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This is Abuse?: Young Women's Perspectives of What's 'OK' and 'Not OK' in their Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

This Welsh study explored young women's understandings of what it means to have a healthy relationship, including the negotiations of their identity and behaviour within their intimate relationships. This study was completed in seven schools in North Wales. An attitudinal questionnaire ($n = 220$) was used in order to explore their gendered attitudes, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with 25 young women aged 15–18, focused on evaluating their experiences of intimate relationships, including the impact of everyday forms of harassment and abuse experienced in schools and beyond. The results indicate that there was a general resistance to, and justification of, somewhat subtle forms of coercion, harassment and control. The findings from the questionnaire and the interviews diverge; however, the journey on both paths reveals an image of young women unable to draw on a narrative of choice in order to assert their voices, their individual needs or negotiate their pre-determined relationship script. Overall, the young women lacked the power to operationalise their egalitarian attitudes in order to engage in relationships that adhere to the description of what they expect, want or desire within a 'healthy relationship'. This study contributes to the debate on how young women negotiate the conflicts inherent in the contemporary constructions of gender and intimate relationships. The findings suggest the importance of a comprehensive educational approach, with young people focused on promoting gender equality and healthy relationships.

Keywords Young women · Attitudes · Intimate relationships · Dating · Gender norms · Goffman · Continuum of abuse

Background

If we are to understand the nature of young intimate relationships, then we must understand how young people construct meaning(s) about their sexual selves, their relationship aspirations and their attitudes towards 'good' and 'bad' relationships. The nature of young intimate relationships has shifted significantly, as 'online' relationships and the emergence of the new technologies play a key role in perpetuating gendered norms and patterns of coercion and control within young people's intimate relationships (Ringrose et al. 2012; Barter et al. 2017). Significant concerns have been identified regarding the coercive nature of teenage relationships and the confusion between 'caring'

and 'controlling' behaviour (Barter et al. 2009), with particular practices such as 'sexting' reflecting wider gendered sexual pressures.

In order to understand the nature of young people's intimate relationships, it is necessary to understand the gendered context of how young women construct their identity and how their limited choices are negotiated through their embodied practices within intimate relationships. Kelly's (1988) concept of a continuum of abusive and violent behaviour links women's everyday experiences with the common cause and consequences of abuse, which are informed by gendered inequality, social norms, roles and expectations of masculinity and femininity. Structural powers dictate gendered norms and inequalities associated with the concept of young men/men as active and controlling, and young women as passive and vulnerable (Connell 1987). Bodies develop gendered identities due to the constant 'doing' of attributes associated with masculinity or femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987), which is an active social construct that can be 'undone', in particular circumstances (Deutsch 2007). The focus is on this 'doing or undoing of gender', the impact of static and established

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norms on the power within young intimate relationships and its subsequent effect on abuse experienced within these relationships. Young women are subject to sexual ‘double standards’, whereby sexually active young men are labelled as the ‘norm,’ and sexually active young women are stigmatised or labelled in a derogatory manner as ‘slags’ or ‘sluts’ (Ringrose et al. 2012). These gendered norms provide the foundation for young people’s attitudes and expectations (Burton et al. 1998; Burman and Cartmel 2005) of their role and identity. Analysing young women’s attitudes can assist us to understand gendered ‘scripts’, the social stereotypes perpetuating these ‘scripts’ and the reinforcement of these ‘scripts’ by young people.

In their capacity as performers, individuals are concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to particular normative standards, therefore ‘staging’ the identity of particular gendered roles. Goffman (1959) adopted theatrical metaphors of ‘performances’ to explore the nature of human interactions, with the front stage performance and the back stage ‘self’ performance. As part of this self-presentation or ‘personal front’, various props and symbols are employed; for example, cues, hints and expressive gestures, emphasising the reliance on appearance, the ‘mask’ of performance and the requirement for the capacity to switch enacted roles. As if communication was a staged drama, the flow of information across daily conversations is often controlled by social norms, but is also concealed as if it were a drama, to ensure the control of our individual situated self. This idea of the influence of ‘back’ and ‘front’ stage presentation of self will be discussed further with reference to the analysis of young women’s behaviours within their intimate relationships.

As part of the ‘staged’ social interactions, Goffman (1959) discusses the idea of ‘aggressive face work’, which involves selecting a victim for whom the audience will have little sympathy. Failing to adhere to social rituals or invading another’s ‘self-territories’, as defined by Goffman (1983), is contrary to social norms. Goffman (1963) identified how individuals defined as having ‘spoiled identities’ found it a challenge to negotiate their environment. This is due to the lack of acceptance of them by others, but also Goffman explored how people’s reactions can ‘spoil’ individual identity. As explained, Goffman conceptualised social life as a staged drama, with the idea of ‘the self’ and social ritual core principles. To perform is to be an active actor that plays a role to control the flow of information and manage situations; for example, shameful situations, with social stigma playing a key part in the performance of everyday social interactions. Within this study, it is the interpersonal level of social interactions which is most of interest; in particular, when gender roles and sexuality are embodied and performed on a social, virtual/social media and intimate platform. It is during these first intimate relationships that relationship scripts are embodied and constructed, including the

patterns of relationship progression; of interest here is the degree of agency available for young women to embody or resist normative scripts and values when enacting socially constructed roles. The framework utilised here argues that social interactions are influenced and shaped by the social construction of our gendered identities. Specifically, that it’s the everyday ‘doing of’ gender that both reflects and influences young people’s roles and power within their intimate relationships.

Methods

This study adopted a ‘mixed methods’ approach, with a sample of young women aged 15–18 across seven schools in North Wales. The fieldwork commenced with an attitude questionnaire ($n = 220$) designed for this study, with a focus on gathering the perspectives of young women on gender norms and on their attitudes towards a spectrum of abuse in intimate relationships. For each school, all young women aged 15–18 were invited to complete the questionnaire in their school. Semi-structured interviews were completed with a sample of young women ($n = 25$) in order to gather a sense of the participants’ ‘lived experiences’, to triangulate the quantitative data and capture a more nuanced understanding of their experiences of intimate relationships. For all stages of the research, the sample was located within schools, primarily due to the convenience of a captive audience, whilst also enabling an insight into research participants’ everyday attitudes and experiences within their own territory and learning environment. No incentives, vouchers or rewards were offered as a form of enticement to participate, in order to avoid imposing a certain level of pressure on participants that may feel coercive (Alderson and Morrow 2011).

