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“Like there’s a difference between love and respect”: The romanticization of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics

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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**“LIKE THERE’S A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LOVE AND RESPECT”: THE  
ROMANTICIZATION OF ABUSE AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP  
DYNAMICS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

by

**Sona Kaur**

December 2021

The Dissertation of Sona Kaur  
is approved:

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Peter Biehl  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2021

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## **Abstract**

“Like there’s a difference between love and respect”: The romanticization of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics

Sona Kaur

Behaviors that occur during romantic courtship have been implicated in intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, suggesting a fine line between romance and IPV. This dissertation explores the phenomenon of romanticized abuse to examine under which contexts relationship abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics are likely to be perceived as normal, desirable, and romantic by heterosexual women. Across 12 focus groups, 53 women responded to hypothetical vignettes depicting two characters, Lucas and Maya, to explore their general perceptions of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics. Specific dynamics that were explored were Lucas’ use of surveillance, cybersurveillance, jealousy, isolation, possessive/controlling behavior, and persistent pursuit to pursue Maya and establish a relationship with her. Throughout the discussion, participants were presented with alternate scenarios that asked them to consider how their perceptions would change were Lucas engaging in these tactics when he and Maya were in a committed relationship or were not dating (no date had been established, or they had broken up). Participants were also asked to consider how their perceptions would change if Maya were pursuing Lucas through these tactics instead. The results suggest that the relationship phase during which unhealthy and abusive behaviors occur, as well as the gender of the pursuer, shapes identification of and understandings of these dynamics in critical ways. While overall participants

perceived the scenarios negatively, they were most likely to romanticize these dynamics during courtship, and they indicated that Lucas was engaging in these behaviors due to internalized gender stereotypes, having sincere feelings for Maya, media socialization of gender roles and romance, and due to being shy and lacking dating experience. When Lucas continued to engage in these behaviors when in a committed relationship with Maya, participants perceived his actions as being driven by his insecurity and lack of trust in Maya. When he continued to pursue Maya through the same tactics when he and Maya were not dating, participants expressed the most safety concerns and advocated for safety planning, including reporting Lucas and seeking support from others. Across all phases, participants described Conflicts and Contradictions, in which they romanticized and problematized different parts of Lucas and Maya's relationship and simultaneously expressed a desire to date Lucas, while also having extreme concerns around safety and potential harm. Finally, when considering a gender role reversal where Maya pursued Lucas through these various tactics, participants emphasized how gender stereotypes minimized abuse perpetrated by women, serving as a barrier to support seeking for male victims. This study reveals the unique ways in which the phase of the relationship when the pursuit is occurring, and the gender of the pursuer, shapes women's perceptions. These factors facilitate the recognition and minimization of abuse differently and can inform prevention and intervention efforts by highlighting how the relationship context and gender of the pursuer and target influence when women are more likely to identify, romanticize, problematize, and seek support for psychological/emotional abuse.

## **Dedication**

For Sunita—my sister, best friend, partner-in-crime, and the fiercest person I know.

## **Acknowledgements**

I have thought about this section for so long and cannot believe that I'm finally at the point where I can sit down, reflect back to the beginning of my graduate school journey, and think about what it took to get here and the many people who supported me in reaching this point.

Thanks so much to all my mentors who supported, advocated for, and were patient with me as I found my way through graduate school. To my advisor, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen, thank you for taking me on as a student, for pushing me to be a better researcher, and for giving me the space to explore my own questions at my own pace. I came in with countless research interests and potential directions I wanted to go. I never felt like I had to choose just one direction, one type of project, or one area of study. I'm also extremely appreciative of your support as I explored opportunities to engage with violence research and prevention work outside of academia.

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To Dr. Adriana Manago, thanks so much for serving on my committee and for your guidance throughout this process! You probably don't know this, but you



unknowingly cultivated several opportunities where I was able to have conversations with and learn from invited media scholars studying gender and violence. These opportunities helped facilitate my thinking about romanticized abuse specifically, and helped generate a number of research questions, some of which I have attempted to explore in this dissertation.

To the countless undergraduate research assistants who have supported this study, to various degrees and at various points in time—I could not have done this without you! Thanks specifically to Isabel DeLano and Xena Refaie, for being there from the very beginning as I was developing this project and piloting the study. Thanks to Natalie Barnett, Erika Pe, Michelle Bostaph, and Megan Ogden, who put in countless hours of recruitment, data collection, and analysis. I’m so appreciative of the conversations we’ve had about this work, offering your own insights, and challenging my own. Our deep dive meetings about the transcripts were some of the most generative conversations I’ve had.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

“Like there’s a difference between love and respect”: The romanticization of abuse  
and unhealthy relationship dynamics

“Why do we stay? Because we are convinced we love this person, that things will change, that it’s our fault, that it will get better and that we are nothing without them.”  
(Hayes & Jeffries, 2013, p. 67)

### **Intimate Partner Violence Against Women and its Consequences**

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse, is a serious public health and social concern with long-lasting effects on survivors (Black et al., 2011; Saltzman et al., 2002). IPV comes in many forms. Physical violence involves behaviors such as being kicked, slapped, shoved, grabbed or choked. Sexual violence consists of rape, unwanted sexual contact, and sexual coercion. Psychological aggression includes humiliating and insulting a partner, as well as coercive control (e.g., monitoring a partner’s actions). Studies indicate that women experience multiple forms of IPV simultaneously (e.g., Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). While people of all genders experience it, women are more likely to be victimized by male perpetrators across all forms of IPV, and the impact is more severe for female victims (Breiding et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2017; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Walters et al., 2013). Estimates based on data collected between 2010-2012 through the National Intimate Partner and Sexual

Violence Survey (NISVS) indicate that 37% of women experience IPV in their lifetimes (vs. 31% of men), with 32% reporting physical violence (vs. 28% men), 16% reporting contact sexual violence (vs. 7% men), and 10% experiencing stalking (vs. 2% men). Importantly, psychological aggression is the most common form of IPV experienced by both men and women, with prevalence rates of 47% for men and women each (Smith et al., 2017).

As noted, women are more likely to experience adverse impacts due to IPV compared to men, many of which last even after a relationship has ended (Ismail et al., 2007). Negative mental health is common, including high levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bonomi et al., 2006; Chronister et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2010; Lutgendorf, 2019; Smith et al., 2017). Women impacted by severe violence are eight times more likely to attempt suicide compared to the general population (Fanslow & Robinson, 2004). Distrust of future dating partners, social isolation, and the discontinuing of extra-curricular activities have been reported by women (Chronister et al., 2014; Ismail et al., 2007). Physical and sexual health is also severely impacted, including eating and sleep disturbances, substance abuse, high blood pressure, chronic pain, and inconsistent condom use (Bonomi et al., 2006; Chronister et al., 2014; Coker et al., 2000; Coker, 2007; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Ismail et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2017).

Furthermore, IPV disrupts women's academic and professional lives. An abusive partner may engage in "school sabotage" against his partner by harassing and stalking her when she's at work or school to prevent educational access (Chronister et

al., 2014). A decline in academic performance, absenteeism, and concentration difficulties have also been reported (Chronister et al., 2014; Ismail et al., 2007; McLean & Bocinski, 2017). In dealing with the aftermath of physical violence, women may be forced to take time off from work and school, resulting in lost wages affecting financial earnings in the long term (McLean & Bocinski, 2017). Survivors also suffer financial losses more directly: women experiencing physical abuse have annual health care costs that are 42% higher than women who were not abused, while costs for nonphysical abuse are 33% higher (Bonomi et al., 2009).

### **Psychological/Emotional Abuse**

Scholars have made distinctions between the experience of partner “violence” and “abuse.” According to Murphy and Smith (2010), relationship violence involves physical acts of aggression and can result in physical pain or injuries. Relationship abuse is broader and along with physical harm, it can also lead to emotional or social consequences (e.g., limited personal autonomy, social isolation). Also referred to more specifically as psychological or emotional abuse, coercive acts such as controlling the victim’s actions, isolating them from friends and family, and stalking (Saltzman et al., 2002) can be defined as relationship abuse. Such tactics have similarly been conceptualized under the Power and Control Wheel, a framework describing strategies men use to maintain control over women in violent relationships (Pence & Paymar, 1993). This is similar to what Belknap and Sharma (2014) call “stealth (nonviolent) gender-based abuse” (p. 181), which involves stalking (including cyberstalking) and non-violent sexual abuse (e.g., verbal sexual coercion). Economic abuse and

minimizing, denying, or blaming the abuse/violence on another are additional tactics used to maintain power and control in relationships (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; Pence & Paymar, 1993).

Murphy and Smith (2010) further break down relationship abuse as being either emotional or social in nature. Emotional abuse includes behaviors meant to harm a partner's self-worth and confidence, such as verbal aggression (e.g., hostile comments), public debasement (e.g., insulting a partner in public), personal putdowns (e.g., insulting a partner privately), and gender denigration (e.g., gender-specific insults). These behaviors are arguably more problematic on the surface and may be what comes to mind when considering psychological/emotional abuse. This is exemplified in research analyzing the Twitter hashtag, #MaybeHeDoesntHitYou by McCauley et al. (2018), where one individual writes, "#MaybeHeDoesntHitYou but he breaks your possessions when he's mad" (p. 887). On the other hand, while social abuse restricts women's autonomy, it is less likely to directly harm their self-esteem and confidence in the same way as emotional abuse (Murphy & Smith, 2010). Such abuse comes in the form of jealousy and possessiveness, social restriction (e.g., limiting access to social, educational, and professional resources) and exit-control tactics (e.g., preventing a woman from emotionally disconnecting from an undesired relationship). These are arguably more likely to be seen as positive indicators of commitment and love in a relationship. For instance, the tweet "#MaybeHeDoesntHitYou but he doesn't 'allow' you to wear a dress that goes a little above your knee because it's 'too revealing'" (McCauley et al., 2018, p. 887) represents a different level of control that might be

considered protective and romantic. Thus, abusive partners maintain power and control over women in various ways (Ismail et al., 2007; McCauley et al., 2018; Pence & Paymar, 1993), and these tactics are critical to identify to fully appreciate women's experiences of unhealthy relationships, as IPV does not always occur in obvious ways resulting in physical harm (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; McCauley et al., 2018).

Regardless of their specific conceptualizations, studies find that psychological/emotional abuse occurs at comparable or higher rates in relationships compared to physical and sexual abuse (Beyers et al., 2000; Caldwell et al., 2009; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Scherer et al., 2013). One study found that while 68% of heterosexual women experienced psychological abuse in their relationships, 29% experienced physical violence (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). In another study with 123 survivors, most of whom were women, about 98% experienced psychological/emotional abuse, while rates for physical and sexual abuse were approximately 83% and 71%, respectively (Murray et al., 2015). Research examining social reactions to IPV amongst 113 female survivors reveals similarly distressing numbers, with 99% experiencing at least one instance of psychological abuse, and 82% and 61% experiencing physical or sexual abuse at least once in their relationships, respectively (Ahrens et al., 2021). National estimates also indicate higher rates of psychological abuse relative to other forms of IPV (Smith et al., 2017).

Moreover, studies suggest that this form of abuse has more detrimental effects on survivors' well-being compared to other forms (Lawrence et al., 2009; McCauley et al., 2018). While both psychological and physical aggression are negatively related to

relationship satisfaction amongst women, only psychological aggression is positively associated with more investment in the relationship (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). Thus, even when they are unsatisfied, women experiencing psychological/emotional abuse may make more effort to maintain their relationship, perhaps because they do not perceive the relationship to be bad enough to end. This is evident in the tweet, “#MaybeHeDoesntHitYou, but sometimes you wish he did. Maybe that would give you the courage to leave him” (McCauley et al., 2018, p. 888). As Belknap and Sharma (2014) note, even though nonviolent abuse may appear less serious compared to physical violence, it results in violation of a partner’s boundaries, disempowerment, and a sense of threat amongst victims. In the following sections, I describe the specific forms of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics that were the focus of this dissertation.

### **Surveillance**

Stalking is defined as any pattern of behavior that is unwanted and brings the target some level of distress or fear (Logan & Walker, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007). It comes in the form of unwanted calls, messages, emails, being watched or followed, or being sent unwanted gifts (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; Blaauw et al., 2002; Black et al., 2011; McNamara & Marsil, 2012; Smith et al., 2017; Walters et al., 2013). While original stereotypes of stalking projected the image of an obsessed and delusional stranger stalking a celebrity figure, current perspectives indicate that it is a courtship tactic used to establish new relationships or re-establish broken ones (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003). According to Logan and Walker (2009), stalking occurs



in both intact relationships as well as in those situations where an individual does not desire a relationship with the stalker (i.e., an “unwanted relational pursuit”) (Sinclair, 2012). The goal of this dissertation was to explore those courtship tactics that are not obviously abusive on the surface but may be considered problematic by some. Thus, this study explored surveillance (Sinclair & Frieze, 2005; Williams & Frieze, 2005), which is a stalking tactic and covers many of the same behaviors (e.g., following the romantic interest, seeking information about them). However, surveillance does not always result in the fear required by the label “stalking.” Moreover, surveillance may occur without a target’s knowledge, making it impossible for them to feel fearful of one who is engaging in such behaviors. This absence of fear in a target may influence one to perceive surveillance behaviors as an acceptable, even romantic, courtship strategy. This dissertation explored whether women responded to surveillance behaviors in this way.

### **Cybersurveillance**

Like in-person stalking, cyberstalking is a form of non-physical abuse that negatively impacts victims (Sargent et al., 2016). Also referred to as cyberabuse, cyberstalking involves threatening, surveilling, or controlling a partner through technology (Lucero et al., 2014). In focus groups conducted with male and female high schoolers, Lucero et al. (2014) found that behaviors such as monitoring a partner’s online presence and having access to their social media accounts (e.g., knowing their passwords) were common. Such behaviors were perceived as being harmful to the relationship, resulting in distrust and jealousy. Again, multiple forms

of abuse co-occur, with research finding that cyberstalking and in-person psychological abuse (e.g., destroying valued property or items) are positively associated (Sargent et al., 2016). Additionally, focus groups with male and female undergraduate students reveal that surveillance of a partner's text messages, particularly those from the opposite sex, often preceded in-person relationship conflicts (Melander, 2010). Stalking and cyberstalking are similar (e.g., both involve surveillance), but they also differ in important ways. For instance, Melander (2010) found that controlling and surveillance behaviors can be more easily perpetrated online or through text message (e.g., instead of waiting to see a partner in person to ask them where they were, one may more easily and quickly send a text with the same inquiry or go through their partners' social media to find out for themselves). Given the similarities and differences between surveillance and cybersurveillance and given that individuals and their lives are constantly accessible in the age of social media, perceptions to both were explored in this dissertation.

### **Persistent Pursuit**

Unwanted pursuit is closely related to stalking, often referred to as its "close cousin" (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Like stalking (and cyberstalking), unwanted pursuit is perceived as negative and involves violations of privacy. It can be as minor as waiting for someone outside places they frequent (work, home, school) or as severe as threatening or causing harm to the target themselves or someone they are close to (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017). While stalking requires an element of fear and distress in the target, responses to unwanted pursuit (also referred to as obsessive relational intrusion;

ORI) are more varied and may instead be perceived as annoying and unwanted by the target (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003, 2007). However, even when such behaviors are unwanted, they may be romanticized. Spitzberg and Cupach (2003) note that while stalking can be used to inflict serious harm or to destroy a target, ORI is used primarily by a pursuer to meet relational needs (which, in their view, will be met through the object of their affection). In fact, Dardis and Gidycz (2017) found that minor unwanted pursuit behaviors (UPB) used against an ex-partner were more likely to result in reconciliation with that partner amongst both male and female pursuers. However, when pursuit behaviors were more severe, only men reported reconciling with their partner. This suggests that extreme pursuit behaviors serve as grand gestures, sending the message that privacy violations “work” in re-establishing a former relationship. This dissertation explored perceptions of persistent pursuit but portrayed it in a romanticized way (i.e., not as “unwanted”), and like Dardis and Gidycz (2017), such pursuit was presented as successful in establishing a relationship.

### **Jealousy**

Jealousy is a negative emotion experienced by individuals who perceive a threat to their relationship (Puente & Cohen, 2003). Research finds that female adolescents perceive jealousy (alongside possessiveness) to be the least serious compared to other types of relationship abuse, such as those involving gender specific insults, private and public humiliation, and socially restrictive tactics by a partner (Murphy & Smith, 2010). Not only is it seen as unproblematic in a relationship, but it is also seen as romantic and an indicator of relationship commitment (Hartwell et al., 2015; Puente &

Cohen, 2003). In fact, Hartwell et al. (2015) and Power et al. (2006) argue that pro-jealousy attitudes may be part of the larger ideology of romanticism, given the seemingly positive nature of such beliefs. Indeed, Hartwell et al. (2015) found that women who hold romanticized beliefs (e.g., belief in a “One and Only” soulmate) are more likely to endorse pro-jealousy attitudes.

Along with being perceived as romantic, jealousy has important implications for relationship abuse. Deans and Bhogal (2019) found that behavioral jealousy (behavioral actions that a partner engages in due to jealousy) predicted cyber dating abuse. Moreover, endorsing items such as “Jealousy is a sign of passion” and “If someone is jealous, it’s a sign that they care about their relationship” (p. 249), is related to sexism, traditional beliefs about men and women’s roles, and women’s desire for jealous and traditionally masculine partners, such as those who engage in violence or are more powerful than women (Hartwell et al., 2015). This dissertation explored whether participants were more likely to view jealousy in a courtship situation as positive and romantic, or as problematic and abusive.

### **Possessiveness/Control**

Possessiveness and control involve an element of ownership and refers to behaviors where one may make routine decisions for another, such as those concerning clothing, eating habits, or social networks (Smith et al., 2017). Buss et al. (2008) explain possessiveness as behaviors intended to show that one’s partner is “taken.” They distinguish between verbal possession (e.g., talking about how committed one is with their partner to others), physical possession (e.g., public displays of affection), and

possessive ornamentation (e.g., wearing jewelry given by the other partner). As discussed, adolescent girls believe possessive behavior (along with jealousy) to be the least serious compared to other warning signs for unhealthy relationships, such as verbal aggression or isolation (Murphy & Smith, 2010). However, qualitative studies illustrate how young women's perceptions of such behavior can change over time:

I thought he [her boyfriend] loved me so much because he was always asking me where I was going and what I was doing. I just thought he cared about me so much, but, really, he was being possessive. He wanted to control what I was doing and who I was doing it with. He would make me call him all of the time. (Ismail et al., 2007, p. 467)

This suggests that possessive and controlling behavior is not always perceived as problematic and may even be considered a sign of love. In this dissertation, whether participants perceived such behavior as abusive or romantic was explored. The study also explored whether perceptions of possessiveness/control changed under certain contexts.

### **Isolation**

Isolation occurs when one influences or has a complete say over who their partner is spending time with. Along with controlling a partner's social network, isolation involves controlling what activities they engage in or their access to work or educational resources (Murphy & Smith, 2010; Pence & Paymar, 1993). Isolation can occur in subtle ways. While in some cases an abuser may play a direct role in interfering with their partner's social network (e.g., not allowing them to see family or friends without his permission or sabotaging relationships; McCauley et al., 2018), in other cases a woman may distance herself from others due to the abuse she is

experiencing. For instance, women may stop seeing family regularly because it will come in the way of their tending to the needs of an abusive partner (Wood, 2001). Women also describe abusive male partners preferring that they spend time as a couple with his friends instead of hers, which is a less obvious isolation tactic (Power et al., 2006). Thus, abusers may monopolize their partners' time to isolate them. Importantly, monopolization has been linked to men's higher scores on measures of control, violence, and injuring a partner (Buss et al., 2008). In this dissertation, perceptions to isolation in its more subtle forms was examined. Specifically, monopolization of time, rather than strict control of one's social network, was explored.

Perceptions of the tactics described above (surveillance, cybersurveillance, persistent pursuit, jealousy, possessiveness/control, and isolation) were examined through hypothetical vignettes where a male character, Lucas, pursued a female character named Maya. While previous research has defined such tactics as abusive and harmful to women, I examined how participants responded to these behaviors when they were presented as romantic and during courtship for the purposes of establishing a romantic relationship, rather than inflicting harm on a love interest. The next section further discusses how such behaviors are abusive and normalized in relationships.

### **The Normalization and Minimization of Abuse & Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics**

Psychological/emotional abuse in relationships is often normalized and minimized in comparison to other forms of abuse. When presented with vignettes depicting emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, male and female college students

reported that the vignettes depicting emotional abuse were the most normal part of a relationship compared to the other types of abuse (Beyers et al., 2000). Thus, emotional abuse is often considered typical in relationships and overlooked. One explanation is due to cultural myths that lead individuals to have very particular ideas about what situations can be defined as abuse or violence, who the likely perpetrators are, and who the likely victims are (Burt, 1980). If one believes that “real” abuse and violence results in obvious harm, then psychological/emotional abuse may be less likely to be labeled as such because it doesn’t involve physical violence and visible injuries (Belknap & Sharma, 2014; Power et al., 2006). Consistent with this, young women experiencing partner violence report that the emotional abuse they experienced was minimized by close others, including parents and employees in the health care system, given their lack of injuries. The absence of dialogue around such abuse can suggest that it is not serious enough to warrant any intervention (Ismail et al., 2007).

Women may also minimize their own abuse. One study found that while 45% of college women reported at least one instance of stalking (as defined by researchers), only 26% identified themselves as having experienced stalking (McNamara & Marsil, 2012), suggesting that certain behaviors that qualify as stalking may not be perceived as such by women. They also found that being followed or receiving unwanted gifts were considered more acceptable compared to other stalking behaviors. Regarding cyberstalking in particular, Lucero et al. (2014) found that female adolescents believed that password sharing between partners and allowing boyfriends access to their phones or online accounts was normative in relationships, even being an indication of a

healthy and trusting relationship. This has important implications for support seeking. If women do not identify their experiences as problematic and abusive in the first place, they may be less likely to seek the necessary support to address those experiences. Littleton et al. (2008) discuss this further regarding women impacted by sexual violence specifically. If a woman identifies her experience as actual rape, she may be more likely to define herself as a victim and seek out support. A woman who does not define her experience as an assault but rather a miscommunication is less likely to define herself as a victim and seek services. Indeed, Littleton et al. (2008) found that women who acknowledged their experiences as rape disclosed more to others compared to victims not identifying their experiences in this way. Given that psychological/emotional abuse and other unhealthy relationship dynamics can be perceived as less serious than sexual violence, it is likely that women in such relationships would seek support at even lower rates (Belknap & Sharma, 2014). The lack of reporting and support seeking inevitably leads to a culture where abuse is normalized.

Another way that abuse against female partners is minimized and normalized is through arguments that women are also abusive against male partners and that such abuse is more harmful given that male victims and female perpetrators are not part of the common abuse narrative (McCarry, 2009). In their analysis of conversations between heterosexual couples involved in legal proceedings for domestic violence, Bonomi et al. (2011) found that men minimized the abuse they perpetrated by blaming the victim herself and claiming themselves as victims. This role-reversal was achieved



through male perpetrators' appeals to the victim's sympathy by emphasizing their own suffering (e.g., mental health issues, difficult conditions in jail) or presenting themselves at risk for self-harm. Similar processes of role reversal and perpetrators claiming a victim identity have been identified by researchers examining interpersonal betrayals more generally, regardless of whether violence was involved or not (e.g., DARVO: Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender; Harsey et al., 2017). As discussed later, one contextual factor that will be explored in this dissertation is gender role reversal. Specifically, I examined how participants responded to abuse-like tactics when used by female pursuers in a courtship situation. The next section argues that not only are abusive and unhealthy dynamics normalized and considered acceptable, but even further, that they are desired and romanticized.

### **The Romanticization of Abuse & Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics**

There is much evidence that women romanticize abuse and unhealthy dynamics in relationships due to Western norms and socialization around gender and romance conducive to such abuse (e.g., Baly, 2010; Chung, 2005; Hartwell et al., 2015; Hayes & Jeffries, 2013; Ismail et al., 2007; Power et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2013; Walker, 1979; Wood, 2001). Moreover, the romanticization of abuse is theoretically supported. Walker's Cycle of Abuse Theory (1979) describes the *Calm, Loving Respite* stage, which comes after the minor abusive events that led up to a larger explosive violent incident. In this "Honeymoon" stage, an abuser attempts reconciliation, is loving and apologetic, and promises to change. Research conducted by Bonomi et al. (2011) with couples navigating the legal system due to domestic violence finds evidence of this

stage. They found that both perpetrators and victims reflected on their love for each other and claimed they cannot live without the other. According to Bonomi et al. (2011), this stage was key in shifting the victims' perspective and getting them to recant statements against abusers. Indeed, Walker (1979) argues that during the Honeymoon stage, women are at risk for revictimization as they attempt to reconcile with the batterer. The following quote from a woman who experienced physical violence, rape, and emotional abuse by her partner reflects this stage:

he said how sorry he was...how much he loved me and how he would never hurt me again and how sorry he was and all. And I could tell he was really upset and...I thought maybe we could go on and things would be okay after that. (Wood, 2001, p. 252)

While in the study by Bonomi et al. (2011) romanticization occurred after violence was identified (after the legal intervention), in other cases, romanticization can prevent women from recognizing an abusive situation in the first place (Power et al., 2006). Certain relationship behaviors may on the surface appear romantic but are meant to keep the relationship intact through controlling a partner and preventing infidelity. Such behaviors, however, have been linked to relationship abuse (Buss et al., 2008). Research conducted with heterosexual young adults finds that men who reported engaging in maintenance behaviors such as wanting to spend all their time with a partner, checking up on them during the day, or telling them they couldn't live without them, scored higher on measures of controlling behavior, violence, and coercive sexual behavior. Women whose partners asked for total commitment in a relationship (e.g., marriage) or reported their partners became upset or violent when they were approached by another male interested in them, also reported controlling, violent, and

sexually coercive behavior in their relationships (Buss et al., 2008). Such behaviors are easily clouded by an element of romanticism because they are perceived as being rooted in a partner's desire to maintain the relationship. For instance, in a study asking women to project themselves in a hypothetical relationship with an abusive male partner named Eric, one woman shares,

I would wonder why Eric is so violent. Maybe he cares and likes me so much that he's worried that someone else is trying to hit on me even if they were not. Honestly, part of me wouldn't mind it because I think this shows how much Eric cares. (Nguyen et al., 2016, p. 179)

Benevolent sexism, a component of the larger Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick & Fiske, 1996), is also relevant here, as it subtly promotes male power over women. Benevolent sexist beliefs claim seemingly positive attitudes about women on the surface (e.g., they should be cherished), but are similarly implicated in attitudes justifying abuse and hostility towards them due to very particular ideas about what kinds of women ought to be cherished and protected by men (i.e., women conforming to traditional femininity) (Viki & Abrams, 2002; Viki et al., 2004). In this section, I argue that various factors contribute to the romanticization of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics. Gender role stereotypes that present traditional masculinity and femininity as attractive (e.g., male dominance, female submission), and romance narratives that idealize relationships and love, are closely intertwined. Moreover, I claim that the cultural pressure for women to be coupled to avoid the stigma of singlism is built into a larger narrative that allows for the romanticization of abuse. Finally, mainstream media is discussed as the key socializer of these narratives.

