically. To address inconsistent ideas about what counts as relationship violence and to ensure the subtle forms of relationship violence, abuse and control no longer remain "hidden", policy and prevention should:

- adopt a broader and more robust definition of domestic violence as *violence, abuse and control,* and ensure this definition incorporates an ongoing pattern of multiple forms of behaviour within its scope
- implement the terminology of *violence, abuse and control* within intimate partner and domestic relationships within RRE curricula, in action plans stemming from the new *National Plan* and in state and territory jurisdictional violence against women frameworks
- adapt policy language regarding coercive control for younger and lay audiences who may face challenges in understanding this technical concept
- develop awareness campaigns about the "subtle" non-physical forms of violence, abuse and control, including the forms particular to at-risk groups of women (e.g. spiritual abuse, visa-related abuse, and carer abuse and neglect)
- make prevention campaigns accessible for diverse audiences and for high-risk groups, including young people, people from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, recent migrants and refugees, and people with disability.

4.3. The unhealthy "stepping stones" towards domestic violence and abuse

Both the quantitative and qualitative components of our study showed that the young people were keenly aware of what is not okay or abusive in relationships: they knew when behaviours crossed the line from healthy into toxic relationship behaviour. In the qualitative component, the young people conceptualised relationship behaviours as toxic or unhealthy based on assessments that the character in the scenario was acting without or against the other person's consent, causing the other person harm, dominating or treating the other person like a possession

or manipulating the other person. Given that these toxic behaviours were unavoidably linked to the specific scenarios used in our study, these understandings of toxic behaviours are not exhaustive. Further research with young people could adopt a more open-ended approach to capture a wider range of problematic behaviours and underlying themes which denote the "toxicity" of these behaviours.

The young people in our study were less confident that the scenarios depicting non-physical or "subtle" behaviours constituted domestic violence and abuse in and of themselves. They questioned whether these behaviours met technical definitions of domestic *violence* as intent to inflict physical harm, as well as questioning whether these behaviours met their own definition of a "snowballing" pattern of multiple violent and abusive behaviours. Instead, the young people conceptualised these scenarios as "stepping stones" toward domestic violence and abuse. Notably, many of the young people's descriptions of the toxic "stepping stones" resembled the "subtle", non-physical behaviours that the young people named as forms of domestic violence and abuse. For example, the theme of manipulation and "emotional blackmail" (from the scenarios) was similar to the young people's descriptions of mental abuse (in the "subtle" typology), while the theme of domination or possessiveness (from the scenarios) also resembled the behaviour of control (in the "subtle" typology). The overlaps in these themes and the young people's different categorisations of them (as "stepping stones" or as subtle forms of abuse specifically) highlight the complexity in conceptualising and identifying specific types or forms of domestic violence and abuse as they may occur in messy, true-to-life (albeit fictional) contexts.

Importantly, the results offer insights into recent Australian evaluations of respectful relationship programs that indicated confusion among young people about when certain unhealthy relationship behaviours "cross the line" into domestic violence (Gavey et al., 2021; Our Watch, 2015). Our participants felt strongly that explicitly violent behaviour (such as physical or sexual assault) or actions without consent were categorically wrong and always *crossed* the line. However, they also conceptualised the physical and non-physical forms of violence and abuse as a continuum: *along a line* and *within* a pattern of behaviour. The young people conceptualised toxic behaviours (such as manipulation and acting without consent) as the initial "stepping stones" in the continuum, which can recur and can then escalate or "snowball" into increasingly abusive behaviour, with physical violence being positioned at the extreme end of the continuum. The young people's continuum concept thus positions domestic violence and abuse within a broader group of toxic interpersonal behaviours, such as bullying, manipulation, harassment and other "red flag" behaviours. The international research similarly highlights the ways young people view forms of relationship violence and abuse on continuums rather than as distinct categories of behaviour (Home Office, 2015; Milnes et al., 2021; Sundaram, 2014). These findings offer fruitful opportunities for RRE initiatives which use activities such as "the line" to demonstrate how violence and abuse can occur and snowball *along* a line or continuum. Employing both approaches – *crossing* the line into abuse, and violence and abuse occurring *along* a continuum – may help young people and educators to interrogate the nuances or grey areas in understandings of violence and abuse, which the findings suggest are a factor in young people's thinking. RRE may also benefit from educating young people about the early "stepping stones" toward violence and abuse in relationships. Additionally, future research could further establish what the "red flags" or "stepping stones" look like, and assess whether these concepts assist in identifying pre-abusive relationship behaviours as tools for prevention and intervention. Research should also examine any cultural differences or norms which shape perceptions about the "stepping stones" toward abuse. Investigating the "stepping stones" in further detail may help to disrupt the trajectory of jealous, controlling and abusive behaviour towards intimate partner violence and intimate partner homicide in Australia, as identified in recent ANROWS research (Boxall et al., 2022). Qualitative research with people who felt one or more of their past relationships were toxic or involved toxic behaviours may also be a useful avenue for exploring how "stepping stones" may occur in lived experience.

The "stepping stones" towards domestic violence, abuse and control – including toxic relationship behaviours, as well as broader problematic interpersonal behaviours such as bullying and harassment – should be targeted through prevention initiatives. RRE should:

- be expanded and incorporated into existing anti-bullying and consent modules within social and emotional wellbeing curricula for all age years
- equip young people with the knowledge and skills to identify "red flags" or warning signs for unhealthy relationships, as well as the skills to leave relationships safely and respectfully
- use scenarios or stories from victims and survivors to demonstrate how violence, abuse and control can manifest in relationships, to improve understanding of what forms of violence and abuse look like in practice
- ensure curricula content draws attention to the purpose of violence and abuse and its impacts or harms, not just to the particular types of violence.

4.4. Normalised or understandable "stepping stones"

The young people offered three main rationalisations for the acceptability of some behaviours in certain circumstances – specifically, if the behaviour was motivated by care or concern for the partner's welfare, if the behaviour was consensual, or if there were suspicions of cheating. However, the young people by and large did not justify the use of toxic, "stepping stone" behaviours, which were seen as harmful and wrong in and of themselves.

The use of mixed methods in our study helped to provide deeper insights into the quantitative ratings of non-physically violent and unhealthy scenarios, especially regarding gender differences in the ratings. As discussed in Section 3.2, both the young women and young men rated *all* of the physical violence scenarios and *most* of the non-physical violence and unhealthy behaviours as "not okay". However, the young men were more likely than the young women to rate certain non-physical behaviours as "sometimes okay". In the qualitative component of the study, young men were more likely than young women to rationalise the financial abuse scenario (Scenario 25)[30] as an act of concern for the person's welfare or for the "greater good", even though the young men more often named financial abuse as an example of a "subtle" form of domestic violence and abuse. In addition, reflecting the quantitative finding that young men more often rated an in-person stalking scenario (Scenario 23)[31] as "sometimes okay", they more frequently cited care or concern for welfare as a reason for why this behaviour may sometimes be acceptable. Together, these "sometimes okay" results and the qualitative findings offer insights into the possible grey areas in young people's judgements about the acceptability of toxic, abusive or violent behaviour, as evidenced in the 2017 NCAS (Politoff et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2018). Additionally, the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that young men may be more likely than young women to take contextual factors into account when assessing problematic dimensions of relationship behaviours, which warrants further investigation.

Consistent with existing studies, our research demonstrated that young people sometimes implicitly rationalise and legitimise controlling behaviours on the basis of heteronormative and patriarchal expressions of "care" and "protectiveness" (e.g. rationalising sharing passwords as "trust"; Abbott et al., 2020). High proportions of our participants rated some of the technology-facilitated scenarios as "sometimes okay", and the three main rationalisations of care, consent and cheating were often provided as explanations for why these behaviours may sometimes be acceptable. These findings may partly reflect the ubiquity of technology and social media in young people's everyday lives (Brown et al., 2020; Messinger et al., 2014; Reed et al., 2016). However, a recent global study (*n*=21,000, 21 countries) of attitudes regarding digital stalking in intimate relationships found rationalisations which mirrored those given by the young people in our study. For example, secret digital surveillance was seen as justified if the partner was suspected of cheating (64%) or if there was concern about the partner's safety (63%; Kaspersky, 2021). Further reflecting our findings, participants in that study were open to monitoring a partner's online behaviours if this monitoring was *consensual* or mutual (Kaspersky, 2021). Together, these pieces of research point to attitudes that normalise technology-facilitated toxic relationship behaviours, which can be "stepping stones" towards abuse. Thus the normalisation and rationalisation of potentially problematic behaviours via technology warrants further investigation, with young people as well as with adults of all ages. Further, research into the normalisation of technology-facilitated abuse should avoid focusing *solely* on the technological aspect (or medium) of this abuse, given online and offline coercive control often co-occur as parts of a "snowballing" pattern of abuse (Dragiewicz et al., 2020; Schokkenbroek et al., 2021). Studies on these topics would reveal points where further capacity-building for healthy relationships may be required through prevention initiatives.