The research was conducted in line with the University of Lincoln ethical guidelines, with ethical approval gained from the School of Social and Political Sciences Ethical Review Panel. The ethical issues primarily revolved around consent, confidentiality and the management of any safeguarding disclosure. A key principle of the ethical planning of this research was the receipt of active, informed and recorded consent from the research participants, with each participant advised of their right to withdraw from the research up to three months after the data collection. Parents/carers were given the opportunity to provide their ‘opt out’ consent with the provision of an envelope and a particular time limit to return the ‘opt out’ consent form to the school.

As part of negotiating access to participants, several stages were filtered, commencing with a meeting with the Strategic Director for the two councils participating in the research, followed by a meeting with the Heads of Education and a presentation to the Head Teachers’ meeting representative of 14 schools across the selected research area. The crucial stage in this ‘filtering’ process was the commitment of both Heads

of Education and the Head Teachers who volunteered their participation for stage one of the research (the advisory groups). Not only did this assist in opening the gates to other schools, but their embrace of this project reflected their willingness to learn and to allow their pupils to experience new participation and learning styles. The selection of the schools for participation depended on the pre-existing commitments of the school to other projects and also the attitude of the Head Teacher towards this particular project. The research area included a mixture of rural and urban areas, with a high proportion of Welsh language speakers.

All young women within the age range who wanted to complete the questionnaire were offered the opportunity to participate until the target sample size was reached based on each school's cohort population. Several related validated questionnaires were assessed and used as guidance in order to inform the questionnaire design, not only in order to improve validity and reliability, but also in order to develop a range of age-appropriate measures with the available validated scales. Some modified questions of related questionnaires (see: Burton et al. 1998; Burman and Cartmel 2005; Ringrose et al. 2012) were used to shape initial ideas on how to formulate questions on such a sensitive topic. The use of pre-tested questions as a guide was useful but, as the questionnaire design evolved, the majority of the questions and statements finally implemented were designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire design varied, with questions which had forced choice answers, Likert Scales, open-ended questions and vignettes, allowing for a broader exploration of their attitudes and views. Vignettes were used in the questionnaire and in the interviews in order to assist with 'setting the scene' in a non-threatening manner. The tools included vignettes depicting a continuum of abusive behaviour, with one of the vignettes separated into three phases. The scenarios were aligned with the research topic in an age-appropriate format, illustrating characters and scenarios from different perspectives; survivor, perpetrator and bystander, in order to elicit reflection and critical thinking.

The qualitative sample was selected and recruited from the quantitative cohort, due to the ethical requirements of anonymity and confidentiality, locating a sub-sample directly from the quantitative stage was not practical and was an 'unrealistic' expectation of self-selection. Instead, the young women were asked, after completing the questionnaire, to place their names on a list in order to note whether they wished to participate, with a random sample then taken from this list of voluntary participants from the sampling frame.

Participants were asked to select their own pseudonyms for the interview as the intention was to place participants at ease from the start by building rapport through the use of 'ice-breakers' and vignettes. As with the questionnaire, the interview schedule was tested as part of the advisory group sessions, piloted and re-tested to ensure non-bias and age

appropriate content. The aim of the research was presented in an open manner, with a focus on the nature of young intimate relationships as a whole, rather than concentrating on abuse, harm or violence per se. The interview schedule explored the progression of their intimate relationships, in order to identify the story of each relationship, an example of a question asked is *How were feelings expressed and demonstrated in the relationship?*. Interviews explored the beginning of their relationship and the general courtship norms, followed by the unpicking of the nature of their relationships, the role of social media within relationships and their views on support and information available on relationships for young women. Open-ended questions were used to allow participants the space to describe their experiences of established intimate relationships, 'going out' with someone and also 'going on dates'. Participants with no or limited relationship experience were asked to draw upon their observations of their peers, their experiences of gender norms and their wider experiences of harassment/'catcalling' within their school and wider public spaces.

The quantitative analysis was assisted by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with the questionnaire variables numerically coded in order to assist with this process. Based on the questionnaire coding, the overall questionnaire score was calculated so that a low score reflected attitudes less accepting of traditional gendered norms and abusive behaviour patterns. Interview transcripts were individually analysed, with a focus on adopting a systematic approach based on locating epiphanies that illustrate when personal concerns become public issues (Denzin 1989), and in connecting personal and interactional experiences to structural issues (Denzin 2008). Each interview transcript was analysed and coded with reference to the research questions, the identification of key words, themes, events and epiphanies which shaped their meaning(s), with a focus on the patterns of interactions and the consequences of these interactions within the intimate relationships. A list of key themes was identified for each participant, which was then cross-referenced to produce a recurrent themes table for the whole sample. Three main themes emerged from the data: gender and relationships, sexual double standards and the nature and patterns of abuse, which weave together to provide a comprehensive picture of how participants conceptualised their position with respect to their gender and intimate relationships.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

From those surveyed 66% replied that they had relationship experience, which is lower than the rate of previous related research which sampled both young women and young men (Barter et al. 2009). The mean age of participants completing

the questionnaire was 16.5 years old, with the majority of the sample identified as heterosexual (90%). From those surveyed, 65% wanted to remain in education, whilst 69% continued to live with both parents. This sample reflected the ethnic composition and the lack of diversity in Wales, as the sample was primarily young women of white/UK origin.

A high proportion of the young women (17 of the 25) selected to speak Welsh throughout their interview. Across the sample, 15 of the young women interviewed had direct experiences of being in an intimate relationship. For many of the young women, the relationship they were describing was their first intimate relationship, with none of the relationships involving child-rearing/parenting or co-habitation. One relationship involved a step-parenting role and staying over at the boyfriend's home during the weekends, as he was older and had his own home. The data revealed that over half of the relationships discussed had lasted longer than a few months, with several of the relationships lasting beyond one year. This does link to the age of the sample, as the majority of the young women with direct relationship experience were over the age of 16 (13 of the 15 young women), which aligns to evidence that relationship experience and average relationship duration develops with age (Meier and Allen 2009). All the relationships were described as heterosexual. The remaining 40% of the sample (ten young women) reflected on their peer or family intimate relationships (primarily siblings) and vignettes. Despite the limited relationship experience of this portion of the sample, these young women drew upon their observations of their peers, their experiences of gender norms and their wider experiences of harassment/'catcalling' within their school and wider public spaces. The young women with no or limited relationship experience were generally more reflexive of their self and their relationship expectations.

Findings

The findings were disseminated to the participating schools via a presentation to the Head Teachers' forum and through Healthy Relationships workshops in the schools. The findings were also shared through a Welsh Language 'Ted Talk' event (titled in Welsh, Prosiect 15), the first of its kind, which was broadcasted on BBC Radio Wales and advertised across the media networks in Wales.