## **Gender Role Stereotypes**

Lloyd (1991) argues that the courtship system in European-American culture is inherently set up for abuse. The gendered nature of dating offers men more control, positioning them in a dominant position and women in a passive one where their main role is to respond to men's pursuits. For instance, while men are more likely to be initiators (e.g., decide what to do on a date) women are more likely to wait for a man to initiate dates (Rose & Frieze, 1993). Williams and Frieze (2005) found additional evidence of gendered pursuits, where according to both male and female participants, men were more likely to express initial interest in a woman than vice versa and were significantly more likely to send notes to their female love interests, ask them on dates, and follow and spy on them. Interviews with young women who've experienced relationship abuse also indicate that despite being attracted to and interested in a man, they did not make the first move to initiate a relationship (Jackson, 2001). These findings are consistent with research suggesting that women desire and are attracted to dominant men, particularly those who are socially (e.g., leader, assertive, has social power) and physically (e.g., tall, strong) dominant (Bryan et al., 2011). Further evidence is provided by Backus and Mahalik (2011), who found that non-feminist and traditional women (such as those who deny sexism) are more likely to desire traditionally masculine men (e.g., those who endorse norms of power over women).

While traditional masculinity places men in positions of power over women and claims that violence is normative (Mahalik et al., 2003), for women, romantic relationships and having a nice and kind disposition is considered critical to their

femininity (Mahalik et al., 2005). Thus, men's abuse against women is considered normative, perhaps even expected. This is evident in research linking several norms of traditional masculinity, including dominance and power over women, to the acceptance and perpetration of violence against women (Locke & Mahalik, 2005; Murnen et al., 2002). On the other hand, traditionally feminine norms suggest women ought to excuse the abuse given their role as caretakers and nurturers. This role is invoked by women survivors who experience guilt for leaving an abuser, fear their abuser would be harmed or unable to take care of himself (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013; Smith et al., 2013), and who vow to support partners financially and emotionally despite the abuse (Wood, 2001).

That romantic relationships define traditional femininity warrants further discussion. Women experience immense social pressure to be in a heterosexual romantic relationship, and these relationships are positioned as being more important for women than other types of close relationships (e.g., friendships, Chung, 2005). Women who are not coupled face singlism, which refers to the stigma, discrimination, and prejudice experienced by single individuals (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2006). Much research has drawn attention to the experiences of single women, who tend to be labeled in deficit terms due to their single status; these include being referred to as "left-out ladies" (Wang & Abbott, 2013, p. 222) the "unhappy and lonely spinster" (Lahad, 2013, p. 23), and undesirable and desperate (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). Given how central romantic relationships are to their self-concepts, single women can

be perceived as having an incomplete identity (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sandfield & Percy, 2003; Simpson, 2016).

The heterosexual script claims that women need relationships to be truly happy (Jackson, 2001), a message that is prevalent in the media (Seabrook et al., 2016). Further built into this script is the idea that women must make personal sacrifices and prioritize male partners' needs (Seabrook et al., 2016). Women are often subjected to the "gendered division of emotional labor" (Sandfield & Percy, 2003, p. 477), where they are responsible for managing their relationships and are blamed when those relationships fail and do not culminate into marriage (Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Such expectations suggest that women's work is their relationships—they are primarily responsible for how they pan out, and their male partners play a minimal role in the successes or failures of those relationships (Chung, 2005). Masculine norms, on the other hand, include having high emotional control, being violent and dominant, a playboy, and having power over women (Mahalik et al., 2003). Such norms are clearly counter to the development of healthy and satisfying romantic relationships with women and are involved in abuse against female partners.

Part of why women stay in abusive relationships may be due to messages from their abuser that they will never find someone else to love them the way he (the abuser) does (Smith et al., 2013). For instance, one survivor shares, "Other men wouldn't be interested in me. I should count myself lucky that he was...He let me know that I wasn't perfect" (Wood, 2001, p. 256). Women may then internalize these messages and continue to endure the abuse out of fear of singlehood (Spielmann et al., 2013).

Consistent with this notion are findings that heterosexual women who fear being single show greater interest in less emotionally responsive partners who may not put as much effort into the relationship and do not view relationships as high priority (Spielmann et al., 2013). In explaining why they remained in an abusive relationship, women note how this fear was more extreme than the pain of the abuse (Smith et al., 2013).

According to one survivor, “Everyone else always has someone and I was like, ‘this is just my someone and I’m going to have to put up with what little I have.’ I just felt like I needed to have someone” (Wood, 2001, p. 253). Additionally, familiarity with a partner and the dynamics of a particular relationship, as well as the lack of desire to start fresh with a new partner and new relationship, may discourage women from ending an abusive relationship:

...he may not act the way that I want him to act ... he may do things that I don’t like, but I know what to expect. So, it is just easier to be in that type of relationship than go to into another relationship that I don’t know anything about. (Smith et al., 2013, p. 399)

The notion that any relationship is better than no relationship, and that the current relationship is likely going to be better than any future relationship, is relevant here.

### **Romance Narratives**

Intertwined closely with gender roles are romance narratives. Also referred to as the “ideology of romanticism” (Sprecher & Metts, 1989), these narratives provide a critical understanding of how women (and society in general) are brought to view certain problematic relationship behaviors and unhealthy dynamics as romantic. In many ways, love prevents recognition of abuse. Romanticism consists of beliefs such as *One and Only* (there is one true soulmate for each person); *Love at First Sight* (love

is immediate—it won't take long for you to fall in love with the right person); *Love Finds a Way* (love will prevail over any and all obstacles and lasts forever); and *Idealization* (the relationship is perfect, or close to it, and one's partner can do no wrong) (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). Believing that they are meant to be with their partner (even though he's abusive) can prevent a woman from ending the relationship, as is evident from a survivor who shares, "I knew he loved me for sure. There were things I didn't question even when he hit me. He was my soul mate. I felt so complete with him" (Wood, 2001, p. 250). Falling in love instantly speaks to the intensity of love and attraction for a partner, which can also overshadow abusive tendencies: "I felt this energy, just sexual energy the first time I saw him. I've never felt anything like that before or since. I was just totally drawn to him, unable to resist him" (Wood, 2001, p. 256). Women who endorse romantic beliefs may believe that their love will prevail over all obstacles, even if the obstacle is abuse. Idealizing an abusive partner can encourage women to justify their partner's actions, blaming themselves for the abuse instead. The following quotes speak to these beliefs:

Shortly after falling in love with him I learned he was an alcoholic and the lies began. I tried to be patient and forgave him many things I probably shouldn't have forgiven; always hoping he maybe would appreciate it and care enough for me to stop. (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013, p. 67)

This example of *Love Conquers All* highlights the belief that love is pain and sacrifice, particularly for women. It also suggests that abuse can be overcome because love is transformative, and if only women love harder the abuse will stop. The following quote reflects *Idealization*:



By then I had decided that this man was a very strong person and I was going to tow to his demands, which weren't bad anyway, and he wasn't asking me to do anything that I didn't want to do. I just went along with it because up til that point I was a very shy person. Very socially inept and not able to cope with the big wide world out there. So he was my kind of crutch I suppose. I went along with whatever he said because I admired him, I thought he was great and he was my hero. (Power et al., 2006, p. 181)

Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) also outline six typologies of love that are popular in the Western literature on romantic relationships, three of which are particularly relevant to how abuse may be romanticized and which overlap with the romantic beliefs identified by Sprecher and Metts (1989). The Eros love style defines love as passionate, consisting of strong chemistry and attraction, intense emotions, and total immersion. *Mania* as a love style is characterized by uncertainty and extreme dependency in a relationship, and is measured by items such as, "When I am in love, I have trouble concentrating on anything else" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986, p. 396). Finally, one who endorses the *Agape* love style gives themselves fully to a relationship, to the point where they take on suffering and pain in the name of love. Research finds that men and women similarly endorse the *Eros* and *Agape* love styles (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), speaking to the broader appeal of narratives about love being equated with suffering and being full of intensity and passion.

The romance narrative is so powerful that it was found to be the most popular discourse invoked by survivors in an analysis of discussion forums centered on abusive relationships (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013). Compared to discourses that implicated the individual, the perpetrator, or patriarchy as an institution, Hayes and Jeffries (2013) found that women relied on their understandings of romantic love most often when

making sense of why they endured abuse. Again, intertwined with these romance narratives are stereotypical gender roles (Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Wood, 2001). What may especially be a cause for concern is that romanticized beliefs are also associated with desiring a male partner with greater power over women (Hartwell et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant in the quote by a participant in Power et al. (2006) describing idealization of a partner, where the participant romanticizes the social and psychological dominance of her partner who could do no wrong (e.g., “very strong person”; “he was my hero”; “I admired him”), and that she would incur certain advantages through her association with him. Moreover, gender stereotypes are also invoked through how the participant positions herself (“socially inept”). Power et al. (2006) and Wood (2001) define this as the fairy tale romance and the abuser a protective and dominant “knight in shining armor.” In line with this is research by Jackson (2001), who found that young women had first become involved with their abusive partners when they were experiencing difficult life circumstances (e.g., isolation from friends and family). This closely represents the damsel-in-distress trope, which positions a young woman as vulnerable and in need of saving by a dominant man who can take care of her (or appear to play that role) (Glick & Fiske, 1996). These narratives also include the image of the nurturing woman who saves the troubled, dangerous young man from a path of destruction, despite his history of violence towards her (Wood, 2001; Mahalik et al., 2005).

The Western idealization of love and romantic partners (e.g., Sprecher & Metts, 1989; Wood, 2001), combined with the centrality of relationships to women’s identities

(e.g., Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003) and the stigma single women face (e.g., Lahad, 2013) can lead to the perception that any type of romantic relationship or marriage is better than none, even if it is an unhealthy union (DePaulo, 2006; Jackson, 2001).

While this section explored how gender role stereotypes and romance narratives work together to romanticize abuse, the next section explores how specific contextual factors can also influence perceptions around romanticized abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics.

### **Contextual Factors Affecting Perceptions about Abuse**

Perceptions of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics are likely to change according to the context. Whereas in one situation certain behaviors may be perceived as more acceptable and romantic, in other situations they are more likely to be defined as problematic and abusive. Here I describe two different contextual factors that were explored in this dissertation that influenced women's romanticization processes: the phase of the relationship and gender role reversal.

#### **Phase of Relationship**

Abusive relationships often do not start off as such. Rather, women report experiencing a gradual increase in the abuse that was initially perceived as a sign of their partners' love and commitment (Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). The following quote illustrates this misperception, where a participant is referring to her friend's experience with an abusive partner:

It was really good in the beginning. He was really charming and endearing and just the type of person that seemed like he had it all together. It was really good. He had a contagious personality, everybody just wanted to be around him. The

abuse gradually developed over time. My friend would say, “Oh, it’s okay, he did that but maybe that’s not really what he’s like.” It was like she just waited for the next time to happen and each time it happened, it became worse and worse. (Ismail et al., 2007, p. 464)

This quote suggests that women’s perceptions of abuse may be clouded by their initial judgments of a partner. Research finds that warning signs for abuse that occur before a relationship has officially been established are linked to similar behaviors during later phases of the relationship. Williams and Frieze (2005) found that mildly aggressive behaviors during courtship (e.g., threatening to harm self or another) was linked to actual physical violence during the relationship. Moreover, approach behaviors (e.g., sending notes or making other attempts at communication) and surveillance (e.g., frequenting the places where one knows another is going to be at) during courtship was positively associated with using similar strategies when the couple had broken up (Williams & Frieze, 2005). These results suggest that even when unhealthy dynamics are established early on, they may not be perceived as serious enough to discourage pursuing a relationship. In other words, abusers engage in similar behaviors at different stages in a relationship, but the meaning of those behaviors can change given the stage. Thus, I explored how abuse and unhealthy dynamics are romanticized differently depending on the phase of the relationship they are occurring in (i.e., courtship, committed relationship, post-breakup, or when no date was accepted to begin with).

### **Gender Role Reversal**

Despite the common narrative of male perpetrators and female victims (Walker et al., 2018), research suggests that women, too, are abusive with male partners

(Caldwell et al., 2009; Frieze, 2005; Sinclair & Frieze, 2005; Williams & Frieze, 2005). For instance, a study of 258 Australian men who shared their experiences of “boundary crossings” by female partners revealed that men experienced many of the same forms of abuse and violence as female victims, such as isolation from friends and family, emotional blackmail, and dismissive behavior (Walker et al., 2020). However, female violence towards male partners is perceived as less serious, perhaps because it is seen as less physically harmful (Sheridan et al., 2003; Walker et al., 2018). The expected feminine role for women which positions them as caring, supportive, and not violent, can work to minimize the abuse they do engage in against partners. Additionally, beliefs that women’s perpetration of IPV is due to self-defense, and essentialist beliefs about women’s physicality (size, strength) also minimize any violence they perpetrate (Walker et al., 2018). However, just because women’s perpetration of abuse and violence is minimized does not suggest that it is considered romantic in the same way as a man’s perpetration of the same, suggesting an important difference between minimizing abuse and romanticizing it. Given that dominance is inherent to masculine norms (Mahalik et al., 2003), and that males are more likely to be pursuers compared to females (Williams & Frieze, 2005), situations where women pursue men through specific tactics (e.g., surveillance in person and online) may be perceived more negatively and as unromantic (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017). This dissertation similarly explored whether female courtship of a male love interest was perceived as romantic or unattractive, contextualizing this reversal with perceptions of male courtship of a female love interest.

The previously discussed factors suggest that perceptions of abuse, such as whether abusive behaviors can be justified or romanticized, are highly context dependent. The next section explores the role of media in shaping perceptions of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics, particularly its socialization of romanticism and gender role stereotypes.

### **Media's Portrayal of Gender, Relationships, and Abuse**

Mass media in the West contain important messages about gender, love and relationships, and violence and abuse (e.g., Bonomi et al., 2013; Hefner & Wilson, 2013), and it is essential to delve further into these messages to understand how cultural narratives influences individuals' attitudes about these concepts. Research suggests that youth are more likely to be exposed to romance and relationships through media compared to other sources, such as personal experiences or through friends and family (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Female audiences may be particularly susceptible to these messages, as women are more likely to view media with romantic content including movies, reality programs, and sitcoms compared to men (Galloway et al., 2015; Lippman et al., 2014; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Such messages are evident in popular culture, including songs, books, movies, and television shows. Bachen and Illouz (1996) argue that whereas individuals may initially rely heavily on media as a source of information about romance and relationships, they come to use this media socialization to supplement later experiences with relationships. Understandings of relationships, they argue, change with individuals' experience of such relationships. Thus, the influence of media portrayals may especially be stronger for younger

viewers, who by virtue of their age may have fewer (if any) relationship experiences. Indeed, Lippman et al. (2014), Regan and Anguiano (2010), and Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that age is negatively associated with the endorsement of specific romantic beliefs, such as the belief that no matter the obstacles, love will conquer, and the belief in a *One and Only* soulmate.

Relationships are often portrayed as idealistic in mainstream media. In their content analysis of popular romantic comedies, Johnson and Holmes (2009) found that affection and physical intimacy are commonly portrayed while relationship issues, such as arguments or jealousy, are often overlooked. Interestingly, the authors note that most of the films they analyzed depicted the beginning stages of a relationship (e.g., courtship rather than more long-term relationships), which may also contribute to the idealistic portrayals of relationships if conflicts occur during later stages of the relationship. Hefner and Wilson (2013) also conducted a content analysis of romantic comedies, finding that 98% of the 52 films analyzed contained at least one popular romantic belief, with the two most prevalent beliefs being *One and Only* and *Idealization*.

The media is also ripe with images portraying abusive relationships. *The Notebook* (Harris et al., 2004), considered a classic romance film, contains a scene at a carnival where Noah, the male protagonist, climbs the top of a large Ferris wheel to ask the female protagonist, Allie, on a date despite her being with another man (presumably on a date). Noah repeatedly asks Allie out, who is disinterested and explicitly rejects his advances. In response, Noah lets go of one of his hands,

threatening “You leave me no other choice then,” indicating that if Allie does not agree he will fall and get injured or die. Panicking, Allie screams, “I wanna go out with you!” Such scenes indicate that a woman’s “No” doesn’t really mean “No,” and that she will say “Yes” with enough convincing by a persistent man. This scene is reflective of the experiences of battered women who report coercion and threats as a controlling tactic used by abusive partners (Pence & Paymar, 1993). That both Noah and Allie fall in love later in the movie and are coupled suggests that such tactics work in establishing a relationship (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). Romanticized abuse is also portrayed in commercially successful songs, such as *Love the Way You Lie* by artists Rihanna and Eminem. This is evident in the recurring lyrics, “Just gonna stand there and watch me burn, but that’s alright because I like the way it hurts.” The song’s visual narrative portrays a couple who is physically violent towards each other while kissing throughout the physical altercation. A content analysis of the lyrics and music video found evidence of several myths about IPV in the song (Thaller & Messing, 2014). Victim-blaming beliefs such as “Some women who are abused secretly want to be treated that way” (p. 626) were supported by the song, as indicated by the female lead’s repeated unsuccessful attempts to leave the abusive relationship. The fact that the woman continues with the relationship (e.g., the video begins and ends with the couple spooning in bed), combined with scenes of the couple kissing in front of a house on fire (eroticizing violence), and scenes of the male giving the female a gift (romanticizing violence) further complicate the narrative around relationships characterized by IPV (Thaller & Messing, 2014).



One of the most criticized examples of contemporary media due to its depictions of relationship abuse is the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy by E.L. James (James, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Bonomi et al. (2013) conducted an elaborate thematic analysis of the first book in the series in which Christian Grey, a 28-year-old extremely attractive millionaire and Anastasia (Ana) Steele, a recent college graduate depicted as clumsy and “ordinary,” embark on a BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) relationship. They found almost all interactions between the couple illustrated emotional abuse (and sexual violence). Christian stalked Ana (e.g., by keeping tabs on her whereabouts), intimidated her (e.g., through his jealousy when she talks to other men), and isolated her by limiting her contact with close others (e.g., following her across the country when she visits her mother). Furthermore, Bonomi et al. (2013) found that Ana responded with a harmed identity, one that is often experienced by abused women in real life and is characterized by stressful managing, disempowerment, and entrapment within a relationship (e.g., Ana avoids telling him about her plans with others, feels suffocated; Smith et al., 1995). Evidence of traditional gender dynamics was also found, where Christian predominantly exercised power and control over Ana. Importantly, the first stalking incident occurred soon after the initial meeting, before any relationship was established between the two, highlighting that abuse can occur even before a relationship has been made official (Williams & Frieze, 2005). Despite the nature of this content, *Fifty Shades* and the relationship between Ana and Christian is highly romanticized. The film adaptations of the book were each released in time for Valentine’s Day in

February (the first film was released on February 13). Additionally, the series garnered immense success particularly amongst female audiences (Williams, 2012), and all three novels were recently named the top three selling books of the past decade (Kelly, 2020).

Stephanie Myer's *Twilight* series (Meyer, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008) has been similarly criticized for the relationship between the two protagonists in the story, Edward Cullen and Bella Swan, and its stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity (Diamond, 2011). Collins and Carmody (2011) conducted a content analysis of all four books in the series, finding evidence of Edward stalking Bella where he listened in on her conversations with others, followed her, and broke into her room. Of the 119 instances of controlling behaviors in the series, 76% involved Edward being controlling towards Bella. Jealousy was portrayed 31 times, with more than half of these consisting of Edward being jealous when Bella interacted with another male character. Similar portrayals of traditional gender dynamics and romanticizing of unhealthy relationship behaviors have been identified in other analyses (Franiuk & Scherr, 2013).

Bonomi et al. (2013) and Collins and Carmody (2011) examined very specific media content, which may bring into question the external validity of their findings. However, other research has identified similar patterns of IPV across a larger sample of media. Schultz et al. (2014) conducted a content analysis of 51 mainstream films about stalking, finding that before the stalking began, 35% of the films showed the perpetrator and victim as being romantically involved. Additionally, 29% of the

perpetrators used stalking as a courtship strategy to establish a relationship with the victim. Such portrayals are present outside of Western media as well. A content analysis by Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003) of Bollywood films found that certain abusive behaviors (those considered more moderate in severity, such as harassment), are depicted as romantic due to being perpetrated by the male protagonist in the film. Combined, these findings suggest that when the perpetrator and victim end up in a relationship, controlling and abusive behaviors may not be perceived as such. When such behaviors are enacted early on during courtship, it suggests that those behaviors “work” in establishing relationships (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). The actual influence of these portrayals on viewers’ attitudes is discussed next.

### **Media’s Influence on Attitudes**

There is a vast literature finding that media does influence attitudes about gender, romance, and abuse. Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) found that amongst male and female viewers, greater exposure to reality dating programs is associated with gender stereotypical attitudes and sexual stereotypes, including the sexual double standard and the emphasis on physical appearance in dating contexts. Greater exposure to television, and to reality dating programs in particular, is also positively related to the heterosexual script among viewers. This includes attitudes such as male sexual dominance and the objectification of women (Seabrook et al., 2016).

Regarding attitudes about love and relationships, studies show that exposure to romantic media relates to the belief that love occurs instantly at first sight, high intimacy expectations, an *Eros* love style, and the belief that love will conquer any and

all obstacles (Galloway et al., 2015; Lippman et al., 2014; Segrin & Nabi, 2002).

Importantly, viewers who perceive media to be realistic are more likely to hold such beliefs (Lippman et al., 2014). Additionally, Hefner and Wilson (2013) surveyed both male and female undergraduates and found that greater exposure to romantic comedies was related to the idealization of a partner or love interest. Again, this has potential implications for women's perceptions of and decisions to leave unhealthy relationships, particularly if abusive partners are idealized and perceived as doing no wrong (Wood, 2001).

Research has also examined the association between exposure to media and attitudes about violence against women more directly. For instance, in experimental research, male undergraduate students exposed to music videos that were highly objectifying and sexualized were more likely to endorse objectifying attitudes towards women, rape myths, acceptance of interpersonal violence, and stereotypical gender beliefs (Aubrey et al., 2011; Kistler & Lee, 2010). Female viewers are also impacted by the media they consume, as Kahlor and Morrison (2007) found that female undergraduate students who viewed more television endorsed more rape myths.

Research suggests that when abuse is romanticized in the media, viewers will do so as well. Lippman (2018) conducted an experiment with undergraduate women who were randomly assigned to either a control condition, assigned to view a film romanticizing stalking (male engaging in persistent pursuit of female love interest, eventually "gets" the woman in the end), or a film presenting stalking as scary (male pursuer terrorizing female target and inducing fear). Lippman (2018) found that women

exposed to romanticized pursuit endorsed more stalking myths that justified and minimized this behavior than those exposed to scary pursuit. Additional support for romanticized abuse comes from a focus group study conducted with young women about perceptions of Christian and Ana's relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Bonomi et al., 2016). The researchers took participants to view the first film in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series at a local theater and then interviewed them about their reactions, finding that in general, the women perceived the relationship to be abusive and believed Christian's stalking and aggressive and controlling tendencies were problematic. They also found that participants sympathized with Christian at times, and a small minority blamed Ana for being in an unhealthy relationship. Despite these negative actions, some elements of the relationship, such as the extravagant gifts reflecting Christian's financial power and status were perceived as romantic (Bonomi et al., 2016). In line with other research (e.g., Puente & Cohen, 2003), this study suggests that the same relationship can be perceived as having both abusive and romantic elements.

The reviewed literature provides compelling evidence about the phenomenon of romanticized abuse and illustrates the numerous interlocking variables that play a role in this process. However, the process by which abuse is romanticized has been identified in relationships where all forms of IPV are present (e.g., Wood, 2001; Smith et al., 2013), rather than psychological/emotional abuse in particular. Moreover, the focus of these studies tends to be on relationships that have already been established, rather than the courtship phase of a relationship. For this dissertation, I conducted semi-structured focus groups with heterosexual women to address these limitations.

The goal was to explore romanticized perceptions of behaviors that, while enacted for the purpose of establishing a relationship with a romantic interest (instead of inflicting harm on them), are also defined as being unhealthy and abusive. I also explored how the romanticization of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics changed across various contexts, specifically the phase of the relationship and the gender of the pursuer.

## **Chapter 2: Method**

### **Participants and Recruitment**

Fifty-three heterosexual women participated across 12 focus groups exploring perceptions of various potentially unhealthy relationship dynamics that have been identified as precursors of IPV. On average, participants were 25.49 years old ( $SD = 8.31$ ) with ages ranging between 18-58 years. While participants were recruited from across the U.S., more than half lived in California at the time data were collected (64.2%). Participants were racially and ethnically diverse, with 32.1% identifying as East/Southeast Asian ( $n = 17$ ), 28.3% Caucasian/White ( $n = 15$ ), 17% African American/Black/Caribbean ( $n = 9$ ), 13.2% Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx ( $n = 7$ ), 1.9% Middle Eastern ( $n = 1$ ), 1.9% South Asian, Punjabi American ( $n = 1$ ), and 5.7% Mixed ( $n = 3$ ). Participants in this sample were highly educated. Most were students at the time of the study (71.7%,  $n = 38$ ). Nine participants (17%) were high school graduates, five (9.4%) completed an associate degree, 16 (30.2%) completed some college, 12 (22.6%) had their bachelor's degree, 10 (18.9%) completed their master's, and one (1.9%) had a doctoral degree. More than half of the participants were in a relationship

( $n = 31$ , 58.5%), 13 (24.5%) were single and not dating, four (7.5%) were married, two were engaged (3.8%), two were single and dating (3.8%), and one (1.9%) was single and getting to know someone. Most participants had prior relationship experience: 50.9% had been in 3 or more relationships ( $n = 27$ ), 39.6% had been in 1-2 relationships ( $n = 21$ ), and 9.4% had no prior dating or relationship experience ( $n = 5$ ). Most participants ( $n = 37$ , 69.8%) had been exposed to relationship abuse, either directly through personal experience, or indirectly, such as by witnessing someone close to them experience abuse.