Finally, the young people's reflections on how domestic violence or abuse differs from conflict and jealousy provide fresh insights for the emerging literature on the links between relationship violence and jealousy (see, for example, the global systematic review by Pichon et al., 2020). Future research could examine how decisions to perpetrate violence or abuse may be linked to jealousy, including whether jealousy and unresolved conflict form or contribute to the "stepping stones" for domestic violence and abuse. The qualitative findings showed that the young people described jealousy as understandable because it is a "natural" and internal emotion, but noted that jealousy becomes unacceptable or problematic when *acted upon* in a toxic manner, such as through manipulative or violent and abusive behaviour. In line with this reasoning, Scenario 22,[32] which depicted "acting jealous" as an impetus for social abuse, was rated as "not okay" by all participants.

30 Scenario 25 read: "Anh and Rory moved in together. **Rory** took Anh's debit card and told Anh, 'I don't trust you with money.'"

31 Scenario 23 read: "**Jordan** kept 'popping in' to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to."

32 Scenario 22 read: "Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them."

In addition, Scenario 14,[33] which conversely depicted the character simply *feeling* jealous *without acting* upon it, was seen as "sometimes okay" by sizeable proportions of young men (45%) and young women (32%). The remaining jealousy scenario (Scenario 12),[34] which described jealousy resulting in constant accusations of flirting, was also rated as "sometimes okay" by sizeable proportions of young men (53%) and young women (49%). While the notion of natural jealousy may offer some explanation of the ratings for this scenario, the young people's rationalisation that toxic behaviour may be understandable if there were suspicions of cheating may also have played a role in their thinking. These conclusions warrant further investigation. Research on this topic would provide insights for prevention to upskill young people to identify jealousy and choose healthy courses of action in response.

Perceptions that forms of violence, abuse and control may be part of what is expected to occur in normal relationships, or can be rationalised based on contextual factors, must be addressed. RRE and prevention initiatives should:

- target rationalisations for abusive or problematic behaviour to correct minimising attitudes
- equip young people and the broader population with skills and confidence to safely intervene in or "call out" problematic behaviour that they witness within their peer networks
- equip young people with skills to identify and healthily respond to jealousy and conflict in relationships.

4.5. Healthy behaviours and the importance of consent

Importantly, our study revealed the young people's expectations for healthy romantic relationships: communication, autonomy and trust, which align with healthy behaviours noted in other research with adolescents (Bell & Stanley, 2006). However, the young people in our study found it much harder to articulate what these behaviours looked like *in practice*, especially compared with their more detailed elaborations of the toxic "stepping stones" to domestic violence and abuse. Future research could further elucidate not only what young people understand about healthy relationship behaviours, but also how they may use these behaviours in their early romantic relationships. Indeed, there is limited exploratory research on young people's (as well as adults') understandings of healthy relationships (Young, 2004), particularly research which recognises cultural and community differences in these healthy relationship expectations (Sharkey et al., 2021). There may also be benefit in Australian research on where young people learn norms for healthy relationships, as media representations have been shown to influence American teenagers' romantic relationship expectations (Kulkarni et al., 2019). The recently developed Happy, Healthy, Safe Relationships Continuum may provide a fruitful starting point for Australian research on this topic (Murray et al., 2020).

Our participants' emphases on the importance of consent in healthy relationships, which "comes in all forms" (Felicity, YW1), also reveals how young people conceptualise consent in relationships quite broadly and holistically, to include more than *just* sexual consent. Recent research from the United Kingdom similarly indicated young people may conceptualise and negotiate consent within a wider continuum of behaviours than solely sexual consent (Boyle, 2018; Kelly, 2011; Whittington, 2021). Likewise, the "This is Abuse" study with 13- to 18-year-old young men and women from the United Kingdom showed that the young people did not see abuse and rape as distinct categories of behaviour; rather, abuse and rape were "viewed on a continuum of abuse" (Home Office, 2015, p. 2). In a similar vein, recent qualitative studies from several European Union countries highlight how young people use the lens of consent in their talk about whether a behaviour constitutes bullying (Milnes et al., 2021). Future research could further examine young Australians' language around consent, not only in relation to sex but also to a wider group of abusive behaviours such as bullying, harassment and dating violence and abuse.

Building young people's capacities and skills for healthy relationships should be central for RRE. Initiatives should:

- equip young people with healthy relationship skills, such as communication, trust and respect
- adopt a wider and more holistic conception of consent in its many forms
- take a holistic approach to consent to foster young people's skills in and respect for autonomy and freedom to make one's own decisions within relationships, *as well as* sexual consent.

4.6. The gender-ignoring lens and the rejection of gender stereotypes

The young people's gender-ignoring lens on the issue of domestic violence and abuse is a key insight from our study and an important contribution to both the academic and prevention literature, made possible by the study's critical youth studies approach. Our findings revealed the young people's gender-ignoring lens in four ways:

33 Scenario 14 read: "**Nakia** got jealous and was suspicious whenever Alex made new friends."

34 Scenario 12 read: "**Sasha** constantly accused Anh of flirting with someone else."

- by emphasising that violence and abuse between individuals is irreducible to gender
- by pointing to the wrong of violence and abuse irrespective of gender
- by equalising the "unfair" gendered stereotyping of men as the main perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse, arguing men are *also* victims and survivors
- by conceptualising gender as a driver of the unequal societal response to domestic violence and abuse.

These findings help to clarify the 2017 NCAS result that there has been a decline over time in young people's understandings of the gendered nature of domestic violence (see Section 1.3). Additionally, our findings build upon McCarry and Lombard's respective works, which similarly demonstrated young people's gender-neutral (or, in our study, gender-ignoring) stance regarding the gendered analysis of domestic violence and abuse (Lombard, 2015; McCarry, 2009; McCarry & Lombard, 2016).

The rejection of gender stereotypes also formed a key facet of the young people's gender-ignoring lens in our study. Addressing rigid gender roles and stereotypes is often flagged as a key primary prevention strategy for young people (Lombard, 2013b; Ollis et al., 2021; Our Watch et al., 2015). Positively, our findings suggest there have been some gains in prevention efforts to dispel problematic gender stereotypes (as also seen in the recent Australian RRE program evaluation by Ollis et al., 2021). To further interrogate young people's adherence to or rejection of gender stereotypes, future studies with young people and evaluations of RRE may benefit from including established measures of gender role acceptance and sexist attitudes, including benevolent sexism (Burt, 1980; García-Cueto et al., 2015; O'Neil et al., 1986; Oswald et al., 2019). Our participants' critiques of gender stereotyping and unfair treatment on the basis of gender are certainly positive. Our findings broadly align with recent research from the United Kingdom, in which adolescent participants often couched their understandings of gender diversity in terms of freedom of individual choice (that one "should be able to do and be who you want") and freedom from constraining gender categories or stereotypes (Bragg et al., 2018; see also Allen et al., 2021). Nonetheless, our findings also give us pause to consider whether the young people's rejection of gender *stereotypes* may have informed their rejection of gendered roles as a driver of violence, as evidenced by their arguments that domestic violence and abuse is *irreducible to* and wrong *irrespective of* gender. Future research could further investigate whether the gender-ignoring lens may be an unintended consequence of prevention efforts to dispel traditional gender stereotypes, on the basis that behaviours are "not a gender-specific thing" (Anton, YM1) or a "gender-assigned situation" (Nolan, YM7).

Given the young people's argument about the irrelevance of gender in discussions of domestic violence, it is ironic that they applied a highly gendered analysis to conclude that victimised men are stigmatised *as men* (an irony similarly noted by Whiting, 2013). In line with other research (Lombard, 2015; Skipper & Fox, 2021), the young people's discussions of men and masculinity in our study (especially the social policing of men's behaviour and the incompatibility of "macho" expectations of masculinity with the status of victimhood) vastly overshadowed those of women's victimisation.

It is also worth noting that concerns about the stigmatisation and unfair treatment of victimised men may have been influenced to some extent by the young men in our study experiencing some discomfort, disassociation or defensiveness when discussing men's perpetration of violence against women – a finding also shown in previous research (Burrell, 2021; Flood, 2019). Interestingly, the young women in our study also engaged in a range of deflective and defensive responses regarding the stigmatisation and unfair treatment of victimised men. Indeed, the young women often spent more time discussing men than the young men themselves. Notably, the young women's deflective discussion that men are overlooked as victims and survivors almost runs counter to their gendered "conditioning" and lack of surprise about the prevalence data on women's victimisation.