The questionnaire findings consistently demonstrated zero tolerant attitudes towards any form of abuse, with the young women noting their understanding of equality and healthy relationships. However, these attitudes did not transfer to their 'lived experiences' of their online or offline relationships described during the interviews. From the relationships described as part of the interviews, 83% featured some form of harmful behaviour; however, not all behaviours were identified as 'harmful' or abusive by participants. The presence of emotional harm was the most visible, including overt verbal

abuse, coercive and controlling behaviour. This harmful behaviour, in particular verbal abuse and controlling behaviour, was often played out within the public sphere, within view of, or at least in the knowledge of, their peers and often also their family members. This may be due to the routine of the daily contact of young people within large mixed gender groups within school and other learning environments. This is in sharp contrast to the 'hidden' nature of adult domestic violence and abuse, as it remains a hidden and highly stigmatised issue within more mature relationships. There were no explicit examples of financial abuse or direct physical harm.

Drawing upon the data, I illustrate the general disconnect between attitudes, beliefs and the reality of young women's narratives. Their inability to operationalise their attitudes on an 'everyday' basis is crucial to understanding the nature of their relationships and in shaping future prevention and support mechanisms. The young women did not describe themselves as vulnerable; rather, their narratives illustrated their lack of power and influence within their own intimate relationships. First, I illustrate the impact of the social construction of gender and gendered norms on young people's intimate relationships. Next, I illustrate how the presence of 'sexual double standards' framed the environment which allowed the presence and growth of a pattern of abusive behaviour within these young intimate relationships. Finally, the discussion focuses on the nature of abuse and demonstrates how the power of these attitudes and gendered traditions perpetuate the presence of abusive behaviour, both online and offline.

Gender Norms & Relationship Roles

Overall, the response of the quantitative sample was consistent in challenging social norms focused on the breadwinner/professional male role and the wife/caring female role. Questions within the questionnaire explored their attitudes towards particular expectations and their perception of what's 'OK' and 'not OK' within intimate relationships. For example, participants noted that it was 'not OK' for it to be expected that girlfriends '*please their boyfriends*' to ensure that their relationship 'works', with less than 5% agreement with this statement. They illustrated attitudes challenging social stereotypes of young women as 'good wives', vulnerable and passive. The level of disagreement was higher than previous research (Burman and Cartmel 2005; Burton et al. 1998), reflecting a progressive approach to traditional social norms that may be due to the creation of a space for a 'women only' questionnaire of attitudes, which contributes towards an overall sense of a shift away from the ethos of attitudes focused on traditional views.

The majority of the young women interviewed demonstrated similar relationship narratives, illustrating the dominance of gendered expectations; however, there were also dissenting voices. Despite the presence of dissenting voices, even here

there continued to be limited power in challenging the prescriptive female role and the culture around it. Participants reflected a belief that they should feel ‘lucky’ to be in an intimate relationship, with a sense of loss and embarrassment if this aim had not been achieved. There was a general sense of ‘success’ when a young woman was selected to undertake the ‘girlfriend role’ and should therefore settle for a boy willing to be part of a relationship. This reinforced the belief that young women valued relationships more than young men. This sense of gratefulness often resulted in young women remaining in unhealthy relationships. In comparison, young men were described as having a sense of entitlement, which placed them in a position of power, as the young women generally felt fortunate when they committed to an intimate relationship. This perceived ‘luck’ was expanded further when there was a sense that their social position within their peer group was improved, resulting in party invitations and inclusion in the conversations about sex and relationships. The absence of an intimate relationship was conceptualised as a void, which resulted in a natural exclusion from the conversation and had a knock-on effect on their popularity and visibility. The pressure to gain relationship experience and avoid exclusion from peer conversations was unavoidable, due to its overwhelming presence in all forms of online and offline spaces. This was in sharp contrast to the automatic entitlement of several boyfriends to attend parties and social gatherings, with this sense of entitlement often extending to their online behaviour through their surveillance of the young women’s Facebook page and the constant sending of instant messages to monitor their movements.

There were examples of the young women adapting their appearance and personalities to attract a boyfriend and to maintain their intimate relationship. The young women described how they adopted Goffman’s techniques of ‘impression management’ to stage and maintain their performance as this ‘ideal girlfriend’. For example, Chloe described how she wanted the ‘ideal relationship’, which she described as ‘going out for meals together’. This illusion of the ‘ideal relationship’ was shattered in front of her friends when she invited her boyfriend to join them on a trip to the cinema and Pizza Hut. He had ‘sulked’ and refused to talk to anyone;

What made you feel that he didn’t want to be there?
(Interviewer)

His body language, he was really quiet and sulked. When I was with my friends, he was more comfortable one to one. He would not talk to me and he argued with me about little things. When I was with my friends, he was more big headed and showing off, different person really. He made me feel uncomfortable a bit. (Chloe).

Chloe portrayed how she felt uncomfortable and embarrassed due to her boyfriend’s behaviour in front of her friends, as he

explicitly demonstrated his behaviour both verbally and through non-verbal gestures, jeopardising the image she desired to project to her friends and the ‘scene’ she wanted to present to others. The signs of Chloe’s embarrassment impacted further on her ‘character’ and her image of the ‘ideal relationship’, influencing the reality of the performance and lifting the presented ‘ideal mask’ of their relationship. Her friends were given a full glimpse behind the scene of Chloe’s performance and their relationship, enabling them to formulate a ‘bad impression’ of her boyfriend.

The complex emotion work that emerged in young women’s narratives of intimate relationships was illustrated by the management of their emotions, which was normalised; specifically, how they were required to hide their real emotions in order to avoid rejection.

The young relationship roles conceptualised utilised traditional binaries of women as caring and emotional, whilst men were seen as stable and cool. The young women implicitly subscribed to this categorisation and drew upon biological gender narratives, for example, ‘*Girls are more open and emotional ...Boys are less emotional; they tend to keep it together a bit more*’ (Becky). Here ‘emotions’ equate to rationality and young men’s perceived ability to ‘keep it together’ as they removed emotions from their prescribed role, whilst young women were ‘open’ and therefore ‘emotional’. Indeed, young women were described as ‘caring’ and ‘emotional’, whilst in contrast young men were described dominant and quick to ‘get in a mood’. The common excuse offered for their partners’ limited emotional response was due to ‘*boys being boys*’ (Bonny), and the general concern for the young men’s emotions; for example, Michelle’s view that ‘*his mood*’ was ‘fair enough’ as he had waited to have sex with her, reflecting a view that young men are more typically aligned to the notion of a dating script focused on achieving sexual aspirations (Alksnis et al. 1996).