Participants were primarily recruited through social media, including Facebook and Reddit pages for various university and community groups (e.g., those focused on dating and relationships), Craigslist, and snowball sampling. The research team also spread the message about the study to our own personal networks, including through postings made to our social media accounts, to identify interested and eligible individuals to take part. Recruitment criteria required that participants identify as female, heterosexual, be at least 18 years old, and have access to stable internet and video webcam to participate in the online focus group sessions. Study eligibility was not limited to participants who had experienced abuse or unhealthy dynamics in a former relationship. Moreover, participants were not required to have past dating or relationship experience to be eligible for the study. This ensured that participants without these experiences could still share their perceptions of unhealthy and healthy relationship dynamics if they had been exposed to messaging around these issues indirectly.

In qualitative research, saturation is a way to determine whether the data collected are sufficient to meet the goals of the study. A basic premise of saturation is that data collection (and analysis) can be concluded if no new information (e.g., themes) is being generated by conducting additional focus groups (Saunders et al., 2018). While saturation was not a specific goal for data collection in this study, each of the six vignettes depicting the unhealthy dynamics/abusive behavior (i.e., surveillance, cybersurveillance, jealousy, persistent pursuit, possessiveness/control, and isolation) were explored in two separate focus groups for a total of 12 group sessions. While researchers suggest that 6-10 participants are ideal for focus groups (Mansell et al., 2004; Morgan, 1997), pilot testing revealed that fewer participants in a group would also allow for a generative discussion. Thus, the goal was to recruit up to six participants for each group. Each group had anywhere from 2-6 participants, with the organization of the groups being based on overlapping schedules and similarities in background.

### **Procedure**

Women who were interested in participating and met the study criteria (i.e., at least age 18, heterosexual, internet/webcam access) were invited to take part in an online research study advertised as “Let’s Talk About Love: A Study about Romance and Relationships.” Through recruitment postings and flyers (see Appendix A, B), interested individuals were asked to contact a Gmail account created specifically for this study, after which they received more information about the research and their eligibility was confirmed by me. Specifically, participants were told that the focus



group discussions would inquire about their relationship beliefs, including their perceptions about various dating and relationship dynamics, their beliefs about healthy and unhealthy relationships, and what they thought was acceptable and unacceptable in romantic and dating contexts. The questions also asked how they came to have these relationship beliefs, how they perceived media portrayals of relationships, and their own personal experiences with healthy and unhealthy relationships, including if they were exposed to such relationships in other ways (e.g., if they knew of a family member or friend who experienced a healthy or unhealthy relationship). Once they confirmed their eligibility and interest in continuing, potential participants were emailed a link to an online consent form (via DocuSign) that provided further information about the research being undertaken, potential risks and benefits, and measures to maintain confidentiality (Appendix C). After providing their informed consent, participants were directed to an online demographic Google form (Appendix D) which also asked for their availability for scheduling the focus groups and asked them to come up with a pseudonym to be used during the focus group and to be included in any reporting of the findings. Along with gathering information for descriptive purposes, the information collected in this form was used to organize participants into focus groups based on shared characteristics (e.g., those with no relationship experience were grouped together, older participants were grouped together).

While originally, the study was designed for in-person data collection, due to Covid-19, the study procedures were modified so focus groups could be conducted

remotely. All focus groups took place over Zoom and were video and audio recorded through Zoom's recording feature, as well as through a back-up SONY Stereo Digital Voice Recorder. Each focus group session was facilitated by me and supported by one-two research assistants (RA). The RAs played multiple roles throughout the focus groups, including being a notetaker to capture highlights and key summary points from the discussion, observing group dynamics and interactions between participants, serving as backup support in case any technological issues occurred, and posting questions in the Zoom chat to remind participants of the questions being asked. The RAs were also responsible for sharing their screen with the group so all could see the vignette and reference back to it during the discussion. The specific role(s) for each RA were assigned before each session began.

Before starting the focus group discussion, participants were reminded about the goals of the study, and key points from the consent form were reviewed. For instance, they were reminded to keep all information shared in discussions confidential to maintain the integrity of the data and out of respect for each other's privacy. They were asked to rename themselves on Zoom according to their pseudonym and state their pseudonym before responding to any questions for ease of tracking participant responses. They were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they could leave at any time without penalty. Participants were also reminded that the session would be recorded, and that while we would take measures to maintain confidentiality, there were inherent risks to participating given that data would be collected in a group setting. Participants were informed that any disclosures about current perpetration of

physical or sexual abuse against another person would be reported to the police. After providing this overview of the study and an icebreaker question, I began recording the sessions. Each session was scheduled for a two-hour block (Morgan, 1997), and each group took a five-minute break about halfway through the session to prevent fatigue.

Once the discussion had concluded, participants were debriefed and asked whether they had any questions about the study (debriefing script attached, Appendix E). Specifically, they were informed that the study goals were to explore perceptions of different forms of relationship dynamics, and whether these would be seen as healthy, problematic, or romantic. I also explained that we intended to examine under which contexts these perceptions are likely to change. Participants were asked to share any feedback about their experience with the focus groups that could be used to improve subsequent groups (McCarry, 2009). As soon as possible after each session had concluded, participants were emailed a code for a \$25.00 amazon.com gift card as compensation, a debriefing statement to provide more context about the study and its purpose, and a list of campus (UC Santa Cruz specific) community (Santa Cruz specific), state (California specific), and national resources about IPV (see Appendix F). Some earlier participants were also emailed a recruitment flyer to send to their networks (Appendix B).

Immediately following each focus group, the research team members debriefed to share feedback about the session, go over any notes or larger themes that arose during discussions, and share concerns that could be addressed with the rest of the research team prior to the next focus group. When needed, I also debriefed with my

graduate advisor and research lab about any concerns (e.g., regarding confidentiality, participants experiencing distress). The research team also memo-ed separately which consisted of reflecting on what we believed to be the most important points from each group, and how the group compared to previous ones that had been conducted. These memos allowed the research team to manage our perspectives throughout data collection and were also used as part of the coding process and analysis phases. A transcription service, Landmark Associates, was used to transcribe each focus group discussion. Only the audio file was uploaded to Landmark's website. Due to cost constraints, only the first six transcripts were transcribed verbatim, capturing information such as filler words, false starts and repetitions. Once each transcript was completed and returned, it was double checked for accuracy by at least one RA and me. The transcripts were then summarized and coded for larger patterns and themes.

## **Materials**

### ***Vignettes***

Vignettes are an engaging and flexible tool to facilitate participation in research exploring sensitive topics, including violence (Barter & Renold, 2000). They have been employed in several studies on IPV (e.g., Beyers et al., 2000; Nguyen et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2018), and were used in this study to help elucidate the meanings and interpretations of romanticized abuse. For instance, past research has used vignettes to examine perceptions of abusive and unhealthy relationship dynamics such as jealousy and coercive control (including possessiveness), as well as physical and sexual violence (Puente & Cohen, 2003; McCarry, 2009). Vignettes allow opportunities to

provide contextualized answers to open-ended questions where participants can explain how and why their responses to the scenarios may change in different situations. Moreover, they are an excellent way to not only elicit general responses to the situation and characters presented, but also specific responses about how participants would behave in a similar situation (Barter & Renold, 2000). Additionally, vignettes are useful in making participants feel comfortable about sharing their personal experiences because they allow a certain level of separation between their own experiences and the experiences of the characters in the scenarios. However, even if participants cannot personally relate to the vignettes, their usage still allows them opportunities to engage with the situation presented in the vignettes. This can also be illuminating if responses from those with personal experience qualitatively differ from those without it (Barter & Renold, 2000). Thus, a participant who has experienced relationship abuse may be more inclined to share what she thinks about unhealthy relationships if she is responding to a hypothetical situation and character, rather than reflecting on her own experience. On the other hand, a participant who has not experienced relationship abuse personally can still offer meaningful contributions to the discussion by responding to the vignettes' portrayal of abuse more generally.

The vignettes for this dissertation were designed based on a survey of the literature and insights gathered from media portrayals of relationship behaviors considered to be problematic (see Appendix G). However, the vignettes used in this study presented each behavior in a romanticized form. Specifically, each vignette portrayed a situation that presented a potentially unhealthy dynamic between Lucas, the

male character romantically pursuing Maya, the female character. Each vignette then concluded with a positive outcome for Lucas, in that in each vignette Maya is flattered by his actions and accepts a date from him, masking the potentially unhealthy aspects of his behavior. Like Sinclair (2012), the vignettes were written so as not to make the unhealthy tactic explicit in an effort to allow participants to decide for themselves whether they deemed the situation problematic. Indeed, Barter and Renold (2000) argue that vignettes should be somewhat vague so that participants are able to contextualize their responses more. Moreover, each vignette focused on the courtship phase of a relationship before any relationship had officially been established between Lucas and Maya. Levitt et al. (2017) argue that to increase fidelity to the study phenomena, it is valuable to examine diverse ways in which that phenomenon manifests itself. In this study, the phenomenon of romanticized abuse was explored with multiple vignettes depicting different relationship dynamics (i.e., surveillance, cybersurveillance, jealousy, persistent pursuit, possessiveness/control, isolation) across different contextual factors. Each focus group responded to one of these six vignettes, with each vignette being explored in two different focus groups.

## **Interview Guide**

### ***Focus Group Discussion Questions***

The interview guide for the group sessions consisted of five main sections (see Appendix H). In the first portion, participants were introduced to the study. I began by instructing them to rename themselves on Zoom to their previously selected pseudonym so these names could be used consistently throughout the discussion. They

were told what the purpose of these pseudonyms were and how they would be used to help maintain their confidentiality throughout the study. I then introduced myself as the lead researcher on the project and facilitator of the session, and participants were also introduced to any RAs who were assisting with the session. Participants were reminded about the goals of the study, which were to hear what they thought about different relationship dynamics, how they understood healthy and unhealthy relationships, setting boundaries, their socialization around relationships, and any personal experiences with certain types of relationships and relationship dynamics (direct or indirect). As noted, key points from the consent form and recruitment emails were reiterated at this point, including the expected length of the sessions, that participants were free to share as much or as little as they'd like, or skip questions entirely, to be respectful of each other's experiences, that sessions will be recorded, and reminders about confidentiality. Additional group discussion guidelines were established, and participants were encouraged to take an active role in the group and drive the conversation themselves (Morgan, 1997). Given that the quality of focus group data relies heavily on group interaction (Morgan, 1997), we spent a few minutes getting to know each other through icebreaker questions. Following this introduction to the study and to each other, recording began.

Section two of the focus group guide started off the main discussion and focused on general beliefs about love and relationships. Participants were asked questions about what they believe defines a healthy and unhealthy relationship and examples of such relationships in real life (whether experienced personally or from

observing the relationships of close others). They were asked where they thought these relationship beliefs came from. Participants also discussed media as a source of socialization and were asked to provide an example of a love story or relationship in the media that they like and dislike. For instance, participants were asked, “When thinking about the media, what is your favorite love story, couple, or relationship? This can be a relationship that you admire and may want for yourself. This can be in real life—like real life celebrity couples or something you’ve seen in a movie or a TV show romance.” Given that participants organically revealed their general relationship beliefs during later points of the focus group, and due to time constraints that limited discussion of the vignettes and participants’ responses to them, these questions were only asked in the first six focus groups.

In the next section, each group was presented with a vignette depicting Lucas and Maya through Zoom’s screen share feature. Each of the 12 groups read and responded to one of six vignettes that varied by specific behaviors that have been identified as unhealthy and abusive in the literature (e.g., jealousy, surveillance). After I read aloud the vignette, participants were asked broad questions focusing on their general reactions to the situation and to Lucas and Maya. They were told to put themselves in Maya’s position and were asked how they would respond if the situation were happening to them in real life. For instance, in the jealousy focus groups, participants were asked:

Pretend that what’s happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive and flirt with sometimes. This man gets upset when he sees another guy getting close to and flirting with you at a party. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine that your



partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

Questions in this section also inquired about how realistic, romantic, desirable, and healthy participants perceived the situation to be (if at all), as well as their perceptions of Lucas and Maya in the vignettes. Participants shared whether they had observed a similar dynamic in another context (e.g., media, real life). This is in line with the approach used by Puente and Cohen (2003), who presented participants with vignettes varying jealousy and violence in a husband. Participants were then asked to rate how much the husband loved and respected his wife and how understanding his reaction was. Similarly, Bonomi et al. (2016) asked about women's perceptions of appealing and unappealing aspects of the relationship in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Like research that has explored attributions for both targets and pursuers in an unwanted pursuit scenario (Sinclair, 2012), participants in these focus groups reflected on what was driving both Lucas and Maya's behavior in the vignette. Whether or not the interactions between Lucas and Maya were romanticized was first explored during this part of the discussion.

The set of questions that followed in the next section explored how (if at all), certain contexts changed perceptions of Lucas and Maya and the interactions between them. This part of the conversation allowed an examination of whether romanticization of unhealthy and abusive dynamics was more likely under certain circumstances. In this section, participants were asked how their responses would change if Lucas and Maya's roles were reversed (e.g., if Maya surveilled Lucas over social media to gather information about him, rather than Lucas engaging in this tactic against Maya, and if

the scenario ended with Lucas being flattered by Maya's behavior and accepting a date from her). Additionally, the impact of the relationship phase on participants' responses was explored. Participants were asked to respond to the scenario depicting Lucas and Maya by imagining them as not dating, being in an official and committed relationship, or having broken up, with the same behavior (e.g., jealousy, cybersurveillance) being enacted by Lucas against Maya (as in the original vignettes). Questions exploring reactions to these new contextual changes included: "Does your opinion of either Lucas or Maya change given this new situation?" and "Do you think Lucas still checking Maya's social media in this way, even though they are broken up, suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?" (cybersurveillance focus groups). In closing this section, participants were asked whether there were any additional contexts under which they felt their responses to the situation and to Lucas and Maya would change.

The final section had participants respond to one question about what they would change about the way society thinks about dating, relationships, and love. Following their responses to this question, participants were debriefed about the study and its goals and reminded about the resource sheet, debriefing statement, and compensation that would be emailed to them afterwards. They were asked if they had any additional thoughts about what was discussed and any feedback about their experience participating in the sessions. The group interview protocol was used as a guide (Morgan, 1997) and was adjusted as needed during the discussions. While efforts were made to ensure that each group mostly covered the same topics and responded to the same questions in the guide, certain questions were, at times, covered at different

points in a group (or omitted completely), depending on time constraints and due to what the conversation looked like in each individual group. This was necessary to allow time for follow-up on interesting responses or anecdotes being shared by participants, or to address cases where the groups had already organically addressed a question on the guide that wasn't explicitly asked by me yet. While the questions in all focus groups were similar regardless of which vignettes each one read, the questions were also modified with additional details based on the specific vignettes. Any new questions that were asked organically over the course of the discussion were not any more sensitive than the questions already listed in the guide.

### **Data Analysis**

The research team consisted of myself and four undergraduate research assistants (RAs). Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously, as preliminary analyses of earlier focus groups helped the research team modify recruitment efforts and determine key questions and concepts to focus on during later groups (including those that were eliciting more generative discussions between participants). Additionally, this helped the team reevaluate the need to ask general questions about dating and relationships in the last six focus groups.

### **Coding Process**

We thematically coded the content of participants' responses, using coding principles that cut across different forms of qualitative analysis (e.g., thematic analysis, Braun & Clarke, 2006; content analysis, Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Our coding process consisted of multiple steps. For each focus group, RAs were responsible for taking

notes on the discussion to document the main ideas that were recurring in individual groups. Following each group session, the RAs and I debriefed to go over any interesting observations about participants' responses and notable interactions between them. The research team also memo-ed after sessions and throughout the coding process to capture ongoing thoughts about the data and how they were being interpreted (Levitt et al., 2017; 2018; Saldaña, 2009).

After each focus group discussion had been transcribed, they were verified for accuracy by at least one RA and me. To become familiar with the data, each RA was assigned to complete an initial review of 5-7 transcripts, reading the transcripts several times, conducting open coding to identify initial patterns in the data, writing summaries for each group, and answering guiding questions to support analysis (e.g., Do participants name the vignette as abusive, or just unhealthy? What are the points of agreement/disagreement between participants?). Two RAs completed this initial review for each transcript (e.g., two RAs reviewed the transcript for focus group 1), after which I met with them to discuss these initial notes and interpretations of the data. The RAs then independently completed another round of preliminary coding for their assigned transcripts, after which the same two RAs and I met again to discuss this initial coding. The full research team (i.e., all four undergraduate RAs and I) met several times to discuss these initial codes and patterns across all focus groups by comparing each group and giving other team members a chance to ask questions about transcripts they were not assigned to review. Based on these discussions, the preliminary codes that were identified, and a review of relevant literature to inform our

interpretations of the data and development of the codes, a coding manual was drafted in collaboration with the research team. One transcript (focus group 3, possessiveness/control) was identified by the team as containing a variety of codes previously outlined in the manual and was used to practice code with the manual. Three RAs and I independently coded this transcript using a qualitative coding software, MAXQDA (Verbi Software, 2021). After this independent coding, we met several times to discuss each time a code was applied, refining the manual as needed (Appendix I).

We used a consensus-based approach in which any disagreements about whether a code was to be applied and definitions and examples for each code were agreed upon by the full group. Once this process had been completed for focus group 3 (FG3), I independently coded the remaining 11 transcripts, meeting with one of two RAs who reviewed my coding, checked for inconsistencies, and identified any additional codes that needed to be applied. Of note, the coding process was iterative, as we constantly switched from reading transcripts individually to processing them together as a group, referencing the literature on relevant topics (e.g., romanticism, gender role stereotypes, abuse and violence, media, qualitative research), developing the coding manual independently and as a larger group, practicing coding with the manual, and refining the codes and manual as needed.

Our initial approach to the analysis included both deductive and inductive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I intended to analyze the focus groups for themes of abuse, romanticism, and gender stereotypes that have previously been identified in the

literature (i.e., a deductive approach). As noted, narratives about romance and gender that explain relationship abuse are heavily intertwined, making it difficult to separate an analysis of gender roles from the context in which they are enacted (dating and relationships). Thus, we searched for instances where participants romanticized abuse by invoking specific romantic beliefs (Sprecher & Metts, 1989) or a preference for traditionally masculine traits in men (Mahalik et al., 2003). We additionally searched for other ways stereotypical gender roles might manifest, such as benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and socialization of traditional femininity that prioritizes nurturance and heterosexual romantic relationships for women (Mahalik et al., 2005; DePaulo, 2006).

While there were several instances of participants endorsing such romantic beliefs and gender stereotypes, it became apparent that our coding would be mostly inductive. Coding responses inductively captured those instances where participants relied on additional explanations for why they perceive certain behaviors as romantic that were not previously considered. When coding inductively, the research team continued to rely on the literature to help make sense of the data. For instance, instead of coding for specific romantic beliefs (e.g., *Love Finds a Way, One and Only*; Sprecher & Metts, 1989), and instead of coding for benevolent sexist beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 1996), we instead coded for romanticization and stereotypical gender roles.

We employed our analysis at the latent level, which allowed us to explore the underlying meaning in participants' responses beyond what is said at the surface level (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For instance, instead of just focusing

on whether a particular vignette was perceived as romantic or problematic by participants, we explored the underlying context that gave rise to those perceptions. Participants may believe that a man who persistently pursues his female love interest is attractive because “that’s how it is supposed to be.” In such responses, the analysis may conclude that this participant is invoking certain gender role stereotypes and a romance narrative that claims that courtship is gendered and the appropriate role for men is to claim dominance in their pursuits until they “get the girl,” while women ought to play the role of being pursued, or risk being rejected because they are engaging in behavior that falls out of their expected feminine norm. In applying a latent analysis, we went beyond merely summarizing the data as is more appropriate in a semantic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Instead, we interpreted the underlying context to participants’ responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), applying a hermeneutics of suspicion (Josselson, 2004).

Employing this type of lens is also in line with my approach to inquiry. In the analysis, I took both a social constructionist and critical realist approach to inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Madill et al., 2000). These approaches argue that various phenomena and experiences with those phenomena are socially constructed and reproduced. As previously discussed, relationship abuse and unhealthy relational dynamics are defined and shaped largely by popular discourses of romance and gender in our society (e.g., Wood, 2001). Traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (e.g., male dominance, female submission) that make up the larger system of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980; Tolman, 2006) play a role in heterosexual

courtship practices and are conducive to abusive relationships between men and women. Moreover, these discourses are socially reproduced through popular cultural tools such as the media (e.g., Collins & Carmody, 2011). In that sense, there is a clear sociocultural context in which abuse becomes romanticized in our society. As I discuss below, our understandings of abuse, romance, and gender are also shaped largely by how we engage with these topics in our personal lives (e.g., I may not consider a behavior to be abusive if I have experienced it in a particular way, even if that behavior is considered abuse by legal definitions). On the other hand, I may also define a behavior as abusive no matter how romanticized it may be and regardless of anyone's personal experience with it, claiming a real "truth" about what abuse is (e.g., I'd consider any behavior that incites fear in a victim as being abusive, which is in line with legal definitions of abusive behaviors such as stalking).

### **Reflexivity**

A critical principle of qualitative research is that the process of research itself is shaped largely by the assumptions, experiences, and values of the researcher (Josselson, 2013). To increase the methodological integrity of a study and ensure fidelity to the subject matter, it is necessary that researchers be transparent about how their positionality affects the research questions they ask, the way they collect data, and how they interpret, analyze, and present research findings (Levitt et al., 2017; Levitt et al., 2018). To understand how my own positionality may have influenced data collection in particular, an RA interviewed me using one of the interview guides (Josselson, 2013). This served multiple purposes, including allowing me to put myself



in my participants' shoes and piloting the interview guide to ensure the flow and wording of questions worked. Being interviewed myself also provided insight on how I would respond to the vignettes and follow-up questions, which was necessary to ensure that I did not insert my own responses into the discussion when conducting the actual focus groups.

As noted, the rest of the research team and I also used memos throughout the process of conducting focus groups and analysis, which served to manage our perspective as researchers throughout these phases (Levitt et al., 2017; 2018; Saldaña, 2009). After each focus group and during coding meetings, we discussed our memos and other observations and, when relevant, shared how our experiences and potential biases shaped our interpretations of the data (Hill et al., 2005). For instance, in these meetings we discussed whether we were relating on a personal level to a particular participant and why (e.g., having experienced a similar unhealthy dynamic as shared by the participant, or due to confirmation bias). Both our notes and memos were used to supplement the analysis. Thus, inter-rater reliability and strict objectivity was not a goal of our analytical process. Rather, the research team strived to build a shared understanding of the complexity of participants' responses and experiences with unhealthy relationship dynamics, recognizing that this shared understanding would also be based on our individual beliefs and personal experiences.

In understanding my positionality as a researcher conducting this study, it is also important to reflect upon how I came to be interested in the topic of romanticized abuse. My interest in exploring this topic comes largely from growing up in a mostly

conservative and strict Indian household. For much of my upbringing, the emphasis was to strengthen familial bonds over any other type of relationship—and particularly over those with potential romantic partners. The pressure for South Asian women to uphold their family’s reputation by monitoring their own social and dating lives is a common experience (Kallivayalil, 2004; Manohar, 2008). Because much of my social life was limited when I was younger, I often looked to the media’s portrayals of dating and relationships to gain an understanding of these issues and I relied on these portrayals to determine what kind of relationship and partner I desired. Given recurring themes about idealized notions of romance in the media I too found myself endorsing these beliefs (e.g., Galloway et al., 2015). As a result, I initially did not notice the abusive elements in the *Twilight* Series and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, likely because those same idealized romantic beliefs were prominent in both series and often concealed the abuse.

Over time and with my own experiences to fall back on (and through reading the critiques of both series by scholars!), I realized that media presents love and relationships in unrealistic and stereotypical ways—which is especially problematic if this is the only exposure one ever gets to relationships. Despite this insight, based on my own experiences I may still interpret some level of jealousy as a sign of care, while another may interpret any level of jealousy as an attempt at control. It is this realization that made me interested in exploring how abuse becomes romanticized. This interest is also reflected in other pieces of my background, including my prior role as a Graduate Student Intern working at the *Title IX* office at UC Santa Cruz, where I conducted

trainings for undergraduate and graduate students about sexual misconduct, relationship violence, and stalking. I have also worked in spaces dedicated to supporting survivors, such as organizations at the community (e.g., *Walnut Avenue Family and Women's Center*) and national (*Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, RAINN*) levels. This background also provided an ideal position for me to undertake this work, as I had prior experience with and felt comfortable working with sensitive topics, and specifically violence and relationship abuse (Levitt et al., 2018).

The rest of the study team was also asked to reflect on their positionality and their relationship to the study topic. For instance, one RA had shared how she went through a major breakup during the study, and how she had viewed certain dynamics as more acceptable when she was in the relationship compared to when she was single. Another RA shared that she had been a victim of stalking, and how that impacted her assessment of the severity and seriousness of unhealthy behaviors. Again, to address these biases and perspectives during analysis, my RAs and I memo-ed (Levitt et al., 2017), paying particular attention to whether we considered certain behaviors to be abusive (even if they are defined by the literature as being abusive), whether we had experienced such behaviors in our own relationships, and whether we considered (or would consider) those behaviors to be acceptable or romantic. Levitt et al. (2017) also suggest using multiple coders to maintain fidelity. Thus, the research team participated in weekly meetings about the coding and analysis, sharing how we came to specific insights about the content and what personal biases and experiences may have shaped

those insights. The use of multiple coders also prevented a single researcher's perspective from being pushed forward during analysis.

### **Summary of Themes and Codes**

This dissertation focuses on a subset of themes and codes that were identified across all twelve focus groups. Specifically, it focuses on three larger themes and their corresponding codes: 1) *Normalization*, 2) *Explaining Abuse/Unhealthy Behavior*, and 3) *Conflicts/Contradictions* (for a complete explanation of codes, including coding rules, definitions, and hypothetical examples, see Appendix I for the coding manual). A summary outlining this information is discussed next.