However, contrary to the young people's views in our study, perceived stigmas against men are not borne out by the evidence (Whiting, 2013). Although gendered stigmas are likely to play some role in hindering men's help-seeking (Bates et al., 2019; Easton et al., 2014; Hill & Diaz, 2021; Holmes et al., 1997; Huntley et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2016; Morgan & Wells, 2016; Sorsoli et al., 2008), many authors argue stigmatisation against men is not the main reason for the higher recorded prevalence of women's victimisation. Specifically, it has been argued that the differential in prevalence data is largely due to men not experiencing the same level of fear nor the same extent of coercive controlling violence, which are seen as the central components of feminist conceptualisations of domestic violence (Gadd et al., 2003; Hester et al., 2017; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Johnson et al., 2014; Myhill, 2015). RRE and other prevention initiatives would benefit from acknowledging young people's concerns that men's victimisation is not taken seriously, while also drawing particular attention to the established evidence on the gendered experiences and uses of violence.

Even though the young people *overtly* rejected gender as an explanatory factor for the perpetration of domestic violence and abuse, they nonetheless often implicitly fell back on traditional gender role explanations by inadvertently positioning mostly men as the perpetrators

and mostly women as the victimised party. These findings reflect existing research with young people by McCarry and Lombard (Lombard, 2015, 2016; McCarry, 2009; McCarry & Lombard, 2016). However, unlike other research, the young people in our study rarely reverted to biological essentialist arguments to explain why they positioned men as perpetrators (i.e. because testosterone makes men "naturally" more aggressive). It is possible that our participants may have been less inclined to explain the violent or abusive behaviour in terms of biologically essentialist or traditional gender roles because the scenarios did not provide gendered names. In turn, this also may have led them to emphasise the moral wrongs of violent and abusive relationship behaviour, as another narrative to help them make sense of (and reject) violence. Future research into the role and rejection of gender stereotypes in young people's thinking would benefit from directly comparing young people's interpretations of gendered and gender-neutral relationship scenarios.

Along with the gender-ignoring lens, our findings indicate that the young people conceptualised the gendered nature of domestic violence and abuse via an abstracted and idealised notion of equality, understood as the *uniform treatment of individuals*. From this angle, gender was not seen by the young people as a *driver* of violence, but as a driver of unequal and unfair treatment (of men). However, this idealised concept of equality as uniform treatment worked to divert attention not only from the magnitude of men's perpetration of violence, but also from the cultural, structural and patriarchal factors that create the context for violence (Berns, 2001; DeKeseredy et al., 2021; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Kimmel, 2002). Our study's results – especially the gender-ignoring lens and the idealised notion of equality – may help to explain young people's uncertainty regarding the gendered nature of violence evidenced in other studies and evaluations, even after educational intervention (Bell & Stanley, 2006; Flood et al., 2009; Flood & Kendrick, 2012; Our Watch, 2015). Indeed, our participants largely did not have the language to articulate or understand the complex structural dynamics of domestic violence, which points to gaps in the young people's education about the nature and drivers of gender-based violence which must be addressed. Evaluations of RRE programs should therefore also assess program impacts on young people's understandings of the gendered drivers, prevalence and harms of domestic violence and abuse (Rose & Coates, 2022). Future research could also examine whether, in addition to the idealised concept of equality and "fairness" highlighted by our study, other factors play a role in the de-gendering of domestic violence and abuse, such as contemporary movements to dismantle the gender binary (Allen et al., 2021); individualising social forces such as neoliberalism (Stubbs, 2015); and social backlash informed by men's rights activist or anti-feminist narratives (e.g. Dragiewicz, 2011; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012; Flood et al., 2021).

In sum, our participants broadly conceptualised domestic violence and abuse within a gender-ignoring lens – in terms of idealised individual *equality* and what is *fair*, rather than as driven by gender or other structural *inequalities*. To address the gender-ignoring lens, policy and prevention should:

- adopt a gender-transformative framework to target the gendered norms and drivers of gender-based violence, abuse and control at all levels of the social ecology
- increase understandings of substantive equality and the structural inequalities that create the conditions for violence, abuse and control (including, but not limited to, gender inequality, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, ableism and poverty)
- consider alternative ways of teaching young people about the gendered drivers of violence, given that they are now rejecting gender stereotypes
- correct misperceptions that the prevailing focus on women's victimisation and support is unfair or discriminatory against men
- continue to address problematic masculinities that reinforce stigmas against men's expressions of emotion or vulnerability
- acknowledge and seek to address attitudes of backlash or resistance to understandings of the gendered and structural drivers of domestic violence, which may manifest as a gender-ignoring or neutral lens
- address young people's scepticism towards the established statistics on the gendered nature of domestic violence and abuse.

4.7. Gendered "conditioning" and gendered differences

Some young people reflected that their ideas about domestic violence and abuse may be shaped by gendered "conditioning", rather than being based on broader stereotypes. That is, the young people also conceptualised domestic violence and abuse in terms of their and their peers' gendered experiences in the world. Both young women and young men argued that women are "conditioned" by their parents and broader society (including through RRE) from a young age to be constantly vigilant about their own safety. This notion of gendered "conditioning" evidenced in our study resembles various theories about gender role socialisation, including social learning theory, gender socialisation and "cultural programming", and the "hidden curriculum" of violence (see Barker & Galliher, 2020; Ellis, 2014; Wozolek, 2020).

Young people's socialisation into gender roles has been explored in different ways. For example, Australian and international studies have examined young women's learnings about gender roles and sexuality from informal and formal institutions, especially in relation to sexual socialisation (Burns, 2018; Ward et al., 2019) and compulsory heterosexuality (Averett et al., 2008; Shibley Hyde & Jaffee, 2000). Other studies, including the "Man Box", have examined gender role socialisation for young men (Irvine et al., 2018). However, very little research has examined young people's experiences of gendered "conditioning" as a site of learning both for what counts as violence and for socialisation into potential future victimhood (Iyer, 2019). Our study contributes important insights here: there was a sense in our focus groups that, because of gendered "conditioning", young women are *more* aware of domestic violence and abuse, and are therefore *more* attuned to potentially problematic behaviour. By extension, these findings suggest young men may be less attuned to or aware of domestic violence and abuse because they do not receive the same extensive gendered "conditioning" or precautions for their safety. Although studies on social learning processes as gendered pathways for violence victimisation are emerging (Latzman et al., 2018; Powers et al., 2020), more work is needed to examine how gendered and cultural structures that "condition" or socialise young women to be vigilant about their safety may act as "pre-victimisation" pathways. Any such investigation must examine this gendered "conditioning" within the broader social context of cultural norms regarding gender, sexuality and race (Powers et al., 2020). Future research could also more thoroughly investigate young people's understanding of "conditioning" processes related to gender (Smiler, 2014; Way et al., 2014). Running mixed-gender focus groups – as suggested by some of our participants – may assist in examining and challenging this social process, and highlighting the gendered disparities in young people's experiences. Further research on gendered "conditioning" could help to identify how and when young women and young non-binary people learn behavioural modifications that reduce the likelihood of certain types of victimisation, such as street harassment (Fileborn, 2020; Vera-Gray, 2017) or harm from coercive control (Myhill & Kelly, 2019).

The notion of gendered conditioning highlighted by our participants may help explain some of the gender differences in our results. For example, the socialisation of young women to be vigilant about their safety may have contributed to the young women in our study being more confident in labelling unhealthy and abusive behaviours as "not okay" and more versed in elaborating the reasons why. In contrast, the young men more often wavered on their ratings of the scenarios and were less conclusive after speculating about the possible contexts of the behaviours. Additionally, in line with other research (Taylor et al., 2017), the young men in our study were somewhat more likely to focus on the actions within the scenarios rather than on the implications of these actions (e.g. on the act of harassment rather than the attempt to control). In contrast, the young women focused more on the harm and impact of the action on the victim as the basis for why the behaviour was "not okay". Similarly, in Taylor et al.'s study, young women conceptualised dating violence in terms of the emotional impact upon the victim and survivor – how abuse might *feel*. The young women in our study also went further to focus on the *inescapability* and the outcomes of controlling behaviour, over and above the "emotional toll" described by the young men in our study or the young women in Taylor et al.'s (2017) research. Thus, gendered "conditioning" – as revealed in our study – may explain the young women's confidence and wider range of language and understanding to conceptualise control, manipulation and the inescapability of abuse. Likewise, young men's lesser "conditioning" may explain their surprise and shock at hearing about the established data on the prevalence and impacts (hospitalisations and deaths) of women's domestic violence victimisation. Prevention initiatives and RRE may benefit from running desegregated sessions where appropriate to promote opportunities for young people of different genders to learn from one another about the ways they experience gendered conditioning – as suggested by our participants (see Section 3.4.5). Young women are unfairly burdened with gendered "conditioning" and the responsibility for learning about violence and abuse from a young age to maintain their safety. To address gendered disparities in learning about intimate partner violence, abuse and control, policy and prevention initiatives should:

- ensure RRE is robust, implemented across early years through to Year 12, nationally consistent and compulsory across public and private education sectors
- conduct gender-transformative RRE and desegregate workshops where appropriate
- create safe spaces for young women and gender-diverse young people to share their stories of being "conditioned"
- expand young men's critical consciousness by encouraging them to reflect on their personal connections to and stake in preventing gender-based violence
- address attitudes and norms that "condition" young women and problematically place responsibility only on women to remain safe
- design campaigns emphasising the whole community's responsibility for preventing and ending violence against women.