Boyfriends often questioned why their girlfriends wanted or needed to spend time with their friends, as it was perceived that it should be enough that they now had a boyfriend, which they saw as a full-time emotional commitment. The agenda was often set by their boyfriends, with the implications of going against this routine often resulting in arguments, verbal abuse, increased controlling behaviour and the general sense that he was ‘in a mood’, which was mentioned by several young women. When young men got ‘in a mood’, the young women became compliant by modifying their behaviour in response to the increased demands of their boyfriends. When the young women become jealous, rather than becoming controlling, they would often respond by providing a greater degree of freedom and would make additional allowances. For example, they would consciously not ask their boyfriends about pictures posted on Facebook of them with another young woman. This general response, to be passive and less questioning, was due to the fear of ‘not being wanted’

(Alyesha). This suggested that young women regarded their intimate relationship opportunities as limited and not to be wasted. These adopted reactive relationships scripts (Connolly et al. 2004) reflect that young men receive greater benefits from young intimate relationships, as young women manage their own emotions to respond to their intimate relationship in a socially desirable manner.

Participants described the expectation by both parties that young men would pay for ‘stuff’ on their first date; in particular, the expected norm of paying for dinner, which reflects the view that a good date is measured by the fulfilment of the expectation that the man pays (Alksnis et al. 1996) and, as with other research, the essentialist belief that men should maintain this control (Lamont 2014). The requirement for ‘fairness’ was regarded as a need to be fair towards their male counterparts, rather than the fairness of promoting their equal position. There was also a sense that women wanted men to pay for them.

Do you think that young women and young men play different roles within relationship? (Interviewer)

Definitely, because I think guys like to be more masculine and they like to pay for things and girls tend to just, oh, if you want to pay for things, pay for it, kind of thing. But, in my relationship, he does do a lot of the paying, but I will, I’ll try and contribute, but he’ll go, no, I prefer to pay myself...girls tend to look after the guys more because they tend to need looking after, but guys tend to do more of the, like, sort of masculine side of things. (Becky)

Becky’s view is conflicting here, as she positions the adoption of a masculine role in a complementary manner to the need to ‘look after’ or care for ‘guys’. The meaning of this payment expectation was focused to some degree on chivalry; however, this changed with a greater financial expectation on young women as the relationship progressed.

The ‘check and balance’ on relationship status and progression was gendered, primarily that the young women checked the status; specifically, if the relationship was established and monogamous, as this was a “*typical girl thing*” (Alyesha). This status check was carefully planned, as “*boys feel trapped in relationships as they’re laid back...I don’t like to nag him, it’s kinda annoying*” (Glesni). On the surface it appeared that boys were more ‘laid back’ and therefore activities were negotiable, when unpicking further it became apparent that this negotiable space was limited due to “his mood”. Glesni also described that; “*Sometimes I want more, but he’s made it clear that he doesn’t want more. He decides what we do*”. The ‘more’ for Glesni here referred to her wish to have a relationship with an older young man she had been ‘seeing’. She described how a pattern had been established that he would ring her when he wanted sex. She would subsequently see him

at parties where he would ignore her and she felt as if she became ‘invisible’. This pattern was accepted, despite her wish to have a stable relationship beyond casual sex, with his behaviour excused by Glesni as “*boys find it negative to stick with one girl*” and that stereotypically “*boys are “not bothered”*”. This illustrates how young women’s choices are limited by their gender, lack of autonomy and power within their intimate relationships. Young men’s desire for an exclusive relationship, or any degree of commitment, was seen as ambivalent, to say the least. When a degree of commitment was offered, this often crossed the boundary to become controlling and oppressive. There was a general essentialist belief that young men naturally take the lead regarding particular relationship developments, so that they can ‘do gender’ and perform their masculine role.

The Gendered ‘Double Standards’ of Sexuality

The results from the quantitative analysis demonstrated a strong belief that young men and women should be treated equally with regard to sexual behaviour, for example, 90% of the sample disagreed with the statement that *Girlfriends should always be sexually available to their boyfriends* (5% noted ‘don’t know and 5% agreed with this statement). The young women’s narratives shared during the interviews revealed that overt sexual behaviour was aligned to being a ‘slag/slut’ and despite the acknowledgment that this was problematic and an unfair label, this remained mostly unchallenged and perpetuated by the young women themselves. Their experiences of a pattern of disparaging remarks and harassment further served to control their behaviour, along with the message that ‘subtly’ performing their feminine role was the solution to avoiding judgement and abuse. For example, Glain described the harassment experienced by her and her friends, including catcalling and insults focused on body image; *‘If you’re thin you’re OK, if you’re not, they call you a pig’* and insults based on appearance, in particular ‘orange makeup’ [foundation makeup]. The wearing of certain make-up was seen as overt sexual behaviour, outside the boundaries of what was judged as decent femininity (Waitt et al. 2011). Glain and Grug described the norm of teachers monitoring make-up and attending classrooms with a wet wipe to remove make-up judged as outside the school or accepted standards. Their physicality was associated with sexuality, with dress standards and make-up monitored, ensuring that young women remained ‘subtle’ and that any effort to appear attractive remained ‘invisible’. This requirement of subtlety transferred to their narratives of how their appearance and behaviours required restraint in order to avoid overtly presenting their sexuality, which may cause shock, offence or perceived sexual availability. As a result, throughout the interview Glain reiterated how she managed her behaviour and appearance to maintain her respect, *‘I have respect because I haven’t done*

anything'. Therefore, she restricted her behaviour and felt fearful of engaging in any form of sexual contact outside the remit of a well-established and long-standing intimate relationship. Basically, Glain wanted to explicitly demonstrate her role as a 'good girl', that she placed limits on her behaviour and was comfortable being 'subtle' and conforming to traditional scripts. Glain adopted her own strategy to regulate her behaviour in order to ensure passivity, inhibit asserting herself sexually and deny her sexual agency (Holland et al. 2004).