The first theme, *Normalization*, refers to the ways in which all forms of violence, abuse, and unhealthy behaviors towards women may be normalized and tolerated in society more generally and within relationships more specifically. *Normalization* was coded in one of two ways. The first code, *Common Occurrence*, was coded for any response that suggests an abusive or unhealthy behavior or situation is common in terms of prevalence. This may come in the form of the participant sharing they had personally experienced a situation similar to one of the vignettes, or them sharing an experience from a close friend or family member that was similar (e.g., “*My friend had this same thing happen to her*”). The second code falling under this theme, *Romanticization*, was coded anytime participants discussed certain dating or relationship behaviors (even those considered problematic by some) as positive, desirable, or romantic (e.g., “*stalking shows that he’s invested in her*”).

The second theme, *Explaining Abuse/Unhealthy Behavior*, consisted of several codes that all served to make sense of the abusive or unhealthy behavior. *Stereotypical gender roles (SGRs)* were coded anytime participants discussed gendered behaviors or roles in dating/romantic situations to explain Lucas or Maya's behaviors, or men and women's dating behaviors in real life. This included responses suggesting that Lucas and Maya, or men and women more generally, act according to stereotypical and expected/socialized gender roles (e.g., men are taught to be aggressive, women are flattered by attention). *Media* was coded for any responses that discussed media as a source of relationship beliefs/ behaviors. It was also coded for any responses that critiqued media's portrayal of dating and relationships. This could be media in general (e.g., films, tv series, books), or specific media examples by name (e.g., *The Notebook*). *Appeasing men* was coded whenever participants shared that they would go along with what Lucas, or men in general, desired despite their discomfort in order to avoid confrontation and ensure their safety (e.g., "I've ghosted people before, it's just easier in the moment"). *Safety concerns/needng other protections* was coded whenever participants' responses expressed some level of concern about safety and harm (either for themselves, or for Lucas or Maya's characters in the vignette) ("She may accept because she's afraid to say 'no'"). *Negative precedent* was coded whenever participants suggested that Lucas' behavior is habitual and will likely continue or escalate in his future relationship or interactions with Maya. *Appeasing men*, *safety concerns/needng other protections*, and *negative precedents* were combined for the final analysis given their overlap and them often

being coded together in participants' responses. For instance, having *safety concerns* often led participants to explain how they have *appeased* men in the past, and that is likely what is driving Maya's perceived flattery to Lucas' pursuit towards her.

*Shyness/lacking experience or maturity* was coded anytime participants described either Lucas or Maya, or people in general, as enacting certain behaviors due to limited social experiences, usually with dating (e.g., by virtue of younger age; "Maya has never had this type of attention before. If she did she wouldn't be so excited"). *Insecurity/lack of trust* was coded anytime participants attributed Lucas or Maya's behavior (or people's behavior in general), to being insecure or lacking trust in their partner or relationship (e.g., "He is jealous because he is insecure about their relationship"). Finally, *sincere like/attraction* was coded whenever participants attributed Lucas' behavior to him genuinely liking Maya (or men sincerely liking women). Moreover, this code was applied if participants believed Maya's response could be explained by her simply liking the behavior and enjoying it, or women in general liking the person enacting such behaviors ("Everyone has their own preferences. It could be that she just likes it").

The final theme that will be presented in this dissertation is *Conflicts/Contradictions*, which was reflected in participants' statements that were in direct opposition or were inconsistent with other comments they made over the course of the discussion. For instance, this theme applied anytime participants' responses suggested both a desire for a relationship with Lucas alongside concerns for their safety if they dated him in place of Maya, suggesting a conflict and contradiction

between romanticization and safety concerns. As will be discussed in the results sections, the three themes and the various codes falling under those themes are complex and interrelated. Given the nature of our coding, the coding and thematic framework is derived from the data itself, rather than prior empirical work.

### **Chapter 3: Results**

Participants' perceptions about the dynamics between Lucas and Maya revealed much about the ways in which women romanticize and justify potential precursors to abuse, as well as under which contexts this is likely to happen. While several larger themes arose throughout the analysis, the findings presented in this dissertation fall under three larger themes: 1) *Normalization*, 2) *Explaining Abuse/Unhealthy Behavior*, and 3) *Conflicts and Contradictions*. *Normalization* of abuse and other problematic behavior occurred in two ways: references to how commonly these behaviors occurred in real life and romanticization of Lucas' actions towards Maya and his overall character. *Explanations for Abuse and Other Unhealthy Behavior* fell into stereotypical gender roles; media; appeasing men, safety concerns/needing other protections, negative precedent; shyness/lacking experience or maturity; insecurity/lack of trust; and sincere like/attraction. Finally, *Conflicts and Contradictions* refers to any statements made by participants that are inconsistent with other statements they made across the discussion, usually resulting in some internal conflict for them (e.g., finding Lucas' behavior romantic while also having major concerns around safety if pursuing a relationship with him).

The corresponding codes associated with these larger themes are further identified below, along with illustrative quotes by participants. Morgan (2010) comments on the extent to which the analysis and reporting of focus group data should emphasize the interactional dynamics between participants. In the following results section, I report my analysis through various ways. This includes providing quotes from individual participants that effectively illustrate key themes and codes. I also provide examples of interactions between participants within individual focus groups to illustrate how they were responding to each other, agreeing, challenging, and building off each other's comments. Additionally, comments made by participants from one group are also presented alongside comments from participants in other groups, to showcase how participants may have been in indirect conversation with each other.

Our coding process allowed responses to fall under multiple codes and themes. To allow for a more targeted analysis and presentation of findings, I do not comment on every single code and theme that applies to each quote in this section. Thus, the different codes described above are discussed at varying levels, and when possible, the most prominent code(s) that apply to each quote is highlighted in the analysis. Additionally, and when necessary, the quotes were lightly edited for clarity (e.g., grammar, removing "like", "you know", "um", repetitions) to ensure the meaning of participants' responses was fully understandable. Finally, this results section includes subsections that are organized by the different relationship phases that were explored across the focus groups, as well as the gender role reversal



between Lucas and Maya. Of note, the courtship phase was the most extensively covered relationship phase across all focus groups. This is because this study was particularly concerned with how unhealthy and abusive relationship dynamics that are romanticized are perceived during courtship, leading to the methodological decision to depict this stage between Lucas and Maya in each vignette. For this reason, all the themes and codes will be discussed in full as they relate to the courtship phase between both characters. For the remaining sections that cover the other relational contexts (i.e., committed relationship, no date accepted/breakup phase) or the gender role reversal, only the most prominent themes and codes are discussed.

### **Courtship Phase**

The first relationship stage that participants were asked to consider between Lucas and Maya was the courtship phase, where Lucas pursued and expressed his interest in Maya through one of six different tactics that have been identified as precursors to IPV. For instance, Lucas may have gone through all of Maya's social media accounts and checked for updates constantly to learn more about her and her social network (cybersurveillance), or he may have become upset at Maya and violent towards another man who was flirting with her at a party (jealousy). In all the initial vignettes participants were presented with, Lucas and Maya started off as acquaintances or friends. Following Lucas' enactment of the specific tactic, Maya became flattered by Lucas' behavior and perceived his behavior as an indication that he truly liked her, leading her to officially accept a date from him.

## **Normalization (Theme 1)**

### ***Common Occurrences of Unhealthy Dating and Relationship Experiences (Code 1)***

Across all 12 focus groups, participants recounted in very specific ways how their personal dating and relationship experiences, or the experiences of close others in their social and familial network (as well as acquaintances), mapped onto the story between Lucas and Maya. For several of these participants, the experiences they shared were nearly identical to the vignettes they had discussed in their focus groups.

When FG1-Cybersurveillance was presented with a scenario where Lucas had consistently monitored Maya's social media accounts and posts to learn more about her, Rosie explained how she had experienced this same exact situation in her first relationship:

For initially my first relationship that was very unhealthy, he kinda messaged me this way in which he went through my social media. And I didn't really know him, and then he just one day, messaged me, "I'm in love with you." [laughter]. Well, it was a red flag off the bat, but it was like, "I'm so infatuated with you 'cause of these details that I gathered up." And at first, I was like, "Okay, weird," but flattered. But it was only until later on that I realized he went to my dad's Facebook to look at pictures of me when I was in the fourth grade... it's like, okay, any future person that ever does that to me again, this one included, like off the bat...[laughter]. (Rosie, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 20)

Rosie's response ties in several key points: The fact that her own experience is so closely related to the hypothetical scenario between Lucas and Maya suggests just how realistic it is for individuals to surveil a potential love interest over social media to facilitate a relationship with them. Moreover, Rosie explains how at the time, she was flattered that her first boyfriend stalked her over social media and found out every little detail about her, suggesting that romanticizing these types of situations is

also quite common, particularly when one has limited dating and relationship experience.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Rosie felt at least some level of discomfort about the situation at that time, while also romanticizing it, also suggests a Conflict/Contradiction where individuals can perceive the same situation positively and negatively and for different reasons. Like Rosie, Daisy, a participant in FG9-Isolation, shared how the scenario she discussed with her group was closely related to the one high school relationship she has had. This focus group responded to the vignette where Lucas tells Maya he prefers that they eat lunch together alone, without Maya's friend, because he prefers it being "just the two of us." Daisy also noted how she has observed similar dynamics in her other romantic relationships:

I can say that this situation is certainly very reflective of the one and only relationship I had when I was in high school. And I remember [*sighs*] I went with it for a few months and then decided that it was stupid, and I was sick of it. And it took me a while to figure out how controlling it was. I knew I wasn't happy, but I couldn't necessarily pinpoint why. And I've encountered similar behavior from a couple of men I've dated since and I find you don't necessarily notice it in the heat of the moment. Sometimes you know you're unhappy; you know something isn't sitting right, but it's hard to pinpoint it. It depends on how the request is phrased. If a partner that you're dating is very blunt and says, "I don't like it when you spend time with your friends," it's very obvious... but there are more subtle ways that it might be presented to you that it kind of slips past your radar at first, and it might take you a while to pick up on the motive behind it. (*Daisy, FG9-Isolation, age 32*)

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<sup>1</sup> While participants' romanticization of Lucas and Maya's story and Lucas' behaviors more specifically will be discussed more fully in the next subsection, it is also referenced here to showcase how common this reaction was amongst participants.

Daisy explained how she has felt some sort of discomfort in her former relationships but has not always been able to explain what was at the root of that discomfort. She believes that the framing of certain behaviors matters. Indeed, the tone of Lucas saying he prefers it to be “just the two of us,” is more subtle and can come across as more benign than, in Daisy’s words, “I don’t like it when you spend time with your friends.” Also apparent in her response is the difficulty in recognizing and responding to uncomfortable behaviors when they happen. As Daisy indicates, it is difficult to recognize these situations “in the heat of the moment.” It often takes the passage of time and encountering other discomforting behavior at the hands of a partner to realize when “something isn’t sitting right.” Daisy’s response provides further support to the normalization of these types of dynamics. Not only are they commonly experienced within romantic relationships in terms of sheer frequency, but the subsequent response—not being able to “pinpoint” the issue right away but still being uncomfortable, also appears to be common.

Like Daisy, Anne, a participant in FG6-Surveillance, shared how she personally related to the vignette her group discussed where Lucas signs up for all of Maya’s classes to be noticed by her, and goes to other places he knows Maya frequents in the hopes of running into her:

My boyfriend in college did that where he signed up for all the classes I did. At that time, I was a little uncomfortable because I wanted to make new friends, and I can’t really do that when people are sitting like two by two in each lecture, you can’t really approach them. But then he just told me it was the easiest schedule for him too, and I was like, “oh okay, then.” I’m uncomfortable with that, so to imagine a stranger doing that would make me very, very uncomfortable. (*Anne, FG6-Surveillance, age 19*)

Anne's experience suggests just how common surveillance of a potential love interest is. She also noted how the relationship context matters; she was already uncomfortable with her boyfriend signing up for all her classes, so she would be even more uncomfortable if this were a stranger. While Anne did not fully minimize the situation, as she clearly preferred her boyfriend not joining all her classes, she did talk about this being slightly more acceptable behavior coming from a boyfriend. Moreover, Anne's discomfort turned into safety concerns, which could further translate into her appeasing a man if this behavior was coming from someone she did not know as well. Indeed, Anne noted in the discussion how she would be too afraid of speaking out against this out of fear that the person would be too obsessed and would try hurting her.

As part of the discussion, participants across focus groups commonly brought up other abusive tactics and situations beyond what was centered in their specific vignettes. As an example, the possessiveness/control vignette depicted Lucas encouraging Maya to wear less revealing clothing to avoid other men's attention. Luna and her groupmates (FG10-Possessiveness/Control) explored other interactions between men and women that they also identified as unhealthy, of concern, and relevant to their scenario. Even though Lunas's group did not respond to the persistent pursuit vignette, this was a situation they organically brought up themselves.<sup>2</sup> In Luna's case, being persistently pursued by men, even when women

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<sup>2</sup> While in each vignette Maya is being persistently pursued by Lucas through a specific tactic (e.g., jealousy, surveillance, isolation), the vignette that FG2 and FG8

are disinterested, is a common occurrence, and a situation she finds realistic as it has happened to her and her friends. She also suggested that women internalize gender stereotypes about appropriate roles and reactions within a dating context, and specifically the belief that women should be pursued but play “hard to get”:

I would agree, that yes, this does happen a lot, especially now. Like if you keep trying, eventually maybe they'll say yes, but I also think that the reverse also happens where women sometimes think that they should be chased and that they should say no because they need to be coy. And I think that's a very old-fashioned view and I think that also comes into play for those older generations. That's really common. So it plays on each other both ways, but that still happens today. This vignette, this is very common. You see it in movies. I've had this happen to me. I've had this happen to my friends. (*Luna, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 29*)

As described, participants shared personal experiences of not only experiencing the same types of situations that Maya was encountering in these hypothetical scenarios, but also responding the way that she did in the vignettes as well. In other words, participants brought up plenty of examples of how they had similarly tolerated and romanticized problematic behaviors within their past relationships. For instance, Lea (FG5-Jealousy, age 18) shared how she used to think like Maya in high school, when she also romanticized jealousy-related aggression and thought that it was a sign of someone caring for and liking her: “When I was in high school, I used to look for that in a person, someone that would get aggressive for me, fight for me in that way.”

Other participants in FG5-Jealousy, such as Alicia, also brought up similar experiences of romanticizing jealousy in the past but recognizing it as problematic

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responded to depicted Lucas persistently pursuing Maya by not accepting her rejection and asking her for a date until she agreed.

today. Alicia recognized that early in the flirting stage (i.e., the courtship stage), certain behaviors appear more positive, but the same behaviors can bring up conflict later in the relationship:

In the flirting stage, it does seem nice, but I'm pretty sure in the long run, it's just not gonna cut it in a relationship. I used to think that way when I was flirting with my boyfriend. I'm just like, "Oh, you know, if he gets jealous of my guy friends, oh that shows he cares." And then once we're in a relationship now and we've been together for a while and there's times where he might or would get jealous, I'm like, "Okay, now, this is really annoying."  
(Alicia, FG5-Jealousy, age 21)

For Alicia, the relationship context matters—jealousy in the flirting, courtship stage is going to be perceived differently, and more positively than if it occurs when in a committed relationship with one's partner. In the former case, jealousy is perceived as a sign of care, while in the latter case, it is seen as an annoying reaction.

Like her groupmates, Churro (also in FG5-Jealousy) reflected on her own personal experiences and realized that she had been in Maya's position before, where she thought that jealousy was a sign of liking someone. Churro also explained how she used it as a measure to determine how much other boys liked her:

...It feels like Maya's testing Lucas, in a sense. Like, "Oh how much does he like me? And, he has to like me a lot." And then, that's how I know he likes me" and stuff. I kind of related to Lea a little bit. I [*laughter*] kinda did this too...I guess for me, it was kinda testing that. "Oh, like, oh you're getting jealous, because of that? I guess I must be important or something, huh?"  
(Churro, FG5-Jealousy, age 20)

Supporting these participants' descriptions of how jealousy can be romanticized is research that finds that amongst both men and women, pro-jealousy attitudes (e.g., jealousy as a sign of care and love) are related to idealized romantic beliefs and traditional beliefs about gender (Hartwell et al., 2015). Another key code reflected in

Churro's response is that of stereotypical gender roles, in which women "test" men, play hard to get, and act as sexual gatekeepers (Murnen et al., 2002). As will be illustrated throughout the results section, gender stereotypes and romanticism are closely linked and oftentimes difficult to separate.

Participants (especially those from FG5-Jealousy) who shared having personally been in Maya's position tended to share that they had previously perceived unhealthy situations and dynamics as acceptable and romantic in past relationships. However, these participants claimed that today, they would not tolerate this type of behavior from a partner, or potential partner. To understand how this shift between romanticizing and problematizing these dynamics occurred for participants, I asked FG5-Jealousy:

**SK:** Alicia, you touched on an interesting point that I think a few others have also mentioned...in the past you could see yourself kind of liking this, right? Wanting your partner to be jealous. And Alicia, you talked about how when you actually experienced that in a relationship, you decided that you didn't like that...I'm wondering for the others who shared that earlier perspective, what changed? ...what made you not like it now, or making you be less okay with it today?

**Lea:** I think the biggest thing that took me away from liking that jealousy obsessiveness was my very first boyfriend was exactly like this. We were together for three years, and it just got to the point where he would be mad at me for anyone that would flirt with me, anyone that would approach me. He would get angry at me that I didn't dropkick them when they came up to me. And I'm like, "I'm not gonna punch someone in the face every time they come and talk to me. I'm not gonna assume their intentions." And this was in high school. So I was like, "What're you taking it so serious for?" And so I think that kinda turned me off to that idea, to the whole possessiveness thing. And when I got to college, whenever my friends would be like, "Oh, yeah, I can't go. My boyfriend—or I have to ask my boyfriend if I can go," or, "Oh, I can't talk to him. I have to ask my boyfriend." I would be like, "Oh, you live like this? Okay." [laughter]. I would be like, "Couldn't be me." I just think I



want to be in control of my own life and my own interactions. I don't need a father, I want a boyfriend. (*FG5-Jealousy, age 18*)

Lea described the “turning point” at which she realized she was no longer interested in a partner who reacted jealously, despite perceiving this more positively in the past. “Turning points” have been described by scholars as those moments or situations (and often, multiple moments or situations) that prompt women experiencing abuse to perceive their relationship, their partner, and themselves differently. It is seen as a shift which pushes women towards the ultimate goal of leaving these relationships (Murray et al., 2015). Of note, across focus groups we explored potential turning points from women who had and had not personally experienced unhealthy relationship dynamics and abuse. While some participants reflected on their experiences and shared their own turning points—that is, what situations encouraged them to perceive their relationships differently and ultimately break up with their partners, other participants shared what their turning points would be if they were in Maya's position and dating Lucas in real life.

Churro also shared that this shift in perception happened for her when she realized that she was being held accountable for other boys approaching her and talking to her—a situation she had no control over. Moreover, she felt that her ex-partner was controlling her social network, preventing her from making male friends. She indicates that the relationship was becoming controlling and abusive in other ways as well:

My boyfriend he would blame me for other people approaching me. I don't have a forcefield around me, and I'm not holding up signs to be like, “Yeah, come talk to me.” So it's literally, it's their actions, but I'm getting the heat

for it ...And that was, like, ugh, just leave me alone. I'm literally doing nothing. How else can I prove to you that I'm not contributing to whatever the other person's talking to me for...?...And then I would be scared to talk to other guys in fear of me getting in trouble again. I think that's what's turned me away from it...now I'm just changing my life too much. I can't have guy friends anymore, or I can't make new guy friends. I guess, also going back to what everyone been saying, unhealthy relationships, changing yourself to meet the standards of someone else or what they want for you. (*Churro, FG5-Jealousy, age 20*)

Churro's reaction to her [former] partner's jealousy and possessive/controlling behavior is reflective of what Smith and colleagues (1995) describe as "perceived threat", "managing", and "entrapment", all of which fall under their conceptualization of harmed identity that can be experienced by victims. Churro describes emotional reactions such as fear and dread in response to her ex-boyfriend's accusations of inviting other men's attentions ("ugh, just leave me alone"), which characterize the threat that women perceive when assessing risk in abusive situations. She alludes to how she managed the situation in response—reflecting on how she was "changing my life too much"—assumably by avoiding interacting with other men. Her response also reflects a feeling of entrapment in her relationship, where she felt she could no longer have male friends.

Another way in which common occurrence was coded was when participants reflected on the dating and relationship experiences of friends, family members, and acquaintances. Participants cited several examples of how people they knew had experiences resembling the dynamics between Lucas and Maya across the vignettes. Some participants like Jennifer (FG1-Cybersurveillance) criticized just how normal these dynamics were:

Honestly, I think, should it be normal? Maybe not, but I think it is normal in our dating culture. I have not experienced it myself, really...But my best friend does this on the regular all the time to people, and so to me, it is normalized because I hear about it from her all the time, sending me screenshots about, "Oh, this guy goes to this with this guy that I know...oh, my gosh, like I found out he knows this person because I saw a picture of them in the tag of, you know, whatever." It's like, "Oh, on Snapchat, they were on Snapchat like a couple of minutes ago, but they won't reply to my text. Like that's so weird." (*Jennifer, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Neyu, also in FG1-Cybersurveillance, sees such a high level of cybersurveillance amongst her friends that she calls them "FBI agents" who are even able to track down a potential love interests' music playlist:

I agree with everyone else that I think it would happen in real life 'cause it's so normalized, and I've definitely had friends where they're kind of like FBI agents. [*Laughter*] They're able to find everything out about who they're interested in, all their social media, even their Spotify, what they're listening to. So it is very normalized. I don't think that it should be as normalized, but I think that other people may respond like Maya. (*Neyu, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 21*)

Some participants explained that while unhealthy and abusive situations were common, they personally would have fewer concerns about them if they were in Maya's place and were being pursued in the way she was. In other words, participants believed that the situations these vignettes depicted were realistic for others, but not for themselves. Izzy (FG6-Surveillance) believed that taking all of the same classes with someone and frequenting the same places as them is not as concerning, because this is actually common in college settings. She indicated that she may think differently if Lucas were engaging in these same behaviors outside of a college setting, though:

I mean this does seem like it's a situation specific to college because they're enrolling in classes. But I think that because it's in college it's a little bit less

weird than if this were to happen in post-college real life. Thinking about my general classes, I've seen the same people in so many of my classes that I don't know if I would necessarily notice or think anything of a few of these things. A lot of people go to the same places downtown to study. (*Izzy, FG6-Surveillance, age 20*)

Like Izzy, Rosie (FG7-Cybersurveillance) explains why she personally would have fewer concerns if someone like Lucas had attempted to gather information about her through social media:

I do agree that it's common, especially nowadays. Everybody feels the need to share every little thing. Where you check into, where you're going, what you're doing. I've never really been like that, so I wouldn't be concerned about myself because my Instagram is private and I don't really share anything. I also prefer to get to know somebody the old-fashioned way. If you friend me on a social media platform, that's fine, but I don't really have all of my information on there, where you can just learn everything that way. You would be forced to get to know me, for real. I think for people that do share everything, they should be a little cautious. That's something that I worry about the most because you don't know what you're putting out there, and who's taking the information and using it for their own God-knows-what kind of intentions. I feel like back then, people were a little bit more cautious. There was only Myspace and stuff. I think once Instagram came around, it was really easy for everybody just to find everything about you because you have all your photos and things like that. It's realistic, but at the same time not realistic for the ones that don't share everything. (*Rosie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 26*)

Because Rosie keeps her Instagram account private and since she posts limited information on her social media to begin with, she did not believe she would be in the same situation as Maya. However, she recognizes that this is likely a common experience for others who use social media differently, and who post more personal information on their accounts.

A few participants distinguished between realistic details within the vignettes that reflected more common occurrences in real life, and other details that were more

unrealistic. This primarily occurred in FG5-Jealousy, where participants discussed at length the difference between being jealous (a common occurrence), and acting on that jealousy, which they believed should not be normalized. To illustrate, Billy brought up her personal feelings of jealousy towards the woman who her male love interest was currently dating:

Say a jealous thought goes through my brain—right now, for example, I’m in a situation where I wanna be with this man, and he does not wanna be with me [*laughs*]. I find myself getting jealous a lot, because he’s with his baby mama, and it’s really stressful...but I do not act on these thoughts. I’ll be like, “damn, I really wish that was me, I really wish I was the one having his babies” [*laughs*], type thing. It’s up to me of whether I act on them or not. If I messaged the baby mama and be like, “Hey, you’re this and that,” I call her names, that would be acting on it. That’s not okay, in any kinda relationship, friendship, whatever the case may be. I guess it’s okay if it crosses your mind, ‘cause we are human and that’s what happens. We’re naturally gonna be a little bit jealous of other people sometimes. It’s all about how you react to it. (*Billy, FG12-Jealousy, age 22*)

Billy’s comment garnered much agreement from her group mates, including Eliza, who agreed that jealousy is a normal reaction but acting on it, which is what Lucas did in the scenario, should not be normalized:

...I also think that low level of jealousy is, it might be a healthy, or not healthy, but it probably would be okay emotion, just like it’s okay to get mad about things or frustrated or angry, ‘cause this is how you follow through and hold people accountable. These emotions are actually how you do life, you have to have the whole range of emotions. I would argue that getting that jealous over that small a situation, it doesn’t really warrant it. I think the level of it is definitely unhealthy and too much. (*Eliza, FG12-Jealousy, age 19*)

Eliza suggests that people need to express the full range of emotions, which might include frustration, anger, and jealousy, but that the emotion must match the severity of the situation at hand. In her opinion, the way Lucas manifested his jealousy — by

becoming aggressive towards another man who he saw flirting with Maya at a party, and by becoming upset with Maya herself — was too severe.

As these quotes reveal, participants across focus groups were able to reflect on their own personal experiences with unhealthy and abusive dynamics within their former relationships. Moreover, some also shared how they have seen their friends experience these dynamics in their relationships as well. Participants' responses suggested that tactics such as jealousy, isolation, and cybersurveillance are extremely common occurrences, and are especially likely to occur in the very first relationship one may be in. The sheer prevalence of these tactics in today's relationships can be one way in which psychological/emotional abuse and other unhealthy relationship dynamics are normalized. In the next subsection, the role of romanticization in normalizing these dynamics is further explored.