Table 11: Key insights and implications for policy and prevention

Key finding	Implications
Narrow representations of "explicit" domestic violence in public discourse The young people conceptualised domestic violence behaviours in terms of two overarching categories: "explicit" and "subtle" behaviours. Physical violence in particular, as well as sexual violence, were characterised as *explicitly* domestic violence. These "explicit" behaviours are most easily recognised as domestic violence by society because they are most commonly represented as constituting domestic violence within public discourse. The young people suggested media portrayals of domestic violence as mainly extreme or sensationalised physical violence result in a definition of domestic violence that is too narrow. Many of the young people felt this narrow definition may hinder public recognition of the full range of behaviours that constitute domestic violence and abuse	To address sensationalised and narrow representations of domestic violence, initiatives and media should: • conduct quality, victim-centred and trauma-informed reporting of violence against women in adherence with guidelines such as *How to Report on Violence against Women and Their Children* by Our Watch (2019) and those developed by private media organisations • change reporting narratives that disproportionately focus on incident-based and severe domestic violence crimes, while overlooking patterns of coercive control, financial abuse and psychological abuse • prioritise voices of victims and survivors and lived experience advocates over law enforcement or criminal justice perspectives • correct scepticism among young people and the general public about the realities and prevalence of domestic violence • incorporate critical media analysis tasks within RRE and other programs
"Subtle" forms of domestic violence and the "snowballing" process of abuse Alongside the "explicit" forms of violence, the young people identified "subtle" forms, including "mental" or emotional abuse, financial abuse, verbal abuse and control. They argued these "subtle" behaviours may be less easily recognisable as constituting domestic violence by society broadly and victims and survivors specifically. Participants described these forms of violence and abuse as more hidden because they are less "talked about" or represented in public discourse. Participants also conceptualised domestic violence as a "snowballing" process or pattern of multiple abusive behaviours and escalating harms that entrap the person experiencing it. Their snowballing concept included multiple, overlapping and escalating forms of physical and non-physical abuse, as well as "levels" of abuse, with physical violence positioned at the most severe or extreme "level" at the end of the continuum. The young people saw "domestic violence and abuse" as a more accurate term than "domestic violence". They noted that the "subtle" behaviours – which are named forms of *abuse* – do not fit neatly within with the term domestic *violence*, given the commonplace understanding of "violence" as an act of *physical* force with the intent of physical harm. "Domestic violence and abuse" was seen as more accurately encompassing the multiple and distinct forms of violence and abuse that can co-occur as a pattern of behaviour within intimate relationships	Inconsistent or non-specific definitions can hinder recognition of violence and abuse among the public, as well as by victims and survivors specifically. To address inconsistent ideas about what counts as relationship violence and to ensure the subtle forms of relationship violence, abuse and control no longer remain "hidden", policy and prevention work should: • adopt a broader and more robust definition of domestic violence as *violence, abuse and control*, and ensure this definition incorporates an ongoing pattern of multiple forms of behaviour within its scope • implement the terminology of violence, abuse and control within intimate partner and domestic relationships within RRE curricula, in action plans stemming from the new *National Plan* and in state and territory jurisdictional violence against women frameworks • adapt policy language regarding coercive control for younger and lay audiences who may face challenges in understanding this technical concept • develop awareness campaigns about the "subtle" non-physical forms of violence, abuse and control, including the forms particular to at-risk groups of women (e.g. spiritual abuse, visa-related abuse, and carer abuse and neglect) • make prevention campaigns accessible for diverse audiences and for high-risk groups, including young people, people from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, recent migrants and refugees, and people with disability

Key finding	Implications
The unhealthy "stepping stones" towards domestic violence and abuse The young people also felt that some scenarios depicted behaviours that were unhealthy or toxic and harmful in themselves, but did not yet reach the *technical* threshold of domestic violence and abuse. Toxic relationship behaviours or "red flags" included acting without or against the other partner's consent, causing harm, dominating or treating the other partner like a possession, and being manipulative. Notably, the young people pointed to consent or a lack thereof when discussing many scenarios depicting a range of domestic violence and abuse behaviours, not just those depicting sexual violence. Thus, these unhealthy or toxic behaviours were seen as the initial "stepping stones" that could escalate towards more generally abusive and then violent behaviour. The young people thus appeared to incorporate toxic behaviours – such as manipulation, bullying and acting against or without consent – into an expanded continuum of relationship violence and abuse	The "stepping stones" towards domestic violence, abuse and control – including toxic relationship behaviours, as well as broader problematic interpersonal behaviours such as bullying and harassment – should be targeted through prevention initiatives. RRE should: • be expanded and incorporated into existing anti-bullying and consent modules within social and emotional wellbeing curricula for all age years • equip young people with the knowledge and skills to identify "red flags" or warning signs for unhealthy relationships, as well as the skills to leave relationships safely and respectfully • use scenarios or stories from victims and survivors to demonstrate how violence, abuse and control can manifest in relationships, to improve understanding of what forms of violence and abuse look like in practice • ensure curricula content draws attention to the purpose of violence and abuse and its impacts or harms, not just to the particular types of violence
Normalised or understandable "stepping stones" Although the "stepping stone" behaviours were generally seen as "not okay", some were seen as common or normalised in relationships – particularly within *unhealthy* relationships. Behaviours most often seen as normal or commonplace in romantic relationships generally involved technology. Jealousy was seen as acceptable as a "natural" emotion, but problematic if acted upon in a toxic or abusive way. The young people argued that some of the "stepping stones" may be acceptable or understandable under certain circumstances: if they were motivated by care or concern for the partner's welfare; if the partner consented or reciprocated; or if there were suspicions of cheating. Context thus played a role in shaping perceptions that a toxic behaviour might be seen as acceptable or understandable	Perceptions that forms of violence, abuse and control may be part of what is expected to occur in normal relationships, or can be rationalised based on contextual factors, must be addressed. RRE and prevention initiatives should: • target rationalisations for abusive or problematic behaviour to correct minimising attitudes • equip young people and the broader population with skills and confidence to safely intervene in or "call out" problematic behaviour that they witness within their peer networks • equip young people with skills to identify and healthily respond to jealousy and conflict in relationships

Key finding	Implications
Healthy behaviours and the importance of consent The young people characterised communication, each person's independence or autonomy, trust, mutual respect and affection or care as highly important in relationships. However, they often struggled to articulate how the healthy behaviour occurs *in practice* (such as what trust *looks like*). In contrast, they found it more straightforward to elaborate what toxic or abusive behaviours look like and why they are problematic. Additionally, the young people placed a high importance on consent in relationships generally – not just in relation to *sexual* consent. Rather, they conceptualised consent broadly in terms of autonomy and the capacity to make one's own decisions: as one young person put it, "Consent comes in all forms." (Felicity, YW1)	Building young people's capacities and skills for healthy relationship behaviours should be central for RRE. Initiatives should: • equip young people with healthy relationship skills, such as communication, trust and respect • adopt a wider and more holistic conception of consent in its many forms • take a holistic approach to consent to foster young people's skills in and respect for autonomy and freedom to make one's own decisions within relationships, as well as sexual consent
Gender and domestic violence and abuse: The gender-ignoring lens The young people conceptualised domestic violence in gender-neutral terms within a "gender ignoring" lens (Our Watch, 2021a), which was influenced by notions of what is "fair" as well as an idealised and abstract understanding of equality as the *uniform treatment of individuals*. The gender-ignoring lens was revealed in four ways. First, the young people regularly shifted focus away from gender to the individual "people" or "partners" involved in domestic violence and abuse. They argued that domestic violence and abuse is "not a gender-specific thing" and is *irreducible* to gender. Second, they also emphasised the universal moral wrong of domestic violence and abuse, highlighting its unacceptability *irrespective* of gender. Third, they argued that public discourse unfairly represents men as the main perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse and underplays their victimisation. They spoke about gendered stereotypes and stigmas that prohibit men from speaking up about their abuse. Fourth, the young people argued that victims and survivors of domestic violence and abuse are treated unequally on the basis of gender: men were described as being taken less seriously and given less access to support. The young people thus characterised gender as a driver of the *unequal societal response to domestic violence*, not as a driver of *violence* per se	The young people broadly conceptualised domestic violence and abuse within a gender-ignoring lens – in terms of idealised individual *equality* and what is *fair*, rather than as driven by gender or other structural *inequalities*. To address the gender-ignoring lens, policy and prevention should: • adopt a gender-transformative framework to target the gendered norms and drivers of gender-based violence, abuse and control at all levels of the social ecology • increase understandings of substantive equality and the structural inequalities that create the conditions for violence, abuse and control (including, but not limited to, gender inequality, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, ableism and poverty) • consider alternative ways of teaching young people about the gendered drivers of violence, given that they are now rejecting gender stereotypes • correct misperceptions that the prevailing focus on women's victimisation and support is unfair or discriminatory against men • continue to address problematic masculinities that reinforce stigmas against men's expressions of emotion or vulnerability • acknowledge and seek to address attitudes of backlash or resistance to understandings of the gendered and structural drivers of domestic violence, which may manifest as a gender-ignoring or neutral lens • address young people's scepticism towards the established statistics on the gendered nature of domestic violence and abuse