Ultimately, young women learn to restrict themselves, specifically with regard to their physical appearance and sexual choices. The narratives illustrated their limited choices and dilemma, either of becoming sexually restrained or overtly sexually active; both polar extremes. There were also examples of young women who selected to be sexually active within their relationships; however, this information was often well established within their peer group. How this information was conceptualised and shared was at the mercy of their peer group or close friends. Their perceived available space was to be passive and preserve their appearance, and essentially their reputation, again in a 'subtle' manner; to become invisible and avoid the label of slut/slag, or to openly share their photos, information and sexual experiences. This notion of abstinence was cloaked as being 'subtle', as sexuality and sex were conceptualised as 'dirty' and unhealthy. Those who did select to be 'subtle' were mostly those not actively within relationships, not engaging in social media discussions or invited to attend social events. Also, my research diary entry highlights a sense of an urgent need for the majority of participants to discuss their sexual experiences on a one-to-one basis within the confidential context of a research interview; in particular, their first sexual experience. In part, this illustrated a lack of space for young women to talk freely and ask advice about their sexuality and sex without the fear of judgement and repercussions. The dichotomy of presenting their body in a 'subtle' manner to avoid judgement and the need to be attractive/desirable, served as a barrier to seeking adult guidance. This also often occurred within the context of unwanted male attention and harassment.

Glain described how she had received a plethora of requests for 'nudies' one evening; she felt pressurised, reflecting recent evidence that young people are often coerced to take a naked selfie or video (Martellozzo et al. 2016). She decided to tackle these unwanted requests by first peeling an apple and sending a picture of a 'naked' apple. As the requests continued, she took a photo of a bath sponge and declared it as a nudie of 'Sponge Bob'.¹ There was a sense of an underlying threat of embarrassment if behaviour contravened social norms, illustrating the social control and expectation that

young women collude to sustain their continued subordination of their sexuality (Holland et al. 2004). As reflected by Glain, steps had to be taken to modify her behaviour in order to avoid embarrassment and shame, but this was done with a sense of humour to deflect these unwanted requests in a creative manner. Glain demonstrated her own surveillance of her position and behaviour to ensure that she was 'subtle' and conformed to normative gender standards in order to avoid judgement or an unwanted label. Glain reinforced the 'subtle' choices she makes and the attention she pays to the actions of others when deciding the boundaries of permissible sexual behaviour for herself. Glain saw it as positive that she had modified her behaviour to become 'subtle'. This essentially meant that she managed her appearance and behaviour in a manner that was socially desirable. She did not see her need for subtlety as a hindrance, rather as a necessary expectation of being a young woman seeking respect, subsequently qualifying her actions as 'but I'm weird'.

Young women's sexual role is limited by the ingrained notion of young women as sexual beings synonymous with being a slut/slag/whore. For the young women, name-calling was a norm within their intimate relationships;

My friends didn't like him cos he would call me names like 'slag'. He would call me a 'slag' and I would swear at him. The arguments would start when he would come up to me and accuse me of things, but I would argue back. He would try to show that I was the 'bad one' (Lowri).

This verbal abuse was naturalised as part of the jealous male role, was often played out within public spaces, primarily the school, and often attempted to discredit the perceived actions of their girlfriends.

There was a general expectation that "*women need to do more sexual [sex acts]*" (Jennifer). In Jennifer's case, she had been with her boyfriend for over a year and explained that their relationship had become acrimonious, describing that there was "*quite a lot of arguing...everything builds up...if he's in a mood*". She described that a key trigger for their arguments was his open discussion with his friends about their sex life, the influence of porn on their relationship and, in particular, his request to have a threesome, which made her feel that "*basically, I've got to do what makes him happy*". Jennifer described that her boyfriend '*sees how girls are in these films [porn films] and is influenced by it. They get paid, I'm not and I'm not doing everything. Boys naturally want threesomes, why?*'. Jennifer explained the pressure she felt to please her boyfriend by doing '*more sexually*', which he then discussed in the school common room with his friends. The emotion work for Jennifer was apparent; specifically, how she attempted to hide her disgust and indeed her choice not to have a threesome with her boyfriend. She felt trapped by her

¹ Sponge Bob Square Pants is a cartoon character of a Sponge who lives underwater in a fictional underwater city.

limited negotiation space and the apparent demand to prioritise her boyfriend's desires, which he openly discussed with their peers. Her initial unwanted feelings of disgust had been 'managed' and suppressed during the course of this relationship. Jennifer was continuing to challenge her boyfriend's demands and was working to prioritise her desires. By doing so, she also could not envisage a future for this relationship. Jennifer on the one hand described how she maintained the 'facework' of her girlfriend role when presenting her role to the audience in the 'open' common room chat about her sex life, whilst on a private level she begun to challenge her boyfriend's lack of respect of her privacy and dignity. Jennifer distances herself from the women portrayed in these films 'as they get paid', as she naturalises his apparent sexual desire to have a threesome and separates herself from sex workers who are paid to feign desire and sexual pleasure. She expressed her concerns regarding the influence of pornography on her boyfriend's expectations; implicit in this is the recognition of porn as a tool used to satisfy male needs through the submission of women.

A year nine pupil in one school sent a video clip of herself masturbating via Facebook to another pupil; she had not intended that this video would then be shared with her peers and across her local community. As this video was sent via Facebook rather than Snapchat, the clip was saved and subsequently circulated to the whole school community without her consent. As a result, she was labelled a 'slag' in the school, and indeed across the community, and ostracised; described as now 'having no-one'. As illustrated, the version(s) of this story shaped the moral and sexual landscape of the school for the pupils.

A year nine girl sent a video of herself via Facebook, someone saved it and then circulated the video, she was masturbating in the video. She was called a 'slut', she was upset, but also bragging about it. ...No one cares if a boy does that [masturbating] cos a video of a boy masturbating was also sent round the school, he didn't come to school for a week and then it was forgotten, but with this girl it went on for a long time (Julie)

And yet another version by Mair:-

Everyone turned against her and called her a slag, she has no one, she sits on her own. She does with people, but they aren't real with her. I would say that this has affected her. Everything's forgotten with boys.

There was a sense of panic around this young woman's overt sexual action, resulting in her stigmatization by her peers and the wider community. Indeed, the moral debate and the panic had arisen from the knowledge that she masturbated and dared to explore sexual pleasure. Conversely, within the same

school and time period, a young man had consensually circulated a picture of himself masturbating. As a result, he remained off school unwell for a week, after which the incident was described as 'ancient history' and he was then a 'bit of a legend'. The labels of 'slag', 'slut' or 'whore' were endured as a form of misery by this young woman, and exercised through the social mechanisms of reputation (Holland et al. 2004). This young woman was subjected to these labels as a symbolism of shame, with this shame prolonged by rumours, bravado and mythical stories of overt female sexuality, and with the sharing of this rumour used as a form of social currency (Marwick and Boyd 2014) in order to build the recognition of some at the expense of this young woman and her 'spoiled identity' (Goffman 1963). As result of how she was seen and located by 'others' (as an outsider), she was symbolised as a 'slut/slag' who endured this label as a form of misery, evidenced by her ostracism, not only by her peers, but also by the wider community. This illustrates how shame and embarrassment promotes self-control through a social hierarchy, focused on rewarding those who align their behaviour with social norms (Cahill 1995). The young man's sexual exploit was accepted as a 'joke' and a positive demonstration of his sexuality. The power of these rumours and insults increased as the social consequences of such labelling became apparent, highlighting the risk for young women when demonstrating their sexual desires (Jackson and Cram 2003).