### ***Romanticization of Unhealthy Dating and Relationship Experiences (Code 2)***

In general, most participants across all focus groups perceived the initial courtship between Lucas and Maya as problematic in some way. They were easily able to identify the unhealthy and abusive dynamics between the two, and as discussed, these dynamics were considered normal in terms of sheer frequency. In this subsection, I present one of the other common reactions that participants had to Lucas and Maya's courtship—romanticization. Participants often normalized Lucas' actions and his pursuit towards Maya through the specific tactics by emphasizing how romantic, desirable, or sweet it was, or by indicating that they would similarly be flattered if they were in Maya's position. Importantly, romanticization was also

endorsed by participants who critiqued the scenarios and problematized Lucas' actions towards Maya. Compared with other focus groups, FG4-Isolation was one of the groups where all three participants consistently romanticized certain elements of the story between Lucas and Maya. For instance, Jesper found it "adorable" that Lucas took so long to ask Maya out, and she found Lucas' jealousy likable:

... Lucas... has taken five weeks of liking Maya before he gets up the courage. That's just adorable, [*laughter*] to finally ask her out. And the kind of part in the middle, where someone else asks her out, basically to the same lunch date, and so he's like, "Oh. I gotta, like, hurry up and do this, or I'm gonna lose my chance"...I'm failing to grab the word to describe it, but I like that about the story. (*Jesper, FG4-Isolation, age 35*)

Chloe, also from the same group as Jesper, romanticized the story because of the happy ending that Lucas and Maya got together, as well as the vulnerability that Lucas was faced with as he was pursuing Maya:

I can't even put an age on this but when somebody is just so shy about saying how they feel, you're so vulnerable, we don't know how Maya is in the story... if she's really excited about Lucas and has been wanting to be asked out...that's kinda what I like about it because in these times...when you're so vulnerable and you don't have the answers in front of your face, you have to piece all these pieces together, it's just so nice. It's just... a relief when things kinda get revealed, and that's what I like about this. I feel such a nice sense of relief and joy for them. (*Chloe, FG4-Isolation, age 51*)

Finally, Tessa from the same group romanticized the story because of how rare it seems in comparison to today's casual dating culture. In fact, Tessa believed that Lucas' behavior in this vignette illustrated his commitment towards Maya:

...the most, exciting thing here that he liked her for several months he didn't just go and say his feelings...he didn't do any steps towards her for several months so it looks unusual for relationships in the modern society... so it really looks very romantic...Because there are a lot of people who every month have new girlfriend and boyfriend. (*Tessa, FG4-Isolation, age 28*)

Emmy (FG8-Persistent Pursuit) also viewed Lucas' persistence as a sign of commitment when responding to a scenario where he consistently asked Maya on a date despite her saying "no," only stopping when she agreed to date him. When her group was asked to put themselves in Maya's shoes and consider how they would respond to Lucas' persistence, keeping in mind that Lucas was someone they found attractive, Emmy commented:

Obviously, if he's someone hot, he's someone likable and he keeps approaching me, I will see the effort. This guy really wants to be with me, right? And obviously, if he keeps coming, he'll definitely one day bring flowers or bring you food, the gestures, you'll just keep knowing that this guy is really interested. But when a guy hits you up several times and you're like, "No," and they just give up, I tend to think this one wasn't really going to be serious with me. He was just trying me. But then if I keep seeing the effort, I'm like, "This one really wants to be with me." So, I think I'd just go with the several days ...saying "no" at first and see how he'll act after that...and I'll know if you actually want to be with me or are you just playing. (*Emmy, FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 25*)

For Emmy, consistency speaks to commitment. She romanticizes Lucas' behavior in this vignette, arguing that men who keep persisting in the face of rejection are the "real deal." Moreover, she suggests that if she liked the man and found him attractive, she would respond more positively to him. Her response also reflects an endorsement of stereotypical gender roles in which men ought to be the pursuers who prove themselves to women and provide for them (e.g., bringing flowers, food, other gestures). For instance, benevolent sexism, and more specifically protective paternalism, claims that men should provide for, protect, and sacrifice for the good women in their lives (Glick & Fiske, 1996), and Emmy's response suggests a strong endorsement of these attitudes. Other participants, also from FG8, similarly



romanticized the situation and Lucas' character specifically, arguing that Lucas never gave up on Maya and knew "what he wanted" from the beginning (Tilda, FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 28).

Elton from FG7-Cybersurveillance also perceived Lucas' pursuit towards Maya as a sign of his commitment towards her. Moreover, she identified shyness as the driving factor behind why a guy like Lucas would pursue Maya through social media rather than in person. When asked what it was about Lucas or his actions that would encourage them to give him a chance, Elton noted how due to casual dating culture, it is difficult to find someone who will commit themselves to you. Dedicating time to go through your social media is a sign of this commitment, which is rare for today's dating scene:

In some cases, I think you'll find that a guy is kind of shy to talk it out to you, so he prefers going through social media. That's a he or she. Okay, so that he gets what you really love, what you love about, what inspires you. That way he can devise a way of coming to you. He could probably be a good guy. Also, there's the fact maybe the guy is also not dating completely. There are some other people who are in multiple relationships.... They don't even have time to go over social media for the people they want to date. For this guy, he sounds very unique. He has a particular person that he is interested in. I kind of feel like he's making up his mind. Finding a guy who'll make up his mind for you is quite hard, especially in these times. [Laughter] (Elton, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 26)

Researchers argue that the same behaviors that serve as precursors to IPV are also used to indicate romantic interest. For instance, Williams and Frieze (2005) found that both men and women use various tactics (e.g., surveillance, intimidation) during courtship to express interest in another person. They also found that when behaviors such as surveillance occurred during courtship, they were also likely to continue

when a couple had broken up. At this point of the discussion, Elton perceives Lucas' cybersurveillance towards Maya during courtship as a way for him to establish his interest and communicate his commitment to her. Her comment does not foreshadow the possible dangers of this tactic if it were to continue into their relationship or following a breakup.

Participants also romanticized relationships more generally, not limiting their responses to what they were reading in the vignette. This included Miranda (FG9-Isolation, age 47), who talked about how she commonly overlooked negative situations early on due to being "in the dumb-and-in-love stage." Jesper was part of FG4-Isolation which, as noted, was one of the groups that most heavily romanticized Lucas' pursuit of Maya. When the group was asked to put themselves in Maya's shoes and pretend that their current partner had behaved like Lucas and pursued them through a similar tactic, Jesper shared:

If I were thinking about the story as if Lucas was my husband, [*laughter*] then I can remember back when we were young and in college, and how flattered I was that he was interested in me, and the first time that he asked me out and that kind of stuff. I would probably respond the same way. (*Jesper, FG4-Isolation, age 35*)

Putting herself and her husband in Maya and Lucas' shoes, respectively, helped Jesper realize that she would be flattered if she were Maya, because Jesper has been flattered in similar situations already.

Jesper was not an anomaly in her focus group, as the other two participants in her group tended to romanticize the story and Lucas' character most of the time throughout the discussion (indicating a high level of agreement between participants

within that group). However, Elton (FG7-Cybersurveillance) was in a focus group where the other participants' assessment of the story and characters was mixed; some participants, like Elton, consistently romanticized the story, others consistently found it problematic, and yet others were in the middle—at times romanticizing and at times problematizing. To illustrate, May, one of Elton's group mates, did not perceive Lucas' cybersurveillance towards Maya positively, thinking that he is likely relying on inaccurate information as people don't post their real lives on social media:

**May:** I think Lucas is chasing on a fairy tale because people post in social media for things that really don't happen in their lives. I wouldn't post anything that is bad about me on social media. I will just post things like I want them to happen in my life. You know? Fairy tales? Lies? I think Lucas is following a lie.

**SK:** Okay. May, you're really thinking that social media and just that whole world is a lie, and that you yourself wouldn't post anything that's really private and real. Is that right?

**May:** Yeah. I only really put private stuff to myself. Social media is just for fun. [Laughter] (FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 28)

In response, Elton suggests that Lucas must be researching Maya for a good reason, such as to get to know her (if they were not officially dating yet), or to surprise her (if they were in a long-distance relationship):

I think Lucas just wanted to get a little bit more background from Maya. You know, at times people might post what is really going on. For me, I think I post what is going on in my life and I don't really fake. Maybe he wanted a bit of background and wanted a platform to connect with her more. That way, you can get to also know the personality. Let's say, for example, it was a ... long-distance relationship. Well, he will get a little bit of information on what she loves, the hobbies, so he could even plan for something to surprise her. I kind of feel like he just needed a little bit of information from her. (Elton, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 26)

Elton romanticized the story and Lucas' character based on her appreciation of men who commit to women (which she believed Lucas was doing with Maya). Moreover, she reflected on her own personal experiences with social media, and she argued that this is an effective way of pursuing someone and getting to know them for genuine purposes. Other participants such as Izzy romanticized the story based on whether they were attracted to Lucas. For Izzy (FG6-Surveillance), a key detail that was important was that Maya was flattered at the end of the vignette, after learning the lengths to which Lucas had gone to get her to notice him (e.g., eating at her favorite lunch spots, hoping to run into her). Putting herself in Maya's shoes, Izzy believed that she would find this type of pursuit romantic, but only if she already liked the person pursuing her. If she was not interested in the pursuer, then she would perceive his actions more negatively—as “weird” and “uncomfortable”:

My first reaction everything up until the last sentence was—I think that this is, mild stalking a little bit [*laughs*], but then at the end...she was flattered, and she accepted the date. It's like, okay, well so maybe she likes it. I think that situations like this can be really tricky. If I liked someone and then they start doing this, that's cool, that means they like me. I wanna spend time with them, so the fact that I keep running into them is fine by me. But if I don't like the person then this is not something I would wanna happen, it would probably creep me out. So I think that there's a very fine line—since she accepted then it's probably fine, but there's other situations that can be very similar to this that it's weird and uncomfortable. (*Izzy, FG6-Surveillance, age 20*)

Izzy emphasizes Maya's preference, and women's preferences in general, in her response. For her, it is okay that women enjoy being pursued through this type of surveillance. Other participants, such as “L” also heavily focused on the detail that Maya liked and was flattered by Lucas' pursuit. “L” was one of the participants across all focus groups who most often romanticized Lucas and his interactions with

Maya. In her responses, “L” tended to bring up idealized romantic beliefs about being pursued endlessly to illustrate her points:

I previously mentioned the idea of someone endlessly pursuing his love, or her love. I think because the story gives context to the fact that Maya actually likes him, likes the fact that he’s pursuing her, I think that adds to the romantic factor because you could easily twist the story. [*Laughter*] If you didn’t get the context that Maya didn’t like being pursued, then I don’t think anyone, or most of us wouldn’t find that attractive. But for the context that we’re given, for the fact that she actually likes being pursued, I guess that can be seen as romantic. Like cat-and-mouse kind of game, to a certain degree. (*L, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 26*)

Like Izzy, “L” centered Maya in her response: If Maya likes it, then it is romantic. If she doesn’t, then this behavior is problematic. Amy, (*FG12-Jealousy*) similarly noted:

...there’s this saying that I heard before that says it depends on if you like the person that it’s romantic or creepy...For example, if people wait outside your house trying to apologize or something for many, many hours... some may think “Oh, that’s so sweet. They took so much time waiting for you and they’re apologizing and stuff.” To someone who doesn’t want that or isn’t interested, it’s really creepy. (*Amy, FG12-Jealousy, age 22*)

What set the courtship phase apart from other relationship phases was the sentiment from several participants that this phase is associated with high emotionality, and when one is in this phase they often view interactions and relationships through a rose-colored lens that can mask concerning behavior early on. This is consistent with Wood (2001), with all 20 heterosexual women who were interviewed about their experiences with IPV citing a “fairy tale narrative” where they were charmed by their Prince Charming-like partners right away. Emotions play a key role in these narratives. When asked to put themselves in Maya’s shoes and consider how they would respond if they were being isolated by someone like Lucas in real life (recognizing that they found this person attractive), Miranda (*FG9-Isolation*) noted

how the emotions she feels in the beginning of a relationship can overpower any rational thinking that would alert her to question whether it is a good idea to be with a man like Lucas. She explained how these emotions tend to wear off later in the relationship:

For me, a lot would depend on my own emotions. Sometimes at the beginning of a relationship, I really have a strong crush on somebody so I might go along with it even though my rational mind might be trying to warn me that this is a bad idea. But then after some months, the feelings would wear off, and it would be easier for my rational person to step up and...assuming we're in a relationship—have a conversation and say, “This isn't cool.” “This is an important part of my life. There's other parts of my life are also important, and I need somebody who can respect that.” (*Miranda, FG9-Isolation, age 47*)

According to Miranda, the beginning courtship phase of a relationship involves less rational thinking from individuals and is overtaken by emotions, and it may take those emotions wearing off to realize that something is amiss. In line with Miranda's view, Ray (FG7-Cybersurveillance) shared her personal experience with being pursued by a man. She described how her previous romanticization of the situation wore off when her former partner's behaviors started to escalate over time, interfering with her work and school. This reflected a real turning point for her (Murray et al., 2015), when she realized just how threatening her former partner was, and how unsafe she felt with him.

The discourse of “perfect love” has been used to explain why some women romanticize such behaviors early in a relationship (Baly, 2010). As Miranda and Ray shared, it takes some time after a relationship has been established for the feelings and excitement to wear off, and for reality to kick in. Phi (FG6-Surveillance) held a similar perspective about emotions being overwhelming in the early stages of a

relationship. She explained that she understood why Maya would accept Lucas' date, because she herself would respond similarly. Phi would also be emotionally overwhelmed rather than rationally assess the situation:

If I were in Maya's shoes and Lucas was someone I had been crushing on for a while, I would definitely accept, only because when you have a crush on someone, you tend to pick up on everything. Like, oh, he looked at me today, or oh, he texted me first. So for her, this would be flattering because he did all of these big, grand gestures for me just to ask me out on a date, which I've probably been looking forward to for a while. So in that aspect, I can understand why she would accept right away...I would probably be more overwhelmed by my feelings rather than rationally analyzing and picking apart everything he did. Because in that moment, obviously I'd be the person likes me back, so I would definitely want to go out with them. (*Phi, FG6-Surveillance, age 19*)

Similarly, Chloe (FG4-Isolation) notes how like Maya, she would be flattered and accept a date from Lucas if he were to tell her that he liked spending time with her alone, "just the two of us." Like other participants, Chloe attributed this excitement to be specific to the beginning courtship phase of a relationship:

I'd be so excited about it...because this is the beginning of the relationship, I'd like to know what happens later...I would think, okay, we're kind of in this space. This is kind of a new thing, and we gotta be protective and we wanna make sure that we're together, so I absolutely would respond like Maya. (*Chloe, FG4-Isolation, age 51*)

Chloe also emphasizes that the relationship context matters here—because the scenario at hand presents the beginning of their relationship, she recognizes that this is the phase where you really want to protect your time with the person you are interested in, given the "newness" of the relationship. It is noteworthy that at various points of the conversation she had expressed several concerns about the scenario.

Regardless, Chloe admitted that if she were in Maya's position, and Lucas was someone that she was attracted to, she would respond like her.<sup>3</sup>

The physical setting in which two people are situated in, as well as being attracted and interested in a man to begin with, plays an important role for participants like Izzy (FG6-Surveillance). She notes how the surveillance vignette, in which Lucas is constantly showing up to Maya's classes, place of work, and other places she frequents, is pretty common in the college setting. She also argues that liking and being attracted to a person like Lucas is what would drive her to find this romantic, and without this attraction and liking in place, she would perceive the situation more negatively. In other words, if she were attracted to the person who was pursuing her in the way Lucas had pursued Maya, she would probably accept. If the attraction was not there, she would be "creeped out." Thus, based on Izzy's attraction towards Lucas, his actions might be minimized. Anne (FG6-Surveillance, age 19) adding on to Izzy's response, shared: "I think in general, people are just more receptive to people they're attracted to. We're nicer, it's kind of sad, but that's how the world works." Indeed, a classic study about the "beautiful is good" stereotype finds that individuals considered more attractive are also perceived as enjoying more positive life outcomes (e.g., social and professional) (Dion et al.,1972). Anne and Izzy invoke this stereotype by implying that if one is considered attractive, their actions (even if problematic), will be received more positively.

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<sup>3</sup> Critiquing Lucas and his actions towards Maya at one point of the focus group discussion, while romanticizing him and his actions at other times (albeit under different contexts), was a common response from participants across focus groups.



As noted, participants found the overall vignettes and Lucas' actions towards Maya problematic during this early courtship phase, but they also found it more acceptable, desirable, and romantic under certain contexts. The quotes presented in this subsection bring to light how participants romanticized unhealthy pursuit tactics due to the excitement and emotions that are inherent during courtship, as well as due to beliefs that excessive pursuit is a sign of commitment. Participants explained that if they liked and were attracted to someone like Lucas, they would perceive his actions more favorably; if they didn't, his pursuit would be uncomfortable. Importantly, even if participants did not romanticize Lucas' actions at present time (at the time of the study), they were able to reflect on a previous time when they would have or did romanticize his behaviors. Or, they were able to explain why other women would romanticize the story presented in the vignettes. Thus, romanticization of unhealthy dynamics and relationship abuse was a critical component of the focus group discussions, suggesting that romanticizing these types of dynamics, particularly during the courtship phase, can further contribute to their normalization. In the next section, I present the explanations participants provided for Lucas' behavior. The normalization of the various pursuit tactics (e.g., persistent pursuit, isolation, possessiveness/control) will continue to be apparent as participants made sense of the vignettes and sought to identify the root cause for why Lucas engaged in these tactics.

## **Explanations for Abuse/Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics (Theme 2)**

### ***Stereotypical Gender Roles (SGRs, Code 1)***

At the core of most participants' responses to the story between Lucas and Maya was the understanding that gender stereotypes drive much of heterosexual dating situations. As previously noted, and as it will continue to be illustrated in participants' quotes throughout this subsection, gender stereotypes were often intertwined with beliefs about romance, and the socialization of these gender stereotypes through media was commonly cited as key in guiding men's pursuit behaviors and women's responses to those pursuits. A number of participants recognized that men and women are socialized with the same message: men pursue and women are pursued. For instance, Jessica's (FG2-Persistent Pursuit) quote below describes expected gender roles for both men and women:

A lot of the behaviors, for most cultures, are primarily male-dominated and patriarchal in essence. And there's a certain expectation of how men are supposed to act, and how women are supposed to act... men are supposed to be more dominant, men are supposed to be more aggressive and all of those things associated with testosterone and that jazz. While women are supposed to be seen as more submissive and giving in to whatever the male wants. That's why I think it's hard to say that does she truly want this? Or was she just taught to believe in this because we live in a patriarchal society where women, until recently, haven't even had much of a voice in terms of leadership or government, and have been continuously taught to submit yourself to a man.

And then on the opposite hand, Lucas could just be trying to fulfill what he thinks is hyper-masculine, or masculine in essence of, "Okay. I can't allow the woman to do anything because from what I have been taught," and the classic male trait is you have to be forward. You have to not take "no" for an answer because the woman doesn't truly know what she wants, because it's a man who has to tell her what she does want because he is the one who is technically in control...And you also have a lot of the nice-guys tropes and

those things that arise in modern culture today that are seen as highly problematic. (*Jessica, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20*)

Jessica outlines the various ways women are stereotyped, including being submissive to men and being seen by others as naïve and not knowing what they want. On the other hand, men are socialized to be dominant, aggressive, hypermasculine, controlling towards women, and forward to the point where they do not take “no” for an answer (Mahalik et al., 2003). By referring to these traditional gendered expectations for men and women, Jessica attempts to understand both Lucas and Maya’s position. She contemplates whether Maya truly does like Lucas and is flattered by him persistently pursuing her, or whether she’s simply internalized the message that she, as a woman, should appreciate this type of pursuit.

Several participants across focus groups brought up a similar point as Jessica regarding Maya’s response and questioned whether she truly did like Lucas, or whether she simply responded by being flattered due to her socialization. Rosie notes that as a heterosexual man, Lucas is expected to be the one to initiate a relationship with Maya, and one of the reasons why he might go through her social media accounts is to gather information to increase his chances of dating her. On the other hand, Maya is expected to receive attention from Lucas and be pursued. Rosie continues, sharing:

And the fact that he put in the effort to do so is like, “Well, he should be rewarded then ’cause guys should ask girls out as well, just ’cause he likes me,” where it doesn’t so much demonstrate on what she thinks of him necessarily. (*Rosie, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 20*)

Rosie also believes that Maya may not genuinely like Lucas and have romantic feelings for him. Rather, what is fueling her decision to date him are gendered expectations that claim that men should put in the work to pursue women, and women who are pursued in this way should date these men. This suggests an even exchange where the reward for men's hard work of pursuit is the woman herself. Daisy's (FG9-Isolation) response below also questions how Maya truly feels about Lucas:

What I'm reading from this little story is less about Lucas and more about Maya. She seems very one-dimensional and passive. They've eaten every day for five weeks. How does she actually feel about him? The line about she's flattered by how much he likes her, but how does she actually feel about him. That doesn't seem to come into this equation. It's Lucas wants something, so she's going to go along with it. Lucas wants to eat lunch, just the two of them. Lucas doesn't want her to invite someone. Lucas asks her out to dinner. Maya just seems to be there to support whatever Lucas is interested in. It doesn't seem to come into the equation who she is, or what she wants really, other than to add the possible antagonist of Maya has another friend. And then she has to give up the other friend because Lucas says so. Her character kind of seems passive, wishy-washy. (*Daisy, FG9-Isolation, age 32*)

Daisy's frustration with Maya is rooted in the fact that she interacts with Lucas in a passive manner, and she is not given much dimension in the story. Her responses reflect a strong rejection of traditional gender dynamics that position women in this way. A bit later in the discussion, Daisy brings up the ways in which Maya submits to Lucas in the story:

The one time that she speaks up and says, "Hey, I want to eat lunch with this friend" or "I want this friend to join us," Lucas shoots down her idea and she says, "okay," and then goes on to agree to date him. So, the one and only time we hear her voice or opinion, it gets smacked down, and that's the end of it.

Like Daisy, Grace (FG8-Persistent Pursuit) also questions what Maya truly wants, looking beyond what is simply stated in the vignette. Grace believes that it is possible

that Maya is older, and perhaps feeling societal pressure to settle down and avoid singlism (DePaulo, 2006):

**Grace:** It says she believes that he really likes her and wants to date her, but what about what she believes? She had said that she doesn't think they're compatible. I might be reading too much into this very purposefully vague description, but is it one of those things where she's like, "Oh, I'm at the ripe old age of 30 and this might be my last chance to find a man and he likes me for who I am...I don't know, but where's her side of the story? Does she think he's that great?"

**SK:** Grace, you're thinking that maybe she's at that age where...and you mention the age 30 or nearing around that age where she's like, "Lucas is asking me out. I gotta say yes." Is that right?

**Grace:** First of all, I think 30 is a great age. I'm just saying there's some stigma around biological clocks... The story doesn't say anything about maybe she had a change of heart or anything. All we know is that she in the beginning says they're not compatible, but eventually gets worn down and says yes. (*FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 31*)

As Grace explains, the pressure to marry intensifies the older a woman becomes. In a society that considers romantic relationships and marriage to be the centerpiece of feminine identity, this pressure may be exponential. These pressures and the overall experience of singlism has also been explored amongst women in non-Western cultures, including in China (Gaetano, 2014) and Israel (Lahad & Hazan, 2014).

Like Grace, other participants also questioned Maya's response and attributed it to problematic gender role socialization. Luna (*FG10-Possessiveness/Control*) offers a few different explanations for why Maya would accept a date from Lucas, one of which is her having internalized gender expectations about women needing to be chased.

This sounds pretty [*laughter*] like when you don't know anything about relationships, it sounds like a young relationship. Sounds like Lucas is pretty

insecure. Maya probably has some confusion on what that actually means. She doesn't know that's insecurity yet maybe and thinks that's cute, almost like a gender stereotype, that no one should look at me like I belong to this person or he's trying to protect me. So I would wonder about what type of internalized gender stereotypes and gender roles that both of these people have.

And then Maya, she's clearly refused two times and after the third time she accepts, so I would wonder why. Did she feel pressure? Is that part of, people should chase you for a little bit or was she not comfortable, or did she feel threatened, what happened there? (*Luna, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 29*)

Trisha (FG12-Jealousy) also questions Maya's response, believing that what she enjoys is the attention she is receiving from Lucas. Trisha is unsure whether Maya actually has feelings for him:

If flattered was the word she used, that itself is also a huge red flag, because it's not even clear if she reciprocates any feelings for Lucas, and it seems more of like she's getting with him because he puts her in a high place, and she probably likes that he has so much emotion for her. (*Trisha, FG12-Jealousy, age 21*)

Page (FG10-Possessiveness/Control) emphasized that gendered expectations about men and women's roles within relationships, and messaging about how men and women should express affection and love, is socialized early on:

...What I remember as a child is when a little boy was mean to me or pushed you down on the playground, then what the adults always told you was well, he must have a crush on you. So very, very early on, girls and women are taught that [*laughter*] a boy being mean to you is a sign of affection and it means that they like you. So, I think we do see a lot of women respond like Maya does and I've known friends who responded that way too. The friends that I've had who reacted that way had a very classical upbringing, if that makes any sense. They were very much stereotypical gender roles and norms within their family, and so it made sense that, to them, that they were supposed to act coy ... and that men were supposed to pursue them consistently until they said yes. (*Page, FG10 Possessiveness/Control, age 28*)

Across the focus groups, there was very little disagreement between participants about the ubiquity of stereotypical gender roles wherein men are expected to be dominant, assertive, and pursue women, while women are supposed to be submissive and reward men's pursuit towards them by giving in and being flattered by the attention. Several participants believed that given how ingrained these gender stereotypes are across all facets of society, it was likely Lucas and Maya were simply aligning themselves with these stereotypes. These participants tended to operate on this assumption rather than thinking that Lucas and Maya genuinely liked each other. Alongside their discussion of stereotypical gender roles, participants often spoke about mainstream, Western media as the key source that socialized viewers about these gendered expectations that guide men's pursuit towards women. The following subsection highlights the specific role of media in men and women's dating and relationship interactions.