Key finding	Implications
Gendered "conditioning" shaping understandings Some young people reflected that their ideas about domestic violence and abuse were shaped by gendered "conditioning", rather than being based on broader stereotypes. Young women were particularly reflective across the focus groups about their experiences of being "conditioned". Both young women and young men argued that women are "conditioned" by their parents and broader society (including through RRE) from a young age to be constantly vigilant about their own safety. As a result of this conditioning, women were seen as *more* aware of domestic violence and abuse and *more* attuned to potentially problematic behaviour, compared to men	Young women are unfairly burdened with gendered "conditioning" and the responsibility for learning about violence and abuse from a young age to maintain their safety. To address gendered disparities in learning about intimate partner violence, abuse and control, policy and prevention initiatives should: • ensure RRE is robust, implemented across early years through to Year 12, nationally consistent and compulsory across public and private education sectors • conduct gender-transformative RRE and desegregate workshops where appropriate • create safe spaces for young women and gender-diverse young people to share their stories of being "conditioned" • expand young men's critical consciousness by encouraging them to reflect on their personal connections to and stake in preventing gender-based violence • address attitudes and norms that "condition" young women and problematically place responsibility only on women to remain safe • design campaigns emphasising the whole community's responsibility for preventing and ending violence against women

4.8. Strengths and limitations

Our exploratory, youth-centred and mixed-method investigation into young Australians' conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse fills an important gap in Australian and international research (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). We spoke with a large sample of young people from across the Australian community, thereby adding fresh perspectives to the existing research which has more typically been conducted with samples from schools or other institutions. Additionally, the study was strong in its inclusion of roughly equal numbers of young men and young women in an area where young men's voices remain somewhat on the margins (Loney-Howes et al., 2021). Much of the existing literature focuses on *what* young people understand about domestic violence and abuse. Importantly, our expanded focus to also include *how* young people conceptualise this phenomenon revealed not only what behaviours they think constitute domestic violence and abuse, but also the underlying gender-ignoring lens and gendered "conditioning" shaping their understandings. Despite these strengths, our study had a number of limitations which should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. These limitations also present opportunities for further research.

Firstly, although we successfully recruited a diverse range of young people aged between 16 and 18 years, our study did not capture disability status, sexuality identities, early school leaver status or indicators of socioeconomic status. In addition, our online methodology, adopted because of COVID-19-related restrictions, may have excluded participation by some young people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds without easy access to technology. Thus, future qualitative research should capture a wider range of demographic information, and could examine if conceptualisations of domestic violence and abuse vary for different groups of young people, such as those with diverse socioeconomic, cultural, disability, sexuality and gender identities. Additionally, we specifically recruited 16- to 18-year-olds so that the findings would be directly relevant to RRE programs in upper-level schooling. Thus, future studies with younger or older cohorts may provide additional or new insights. Our research design could be also adapted to examine the understandings of older and younger cohorts of young people about the "grey areas" and gendered nature of domestic violence, and to examine any shifts in these understandings with age. Future research could also consider whether cultural dynamics shape the ways young people or older cohorts rationalise or minimise abusive behaviour in relationships, given other studies indicate that cultural norms shape relationship behaviours and gender expectations, as either an exacerbating or protective factor for abuse (see e.g. Emery et al., 2021; Messinger et al., 2014; Muluneh et al., 2021; Velonis, 2016; Yamawaki et al., 2009). Moreover, future studies could recruit a sample of LGBTQ participants to map out the relationship expectations and understandings of patterns of abusive behaviour within relationships between people with diverse genders and sexualities.

Secondly, aspects of our methodology may have had a small influence on some of the results. The gender-ignoring lens may have been primed partly by the use of gender-neutral names in the scenarios. The use of gender-neutral names was part of the youth-centred approach to allow participants to provide their own interpretations of the scenarios rather than imposing adult-centred notions of gendered violence. Given how extensively participants de-gendered the discussion, it is unlikely that participants' de-gendering was simply a result of the method. Similarly, although the theme of the importance of trust in healthy relationships may have been influenced by the inclusion of the word "trust" in two scenarios (Scenarios 16 and 25),[35] this theme emerged largely unprompted and was organically cited in the early discussions of healthy behaviours prior to the in-depth discussions of the scenarios. Additionally, the theme of the moral wrongs of violence may have been partially prompted by the design which asked participants to rate whether certain behaviours are "okay" or "not okay". However, this design is similar to Australian relationships programs with young people such as "The Line" (Our Watch, 2015) and was used in our study for the specific purpose of investigating how young people distinguish domestic violence and abuse from other unhealthy relationship behaviours. Future research and prevention initiatives could adapt our survey to also ask young people whether each of the survey scenarios represents domestic violence and abuse. This change would also make the scenarios more comparable to the wording of the NCAS items and allow more *direct* comparisons with the NCAS results.

Thirdly, our study's scope was also somewhat limited by using the term "domestic violence". We used the term "domestic violence" in line with the 2017 NCAS, which provided the basis for our scenarios, and in line with the most common term used in Australian research and policy more broadly (as specified in Section 1.2.1). We also decided young people would be most likely to understand this vernacular term compared with other technical language (such as "coercive control"). Our participants preferred the term "domestic violence and abuse" because of the lack of clarity about whether "violence" referred only to physical violence. They also argued that there was a lack of

35 As noted in footnote 25, the character in Scenario 25 was quoted as saying, "I don't trust you with money", while the character in Scenario 16 was quoted as saying "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me".

clarity about which relationships would be included within the term "domestic". Future research could explore how young people understand different terms in relation to different types of relationship behaviours. Similarly, future research could further investigate the generalisability of the present participants' concept of the "stepping stones" towards domestic violence and abuse with other cohorts. Further, while our study focused on the gendered nature of domestic violence in light of the 2017 NCAS, future research could employ a broader intersectional analysis and adopt a wider scope of abusive behaviours to examine young people's understandings of intersectional drivers of violence. Similarly, although our study used gender-neutral names in the scenarios, the relationship dynamics in the scenarios may have been largely heteronormative, given their basis in the NCAS items and given that the literature on domestic violence and abuse is most typically framed around heterosexual relationships (Donovan & Barnes, 2020). As noted above, future research should explore the dynamics in relationships involving people with diverse genders and diverse sexualities, and prevention initiatives should develop scenarios that reflect relationship diversity to challenge binary thinking.

Fourthly, although we adopted a critical youth studies approach and centred the young people's voices, the topic itself was developed from the 2017 NCAS results rather than from the ideas or initiatives of young people. While we took steps to decentre adultist claims to knowledge, we acknowledge that some adult-centric aspects of our research remained (Barter & Lombard, 2018). Future research could adopt a more participatory, collaborative and youth-led model (Baker, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2014) by developing the research aims and scope in dialogue with an advisory group of young people and practitioner or prevention partners (such as R4Respect or Men4Respect). Future studies could also adopt more open-ended and exploratory qualitative methods to further decentre the adult frameworks in relationship violence research. For example, story completion methods may prove fruitful for learning about young people's "lay theories" of relationship violence, while open-ended qualitative surveys may provide more space for individual young people to elaborate their ideas in detail without interference by the researcher or interview moderator (Braun et al., 2019; Braun et al., 2020; Clarke et al., 2019). Additionally, although we speculate that the young people felt they have a stake in preventing and ending violence against women based on their discussions, it remains unclear whether the young people were in fact motivated to participate on this basis, as we did not ask them why they decided to engage with the study. Participants may have been motivated initially by the monetary reimbursement, which itself is a valid reason to participate (Seymour, 2012). Future studies on these topics, particularly those centring young people as agents of change, should consider young people's motivators for participating in research studies by unpacking why they want to engage with the research (Fox, 2013; Lohmeyer, 2020).