The Nature and Patterns of Abuse

Several of the statements within the Likert Tables in the questionnaire focused on exploring the concept of violence and abuse by conceptualising a myriad of behaviours on a continuum of violence and abuse (Kelly 1988). The questionnaire design focused on unpicking their 'naming' of abuse, but also on exploring their attitudes towards the gendered expectation of 'pleasing your boyfriend'. From the analysis of this data, it is possible to draw out some conclusions regarding their attitudes towards overtly abusive behaviour and coercive control. Their overarching attitudes was focused on condemning the abuse of young women, with a recognition that threatening behaviour as a whole was unacceptable, including the wider spectrum of abuse beyond direct violence. Forms of controlling behaviour, such as selecting friends, sexual coercion and financial control were overwhelmingly regarded as 'not OK'. Despite this, the confusion around care and control was evident, and resembled findings from previous research (Barter et al. 2009). The several forms of justifications offered in response to violent behaviour, mainly the act of 'slapping', were overwhelmingly rejected. This gave a clear indication of the unacceptability of various excuses, from retaliation, jealousy, intoxication and apologising after the abusive incident. In keeping with this notion of a continuum of abuse,

unwanted groping/touching was overwhelmingly regarded as harmful by the participants.

Reflecting on the interview data, the most common form of abuse was emotional. For this purpose, emotional abuse was defined as including a continuum of behaviour perceived as abusive and harmful, as well as verbal abuse and threatening and controlling behaviour. Whilst there are examples within this research of emotional abuse mutually occurring, the young women within this research primarily spoke of their emotional and verbal abuse as reactive to their boyfriend's behaviour.

The influence of *'his mood'* in dictating the relationship's landscape was visible throughout several of the narratives. Whilst explicitly discussing their acknowledgement of this mood change, and indeed their dislike of its consequences, its impact was minimised and framed by the young women as a *'fear of losing them'*. This was irrespective of the build-up towards an argument. As Michelle explained:

I wanted to go with my friends on New Year's Eve. I wanted to look at the option of splitting the evening between him and my friends, he 'got in a mood' and said that he was not happy and placed a sad face on 'my story' on snapchat. I changed my plans with my friends, once he got his own way he was ok.

In several instances, control was focused on social contact with friends;

He wouldn't let me go and see my friends, only in the evenings. If I saw them lunchtime, then he would go off in a mood. He expected me to stay with him lunchtimes. My friends would say, 'you need to leave him or you won't have anyone, but I didn't listen, I lost them in the end, but I got them back. (Lowri)

Again, *'his mood'* played a key part in triggering controlling behaviour and limiting Lowri's movements, as if she was within an 'invisible cage' (Stark 2007). Across the sample, there was a general expectation of being in touch and reporting movements. When attending social gatherings or parties by themselves, there was a general description of a specific line of questioning at the pre-party stage, *'Why can't I come? Who else will be there? Where's the party?'*. Whilst the party was in full flow they described receiving multiple messages and phone calls and, post-party, one young woman described being questioned by her boyfriend two weeks after the event. The result of going against his wishes was further surveillance via multiple calls, text messages and automatic accusations, *'If I was doing something with my friends I would get loads of missed calls- he would ask, are you with boys? , 'no', 'don't lie to me' (Rhiannon).*

Aleysha described the power imbalance in her relationship with an older male, perpetuated by their age gap, role and responsibilities. When she went out with her friends, he decided when she returned home, as he would collect her in his car. A rejection of his offer would commence a line of questioning focused on *'who's giving you a lift? Where are you staying then?'*. She felt that this established routine resulted in his power over her social arrangements, her movements and when she returned home. However, she had no control over when he returned home after a night out, and would attempt to address this by staying up all night to await his phone call or his return to stay at her home. Again, this reinforced his position of power, which was justified and naturalised by her belief that *'boys want to be in control and they decide'*, with any reaction to his behaviour as a result of her going into *'psychotic girlfriend mode'*. She also felt that if she did not have sex with him, her role within the relationship would become redundant.

The 'doing' of sex for young women ignites a web of controversy and dilemma, often placing them in an impossible position. The often unspoken dilemma of their decision-making process of agreeing or disagreeing to have sex was a key theme weaving throughout their narratives. However, the consequences of their potential refusal to have sex were overtly known and questioned; *'What if they don't like me if I don't do it?' (Rhiannon)* and *'When you say 'no', they say 'f**k off then' if you're not going to do that' (Aleysha)*. The consequences of refusing sexual consent were framed in the aggression of the language used. This was further confirmed by the message that *'If you don't have sex with them, they won't want you' (Aleysha)*. This rejection and coercion was overtly conveyed by the change in mood and character of their boyfriends, as they would either *'get in a mood'* or *'sulk'* if they faced a rejection or a refusal of their sexual advances.

The analysis of Elen's experience reflects the common features of emotionally harmful and coercive behaviour; in particular, the unequal power relations within young intimate relationships and the dominance of young women by young men. Chloe demonstrates her confusion and concern about the potential judgement from her peers, her self-blame of not feeling ready to have sex and primary concern of what she saw as the impact on her boyfriend of not knowing *'where he stood'*.

I was resigned to the idea of sex after a period of seven months- 'do it with the right person'. I was worried what they [her friends] would think...it's important to me what they thought ... I had previously said that I wasn't ready, then said that I was more ready to progress the relationship. The uncertainty meant that he didn't know where he stood (Chloe)

The fact that she felt 'resigned' to have sex reflects that she felt it was a duty to have sex at this time; essentially, that as the

relationship and time progressed, this was an expectation on her as a girlfriend. Chloe also voices the dilemma of pleasing her boyfriend, despite her concern of being judged by her peers, with her wishes and desires secondary to this concern. The consequences of sexual coercion, both subtly and overtly, resulted in participants questioning their self-worth and character if they submitted to both unwanted and wanted advances. This illustrates the sexual coercion of meeting male sexual desires within their timescales, with the sanctions of refusing to respond well known and rehearsed. Furthermore, participants questioned the uncharted territory of first sexual experiences; *'taking a step back'* once the realm of sexual activity had been entered.