### ***Media Socialization of Gender, Romance, and Abuse (Code 2)***

Participants spoke at length about how gender stereotypes are perpetuated throughout mainstream Western media and consequently internalized by viewers. This internalization then plays out in their dating and romantic relationships. As noted in the previous subsection, one of the most common gender stereotypes in relation to dating and relational contexts that were discussed across all focus groups during the courtship phase was the idea of a male pursuer and female recipient. Many participants consistently acknowledged that Lucas' actions were being driven by the

message that he is supposed to pursue Maya until she says “yes.” For instance, Jessica (FG2-Persistent Pursuit) shares:

It seems like Lucas is, he’s kinda acting like the nice-guy stereotype... You know how movies are always like the guy has to constantly pursue the woman in order to get her hand or whatever. It seems like he’s trying to portray into those tropes, even though those doesn’t necessarily translate to an actual thing in real life. (*Jessica, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20*)

Lizzie, another participant in Jessica’s group, agreed with Jessica about Lucas trying to embody the “nice-guy” trope that may be emphasized in the media he consumes.

Lizzie adds why she thinks this persistence on Lucas’ end will not work in the way he may want:

...She says in the beginning that she doesn’t think they’re compatible. And I think like, “Oh, just give ’em a chance” kind of thing. When in reality, generally the woman will give a guy a chance if they think that it could possibly work out. That’s why you date is to see what you like and don’t like. And if she already doesn’t like him, generally she won’t end up saying “yes” to it unless she feels worn down, or afraid that he’ll continue to escalate. So definitely a lot of red flags there. It definitely reminds me of *17 Again*. Gonna reference a movie. Zac Efron’s roommate continuously asking out the principal until she says “yes”. And then they get together. And it’s just red flags all around. [*Laughter*] (*Lizzie, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20*)

Lizzie believes that the only way Maya will agree to date Lucas is if she is worn down by him or is trying to prevent the situation from escalating. This is because Maya has already decided that she and Lucas are incompatible with each other, and thus any action to the contrary (i.e., accepting his date) would be to appease Lucas.

Lizzie also brings up a specific movie, *17 Again*, which depicts the same trope where a man persistently pursues a hesitant woman until she gives in.

“L”, another participant in Jessica and Lizzie’s group, extends the discussion on media to focus specifically on the influence of books—such as *Fifty Shades of*



*Grey*. She argues that some women do find the dynamic where Lucas is persistently pursuing Maya romantic, even if it may be unhealthy, because of the wide-ranging success of these stories (Kelly, 2020; Williams, 2012) which suggests that women are attracted to media depicting unhealthy relationships:

I don't know much about *50 Shades of Grey*, for example, I don't think that's the healthiest relationship, but it's one of the [laughter] best-selling books. It might not portray the most healthiest relationship, but for the fact that we're given the context that she likes this, I think women might put a more idealized version in their heads, and they may not think of what could go wrong in this situation. There are lots of stories that women really like that portray unhealthy relationships. (*L, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 26*)

“L” continues that when it comes to these types of stories, “They think of the best men in this situation. Lucas can be very handsome, the most attractive. That’s what they think for these readers.” “L” brings up a critical point about who is typically chosen to play the male character in media depicting unhealthy relationship dynamics. As she explains, these characters usually hold various types of power. Their physical dominance may be exemplified through their attractiveness and muscular body size and strength. Their psychological power tends to manifest in their ability to be charming and charismatic, qualities that might eventually win over the female lead. And, their financial power is commonly depicted by their wealth.<sup>4</sup> The confluence of these various forms of power can work together to mask abuse from audiences. Research finding that women’s satisfaction with their partners is shaped by how financially and socially dominant they are further highlights the preference

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<sup>4</sup> *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a key example in which the male protagonist, Christian Grey, is characterized based on these different forms of power

women have for these qualities in their partners (Bryan et al., 2011), which appears to manifest in casting choices for male actors in stories like *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Notably, the trope of men persistently pursuing women was a gender stereotype that was not just limited to the persistent pursuit focus groups. Rather, this was a stereotype all groups were able to recognize in their discussion of Lucas and Maya and their relationship. For instance, Anne (FG9-Isolation) believed that media romanticizes persistence and jealousy:

I think the media does portray a lot of times if in a story a guy keeps pursuing a girl even though she doesn't like him at first, that's real love, or if he gets jealous of her with someone else, they portray that in a "Oh, he really cares about her" kind of light." (Anne, FG9-Isolation, age 39)

Participants in other groups, such as Page (FG10-Possessiveness/Control), expand on this discussion by bringing in another specific media example:

I think we see it in media all the time... *The Notebook*. He asked her out and asked her out and asked her out, and then she finally said yes. And, it's a romance movie and they end up together in the end, so I think it's in media in general. I think it's been established that if men just keep trying and trying and trying, inevitably whoever they're trying to get together with is going to be, beaten down enough that they finally say yes and give it a chance. And movies like *The Notebook*, and not to pick on *The Notebook*, but any kind of movie where that occurs or media, it happens all the time in real life too, not to just say it's in media, it's happened to me, it's happened to people I know. They think that it's completely appropriate behavior because society has told them that if you try hard enough, then the person you're trying to get together with will say yes. So, I don't know that it's as normalized now that we talk about it a lot more, but I do think that for a long time it was normalized and even deemed, generally appropriate for specifically a man to act that way towards a woman. (Page, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 28)

Page brings up a classic romantic drama, *The Notebook* (Harris et al., 2004), where the male lead, Noah, incessantly asks out his female love interest, Allie, until she agrees to go on a date with him. Moreover, Noah does so by putting his own life at

risk.<sup>5</sup> As others have also alluded to with regards to Lucas and Maya, Allie does not agree to the date because she is genuinely interested in Noah, but rather because she is worn down and is trying to appease him in the moment to ensure his safety. This is apparent later in the movie when Allie lets him know that she is not planning to go on the date in question (though of course, she does end up dating him soon). As Page mentioned, Noah and Allie end up together, a pattern scholars have argued send the message that persistence will lead to a relationship (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003).

Of note, Page shares that this “endless pursuit” that is often depicted in the media is a common experience that she and others she knows have had, suggesting that viewers’ off-screen experiences can resemble the messages they are being exposed to in media. Indeed, research finds that viewers are heavily influenced by the gendered messages they interact with in media (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006; Seabrook et al., 2016)

Participants like Emma (FG11-Surveillance) argue that the romanticization of big and, what she believes are unhealthy, gestures are especially present in 80’s romance movies:

... I think that the ‘80s really had this as a pinnacle of romance of these big, grand, romantic gestures that might border on creepy now... the ‘80s specifically displayed romantic things that are now just violations of consent or we recognize now as violations of consent and things like that, such as... *Sixteen Candles*... There’s definitely some big consent violations and I feel

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<sup>5</sup> by climbing on top of a large Ferris wheel where Allie is seated with another man. In this scene, Noah is hanging from the wheel, leading the operator to halt the wheel from continuing to move forward.

like they kind of mirrored this story sometimes. (*Emma, FG11-Surveillance, age 20*)

Emma references *Sixteen Candles* (Green et al., 1984) as a prime example of a celebrated movie that normalizes violence against women. In the movie, the idealized male lead protagonist, popular and handsome high school senior Jake Ryan, learns that sophomore Samantha Baker has a crush on him. Jake pursues a relationship with Samantha, but not before “handing off” his current girlfriend, Caroline, to another male student, Ted “the geek.” Importantly, this handoff occurs despite Caroline being drunk, unconscious, and clearly not consenting to the interaction. During the handoff, Jake tells Ted to “have fun,” giving him permission to have sex with Caroline without her consent and knowledge. Critics have argued that the film makes clear distinctions between the virgin (Samantha) and the whore (Caroline), the former being deserving of respect and the latter of violence. The story also sheds light on how well-liked and decorated characters, in this case Jake Ryan, can be implicated in violence against women (Grady, 2018). Content analyses of Indian media finds that moderate sexual violence (e.g., sexual harassment) is often perpetrated by film’s male protagonists. Such violence is minimized and romanticized, especially when compared with more severe violence (e.g., rape) perpetrated by male antagonists (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003).

As illustrated, participants across focus groups had no difficulty coming up with media examples in which male protagonists inflicted violence against female characters. Eliza (FG12-Jealousy) focuses specifically on *Twilight*, a popular film and book series in which a handsome vampire Edward, and high school teen Bella,

embark on a relationship together. Eliza explains the many issues she sees in the story:

I would hope that if you had a supportive environment, you not be so influenced by standard movies and books and stuff like that. I'd hope that if my sisters watch—they're younger... if they watch something, we can discuss, "Hey, here's why it's a good film. Here's what not to copy." I think some people don't have those sort of conversations or for a lot of reasons, media can be very influential on what people think is good. First thing that comes to mind that I had a lotta friends that liked *Twilight*, which the main male character stalked this woman, and is considered very romantic. He watches her sleep and calls her and keeps tabs on her, and it's really concerning, but it's portrayed as very romantic, and this gorgeous wedding and all these other things. I think if you wanna watch it 'cause it's pop culture, and that's totally fine, do what you want. I think it's important to step back and be like, okay, these were some abusive behaviors.... (Eliza, FG12-*Jealousy*, age 19)

As Eliza explains, *Twilight* contains several instances of dating violence which have also been called out by researchers (Collins & Carmody, 2011), and it has been criticized for its portrayal of gender stereotypes (Diamond, 2011), in which Edward serves as the protective savior for Bella, a submissive damsel-in-distress often in need of saving (Glick & Fiske, 1996). In her response, Eliza notes the importance of media literacy and having constructive conversations with your social network to disentangle the messaging in these types of stories. She suggests that having a supportive environment where these conversations occur can help prevent viewers from romanticizing unhealthy relationships. Eliza also explains that this intervention is needed early on, as many of the audiences to whom these stories are targeted are young and impressionable, who are developing their first crushes and can "get head over heels in puppy love." She notes that exposure to unhealthy media relationships at this age can especially be harmful and confusing. Lisa also discussed media as a point

of intervention when responding to a scenario where Maya perceives Lucas encouraging her to change into less revealing clothing as a sign of care and protection:

I think that a lot of women still would think that this behavior is okay, based on how they were brought up. What they've been told by their parents or family or people around them that maybe if a boy's mean to you, he likes you or men are supposed to be strong and protective and basically, you're supposed to belong to him. I think maybe women who grow up around those kinds of ideas and never exposed to any other types of ideas would be most vulnerable to falling into these types of relationships, even though they're unhealthy. I do think maybe in recent years, maybe in the media, feminist ideas have been more popularized or have become more prevalent. So, I think maybe on the Internet, and in general media, ideas about how women should have personal agency and types of behavior that's unhealthy...it's easier to learn about that information and get access to it. So I think that may mean more women who before would have more traditional ideas are starting to have a better idea of what kinds of behaviors are bad, and which behaviors are good. (*Lisa, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 27*)

According to Lisa, women who are exposed to messages that equate liking someone with being mean to them, stereotypes that emphasize men needing to be strong and protective, and beliefs about women belonging to men, are most vulnerable to perceiving the dynamics between Lucas and Maya as acceptable and romantic. However, Lisa believes that feminist ideas that problematize these types of dynamics and messages are more readily available and accessible now, and with exposure to these more critical perspectives, women will also adopt more feminist perspectives on dating that emphasize gender equality within relationships.

Overall, participants believed that mainstream, Western media played a critical role in romanticizing unhealthy relationships. There was a strong sense that viewers, especially those who are younger and those who had other exposure to

traditional gender stereotypes, would be particularly susceptible to these media messages. While some participants spoke about the role of media socialization more generally, others cited specific examples of media they saw as problematic that could influence women to perceive the dynamics between Lucas and Maya positively. Next, I describe the other problems that participants identified in the vignettes, which specifically centered on the dangers and risks inherent in these types of courtships.

***Appeasing Men, Safety Concerns/Needing Other Protections, and Negative Precedents (Codes 3-5)***

One of the most common ways that participants expressed negative reactions to the tactics Lucas used to court Maya was by arguing that the dynamic between both would set a negative precedent for their relationship in the future. Oftentimes, these conversations incorporated safety concerns about how the relationship could become unhealthier over time (or, how interactions between men and women more generally can escalate in real life). Appeasing men was brought up by a few participants as a strategy to manage these safety concerns in the moment and to prevent further escalation. Given the overlap between these three codes (negative precedents, safety concerns, appeasing men), they are discussed in combination with each other in this subsection.

As Neyu's (FG1-Cybersurveillance) comment below indicates, participants commonly voiced concerns that Lucas' behavior during courtship would set an unhealthy dynamic later in his relationship with Maya:

I think that if this behavior occurs even before they get to know each other, then during a relationship, it could definitely carry on. For example, if she had

a problem, then he might stalk her to find out what it is instead of just directly asking her...(*Neyu, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 21*)

When participants were asked to put themselves in Maya's shoes and consider how they would respond to Lucas, keeping in mind that they are attracted to him, Mei (FG3-Possessiveness/Control) argued that any attraction she may feel towards him would not matter because his behavior set a negative precedent for the rest of the relationship:

I would not be okay with it. I don't know if this is harsh, but I would just cut the relationship at the root. If he's acting like this, it sets a bad precedent...I think this is a red flag. And if this is how he's acting now, later on I think he's gonna continue acting kind of controlling. I would rather be independent. I don't care how attractive he is. I would probably just cut my losses. (*Mei, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 21*)

While most participants focused on Lucas and believed that his behavior was setting a negative precedent, other participants like Billy (FG12-Jealousy) also found fault with Maya for being flattered by Lucas' jealousy:

I think that right off the bat, okay, these people aren't dating, right? They're only flirting. I flirt with people every day, that doesn't mean I'm dating them. They made it a point to say that he has yet to ask her out officially, so they're not officially together. Now if you go to a party not even together, but with their friend groups, and you see someone else flirting with the person that you're flirting with, you don't get mad and aggressive. That's toxic, that was a red flag right off the bat for me, the whole he becomes upset, he got mad at her for it, even though she probably wasn't even flirting back. The man was flirting with her, she wasn't flirting with him, yet Lucas still got mad at her for it and got aggressive. That is toxic...for Maya to be flattered by that. To be flattered that he's getting upset, is a red flag for her too. She is probably toxic as well. These two people are probably not good for each other. I would need a little bit more information, but I don't think she should have accepted it. I think that if he gets like that and they're not even dating, imagine how he's gonna get when they're dating, is he gonna hit her, stuff like that? (*Billy, FG12-Jealousy, age 22*)



Billy sees both Lucas' behavior and Maya's positive reaction to his jealousy and aggression as toxic, and she brings up the same concern that many other participants voiced: that whatever concerning behavior Lucas is engaging in early in his courtship with Maya may eventually turn into him becoming violent towards Maya. Of note, Billy emphasizes the point that Lucas is becoming jealous and aggressive even when he and Maya are not officially dating, which might suggest that if they were dating, this type of reaction by Lucas would be more acceptable. However, this tended not to be the case, particularly for the jealousy vignette. In the two focus groups that centered on Lucas' jealousy (FG5 and FG12), his behavior was generally perceived as negative across all relationship phases.

Like Billy, Josie, a participant in the other jealousy focus group, perceived Maya's response as a red flag:

That was a big red flag, but it was also a red flag for Maya. Like girl, why are you excited about that? That's not good. Why are you impressed about that? That's worse because, what if Lucas takes it as, "This is the only way to make her happy is if I act crazy and fight with people that have nothing to do with the situation"? [*Laughter*]. (*Josie, FG5-Jealousy, age 23*)

Interestingly, Josie's judgmental tone in this response suggests that she is more concerned about how Lucas is going to perceive Maya's flattery, and that he may continue to exhibit jealousy-induced aggression towards other men who are flirting with Maya because he believes this is what Maya prefers. Unlike other participants, Josie's focus does not remain on how Lucas' actions may be harmful to Maya.

Wens (FG5-Jealousy) is another participant in Josie's focus group who discussed the scenario where Lucas became jealous and aggressive towards another

man for flirting with Maya at a party. Wens' response elevates the conversation about negative precedents by linking jealousy to homicide:

**Wens:** I think most of us have watched “You”...And I immediately notice a man becoming unnecessarily jealous, that is not even red flag. That's a risk for your life because either he can be capable of killing someone or even killing you if they cannot have you. So she didn't do anything wrong, and she did not have any privacy or just go somewhere with this guy. So they're just having some talk and flirt. And so if he becomes violent at that point, no. Maya could have imagined what he could have opted to do if he found out...she had some lunch with other man.

**SK:** So Wens, you're drawing a connection to, we're seeing jealousy here but later, it could lead to something more violent.

**Wens:** Yeah, So this is nature. It's him, and he has shown what he is in the first place...most of them hide, and you come to realize whom they are. They are jealous type later on when you're already into them. But this was the best moment for her to just let go— 'cause she was not already into something.  
(Wens, *FG5-Jealousy*, age 24)

Wens brings up the wildly popular Netflix series *You* (Berlanti et al., 2018) to illustrate her argument about the link between jealousy and violence. In the first season, charming bookstore manager Joe Goldberg stalks and obsesses over his love interest, Beck. He removes anyone (usually by way of murder) he views as an obstacle in his relationship, including Beck's best friend, therapist, and on-and-off again casual boyfriend. In the series, viewers see how jealousy fuels much of Joe's abusive and murderous behavior towards others in Beck's network. Eventually, in the final episode of season one, Beck succumbs to the same fate, being murdered by Joe. Thus, the connection that Wens makes between jealousy and murder is one that even popular media exposes. Wens has extreme safety concerns for anyone who has a partner who is overly jealous, and she believes that the courtship phase, before a

woman might become too invested in this type of man and this type of relationship, is the best time to leave the situation.

The jealousy vignettes elicited much more negative reactions amongst participants compared to the other vignettes. This contrasts with prior research finding that female adolescents rank jealousy (in combination with possessive behavior), as the least serious form of relationship abuse (Murphy & Smith, 2010). However, it is likely that across the study participants perceived jealousy as the most serious tactic used by Lucas because the story depicted him engaging in jealousy-induced aggression towards another man for flirting with Maya, and because he also became mad at Maya herself. This type of aggression and anger was missing from other vignettes. While overall participants argued that jealousy is always negative in a relationship, Trisha (FG12-Jealousy, age 21) shed some useful insight about when it is acceptable and where she draws the line: “I know jealousy is okay, and it’s okay to have jealousy in relationships because it’s just a normal feeling to have, but aggression following jealousy, for me anyways, is never a good sign.”

Beyond the two jealousy focus groups, participants in other groups also spoke about how unhealthy relationship dynamics could lead to murder. In responding to Lucas’ online surveillance of Maya, Ray brought up the possibility that Lucas might be a serial killer who had access to everything Maya posted on her social media:

I’ll say it’s a bit creepy because he checked up too much, too much because I feel like he knows her whole program. If Maya is the person who posts everything about herself on social media, Lucas has all her information, so if it turns out he’s, let’s say, a serial killer—sorry—and by any chance they don’t agree, chances are very high Lucas will be able to trace Maya and do something to her. I feel like he should have spoken up, talked to Maya, ask

her, “What do you like?” You know? Learn from her. (*Ray, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 27*)

For many participants, the link between early warning signs (e.g., excessive jealousy, cybersurveillance) and more grave consequences for victims (i.e., murder), was clear.

Participants shared how they could personally relate to a situation where safety concerns were eventually heightened, and a relationship that started off in a seemingly benign and healthy way quickly turned sour. For instance, Ray explained:

At first, I felt it was good. This person wants to know more about you. He’s really obsessed. You know, it’s every girl’s dream to have that one guy who gives you butterflies. You’re his everything, his world. But as time goes on, you can’t even have your own space. Even going to work or to school is an issue for them. It gets to a point, even if your phone goes off, he will call your family members, your friends, your workmates, anyone who is close to you, and he will be asking everyone about you... For me I felt this is too much. The worst part is even breaking up with them. You can’t just let them go. They’ll be crying and they even have threats. They’ll tell you, “You know? I know all of this about you, and if you do this, I’m gonna harm myself, or I’m gonna harm you.” They come with a lot of threats. So I’d advise anyone to be really cautious because they are not really safe unless someone is really genuine about you. But personally, I’ll overthink about the whole situation. (*Ray, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 27*)

Ray walks us through the full course of a past relationship and shows how warning signs early on eventually served as a negative precedent for her partner’s abuse during the relationship and following a breakup (Williams & Frieze, 2005). Her story illustrates how the meaning of the same behavior can change depending on the phase of the relationship it is occurring in. In the beginning, having a partner who is obsessed with you and puts you at the center of his world is “every girl’s dream.” This excessive attention is heavily romanticized in the beginning of the relationship. However, as time goes on, the same attention is perceived as excessive, and can lead

to overstepping boundaries and one feeling suffocated and without their own space. The greatest safety concerns may be realized at the end, when one is trying to end the relationship. In Ray's case, it is during the breakup phase when threats of violence came in. She argues that women need to be cautious and be aware that their relationship may become more unsafe as time goes on.

Another way that safety concerns were discussed during Lucas and Maya's courtship is when participants used these concerns to justify women's seemingly positive responses to men's pursuit, or when participants imagined women as the pursuers and explained what would be driving their behavior. Participants explained that women go through the social media accounts of men they are interested in to ensure that they really know who they are interacting with well, and to ensure their own safety when alone with those men. Jennifer's explains this perspective, and she also suggests that men do not operate on these same safety concerns when they are checking their female love interests' social media for information gathering purposes. Men, Jennifer argues, are more likely to use social media to vet a potential partner, and to confirm whether this potential partner is compatible with their relationship or sexual preferences:

...If we're talking about heterosexual relationships, I think that there are a lot of guys who at least now are kind of scared to get involved with people if they don't know what they're getting into, and a lot of guys who are scared of commitment if you will. So, he might be trying to prepare himself and make sure that if he asks her out, ...he can try to sort of gauge if he'll think that she's gonna be too clingy, if he thinks that she's gonna be down to...if he's looking for a sexual relationship or something...he can kind of try to discern what she might be down to do or not do based on certain characteristics that he might notice about her. So he might just be trying to observe if she's suitable for whatever he's looking for in that relationship. Where I feel like

girls, a lot of times, at least if I would do that, I would try to make sure he's not a weirdo, because there are a lot of weird people out there. So if I was gonna do this to someone and go to the extent of finding out everything about them, it would be more for my own safety. Whereas, I don't think guys really do that for that reason. (*Jennifer, FG1- Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

A similar safety concern was shared by Eliza, who reflected on why Maya would be flattered and accept a date after Lucas became jealous and aggressive because another man was seen talking to her at a party. Eliza suggests that Maya may be focused on her own wellbeing and safety, and possibly the safety of her close others. She believes that Maya may have pretended to be flattered and interested in Lucas in the moment to prevent the situation from escalating. In this case, Eliza understands why Maya would respond the way she did:

It says that he got mad at her specifically, aggressive at the man, but I noticed that she's flattered, which I don't know if that's Maya's words or not. I know this is at a party, so it's a group setting so she should feel safe. But she could have easily accepted a date and then bail out later if she realizes that. I know sometimes those kind of situations are very stressful, and you don't want the Lucas person to get more upset and more violent. Even though that shouldn't happen, 'cause it's a group setting of a party, but doesn't mean it won't happen. It could have been a way to, once again, calm someone down who was mad at that person, and she didn't feel safe, and she didn't know this person, so maybe she was concerned about her friend group or who knows how much family he knows or work friends. Lucas is definitely concerning, and that's overall a bad situation that, yes, she should not date him, but I don't entirely blame Maya either. I see how the situation could unfold. Yeah, I wouldn't follow through with the date (*laughs*), I hope she doesn't...

When asked to elaborate on why Maya would see this as a potentially unsafe situation and why she should not end up following through with the date, Eliza explains that Maya may be concerned for her own safety because Lucas also became upset with her at the party:

...it says that he actually got mad at her, not just aggressive with other man. Out

of concern for her own safety or just to kinda cool the conversation and cool the setting, even if she didn't think she's gonna be physically hurt, maybe she just wanted to end it, and the best way to end it was to accept a date. And then later do whatever she felt was appropriate of confronting him or ghosting him, or I don't really care what she does next. But she can handle that later with some space and consulting a friend. (*Eliza, FG12- Jealousy, age 19*)

Eliza's assumption that Maya may be responding positively to Lucas' jealousy in an effort to appease him as a safety strategy is in line with the real-life experiences of participants like Gianna (age 20) and Emma (age 20), both from FG11-Surveillance. They explain that in real life, they have appeased men to avoid confrontation and out of fear for their own safety:

**Gianna:** I feel that Maya might have agreed to the date just because she was maybe creeped out. I know sometimes when I was alone...they were just like, "Oh, see you around, you know, whatever," and I was like, "Yeah, definitely," but I definitely didn't wanna pursue a friendship with them. I just wanted to say that because I wanted it to be done and I didn't wanna put myself in danger.

Gianna explains that she briefly participated in conversations with individuals she had no intention of developing a friendship with due to wanting that interaction to be over as soon as possible. Emma has had similar experiences, sharing: "I definitely have also accepted dates that I had no intent of actually maintaining, just for the sake of convenience and safety in the moment and then have later not followed through on."

Safety concerns was a major issue that participants identified across focus groups, and participants often believed that the tactics that Lucas was engaging in to court Maya (e.g., jealousy, cybersurveillance) would set a negative precedent for their relationship, in which their issues may escalate and put Maya in real danger.

Appeasing men, such as accepting dates from men in order to fake interest or calm

them down in the moment, was one strategy that participants discussed that could address these concerns momentarily and de-escalate the situation. However, these three codes—and particularly safety concerns—were most elevated during the no date accepted/breakup phase in Lucas and Maya’s relationship timeline. Thus, these safety concerns are further addressed again later in the results section.

### ***Shyness/Lacking Experience (Code 6)***

Participants often understood Lucas’ pursuit behaviors and Maya’s flattered response to them as an indication that they had little dating or social experience and maturity, which at times could translate into shyness (usually for Lucas). This lack of experience could be attributed to younger age or a lack of healthy role models or other additional perspectives on relationships. Jacky (FG1-Cybersurveillance) assumes that Maya lacks this experience, otherwise she would have responded differently to learning that Lucas monitored her social media activity to learn more about her:

I’m assuming Maya is not necessarily the most experienced in dating because of her response to it. I feel like if you’re a little bit more experienced in dating, this may not necessarily be the response you would have to someone who you don’t know as well. (*Jacky, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 20*)

Similarly, Nina and Lizzie, both from FG2-Persistent Pursuit, believed that those with less dating experience were more likely to romanticize Lucas’ persistence.