4.9. Conclusions

Prompted by results from the 2017 NCAS, our study aimed to investigate both *what* young people conceptualise as domestic violence and *how* they do so, in order to examine potential gaps in their knowledge and to inform respectful relationships initiatives. Our study revealed the complex – and at times inconsistent – ways that young people conceptualise domestic violence and abuse. They navigated not only "what counts" as domestic violence as a *technical concept*, but also the challenges in identifying how this concept *plays out in true-to-life examples* and amid the messiness of real-life contexts. The study shows that even with a generally solid conceptual understanding of domestic violence and abuse, the "grey areas" in real life often make the identification of violence and abuse less clear-cut.

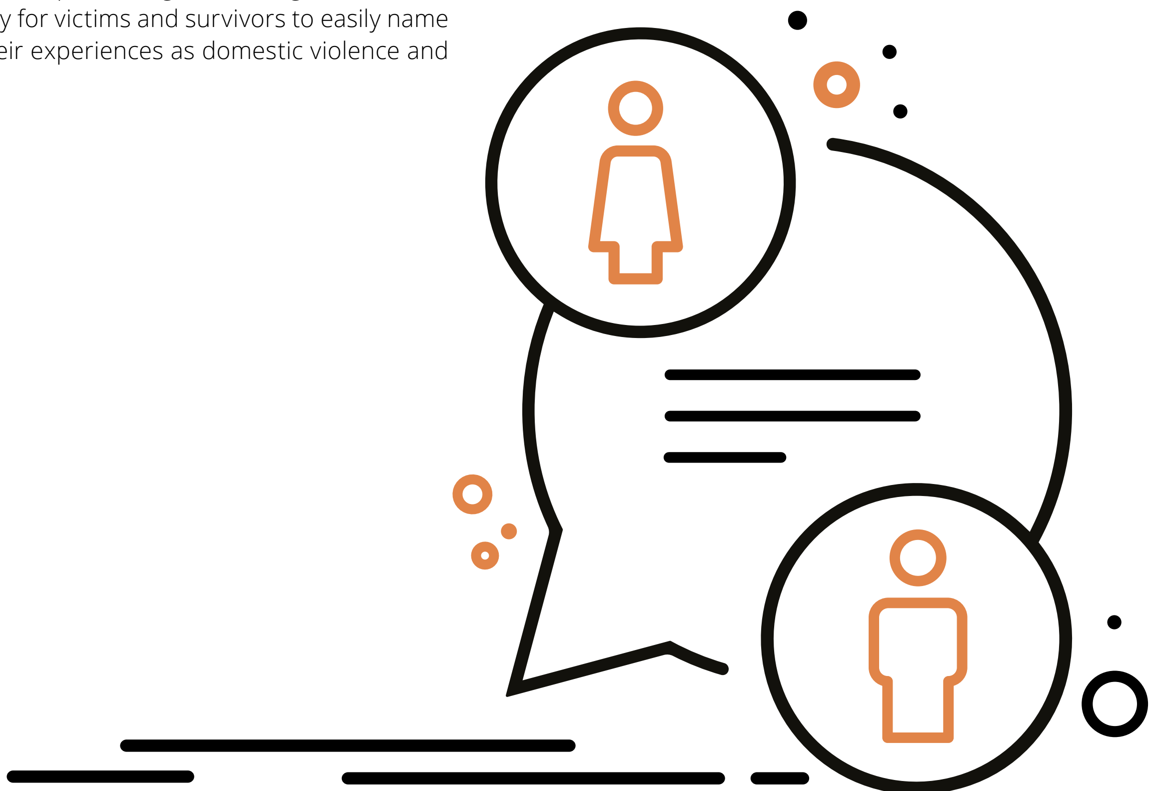
Our study demonstrated that understandings depend "on what the definition of domestic violence is" (Joel, YM2). It showed the difficulties posed by technical definitions of domestic violence which are too narrow, inconsistent or do not reflect common usage, such as the inclusion of behaviours in the technical definition of "domestic violence" that are not "violent" according to the common understanding of "violence" as physical violence or force.

Although they used slightly different language than that found in technical definitions, the young people demonstrated a generally solid understanding of the different forms of domestic violence and abuse. They conceptualised domestic violence and abuse as including "explicit" and "subtle" *types* of behaviour, and as involving an overlapping, "snowballing" *pattern* of violence and abuse. They described toxic relationship behaviours as "stepping stones" toward violence and abuse. Thus, rather than *distinguishing* toxic behaviours from abuse, the young people highlighted the *common ground* between toxic behaviours that can grow into domestic violence and abuse. The young people did, however, distinguish toxic and abusive behaviours from behaviours considered "normal" and healthy in relationships (although they struggled to articulate what these healthy behaviours look like in practice).

Our findings also demonstrated *how* the young people largely conceptualised domestic violence and abuse via a gender-ignoring lens. Using this lens, they broadly conceptualised domestic violence and abuse in terms of idealised individual *equality* and *fairness*, rather than as driven by gender or other structural *inequalities*. Their argument that violence between individuals in relationships

is irreducible to gender offers some insights into the NCAS finding showing a decline over time in young people's understandings of the gendered nature of domestic violence (see Section 1.3). Although the young people argued that gender is irrelevant to domestic violence given the moral wrong of violence and the inappropriateness of outdated gender stereotypes, they nonetheless brought a highly gendered analysis to their claims that victimised men are treated unfairly *as men*, compared to victimised women. Our findings thus emphasise the critical importance of educating young people about the structural inequalities that drive violence against women, and the realities and evidence on the gendered uses and experiences of violence.

Our study fills an important gap in Australian and international research, and opens further pathways for future investigations into young people's understandings of domestic violence and abuse. Our use of quantitative data together with qualitative explorations highlighted the complexities of interpreting and naming abusive and violent behaviours. The young people's passionate, thoughtful contributions underscore the value in centring young people as instigators for change within research, policy and prevention related to domestic violence. As argued earlier, young people are not alone in navigating the contradictions and inconsistencies about "what counts" as domestic violence and abuse. The study therefore demonstrates the need for research, policy and prevention to address these inconsistencies, which not only impact the effort of reducing and preventing violence against women, but also the ability for victims and survivors to easily name and recognise their experiences as domestic violence and abuse.



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Appendix A: NCAS panel of experts and advisory group

NCAS panel of experts

Name	Position and organisation
Associate Professor Kristin Diemer	Department of Social Work, School of Health Sciences University of Melbourne
Associate Professor Michael Flood	Faculty of Creative Industries, Education, and Social Justice Queensland University of Technology
William Milne	Director, National Centre for Crime and Justice Statistics Australian Bureau of Statistics
Professor Jenny Morgan	Melbourne Law School University of Melbourne
Associate Professor Anastasia Powell	Criminology and Justice Studies RMIT University
Professor Julie Stubbs	Faculty of Law and Justice UNSW Sydney

NCAS advisory group

Organisation	Jurisdiction
Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)	Australia
Australian Human Rights Commission	Australia
Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)	Australia
Harmony Alliance (Migrant & Refugee Women for Change)	Australia
Healing Foundation	Australia
LGBTIQ+ Health Australia	Australia
No to Violence	Australia
Our Watch	Australia
People with Disability Australia	Australia
WESNET	Australia
Department of Social Services Australian Government	Australia
Office of the Coordinator-General for Family Safety Australian Capital Territory Government	Australian Capital Territory
Domestic Violence NSW	New South Wales
Women NSW New South Wales Government	New South Wales
Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities Northern Territory Government	Northern Territory
Men4Respect	Queensland
R4Respect	Queensland
Office for Women and Violence Prevention Department of Justice and Attorney-General Queensland Government	Queensland
Office for Women Department of Human Services Government of South Australia	South Australia
Family Safety Secretariat, Department of Communities Tasmania Tasmanian Government	Tasmania
Respect Victoria	Victoria
Office for Women Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Victoria State Government	Victoria
Department of Communities Government of Western Australia	Western Australia

Appendix B: Fictional scenarios by theme and whether they are based on NCAS items

Theme	Survey item no.	Scenario text	Based on NCAS item	Scenario order in focus groups
NCAS knowledge component: Physical forms of violence				
Physical harm	5	**Jamie** found out Eden was hanging out with someone else. Jamie then pushed Eden onto the floor	DV2a	1st
	29	**Alex** slapped Charlie. Alex then said to Charlie, "It's your fault I'm in a bad mood"	DV2a	
Threat of harm	3	Dian tried to break up with Jordan. **Jordan** got upset and told Dian, "If you leave me, I'll hurt myself"	DV2e	
	20	**Jun** smashed Rory's phone. Jun said to Rory, "I wouldn't have done that if you just listened to me"	DV2i	
Coerced sex	10	**Shannon** guilt-tripped Ashley into having sex	DV2c	
	28	**Blair** pressured Jun into doing things sexually, even though Jun already told Blair, "I don't want to"	DV2c	5th
NCAS knowledge component: Non-physical forms of violence				
Social abuse	15	**Morgan** made sexual jokes about Riley in front of their friends	DV2g	
	18	**Lee** repeatedly put Ashley down and called Ashley names in front of their friends	DV2g	6th
	27	**Sam** repeatedly called Dana names. When Dana asked Sam to stop, Sam said "I was just joking"	DV2g	
	22	Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them	DV2k	
	24	Whenever Alex planned to go out with friends, **Sasha** said, "You can't go without me"	DV2k	
Financial control	25	Anh and Rory moved in together. **Rory** took Anh's debit card and told Anh, "I don't trust you with money"	DV2m	8th