Arguments were generally normalised as acceptable within intimate relationships; however, a line was drawn when the arguments became physical or threatening, with an acknowledgement by the young women interviewed that this was unacceptable. There were several examples of boyfriends approaching their girlfriends and shouting abuse close in their face, invading personal space and causing fear, *"He would shout in my face and that would make me feel uncomfortable. But when he said 'sorry', that would mean a lot to me"*. (Lowri). Despite the advice from Lowri's friends that her boyfriend was nasty, she justified his behaviour and was reassured by his constant apologising. This was despite his actions of frequently humiliating her in front of her peers, with examples of explicit verbal abuse within the school grounds during break and lunchtimes. However, peers were often influential in triggering arguments and abusive outbursts,

He would also accuse me of talking with other boys on social media...I would get upset and stay quiet. At the end of the day he would come up to me and apologise as his friends had said that they had been joking. His friends would get in his head (Lowri).

The escalation of controlling and verbal abuse was focused on the physical display of *'his mood'*, with his temper escalating to a physical outburst involving damage to property and objects, as illustrated by Bonnie.

If he lost his temper, how would he show that?
(Interviewer)
Punching things (Bonnie)
Just go round punching things? (Interviewer)
Yeah. I just said, what is the point? You're going to regret that in about half an hour, when you've got to clean up all the glass and everything. I wouldn't clean it for him. You made it, you can clean it. (Bonnie)

There was a sense of 'calmness' voiced by the young women placed in these types of circumstances; however, closer examination would suggest that this calmness was a lack of control

or power to divert the situation or the escalation in behaviour, and the justification and naturalisation of this behaviour:

He stormed out punching the walls; he has a short behaviour anger thing. He had a bad day at work and I was provoking him. I just thought, 'what are you doing?' I've seen it with my older brother, for some girls it would have been more scary, but I've seen it before. You have to meet their needs and their wants (Aleysha).

Aleysha describes how her boyfriend physically displays his anger and excuses his behaviour as a *'short behaviour anger thing'*, *'due to his bad day in work'* and her perception of self-blame that she was *'provoking him'*. She justifies his behaviour and blames herself, whilst explaining that this is natural male behaviour that she has witnessed with her brother. Her self-blame extends further to illustrate her coping mechanism when she claims that there is a requirement to *'meet their wants and needs'*, and failure to do so therefore have consequences. This resolution of damaging or throwing items was common, and often justified as a male behaviour trait triggered by temper and tendency to sulk.

The shame and stigma of being in a 'bad relationship' was also apparent as, *'I don't know because with most people, if they are in one of them bad relationships, they don't exactly talk about it, no. Just like, yeah, yeah, we're okay.'* (Bonnie). Bonnie illustrates the pressure of the emotion work of managing her emotions in order to hide her true feelings, due to the norm of 'not talking about it', and due to the view of not being believed.

Discussion

This article has argued that gender norms shape young women's power and space to operationalise their attitudes and beliefs of gender equality within their own intimate relationships. The research adopted a 'mixed methods' approach, and was designed to build on existing knowledge in order to offer an in-depth understanding of how young women conceptualise the nature and patterns of behaviour within young intimate relationships. As this was a small scale study, the intention was not to establish prevalence, but rather to propose a fresh perspective on young intimate relationships by drawing upon Kelly's continuum of abusive and violent behaviour and Goffman's theory of self-presentation. The advantages offered by adopting a 'mixed methods' approach included a focus on evaluating the attitudes of young women, whilst also conducting an in-depth qualitative analysis of their experiences. Adopting this combination of methods revealed the tensions between the survey and interview responses, which has methodological implications for further research in this area.

If we are to understand the nature and patterns of abuse in teenage relationships, then we must understand how young people construct meaning(s) about their gender, their sexual selves, their relationship aspirations and their understanding of attitudes towards ‘good’ and ‘bad’ relationships. Creating the space for a ‘women-only’ questionnaire on attitudes towards young intimate relationships provided an overall sense of a shift away from the ethos of attitudes which are accepting of particular violence and abuse in specific circumstances.

The gap between young women’s expectations and lived experiences was clear. It was identified that the young women were able to articulate ‘healthy’ relationship attitudes, both with reference to equal gender roles and their views on the role of young women within intimate relationships. Their attitudes were focused on an ideology of equality, whereas their intimate relationship experiences generally revealed their limited and unequal power base. The young women interviewed naturalised and justified abusive behaviour in their ‘passive’ or ‘reactive’ girlfriend role; in particular, when faced with harassment, controlling behaviour and unwanted attention. The presence of gendered norms was damaging for young women in three distinct ways. Firstly, due to the construction of the young women’s propensity to be ‘emotional’; secondly, their perceived sexual weakness in contrast to male dominance and desire and thirdly, the justification and naturalisation of emotional, abusive and coercive behaviour. This indicates the challenges posed by a post-feminist society, where aspirations and narratives of equality are far removed from their perceived and real positions in intimate relationships.

There was a general resistance to, and justification of, somewhat subtle forms of coercion, harassment and control. The extent of acceptability was shaped by their image of traditional gendered norms and expectations. In many instances, the young women failed to propose an alternative script to the hegemonic masculinity they were experiencing within their own intimate relationship. The popular narratives of men’s ‘nature’ were reinforced when prioritising what young men wanted from relationships, primarily as a result of the fear of rejection. Not only did this reinforce the perspective that male demands and desires were prioritised, but also that the notion of casual sex was accepted, as men are naturally commitment-phobic. This sense of symbolic gendering (Lamont 2014), basically the norm or cultural feature of courtship, revealed the perceived benefits and comfort gained from accepting established gendered scripts, rather than suffering the consequences of non-conformity. Thus it was permitted and expected for young men to have a focus on the physicality of intimate relationships. The ingrained fear of transgressing gender norms and challenging this sexual emphasis placed young women within the quandary of ‘sexual double standards’. It was apparent that young women lacked the power to operationalise their egalitarian attitudes in order to engage in

relationships that adhere to the description of what they expect, want or desire within a ‘healthy relationship’. As a default position, they relied and drew upon normative scripts which were focused on essentialist beliefs. The young women undertook the daily ‘impression management’ of performing both the ‘doing of gender’ and their perceived ‘ideal girlfriend’ role, often to their own detriment. The young women demonstrate how they carefully managed their ‘performance of self’ and the management of their own identity. It can be argued that barriers preventing the operationalisation of their attitudes, beliefs, wishes and feelings reinforced gender differences, providing unstable grounding for a change towards ‘real’ gender equality. The young women performed what they saw as the expected girlfriend role to satisfy the needs of their audience; essentially, to maintain what Goffman termed as ‘facework’ and paying ‘lip service’ to their boyfriend’s demands to the detriment of their own self-development of identity.