**Nina:** I think it really depends on your experiences with dating. I feel like if you’re more experienced with dating, you would see Lucas’s persistence as more of a bad sign. But, if you’re more inexperienced with dating and you get most of your ideas of romance towards media, and you don’t really do much research into it, then you might see this Lucas’s persistence as a more positive thing and possibly reacting the same way as Maya. (*Nina, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20*)



Nina suggests that those with less dating experience learn about romance through media, and because they don't have other knowledge to counter these messages (whether through actual dating experience or other "research"), they may perceive Lucas' persistence positively. Similarly, Daisy (FG9-Isolation, age 32) believes that inexperience and low self-esteem may be shaping Maya's response to Lucas' pursuit, noting that "it's more likely to happen the younger you are when you don't have anything else to compare, to compare a man to, or to compare that sort of attention to." Lizzie offers that Lucas and Maya must be in high school, and have limited dating experience by virtue of their age and developmental stage:

I think that it's possible that Maya and Lucas are both really young. Maybe still in high school or something. And maybe Maya has been rejecting his advances not necessarily because she doesn't think that they're compatible, maybe it's like, they're in different groups, and she thinks that it won't really mesh very well. But she's flattered because she thinks, wow, I've never had somebody pursue me before, and this is a really fun kind of thing to have happen. It's kind of flattering because maybe she's never had that sort of attention before. And that could be one reason why. (*Lizzie, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20*)

The belief that Lucas and Maya were in high school was shared by other participants as well, such as Eliza (FG12-Jealousy):

It doesn't say her age in here, I know someone else in this group said high school. Maybe this is that age, it could be even older, but I think those stories that we read at that young of an age, or even older, when we're lonely, when we're missing someone, they are very impressionable. They go, "Oh wow, I just want that." What we want is something else, but it kinda fills the void for us because it's what we have. (*Eliza, FG12-Jealousy, age 19*)

These participants believed that younger age (i.e., of high school age) could explain why Lucas was pursuing Maya in an unhealthy manner, and why Maya perceived Lucas' pursuit positively and as an indication that he really liked her. According to

Eliza, when we are younger, or when we are lonely and missing someone, we are very impressionable, and that is perhaps what explains Lucas and Maya's story and their reactions to each other. These responses are consistent with research on endorsement of romantic beliefs, as Lippman et al. (2014) found that the younger one is, the more likely they are to hold idealized beliefs about love and relationships (e.g., belief in a *One and Only* soulmate).

Anne also assumed that Maya in particular was very young—possibly in high school or a young 13-year-old girl. She equates Maya's young age with immaturity, and suggests it is normative for someone of this age to think that a man who wants her all to himself likes her:

Maya just seems really young. I mean, based on this story, I assume they are maybe in high school or something like that? It seems more like a reaction of a young teenager for Maya. So maybe not necessarily passive, but more of just she's young and immature, and that's how a 13-year-old would think that a guy shows that they like them. (*Anne, FG9-Isolation, age 39*)

Some participants discussed a lack of experience in terms of lack of knowledge, suggesting that participants who did not have the “right” type of feminist knowledge and education about relationships, gender roles, and equality were more likely to tolerate and romanticize someone like Lucas:

I think the socialization of how we are taught, like boys act like this, girls act like this, when you like each other this is what happens, that leads into your adulthood and especially if you see models of relationships that are like that, they're possessive or they're traditional in a sense, I think people who come from those types of backgrounds and maybe haven't had a lot of access to knowledge or education or more modern types of thinking, or feminist ideas...end up in these situations more than someone like myself. I'm a feminist. I really believe in autonomy, independence and strength and being able to do what we want to do and being equal. And this example is not—this isn't equal. This is something that I would never tolerate or never accept. But I

think that people's backgrounds and their knowledge about this stuff and I think that really kind of separates who would accept this and who wouldn't...  
(Luna, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 29)

Lack of experience and shyness was also framed in terms of Lucas and Maya “not knowing any better.” Cajunchic (FG9-Isolation) suggests that by virtue of her age and lack of experience, Maya did not know any better than to be flattered by Lucas wanting her alone:

Maya might be glad to have the attention, and she might not know any better. She might expect that this is what happens in a relationship, and she goes along with it, and however it turns out, it turns out. A lot of people are inexperienced, or if anybody shows 'em attention or affection, they turn toward that. And whatever they want, they usually get. So, there may be nothing wrong with Maya. It's just the fact that she's inexperienced and younger (Cajunchic, FG9-Isolation, age 58)

Gianna (FG11-Surveillance) on the other hand focuses on explaining Lucas, and suggests that it is possible that Lucas has never asked out a girl before, and this lack of experience may come across as creepy:

There's a borderline of it being nice and just being creepy. I think sometimes people don't realize that they're coming off as creepy when that's not their intention, whereas other times, that's people's intention. So I feel like it really depends on the person's intention and how the person is. To give Lucas the benefit of the doubt, maybe this is his first time asking out a girl. Maybe he doesn't really know how to go about it. But, if he's just stalking her just because, that's weird. (Gianna, FG11-Surveillance, age 20)

According to Gianna, if Lucas' intentions were good, and he was simply just trying to ask Maya out and did not know any better way to do it, his behavior would be understandable. However, if Lucas is just stalking Maya, then that is unacceptable.

Pointing out Lucas' lack of dating or relationship experience was a way for participants to give him “the benefit of the doubt,” which was more likely to be done

during the courtship phase. Emma (FG11-Surveillance) explains this further when her group was asked to share how other women they knew would react to the vignette and to Lucas:

As for the people who I think would be flattered by this situation, I think that they would really focus on Lucas's intentions... He probably didn't mean to be creepy. It's not his fault... I think it really boils down to believing that Lucas has good intentions. (*Emma, FG11-Surveillance, age 20*)

Jennifer (FG1-Cybersurveillance) suggests that she would be more inclined to find Lucas' tracking of Maya's social media activity as "cute" under certain contexts:

I think if it was more implied that Lucas was really socially awkward, and had never dated anybody before, and that this behavior did not continue after they started dating, then I would see it as like, aw, cute...he was nervous. (*Jennifer, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

While Emma and Jennifer focused on shyness and lacking experience as possible explanations for Lucas' behavior, Billy (FG 12-Jealousy) focused on Maya and how her lack of experience suggested that she does not know any better, which can be dangerous for her and lead her to a toxic relationship. Billy's response ties in safety concerns, which may be higher for women who are younger and more inexperienced:

I think that this is dangerous for a lot of women, especially if Maya—this is Maya's first relationship, first dude that she's ever flirted with and tried to talk to. She doesn't know no better. Him acting like this, he can easily manipulate her into thinking that this is okay and that this is normal, and that it was her bad, that it was her wrong, that she did something wrong because she allowed the man to flirt with her... (*Billy, FG12-Jealousy, age 22*)

For some, explaining away Lucas' behavior and Maya's subsequent response as shyness/lacking experience or maturity seemed harmless. For instance, a few participants did not express any major concerns with Lucas cyber-surveilling Maya if he lacked dating or social experience or was shy. Rather, his actions were reframed as

sweet and understandable. On the other hand, this same code led some participants to be very worried about the possible consequences if Maya were the one lacking the necessary experience to identify warning signs for abuse. Thus, responses that received this code reveal other gendered messages about safety and harm.

Specifically, men's shyness and lack of experience can make them appear more relatable and seem less concerning, while women's shyness and lack of experience can put them at risk to being subjected to men's manipulation and control.

### *Sincere Like/Attraction (Code 8)*

One of the last explanations that participants used to make sense of Lucas and Maya's story and their interactions with each other was by claiming that one or both of them genuinely liked each other or had an attraction towards the other. Participants believed that this sincere like/attraction was what was driving Lucas' pursuit behaviors in each story, and Maya's response to that pursuit. For instance, when asked why Maya would be flattered by Lucas consistently pursuing her, despite her rejecting Lucas several times, Alex (FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 18) shares: "I think people are gonna like different things, so if she just likes that, that's what she just likes." Alex's response makes room for the fact that women have different preferences, and regardless of her not liking this type of persistent pursuit herself, she can understand why someone like Maya would. Anna (FG12-Jealousy) also recognizes that Maya must actually like Lucas, which is what's driving her positive perceptions of his behavior and leading her to be flattered:

**Anna:** I was just gonna say while she likes him, so I'm sure that's definitely a bias, to encourage her to just be like "oh okay," and look at these

qualities and be like, “oh, those are actually good qualities, not bad ones.” That’s the first thing that jumped out is she likes him, so obviously her reaction being more favorable, rather than the opposite...

**SK:** What jumps out to you Anna is that Maya likes Lucas, and so maybe that’s really what’s driving her response?

**Anna:** Yeah. Because in most situations, I think somebody mentioned earlier, if you like someone, you probably justify their behaviors, even though they’re not necessarily the greatest. That idea that love is blind—not love is blind, but you’re blinded by love and that aspect. Even though they’re in a early stage in their relationship, it’s that idea of having a partner to be with, maybe over some of the negative behaviors that they might be performing. (*Anna, FG12-Jealousy, age 20*)

While Alex and Anna focus on Maya’s sincere feelings about Lucas, other participants focused their attention on him. Alicia (FG5-Jealousy) gives Lucas the benefit of the doubt, and believes that he does like Maya, but the way he expressed his feelings towards her was inappropriate:

But just the way he went about it is wrong, but maybe his ‘tentions were there. So I’d say yeah, he probably has feelings, which is great, but fighting someone is not the way to go about it. [*Laughter*]. Communication, like I said, would’ve helped the situation better. (*Alicia, FG5-Jealousy, age 21*)

Participants often made distinctions between sincerely liking someone, obsessing over them, and being infatuated with them. Lena conflates Lucas liking Maya with him obsessing over her:

I do think that Lucas likes Maya, in fact, is probably obsessed with her, considering that she is unaware of his presence at all these locations and he’s just kind of following her around. I mean, he definitely enjoys doing that in order for him to have like gone the distance to literally go to where she is. (*Lena, FG6-Surveillance, age 22*)

On the other hand, Phi believes that Lucas is just infatuated with Maya, and does not intend to invest in a relationship with her:

And I think this indicates only infatuation, and as I've learned, infatuation doesn't last very long in any relationship. In fact, it burns out almost immediately at the start of any relationship. So I think that he finds Maya to be someone interesting and worthy of time, but not someone that he would probably invest time into a relationship and actually... get to know her maybe. (*Phi, FG6-Surveillance, age 19*)

Izzy, another participant in Phi's focus group, responds with her initial impression of the story, where she believed that Lucas did have genuine feelings for Maya:

I think it's very interesting what Phi said, because that's not what came to mind when I first thought this. I kind of thought that he likes her, he saw her on campus and was like, "oh like she's cute, oh she's in my class and she's smart," whatever. And that he was just too nervous to say something. (*Izzy, FG6-Surveillance, age 20*)

Whether participants believed that Lucas' pursuit of Maya, be it through surveillance or another tactic, was an expression of his genuine feelings for her seemed to play a role in how positively or negatively participants evaluated Lucas and his interactions with Maya. Phi already believed that Lucas was simply infatuated and did not see Maya as someone worthy enough to get to know deeply, which may have explained the more negative reactions she shared throughout the discussion. On the other hand, Izzy's more positive evaluation of Lucas and his intentions, and the possibility that he was too nervous to talk to Maya directly, appeared to have played a role in her comments throughout our conversation, which usually took a more understanding and sympathetic tone towards Lucas.

Churro's (FG5-Jealousy) response below is a prime example indicating to what lengths participants went to justify and make sense of Lucas' pursuit:

I agree... especially Wens' point where he might be fearful of losing her. And I feel like that maybe came out in his reaction. Obviously, he has communication issues, so he's not able to openly say that. Maybe he's

casually flirting because he has trust issues or something. Like now I feel like, in a sense, when you do that you're kinda justifying his actions [*laughter*] — somehow, and I feel like that also becomes another flag...He should learn to be more honest in how he's feeling and his reactions to things...And I mean something I thought of was, well, he could've been like, "You know what, like, I'm done with Maya 'cause she's talking to this guy. I'm gonna go talk to this girl," and then Maya coulda been upset and then, they just would've never been together. (*Churro, FG5-Jealousy, age 20*)

While Churro briefly criticizes Lucas' communication issues, she is overwhelmingly understanding of his jealous reaction when he witnesses another man flirting with Maya at a party they both attend. Like her group mate Wens, Churro believes that Lucas' fear of losing Maya is what drove his jealousy, aggression, and anger in this story. Moreover, Churro suggests that perhaps Lucas is only flirting with Maya in a casual way because of his own trust issues. While she recognizes that offering these different explanations for Lucas' behavior suggests she is justifying what happened in the story, it does not stop her from offering yet another justification, and probably the most telling one: at least Lucas did not just give up on Maya and decide to go talk to another girl, because otherwise they wouldn't have ended up together. All the explanations for Lucas' behavior provided by Churro ultimately suggests that what he ended up doing in the story (becoming aggressive towards a male rival, upset with Maya) was preferable—because the “end justified the means.”

Some participants, such as Emmy (FG8-Persistent Pursuit) believed that one way Maya was expressing her interest in Lucas was by “playing hard to get”:

I think for Lucas to keep pursuing Maya as much as she kept saying “no,” she kept showing signs that she doesn't mind him around. That's why he kept coming back. I'm sure if a girl is grossed by you, she'll be so harsh on you and you wouldn't come back. I'm sure no one want to be rejected and go back to such an embarrassment. I think Maya at some point was tolerating Lucas



and he saw the opportunity and was like, “Yes, she’s like, ‘no,’ but she didn’t act crazy or she didn’t act mad, so I’m free to do it again ’cause she just said ‘no’ anyway.” And, the way she eventually said “yes” shows that she was just playing around with him ’cause I don’t think when you’re not interested in a person at first, you’ll come and get interested in them later as they keep pursuing you. I just think if you like them from the start, you’re just playing hard to get. (*Emmy, FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 25*)

Emmy’s response ties in how gender stereotypes guide the ways in which men and women express their interest in each other. Emmy believes that Lucas kept pursuing Maya because he was receiving positive reinforcement from her—“she just said ‘no’”, she didn’t act “crazy” or “mad.” For Emmy, someone who is really disinterested would need to set stronger and more direct boundaries beyond saying “no.” Moreover, Emmy claims that women often play “hard to get” with men they are interested in, and they eventually come around and accept a date from them. If women were really disinterested from men from the start, they would never say “yes” to a date and they would be harsher in their rejections to the point where men would not try to pursue them again. Similarly, Sandy (*FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 25*), another participant in Emmy’s focus group, emphasizes “Eventually she actually did give into his advances. So that speaks a lot about her because if she didn’t want him, she could have actually pushed him away.”

As the above quotes reveal, several participants believed to varying degrees that Lucas and Maya did have genuine feelings and attraction towards each other, and it was this sincere like/attraction that explained their interactions with each other. However, it is important to note that just because participants were able to identify this as a potential explanation for Lucas’ pursuit and Maya’s flattered response in

return, it did not mean that participants themselves endorsed this code personally. In other words, participants who believed that Lucas and Maya sincerely liked and were attracted to each other still explained why they found the scenario and their dynamic concerning. These participants were able to problematize this code and brought up reasons for why having feelings for someone like Lucas and being attracted to them could cause issues within the relationship. This conflict of having feelings for or being attracted to someone, while also understanding the potential associated risks of being in a relationship with that person, are further highlighted in the next subsection.

### **Conflicts and Contradictions (Theme 3)**

An interesting pattern that was identified in the focus group discussions was that some participants simultaneously found Lucas and Maya's relationship both appealing and problematic. One common way this occurred was when participants spoke about finding Lucas' behavior or Maya's response concerning, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous, while at the same time admitting that they would be flattered and accept a date from Lucas if they were Maya, especially if they found him attractive. For these participants, then, safety concerns and other discomforts about Lucas, and their desire to have at least somewhat of a similar relationship, co-existed and led to internal conflicts. Oftentimes, participants were not aware of these conflicts. In other words, participants tended not to be aware that they were making contradictory comments.

Despite being one of the participants who most often romanticized Lucas' persistent pursuit towards Maya, "L" was sure to also acknowledge how the story between Lucas and Maya could go wrong:

I think maybe some women do like the idea of being pursued endlessly... She likes the idea of being pursued. But at a certain point, he could ask for something that crosses over her boundaries, and she's going to be adamantly saying "no." But he's going to think, well, if I keep maybe asking her, maybe she'll say "yes" at some point because that's what she did the first time. So even though I guess this could be seen as romantic because...and it doesn't have to be the man, but I guess stereotypically the man endlessly pursuing the woman is seen as a very romantic ideal. This man will do anything for this woman. But it doesn't factor in that there's a possibility that he may cross her boundary at some point. And she might say "no," but he might just ignore that. (L, *FG2-Persistent Pursuit*, age 26)

In her response, "L" is making room for the fact that Maya may really find Lucas' endless pursuit of her romantic. She does not question Maya's appreciation for this pursuit in any way. While she is contemplating scenarios between Lucas and Maya that may be concerning in the future, she does not do so in a judgmental tone, or claim that because of the possible negative outcomes that may occur in the future, Maya should be perceiving the situation differently. When asked what might be driving Lucas' behavior, "L" continues:

I think he could be doing this because he does like her. But just because he likes her doesn't mean he respects her boundaries, so that's one thing. So it could be that, or it could just really be he's not interested in Maya, but he might like the idea of pursuing something with the possibility that he can't win. So it could be both. Maybe for him it's a game, and that he could win at this game of pursuit. Or he could really like her, but he doesn't really respect the fact that she kept saying "no". Like there's a difference between love and respect. Respect should be involved in love, but, I guess...if you have this illusion of love, you might not include the respect to the other person.

“L” highlights that while respect should be inherent in love, the reality is that the two are separate constructs. She suggests that idealized romantic beliefs (e.g., the “illusion of love”) play a key role in perceiving these types of situations. Her argument is aligned with a wealth of research that finds that women romanticize abusive partners and relationships, and that victims rely upon romance narratives when making sense of the abuse. For instance, remembering the “honeymoon period” (Bonomi et al., 2011; Walker, 1979), believing that one’s abuser is their soulmate (e.g., Wood, 2001), and the belief that love conquers all, including violence (e.g., Hayes & Jeffries, 2013) have been identified as critical romantic ideals that shape women’s perceptions of abuse.

Participants such as Emma (FG3-Possessiveness/Control) shared responses that reflected other types of contradictions. When putting herself in Maya’s shoes, Emma simultaneously would find issue with Lucas telling her to change out of a revealing dress to avoid other men’s attention, while also being flattered. She indicates that she would be offended, upset that he doesn’t trust her. She also shares that in the moment, she would appease Lucas and change out of the dress and have a conversation with him later about the situation. At the same time, Emma admits that she would see this response as a sign that he liked her and cared enough to say something about her clothing:

I guess putting myself in Maya’s shoes—so let’s say, for example, I’m already with the person I am now currently with my boyfriend and he tells me, “Hey, don’t wear that because it’s too revealing,” I mean, I probably act a little bit like Maya, be a little flattered. Like, “Oh, dang, you know, he actually cares that people are gonna, you know, take it the wrong way.” But either way, I feel like I’m still gonna be a little offended, ’cause how I see—he’s not

trusting in me that I'll behave as well. So I see that more as offensive.... Like, at the moment, sure, I'll change—whatever. But later on, I will talk to him... keep that communication open and be like, “Hey...I feel like you're not trustin' me...is there a reason why you don't trust me? Like, have I done something?” (*Emma, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 20*)

Like Emma, other participants also presented with internal conflicts and contradictions when they considered how they would respond if they were in Maya's position. For Jennifer, recognizing that she is attracted to the person that is surveilling her social media accounts puts forth an extra filter that complicates how she would assess the situation:

It's hard to say if it was happening to me. When you add in the aspect of if you are attracted to that person, you might see it as, “Oh, they're into me. They wanna know more about me.” You might get confused about what's the appropriate level of interest before they talk to you. I would prefer that... if they were into me, just tell me that they want to get to know me more, and then we can talk about all these things, rather than them going through and figuring out every little detail. Even if I thought they were attractive, and then I said, “Oh, yeah, I love going to like this place to eat,” and if he was like, “Oh, I know,” I'd be like, [*laughter*] “What?” I'd probably be like, “Okay, bye.” [*Laughter*]. But it is hard to know how you would respond if you think the person's attractive because then it might put an extra filter on how you perceive their actions. (*Jennifer, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Jennifer admits that being attracted to a person does cloud your judgment of them and their actions, which can make it easier for you to perceive their actions as an indication of interest in you. Jennifer clearly feels uncomfortable about this conflict (e.g., “It's hard to say...”).

Perhaps one of the most concerning and complicated conflicts and contradictions expressed by participants was when they shared having safety concerns, while simultaneously expressing a desire for a relationship. As before, this

commonly occurred when participants put themselves in Maya's shoes and explained how they would respond to Lucas' pursuit. For instance, Sophia comments:

Part of me thinks although this scenario is really weird, I think part of us, when you're talking to someone new, it's very common to look at their social media and make sure they're not crazy...I think part of me tries to understand it a little bit. When you like someone, you tend to look at their Instagram or their Facebook or whatnot. It's very possible that he could be doing his research for good purposes. Maybe he wants to know what she likes so he can surprise her one day with it or something. (*Sophia, FG7-Surveillance, age 20*)

Sophia's response indicates that while she thinks it is "really weird" that Lucas would go to extreme lengths to examine Maya's social media, she also tries to make sense of it and notes all of the ways that this may be acceptable. Sophia's reasoning is similar to the thought process victims go through when reflecting on their experiences in abusive relationships, where they emphasize the positive elements over the much worse, violent parts of the relationship (Wood, 2001). Moreover, while on the one hand Sophia believes that surveilling a potential partner's social media in this way can suggest that you like them, it can also suggest that you have serious concerns about them and need additional information to evaluate any danger they may pose.

Rosie, another participant in Sophia's focus group, also brings up safety concerns with Lucas while simultaneously romanticizing the situation:

**Rosie:** Part of me wants to believe that it's for good intentions, and this could all work out, and he's just really romantic and was shy and wanted to have something to go off of. But I've seen a lot of Lifetime movies and I've seen *You*, and I've read books [*laughter*] about things like this, so I'm very 50/50 on it. It could go either way. If there is other red flags showing up later on, then I wouldn't trust him. But I guess this would be a thing that you'd just take slow and feel the guy out and get to know him as a person even though he did all of this. Like if he's honest and he states true intentions, I would give him a chance. I guess I get why she accepted in that case.

**SK:** Okay. Rosie, you understand why Maya would accept this date, why she'd be flattered. Maybe you'd just be a little bit cautious.

**Rosie:** Yeah. I mean, it's sweet in hindsight. It is. If you're not one of those people that really worry about stalkers all the time, or know how other things can go because you fill your head with [*laughter*] a bunch of fictional things, then I don't see anything wrong with it. But if you're cautious and you have parents that are like, "Oh! Be careful!" You just go into it slowly. (*Rosie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 26*)

Rosie romanticizes Lucas and his behaviors in different ways, including by suggesting he may be "really romantic," and this being "sweet in hindsight." At the same time, Rosie notes how this can be a potentially dangerous situation (e.g., Lucas may be a stalker, one must be cautious). Like the previous examples, Rosie's response suggests the extreme benefit of the doubt women are encouraged to offer men who indicate interest in them and pursue them. As seen in these participants' responses, any concerns for their own wellbeing and safety are canceled out by the potential for Lucas, or someone like him, to be "the one":

If it was me, and he was attractive, and I kind of knew him a little bit because it says they're acquaintances, I would give him the one chance and see if there's chemistry, or see how it goes. But the one thing that would be in the back of my head is that he knows everything about me, and I know nothing about him, which is always a really creepy feeling. There is not much for you to talk about when the other person knows you 100 percent. And if they don't reveal anything about themselves, then you wonder what they're hiding... It's tricky. The vain part of you is like, "Oh, he's attractive!" Who doesn't want an attractive boyfriend? Then the other side is, even though he's attractive he could be a psycho because that's usually how that turns out. The same thing. Feel it out slowly. Maybe after hanging out, if it doesn't work out, keep him as a friend. I would just be on the look-out for any red flags. Then if there are any others, he's going to the side, and I'm not bothering with him [*laughter*] anymore. (*Rosie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 26*)

For participants like Rosie, having chemistry with and being attracted to a potential male love interest was in some cases prioritized over any potential concerns that he

may be dangerous. Their responses also reveal that being on the search for and navigating “red flags” is a key part of the dating experience for heterosexual women.

The courtship phase presented participants with a scenario in which Lucas pursues Maya through one of six tactics (e.g., isolation, cybersurveillance, jealousy), ultimately leading a flattered Maya to accept a date from Lucas. Participants had varied responses to this courtship scenario. They spoke of how normalized the scenario was in terms of sheer frequency, citing examples of when they themselves had experienced similar situations in real life, or sharing their friends’ experiences. Moreover, participants’ responses reflected a high level of romanticization when discussing Lucas and Maya’s courtship. In trying to explain both why Lucas was pursuing Maya in these ways, and why Maya might be flattered and accept a date from Lucas, participants offered several explanations, including that both characters had been exposed to and internalized gender stereotypes that dictate appropriate roles for men and women in dating contexts and relationships. Additionally, participants explained that both were heavily influenced by mainstream Western media, and both were shy or may have lacked dating experience that would have otherwise provided them more insight into healthy dating behaviors. Participants also genuinely believed that it is possible that Lucas and Maya truly do like each other, and their sincere feelings were driving both characters actions and responses in the story.

Participants also provided several critiques of the scenario and highlighted the various risks that women like Maya face in these situations which can further explain why on the surface, they would respond favorably to men like Lucas. Specifically,



they cited the many safety concerns women encounter when being pursued by men which make it difficult to reject them. As a result, participants described appeasing men (e.g., accepting a date in the moment) to prevent situations from escalating. Closely linked to safety concerns and appeasing men was participants' discussion of negative precedents, where they explained that standards set early in the relationship had important implications for the health and safety of the relationship and the female partner. Indeed, several participants explained that Maya ought to be careful during this courtship phase, because Lucas' current behaviors (e.g., cybersurveillance, isolation) could lead to more abusive behaviors over time.

In the next section, participants' responses to the committed relationship phase in which Lucas and Maya are officially dating are discussed alongside representative quotes from participants. Importantly, rather than presenting all of the codes that were applied to responses during this committed relationship phase (as had primarily been done with the courtship phase), I present the most prominent code(s) for a more targeted discussion of the findings in this part of the focus groups.