Theme	Survey item no.	Scenario text	Based on NCAS item	Scenario order in focus groups
Stalking	23	**Jordan** kept "popping in" to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to	SV1a	3rd
	26	**Nakia** kept turning up at Jordan's house uninvited, even though they were broken up	SV1a	
Technology-facilitated surveillance	13	**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening	DV10	2nd
	19	**Riley** checked the call history and text messages on Sasha's phone when Sasha was out of the room	DV10	10th
	1	**Alex** continually called, texted and Snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing	SV2c	4th
	11	**Taylor** kept calling and texting Lee, even though they were broken up	SV2c	7th
	17	Jamie was out with friends. **Zain** texted and called Jamie over and over to find out where Jamie was and who Jamie was with. Zain was angry because Jamie didn't reply right away	SV2c	
Unhealthy behaviours not based on the NCAS				
Unhealthy	2	**Shannon** gave Rory the silent treatment after Rory got home late from a party		
	4	Sam felt upset with **Adi**. When Sam tried to speak to Adi about it, Adi said to Sam, "I can't talk to you when you're so emotional"		
	6	**Lee** played games with Dana by ignoring Dana's phone calls		
	8	Morgan loved wearing a particular top. **Jamie** criticised how Morgan looked and told Morgan to change clothes		
	12	**Sasha** constantly accused Anh of flirting with someone else		
	14	**Nakia** got jealous and was suspicious whenever Alex made new friends		
	16	**Tai** kept asking for Shannon's social media passwords by saying, "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me"		9th
	21	**Ashley** kept pressuring Sam into sending nudes by saying, "Don't you love me?"		
Healthy behaviours not based on NCAS items				
Healthy	7	**Zain** was away on holiday. Zain missed Blair, but had a great time anyway		
	9	Jun broke up with Taylor. **Taylor** was upset, but stayed friends with Jun		
	30	**Morgan** and Tai had a heated discussion. Morgan was frustrated, but agreed to disagree		

Appendix C: 2017 NCAS items used for fictional scenarios

Theme	NCAS item	NCAS item text	Present survey item no.
Physical harm	DV2a	If one partner in a domestic relationship slaps or pushes the other partner to cause harm or fear, is this a form of domestic violence?	5, 29
Threat of harm	DV2e	If one partner in a domestic relationship tries to scare or control the other partner by threatening to hurt other family members, is this a form of domestic violence?	3
	DV2i	If one partner in a domestic relationship throws or smashes objects near the other partner to frighten or threaten them, is this a form of domestic violence?	20
Coerced sex	DV2c	If one partner in a domestic relationship forces the other partner to have sex, is this a form of domestic violence?	10, 28
Social abuse	DV2g	If one partner in a domestic relationship repeatedly criticises the other one to make them feel bad or useless, is this a form of domestic violence?	15, 18, 27
	DV2k	If one partner in a domestic relationship controls the social life of the other partner by preventing them from seeing family and friends, is this a form of domestic violence?	22, 24
Financial control	DV2m	If one partner in a domestic relationship tries to control the other partner by denying them money, is this domestic violence?	25
Stalking	SV1a	Do you regard stalking to be a form of violence against women? By stalking we mean being repeatedly followed or watched at home or work	23, 26
Technology-facilitated surveillance	DV10	If one partner in a domestic relationship repeatedly keeps track of the other's location, calls or activities through their mobile phone or other electronic devices without their consent, is this a form of domestic violence?	13, 19
	SV2c	Do you regard harassment via repeated emails, text messages and the like to be a form of violence against women?	1, 11, 17

Appendix D: Online survey instrument

[Prompt appearing on each page:] Please read each imaginary romantic relationship scenario outlined below. We want you to tell us if you think the **behaviour of the person whose name is underlined** in each imaginary scenario is “okay”, “sometimes okay” or “not okay”.

Survey item no.	Scenario text	Okay	Sometimes okay	Not okay
1	**Alex** continually called, texted and snapchatted Morgan throughout the day to check in on what Morgan was doing.		☐	☐
2	**Shannon** gave Rory the silent treatment after Rory got home late from a party.	☐	☐	☐
3	Dian tried to break up with Jordan. **Jordan** got upset and told Dian, “If you leave me, I’ll hurt myself.”	☐	☐	☐
4	Sam felt upset with **Adi**. When Sam tried to speak to Adi about it, Adi said to Sam, “I can’t talk to you when you’re so emotional.”	☐	☐	☐
5	**Jamie** found out Eden was hanging out with someone else. Jamie then pushed Eden onto the floor. Please choose **one** of the scenarios above that you had the strongest opinion about. [-- Please Select --] Thinking about the scenario you chose, can you explain to us what made you say it was “okay”, “sometimes okay” or “not okay”? [ ]	☐	☐	☐
6	**Lee** played games with Dana by ignoring Dana’s phone calls.	☐	☐	☐
7	**Zain** was away on holiday. Zain missed Blair, but had a great time anyway.	☐	☐	☐
8	Morgan loved wearing a particular top. **Jamie** criticised how Morgan looked and told Morgan to change clothes.	☐	☐	
9	Jun broke up with Taylor. **Taylor** was upset, but stayed friends with Jun.	☐		☐
10	**Shannon** guilt-tripped Ashley into having sex.	☐	☐	☐

Survey item no.	Scenario text	Okay	Sometimes okay	Not okay
	Please choose **one** of the scenarios above that you had the strongest opinion about. -- Please Select -- Thinking about the scenario you chose, can you explain to us what made you say it was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay"?			
11	**Taylor** kept calling and texting Lee, even though they were broken up.	☐	☐	☐
12	**Sasha** constantly accused Anh of flirting with someone else.	☐	☐	☐
13	**Dian** used mobile apps to see where Sam was and who Sam was talking to, but Sam didn't know this was happening.	☐	☐	
14	**Nakia** got jealous and was suspicious whenever Alex made new friends.	☐	☐	☐
15	**Morgan** made sexual jokes about Riley in front of their friends.	☐	☐	☐
	Please choose **one** of the scenarios above that you had the strongest opinion about. -- Please Select -- Thinking about the scenario you chose, can you explain to us what made you say it was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay"?			
16	**Tai** kept asking for Shannon's social media passwords by saying, "I can't trust you if you don't give them to me."	☐	☐	☐
17	Jamie was out with friends. **Zain** texted and called Jamie over and over to find out where Jamie was and who Jamie was with. Zain was angry because Jamie didn't reply right away.	☐	☐	☐
18	**Lee** repeatedly put Ashley down and called Ashley names in front of their friends.	☐		☐
19	**Riley** checked the call history and text messages on Sasha's phone when Sasha was out of the room.	☐	☐	☐
20	**Jun** smashed Rory's phone. Jun said to Rory, "I wouldn't have done that if you just listened to me." Please choose **one** of the scenarios above that you had the strongest opinion about. -- Please Select --	☐	☐	☐

Survey item no.	Scenario text	Okay	Sometimes okay	Not okay
	Thinking about the scenario you chose, can you explain to us what made you say it was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay"? [text box]			
21	**Ashley** kept pressuring Sam into sending nudes by saying, "Don't you love me?"	☐	☐	☐
22	Taylor had lots of friends. **Adi** acted jealous and made Taylor stop seeing them.	☐	☐	☐
23	**Jordan** kept "popping in" to see Charlie at work, even though Charlie told Jordan not to.	☐		☐
24	Whenever Alex planned to go out with friends, **Sasha** said, "You can't go without me."	☐	☐	☐
25	Anh and Rory moved in together. **Rory** took Anh's debit card and told Anh, "I don't trust you with money." Please choose **one** of the scenarios above that you had the strongest opinion about. -- Please Select -- Thinking about the scenario you chose, can you explain to us what made you say it was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay"? [text box]	☐	☐	☐
26	**Nakia** kept turning up at Jordan's house uninvited, even though they were broken up.	☐	☐	☐
27	**Sam** repeatedly called Dana names. When Dana asked Sam to stop, Sam said, "I was just joking."	☐	☐	☐
28	**Blair** pressured Jun into doing things sexually, even though Jun already told Blair, "I don't want to."	☐	☐	☐
29	**Alex** slapped Charlie. Alex then said to Charlie, "It's your fault I'm in a bad mood."	☐	☐	☐
30	**Morgan** and Tai had a heated discussion. Morgan was frustrated, but agreed to disagree. Please choose **one** of the scenarios above that you had the strongest opinion about. -- Please Select -- Thinking about the scenario you chose, can you explain to us what made you say it was "okay", "sometimes okay" or "not okay"? [text box]	☐		☐

Appendix E: Focus group interview guide

Part one: Defining violence (15 minutes)

Imagine a really good romantic relationship from a television show or a movie. It can be any television show or movie, and you can think of more than one great romantic relationship if you want.