The experiences of the young women interviewed reflected the impact of these forms of abuse on their overall well-being, both physical and emotional. The harm, upset and impact of the abuse was reflected in the deterioration of their physical and emotional well-being, with the abuse often leading to their isolation from their community as a whole. The impact on their identity was also evident in several ways. Firstly, their lack of power and control to operationalise their attitudes and beliefs of healthy relationships as part of their intimate relationships, therefore the need to re-shape their beliefs in order to have an intimate relationship. Secondly, the requirement for young women to be ‘passive’, again with regard to sharing their true beliefs, but also with regard to their ability to share their desires and sexual identity, specifically due to the oppressive constant presence of gendered ‘sexual double standards’. Young women’s identities often became ‘spoilt’ when they acted in a manner that was perceived to be contrary to social norms and the presumed ‘natural’ sexual passivity in women. The challenge faced by the young women interviewed of negotiating a female identity, with shifting appropriateness of this ‘double standard’ dictated by the requirement to be virginal, whilst also available to sexually please the opposite sex. Due to their lack of power, the ‘emotion work’ was undertaken in order to disguise their true feelings and beliefs of their wishes, desires and their concept of a healthy relationship. They had the knowledge and understanding of the meaning of a healthy relationship, but lacked the power or control to challenge unacceptable or abusive behaviours. Finally, participants described negotiating their identity and the ‘performance of self’ within settings and communities which actively restricted their identity, behaviour, physical choice and liberty.

As part of the questionnaire and the interviews, the young women were able to demonstrate clear knowledge of the support services available, both on a local and national level. The negative experiences of feeling shame, stigma, sexism and

harassment both online and offline was oppressive and visible. Whilst this visibility means that the patterns of abuse in young people's intimate relationships and wider communities are transparent rather than hidden, it also raises the challenge of addressing harmful behaviour that is well known, rehearsed and permitted. This is a key challenge for any prevention interventions with young people. Despite the general willingness of the participants to access support services, barriers to accessing support were identified. Firstly, the lack of services to discuss the emotional aspects of intimate relationships; secondly, the shame and stigma of acknowledging being in a 'bad relationship'; thirdly, the need for person-centred and confidential professional support; and finally, young people's confidence in the ability and suitability of specific professionals to deliver prevention sessions linked to their understanding of the key issues.

This research identified the need to ensure that the right intervention is offered, at the right level, by the right person, as the consequences of providing the inappropriate 'sympathetic individual' can result in provision that appears to patronise, trivialise and alienate, rather than engage young people. This also indicates the importance of co-producing teaching materials on these topics with young people and the need to continuously evaluate the impact of prevention programmes in schools. The key issue identified was not focused on a gap in knowledge or a general unwillingness by the young women to access support if required; but rather on the lack of power of the young women to operationalise their knowledge as part of their intimate relationships. The young women's narratives illustrated the challenge of shifting young men's power, due to the cultural attitudes that perpetuate established hierarchical gendered identities, which favour men over women. Therefore, prevention education needs to have a practical focus on providing young women with the ability to apply their understanding of relationship equality to their reality, whilst preparing young men to relinquish their power and privilege. Furthermore, the young women's narratives revealed a lack of understanding of what it means to operationalise equality in intimate relationships in order to have equal power. Preparing young men to relinquish at least a portion of their power needs to be incorporated as part of prevention education. Prevention programmes geared towards empowering young women should focus on promoting their confidence and individual agency. This re-evaluation will assist young women to construct their position in a manner that reduces the likelihood that any form of negotiation and power comes at a cost. This cost, seen within their narratives, was the emotion work of the management of this power imbalance and the requirement to 'subtly' perform their expected girlfriend role, due to the lack of negotiating space within their intimate relationships. The gaps between young women's attitudes,

their desires, expectations and their 'everyday' experiences, draws attention to the complex dilemma for young women when performing their role in intimate relationships.

Research Limitations

This study was small-scale in nature and is not intended to be representative of the UK or indeed Wales as a whole. The questionnaire drew its sample from schools in a particular area of Wales, and although it provides a snapshot of the attitudes towards young intimate relationships within this area, these results are not generalisable, given the nature of the schools and the area. The results are not necessarily unique to this particular sample; however, due to the limited diversity in ethnicity of the sample, not all the results can be generalised beyond this group. Despite purposively selecting a sample to include a diverse range of schools in terms of student composition, the total sample comprised a small percentage of all schools in the region. Strong patterns emerged in the views of young women across the different schools, which suggest the significant role of gendered norms in shaping meaning(s) of abuse in teenage intimate relationships. However, this understanding was not attributed to specific groups of young women based on particular identity traits or demographic information. Future research should strive to elicit specifically whether differences in the meaning(s) of abuse can be established across a range of intersectional needs, e.g., social class status. Although this research did include young women from diverse backgrounds, the overall sample size limited the ability to conduct this degree of analysis. The lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the sample provides little opportunity for exploring the ways that racial identities interact with their 'doing of gender' or their attitudes and experiences of their intimate relationships.

Conclusion

The findings from the questionnaire and the interviews diverge; however, the journey on both paths reveals an image of young women unable to draw on a narrative of choice in order to assert their voice, their individual needs or negotiate their pre-determined relationship script. The analysis identified the impact of gendered expectations on young women's abilities to navigate the 'uncharted territory' of young intimate relationships. Overall, the attitudes of participants questioned the acceptability of abuse within heterosexual and same sex relationships. Moreover, this position was further challenged by their lack of tools with which to address these inequalities, or negotiate their degree of power within intimate relationships, within a period where there is a presumption of equality.

This research contributes original findings to the current gap in the UK academic literature on the progression of young intimate relationships, gender and dating norms, and the continuum of abusive behaviour within these relationships. Firstly, by making an empirical contribution at a time when little empirical work has been completed with young women in Wales; in particular, qualitative research. Secondly, the research findings further develop an under-researched area of research on gendered norms by shifting the analytical focus in order to identify the pattern of behaviour that shapes the power dynamics within intimate relationships. Finally, it offers findings that contribute to existing debates on developing prevention and early interventions education for and with young people.

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