1. What about their relationship and the way they treat each other makes it a really good relationship for you?
2. [Alternative probe] In the perfect romantic relationship, how do the two people treat each other?

Now, imagine a really bad, or unhealthy, or toxic romantic relationship from television or film. Again, it can be any show or any movie.

1. What about their relationship and the way they treat each other makes it a really bad or toxic relationship for you?
2. [Alternative probe] What do you think makes a really toxic romantic relationship? How do the two people treat each other?

I want to explore the good, the bad and the ugly in relationships a little bit more. So, I want to ask …

1. What do you think of when you hear the term "domestic violence"?
2. Who would you say mostly commits domestic violence?
    - Follow-up, if needed: Do women also commit domestic violence?
    - Follow-up, if needed: What effects do you think domestic violence has on the person being hurt? Is the impact bigger for women or men victims? (Or equal?)
3. What makes domestic violence different to other things that can happen in relationships, like conflict or jealousy?

Part two: Ranking scenarios activity (40 minutes)

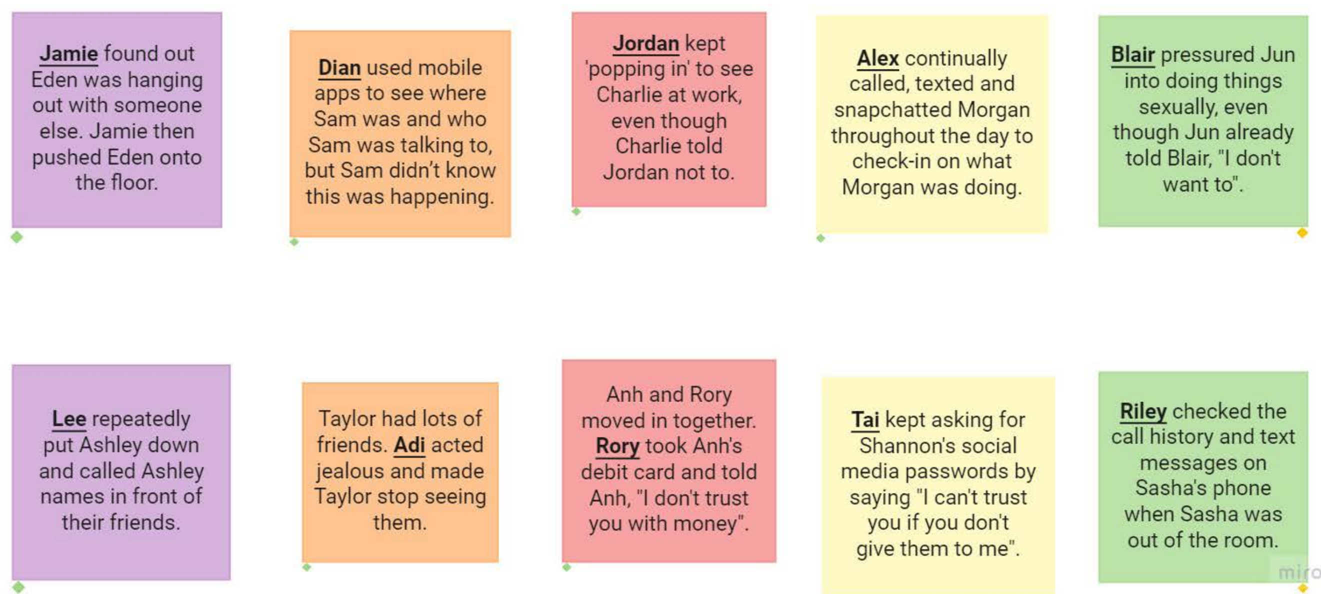
Prompt: We are now going to discuss some of the scenarios from the survey that you completed before our discussion today. I will show you a number of these **imaginary** scenarios which describe a behaviour that might happen in **romantic relationships**. I will read the scenarios out loud and then ask you some questions about each scenario.

For each imaginary scenario, I want you to think about what the person **underlined** is doing. Then I want you to decide if the underlined person's behaviour is okay, sometimes okay or not okay in a **romantic** relationship. This relationship could be between two people of any gender – we've left the details up to your imagination. We will discuss the scenarios one at a time.

Exploratory questions to guide discussion of each scenario:

1. What were some of your initial thoughts when you read what [character name] was doing in this scenario?
    - Follow-up: How would you describe [character name]'s behaviour, and why?
2. What surrounding circumstances might make you understand why [character name] is doing this?
    - Follow-up: Are there situations where this might be okay, or okay sometimes?
    - Follow-up: When would this behaviour cross the line and become not okay? I.e., at what point does the sometimes become not okay?
3. When you looked at this situation, what gender do you think [character name] was? Why?
    - Would you think differently about the scenario if [character name] was a different gender? Do you think it makes a difference which gender is doing what?

Figure 7: Scenarios used for discussion



Part three: Reflecting on scenarios (15 minutes)

Prompt: Now looking at all of the scenarios together and thinking about how you categorised them, I want to ask:

Questions:

1. Would you say that any of these scenarios are **realistic** or a normal part of being in a relationship? (Which/why?)
2. Could these scenarios be "domestic violence"? (Which/why?)
    - Clarification if needed: This question could mean *any* or *several* of the scenarios, it's open to your interpretation.
    - Follow-up: If someone did just **one** of these, would it be domestic violence?
    - Follow-up: Are some of these scenarios more or less severe than others? Why?
3. Asking a similar question but the opposite way: are there any scenarios that you would say are **not** "domestic violence"? (Which/why/why not?)
4. We are running these discussions with groups of young women and young men. Now, I want you to think about how a group of [opposite gender to current interview group] would categorise these scenarios. Do you think they would categorise the scenarios differently, or the same as you? Why?

Part four: Perceptions of domestic violence as an issue and closing (15 minutes)

Questions:

1. How common do you think domestic violence is in Australia?
    - Follow-up, if needed: Do you think domestic violence happens rarely or a lot?
    - Follow-up, if needed: Do you think domestic violence is a big problem in Australia?
2. Asking a similar question but in the opposite way: Do you think the issue of domestic violence is exaggerated?
    - Follow-up, if needed: Does domestic violence get too much attention compared to other important issues?

Prompt: To finish, I'd like to run through some of the established definitions about domestic violence if you'd be interested in hearing these?

Closing information, definitions and statistics about domestic violence

First let's think about what domestic violence is. According to agreed national and international definitions, domestic violence (or domestic abuse or intimate partner violence, as it is also called) is when one partner does things to control, bully, or hurt the other partner. It doesn't just have to be physical violence – in fact, it might not be physical at all. Most often, domestic violence involves multiple forms of violence, to create a pattern of abusive behaviour. It can be emotional, like being put down, being manipulated or blackmailed. It can also be "social", like one partner trying to control the others' social life, or by following them around and keeping tabs on them in real life or on social media. It can be sexual, such as demanding, forcing or guilt-tripping the partner into doing sexual things. And it could also involve spiritual or financial abuse (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 2019; Our Watch, 2021b).

Unfortunately, domestic violence is a problem in Australia, and it impacts women much more than men. According to the 2016 Personal Safety Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017):

- *Around 1 in 6 women and 1 in 16 men in Australia have, since the age of 15, experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former partner they lived with.*
- *Australian women are nearly three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner, and more than twice as likely to experience fear because of violence.*
- *And: almost 10 women a day are hospitalised in Australia for injuries perpetrated by a spouse or domestic partner, and on average, one woman per week in Australia is killed by a current or former partner.*

There are lots of data that show us how domestic violence has a greater impact on women than men. But there are a lot of myths floating around in the community, especially about how domestic violence isn't very common, or that men and women are equally likely to commit domestic violence. Part of what we were trying to do today was to explore how young people understand abusive behaviours, as well as young people's perspectives about domestic violence as an issue.

Questions:

1. Does any of this surprise you?
2. Does this change how you thought about some of the scenarios, or anything else we discussed today?
3. Do you have any other final thoughts or comments you want to share today before we finish up?

Notes

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY

to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children