### **Committed Relationship Phase**

In the committed relationship phase, participants were asked to consider how they would respond if the behavior first introduced in the original, courtship vignette continued once Lucas and Maya were in an established relationship. For instance, participants reflected on a situation where Lucas still enrolled in all of Maya's classes and showed up to locations he knew she'd be at (surveillance). Or, participants discussed a scenario where Lucas continued to get upset whenever other men became

friendly with and flirted with Maya, with Lucas still becoming aggressive towards these other men. As before, Maya would calm Lucas down in these situations, reminding him that she likes him (jealousy).

**Problematizing Lucas: Stereotypical Gender Roles, Negative Precedents, and Insecurity/Lack of Trust (Theme 2; Codes 1, 5, 7)**

As with the courtship phase, participants provided several explanations for what might be driving Lucas' behavior. Perhaps the most popular explanation that appeared during the committed relationship phase was insecurity/lack of trust. In fact, participants often felt most confident naming Lucas' insecurity and lack of trust towards Maya and his relationship during this phase. According to many participants, healthy romantic relationships are rooted in trust and security, and the fact that Lucas was continuing to engage in the same tactics as before suggested that he did not have this trust and security in the relationship. Rosie's response below, illustrates this confidence in naming Lucas' behavior as insecure:

To me, that just cements the fact that him initiating, and his behavior before, it was just rooted in insecurity. And then now, being that he continues to do so, it's just still seeping in that and not really going beyond. Even though he is in a committed relationship now and should probably be secure in the affections of his now girlfriend, that instead he's still in that place of just not really knowing, and being, "What's she's posting?" (*Rosie, FGI-Cybersurveillance, age 20*).

When asked what Lucas' behavior must have been rooted in before he and Maya were committed to each other (i.e., during courtship), Rosie responded that she may have explained Lucas' behavior by giving him the benefit of the doubt, and as being rooted in shyness. Like Rosie, Gianna explains that she didn't realize Lucas was

being clingy<sup>6</sup> until he and Maya had committed to each other. Rather, she initially saw Lucas showing up to all the places Maya went in the surveillance vignette as his way of flirting with her during courtship. Looking back, however, her perception of and explanation for the surveillance shifted based on the relationship phase, and she explained how she would now also see his previous behaviors during courtship as clingy. Emma, the other participant in Gianna's focus group, differed when asked whether she noticed Lucas' clinginess in one phase more over the other:

I think that I would characterize it as clingy more so in the second—or in this scenario than in the first one just because I feel like knowing that they have an already established relationship aligns more with my definition of clingy, whereas I think I see the first scenario as something that is more creepy and uncomfortable. (*Gianna, FG11-Surveillance, age 20*)

Contrary to Gianna, Emma explains that she more easily identified Lucas' behavior as clingy during the committed relationship phase. In other words, Emma did not need to compare both the courtship and committed relationship phases to identify Lucas' clingy behavior. In her opinion, clinginess occurs within the context of a relationship—if a relationship has not been established, there's not much to cling onto. Moreover, Emma distinguished between clinginess and creepiness; while she found Lucas surveilling Maya when they were dating as clingy and potentially unhealthy behavior, she was less concerned about Maya's wellbeing given that there was an established relationship between the two. In other words, it is safe to assume

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<sup>6</sup> Clinginess was another way that participants described Lucas' insecurity and lack of trust in Maya and his relationship with her.

that on its own, Emma did not find this particular scenario as fear-inducing and abusive:

I think that the situation in which they're already dating and Lucas starts doing this stuff, while it may not necessarily be super healthy, I think that it's less creepy because they already have a relationship established and they obviously wanna spend time with one another. I would find it concerning if they're unable to separate—if Lucas is unable to separate himself from Maya's life or if they're unable to have separate lives. But, I think that them having an already established relationship makes me less concerned for Maya [*laughs*]. Actually, I don't know. I feel like it's still kinda concerning. It's not as concerning. (*Emma, FG11-Surveillance, age 20*)

Other participants across focus groups shared the sentiment that Lucas' continued behavior was now reflective of his insecurity, with Daisy (FG9-Isolation, age 32) arguing that along with being insecure, Lucas lacked self-confidence, and "he's scared that if she interacts with friends and family, she's going to leave him." Jennifer (FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22) contemplated whether Lucas' insecurity and lack of trust were due to him having been cheated on before, and him continuing to check Maya's social media accounts being a way for him to maintain some power and control.

Billy (FG12-Jealousy, age 22) also understood insecurity and lack of trust as being more relevant to when a couple have entered a committed relationship with each other. When asked whether they were able to identify Lucas' insecurity in the story during the courtship phase, Billy noted that she was more easily able to identify this insecurity and lack of trust when Lucas and Maya were committed to each other. Moreover, she implied that these reactions outside of a relationship context are "psychotic." Eliza, also from Billy's group, noted that insecurity does not make sense

outside of the bounds of an established relationship. Rather, Eliza distinguished between personal insecurities and relationship insecurities:

I think if they're not together then there's nothing he should feel secure about [*laughs*]. He might have personal insecurities, I think in most situations, but regarding the security of the relationship, if they're not in one, you can't really—in my opinion, have feelings about it. But I think in both situations he could have easily felt intimidated or threatened by her. If that's the case he shouldn't be—this is just kinda messed up. I think he could easily be insecure as a person, but I think when the relationship, you had that extra factor that he could be insecure about them as a couple. (*Eliza, FG12-Jealousy, age, 19*)

Scholars have linked attachment theory, and specifically insecure (preoccupied) attachments, to behaviors such as stalking (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). They argue that those with such attachments experience greater difficulties in handling abandonment, rejection, and relationships that have actually ended. Thus, Lucas' insecurity/distrust may be attributed to his anxiety around possible abandonment from Maya (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Some vignettes used across focus groups, such as the jealousy vignette where Lucas sees another male rival getting close to and flirting with Maya, and the isolation vignette where Lucas prefers that Maya's friend not interfere with his time with her, both illustrate possible sources of threat for Lucas. Thus, in line with this explanation, Lucas' insecurity may be theoretically supported.

Phi explained Lucas' insecurity and lack of trust as co-dependency on Maya. According to her, she would find it more acceptable if Lucas were to continue showing up places Maya frequented in an effort to be noticed by her before a relationship had been established. In Phi's opinion, independence is critical and something Lucas is lacking:

**Phi:** I think this kind of confirmed our group suspicions earlier that [laughs] he was a little bit creepy and stalker-ish. And, touching upon what we said earlier that independence is super important in a relationship, I think he's kind of overstepping his boundary, because the fact that this behavior is still continuing even when they're committed to each other, so he knows that she'll be loyal to him and still like him for him who he is, but he's like.. being.. codependent. I would say he's really depending on her to be close to her, and like he probably seeks comfort in her proximity, so that's really weird [laughs].

**SK:** So am I getting it right, that this is more weird now that they're committed to each other, compared to before they had even officially started dating, is that right?

**Phi:** I think if we were to justify it, it makes more sense before they were dating, because it's his way of showing that he's really interested in her, and he's interested in pursuing the relationship. But once they've committed to each other, it would be weird for him to keep doing these really big unnecessary thing. (*Phi, FG6- Surveillance, age 19*)

Like other participants, Phi's response emphasized the importance of considering the relationship context. She was more able to identify insecurity and lack of trust as a motivator for Lucas' behavior when he was in an established relationship with Maya. When he was engaging in surveillance behaviors before the relationship was confirmed, it was framed as him expressing his interest in Maya.

While most participants simply noted that Lucas' behavior was rooted in insecurity and a lack of trust during the committed relationship phase, a few participants dived even deeper, arguing that insecurities can be worked on in a relationship. Page did not necessarily frame insecurity/lack of trust as being abusive or toxic. Rather, she framed insecurities and trust issues as points of intervention, particularly in comparison to a cycle of abuse which is more difficult to break out of:

I guess it depends on what his motivations are to me. Because if he's motivated by his insecurities, like we had mentioned earlier on, then I feel like insecurities are things that you can acknowledge and change. But I do think

that there are certain circumstances where the person might just be kinda shitty and not realize that their power dynamic and the way that they behave is abusive or toxic or inappropriate at all. But if it's just an insecurity, I say just an insecurity, but if it's just an insecurity, that's something that you can work on, right? But if someone is playing out a cycle of abuse that they have been watching their family go through, like maybe their dad treated their mother the same way, and so if they're just playing out that cycle of abuse again and again, the fact that it's happening to begin with to me would mean that they don't know that it's wrong. (*Page, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 28*)

When participants were asked to consider themselves in Maya's shoes, Mei commented that she would not tolerate Lucas' continued comments about her clothing if she were Maya. Like Page, she also saw this situation as a point of intervention—however, her goal would be to educate Lucas so his future relationships with other women could look differently. In other words, Mei had no tolerance for this continued behavior, and her intent would not be to salvage any relationship she herself could have with Lucas.

I just think he's insecure. That's it. This is kinda why earlier I said I would just cut my losses because I don't want this type of situation to happen because...would be a bad first impression of how you would react if I were to wear what I want...I would definitely tell him what was wrong so that in the future with other women he wouldn't project his own insecurities. But, I think that's just not a guy for me. (*Mei, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 21*)

While Page noted that “if it's just an insecurity,” this can be worked on and there's opportunity for positive change, Mei went further and shared how she'd take this opportunity to specifically help Lucas improve for his future relationships. Billy also believed Lucas' behavior was rooted in insecurity and suggested how he could change in the moment, and in the long-term:

I think that if he's already acting like this, he needs to take a step back and reevaluate his life and who he is as a person, because no one deserves to be treated like that. And if you do have a problem with it, say Maya is actually

flirting with this other dude, and they're in a committed relationship, then you pull her aside. You kinda tell her, "Hey, I saw you talking, we're together, I'm uncomfortable with that," whatever the case may be. We don't know if she was flirting back, but if she was, that's not okay. That's just another form of cheating, it doesn't matter if you don't act on it. (*Billy, FG12-Jealousy, age 22*)

Billy argued that Lucas needed to communicate directly with Maya in the moment about his discomfort with another man getting close to her at a party they both attended. As a longer self-reflection project, she believed that he needed to reevaluate why he became jealous of another man getting close to and flirting with Maya, and why he became aggressive towards the other man and upset with Maya. Interestingly, Billy did not fully absolve Maya of any wrongdoing here. Rather, she found fault with both Lucas and Maya's behavior (if she was, in fact, flirting back); however, Billy did not justify Lucas' jealousy based on Maya's potential flirting with other men.

Other participants did not always see this situation during the committed relationship phase as an opportunity for change and intervention for Lucas. Rather, they instead focused on how Lucas' insecurity/lack of trust could set a negative precedent in his relationship with Maya, leading to more concerning and controlling behaviors. For instance, Ray saw this lack of trust as a red flag:

First of all, Lucas wants to control everything Maya's doing by checking her social media. The next minute, he will be telling her what to post, what not to post, who to like. Who to be friends with. Also there's an issue of trust because if he keeps checking her social media...So I feel that's a red flag already. If I was Maya, I would definitely do something about it there and then before it gets too far. (*Ray, FG7-Cybersurveillance, age 27*)



In Ray's opinion, this was a point of intervention for Maya specifically. She did not make any claims about Lucas needing to change in any way at this point, instead focusing her attention on Maya needing to "do something" before it "gets too far." Similarly, Daisy shared her concerns about Lucas continuing to prefer that he and Maya spend time alone together once they made their relationship official:

I'm gonna say that the longer they continue to date and the longer she allows that behavior or goes along with that behavior of 'just the two of them,' the more isolated she'll become. She'll distance herself from her support system, and it makes it harder for her to actually leave. It's essentially by forcing her to distance herself from her friends and family, she's isolating herself. She's becoming dependent on him. He's the only company. He's the only one who spends time with her. It kind of becomes cyclical in a way. (*Daisy, FG9-Isolation, age 32*)

Researchers identify monopolization of time (e.g., spending all free time with a partner) as a method to keep one's relationship intact. Monopolization of time has also been found to correlate with other forms of IPV, including sexual coercion, controlling behavior, and violence (Buss et al., 2008). Such findings suggest that per Ray and Daisy's assertion, Lucas isolating Maya may further lead to additional unhealthy and abusive behaviors that can increase in severity. Like Ray, Daisy's response also centered Maya as the one needing to change, as she is the one who is "allowing" and "going along" with Lucas isolating her from her social network. In contrast to Ray and Daisy, Lea found issue with the fact that Maya needed to take responsibility for Lucas' behavior to begin with. Lea's group reflected on a situation where Lucas became jealous and aggressive towards another man for seemingly getting close to Maya at a party, and she shared that she would view Lucas' behavior

as problematic in the committed relationship phase just the way she did during the courtship phase:

My opinion would stay the same as my first answer. Even if they're in a committed relationship, because Lucas would be treating it as literally that Maya is his property or something. He's gettin' mad that somebody's just talking to her, flirting with her. Like I said, that's really toxic behavior. And the fact that Maya would have to be the one to calm Lucas down, it puts a whole other responsibility on Maya that she doesn't have to have. She doesn't have to be explaining herself to Lucas like, "No, I like you." The fact that they're in a committed relationship should be evidence enough, if she should just be like, "Well, Lucas, if I didn't like you, obviously we wouldn't be in a relationship." And that's a really passive aggressive way of doing it, but sometimes it's like, you can't keep explaining yourself. (*Lea, FG5-Jealousy, age 18*)

Lea identified strongly with Maya here, taking her position and expressing frustration that Maya is the one calming Lucas down and explaining herself to him. However, another participant in Lea's group, Wens, argued that Maya was responsible for Lucas' jealousy-induced aggression. She commented:

You cannot change this person. So if he's violent and that is him, even if you live for 40 years, he will still be the same person. I think it will continue like this—to the very end because, at first, she encouraged him to do this. And she continue doing that, and she's still in the relationship. So to this guy, it is okay. So we can't blame Lucas for behavin' in such a manner because no one is tellin' him it's not okay...So my point is, even though this a nature in someone, don't try to change them, and don't be convinced that, as time goes by, they'll change. They can't. (*Wens, FG5-Jealousy, age 24*)

Wens takes Lucas' position, identifying with him and absolving him of any real responsibility for his behavior. By remaining in the relationship with Lucas and calming him down in these situations, Wens believed that Maya was encouraging his jealousy-induced aggression and believed Maya should do better and know better than to think Lucas will change. Along with endorsing victim-blaming beliefs, Wens

also strongly endorses essentialist beliefs which suggest that Lucas, and men like him, are naturally violent—they cannot change and we should not blame them for that. Studies find that beliefs excusing perpetrators and the masculine norm of violence (amongst others) are related. Locke and Mahalik (2005) found that men who endorsed violence (which has been identified as normative in traditional masculinity) are also more likely to accept rape myths that blame the victim and absolve the perpetrator of responsibility. The masculine norm of violence is also implicated in actual sexual aggression against women.

### **Understanding Lucas: Stereotypical Gender Roles, Sincere Like/Attraction, & Other Explanations (Theme 2; Code 1, 8)**

There were some instances across focus groups where participants believed it was possible that Lucas' behavior towards Maya was not problematic, and they were, in fact, in a positive and healthy relationship. Izzy took this approach, and contemplated situations where Lucas' behavior would be acceptable:

I agree that it's kind of like showing that he's maybe too dependent on her. But at the same time, I don't think you gave any details on does Maya do the same thing for Lucas. Like is she also going to places she knows that he'll be, because if Maya wants to also take the same classes as Lucas, and I mean if they need the same classes, they can have the same major, if they need the same classes and maybe weren't initially planning on taking the same ones in the same order, and now he's just shifting his schedule to take it in the same order as her. But if they're both showing up at places they know the other person would be, then I think that can be pretty healthy, as long as it's not like too codependent on each other...maybe they just wanna spend time with each other. But I think if it's just Lucas doing it to Maya, then I agree with what everyone else has said. (*Izzy, FG6-Surveillance, age 20*)

According to Izzy, in determining whether the behavior Lucas is engaging in towards Maya is problematic—in this case showing up to all the places Maya is known to

frequent (e.g., classes, lunch spots), the important questions to consider are whether this behavior is mutual and whether Maya also shows up to places Lucas is always known to go to. Additionally, Izzy considers contexts where this situation might actually make sense (e.g., if Lucas and Maya needed the same classes for school). For Izzy, whether both partners are on the same page and have the same needs and desire for attention is the critical question here. When this is unbalanced between both partners, that is where the cause for concern would come in. This recognition—that Lucas and Maya’s behaviors towards each other may be mutual and thus pose fewer concerns, was also expressed by participants in FG11-Surveillance, suggesting that Izzy was not alone in trying to understand and justify Lucas’ behavior. Gianna believes that Lucas’ behavior does indicate that he likes Maya, but regardless, setting boundaries and maintaining independence is still critical here:

It seems like he wants to spend time with her, but I just think that they need to create boundaries because I feel like being in the same classes with your significant other or if they work at the same place and have the same friend group, I feel like you’re honestly with them 24/7 and I feel like it’s really important to create boundaries. Not that you don’t wanna spend time with them, but you’re allowed to have your separate friends. You’re allowed to have worked separately, if possible. Obviously, if you happen to be working together, then there’s nothing you can really do about that. (*Gianna, FG11-Surveillance, age 20*)

Izzy’s response reflects an overall understanding of Lucas’ continued behavior throughout the committed relationship phase. In general, being understanding of Lucas and what might be motivating his behavior towards Maya was a stance that Izzy took throughout the focus group discussion. On the other hand, participants like Gianna contemplated both sides of the coin—situations where they’d find Lucas’

behavior concerning and situations where it'd be more acceptable. However, it was clear that these participants had an overall negative perception of Lucas' behavior and the dynamic between him and Maya. The dialogue between Emma (age 20), Gianna (age 20), and I in FG11-Surveillance is a key example of this. Before this exchange, Emma and Gianna had shared that they were uncomfortable with Lucas surveilling Maya, but they also provided examples where this would be more acceptable, such as if Maya did like this behavior from Lucas. I asked Emma and Gianna to elaborate further:

**SK:** Do both of you get that Maya's character, that she does really appreciate that? Because the story does say that she is flattered and she accepts that date after this has happened. Are you getting that vibe from Maya?

**Emma:** I think that flattery and desire are not necessarily the same thing and they're not mutually exclusive. I feel while Maya could be flattered, like, "Oh, it's cool that this person finds me attractive, but oh, I'm still creeped out," that could still be a scenario that's happening.

**Gianna:** I agree with everything that Emma said. For all we know, too, is that she could just be agreeing to it 'cause maybe she doesn't know how to get out of it.

Emma's response suggests a conflict/contradiction where one can enjoy flattery and appreciate that someone is interested in them, but not wish for any further interactions or relationship. On the other hand, desire, and acting on desire, is rooted in consent. While Maya may be flattered by the attention she's received from Lucas, she may not desire and consent to anything further with him. According to Emma, then, Maya may simultaneously be flattered and "creeped out" at the same time instead.

Gianna's response also complicates her previous statements, where she provided scenarios where Lucas' surveillance of Maya and them spending excessive amounts of time together would be acceptable. Gianna offers another perspective above, however, in which she suggests that Maya may not be comfortable with this dynamic with Lucas after all. Rather, Maya may be appeasing Lucas by agreeing to this type of dynamic in their relationship. Erika's response also reflects this more complex understanding of Lucas, Maya, and their relationship. She plays "devil's advocate," bringing up different, and at times conflicting, perspectives:

Maybe I do believe Lucas is tryin' to look after her. Either way, I'd feel more protective if someone were to look at me, and I were wearing a dress, and my boyfriend was going up to the boy or the man who's looking at me. I feel more like, "Why are you siding against me? Why aren't you siding with me and saying, let me wear my dress...I'm not the problem. He's the problem. He's looking at me." Because Maya gave Lucas the pass on the first one like, "Okay, I'll do what you want," then that kinda sets your tone for the relationship... so it will be Maya's fault [*laughs*] in this—if Maya decides later that, "Oh, I don't like Lucas telling me." It's totally her fault that she let this slide the first time. And then it—and if I was in this shoes, I'd be like, "No, Lucas. Like, I'm not wrong. Men are wrong. Go fix that. Don't fix me." (*Erika, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 20*)

On the one hand, and similar to Paloma (one of Erika's group mates), Erika romanticized Lucas' behavior, sharing that she believes Lucas wanting Maya to change clothes for a party to prevent other men's eyes on her is rooted in wanting to protect her. Erika seemed to have no issue with Lucas defending Maya against other men and confronting them, as this took the focus off Maya and her clothing and shifted it to men who may be looking at her. While Erika started off explaining that if she were Maya, she would want to wear whatever she wanted (reflecting a strong stance in favor of Maya, and women like her), she undercuts this by blaming Maya

for Lucas' reactions. Because Maya gave in to Lucas and changed out of her dress into clothing that he found more acceptable, Erika believed that Maya was responsible for what happened after because she let his possessive and controlling behavior pass from the start. Erika ends by distinguishing herself from Maya and women like her—if she were in Maya's shoes, she would not let this pass, and would instead tell Lucas to focus on other men's responses rather than her wearing certain clothing. Erika's response, thus, suggests a conflict/contradiction in which she appears to both defend and empower women on the surface, while also holding them responsible for their partner's controlling behavior.

Perhaps the most common explanation participants gave to make sense of why Lucas was continuing to engage in the same tactics as before (e.g., jealousy, surveillance), even though he and Maya were now in a committed relationship, was insecurity/lack of trust on Lucas' part. Some participants claimed that they would view both situations similarly, identifying the behavior as problematic in the same way during the committed phase as they had during courtship. Several felt more comfortable naming Lucas' behavior as being rooted in insecurity/lack of trust in this phase compared to the courtship phase. As was the case during courtship, participants also believed that Lucas was setting a negative precedent in his relationship with Maya by continuing to engage in the same tactics. Participants also focused on Maya's role here, arguing that she needed to "do something" before the relationship took a turn for the worst. A few even implicated Maya in the story, holding her responsible for being in a relationship like this in the first place. While participants

expressed an overall annoyance with Lucas' behavior in the committed relationship stage, they did not necessarily identify it as outright abusive. There were still attempts to understand Lucas and where he was coming from, as well as justify his actions (e.g., it's okay if he enrolls in all of Maya's classes if this is mutual, and she does similar things).

Some participants spoke about Lucas' insecurity/lack of trust as a point of intervention, with a few participants arguing that they would educate him so he could improve as a partner for future relationships. Overall, it was clear that participants went to great lengths to justify Lucas' behavior, even when he was continuing to engage in tactics that had previously been identified as problematic by participants throughout his courtship of Maya. The next section presents participants' reactions to two scenarios that find Lucas and Maya either never having been in a relationship at all or broken up. As will be described, participants expressed the greatest concern about Lucas' continued pursuit towards Maya through the previously examined tactics, as well as the most safety concerns for Maya.

### **No Date Accepted/Breakup Phase**

During these parts of the focus group discussions, participants reflected on how they would perceive the dynamic between Lucas and Maya if Lucas continued to pursue Maya through a specific tactic (e.g., surveillance, isolation, jealousy), despite her rejecting him. This was explored in one of two ways. First, participants responded to a hypothetical situation where after Lucas' initial pursuit, Maya did not accept a date with him despite being flattered by his actions, suggesting that no official



relationship was ever established between the two. Second, participants considered a situation where Maya was flattered by Lucas' actions and accepted his date (as in the courtship phase), officially committed to an established relationship with him, but ultimately ended with the couple breaking up. In this second situation, participants were told that Lucas was continuing to pursue Maya in the way he had originally, despite their relationship having ended. While these two hypothetical scenarios were presented to participants at different points of the discussion, they are being discussed in combination here given the overlap in how participants responded to both scenarios.

### **The Issue with Unwanted Pursuit**

Participants had varied reactions to Maya rejecting Lucas' date, leading to no official relationship being established between the two from the very beginning. Some indicated an appreciation that Maya was "looking out for herself" (Rosie, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 20), and "stuck to her guns" (Lizzie, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20) by setting her boundaries and rejecting Lucas even though she was flattered. Participants like Neyu (FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 21) wanted to make clear that Maya's response—whether she accepted or did not accept Lucas' date—did not change her belief that his actions were problematic to begin with. Other participants expressed at least some sympathy for Lucas, including Erika (FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 20), who notes that her initial reaction would change from "Oh, poor Lucas" to "No, that's what he gets."

However, overall, participants expressed the most concerns about Lucas' behaviors towards Maya during these two phases—when she rejected a date from him and no official relationship was established, and during the breakup phase. In the latter case, participants felt most confident naming his behavior as stalking, obsessive, possessive, and controlling, with participants continuously returning to the fact that his behavior was not acceptable since he and Maya were no longer in a relationship together. For instance, Gianna felt more confident naming Lucas' behavior as “stalking” in the breakup phase, even though that was her first impression when presented with the original vignette depicting Lucas and Maya's courtship:

I definitely think at that point that it's more like stalking. Originally, I felt that to begin with [*laughs*], but I think that he just can't let go of their relationship and maybe still just wants to be around so she won't quote unquote forget about him. (*Gianna, FG11-Surveillance, age 20*)

It is likely that stalking—in the way that it is commonly understood—is more in line with what Gianna observed in the breakup phase, and what led her to officially call out Lucas' behavior as such. Popular definitions of stalking suggest that it is a pattern of behaviors that bring the recipient some level of distress or fear (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). For many participants, fear and larger safety concerns were brought up most often during the breakup phase, which explains why it took getting to the end of Lucas and Maya's relationship and the behavior continuing for participants to speak out with more confidence and recognize this as a potentially distressing and threatening situation. Until we reached this part of the discussion, participants went to great lengths to understand Lucas, his motivations, and give him the benefit of the doubt. It was during the breakup phase when participants were more forthright about

Lucas' actions being problematic, and a few participants, like Gianna, wanted to make clear that this is what they thought in the beginning as well.

When participants considered situations in which Maya rejected a date from Lucas from the very beginning and no official relationship had ever been established, they relied heavily on the fact that Maya's rejection must mean that she had real concerns about dating him—concerns that the participants likely adopted themselves when putting themselves in Maya's shoes. Although each story during the breakup or no date accepted phase claimed that Maya was flattered by Lucas' behavior (which would suggest at least some positive reaction to his behavior), participants like Alex were not swayed to think this way and instead tended to believe that this is no longer a “crush” or “love” on Lucas' end, but rather border lining into obsession:

Obviously they broke up for a reason, and from my assumption, I would assume it was from Maya breaking up 'cause obviously if Lucas still wants to date, obviously then he's not the reason...So I think it's starting to borderline to an obsession which isn't healthy for both parties. (*Alex, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 18*)

Like Alex, Jade (FG-Persistent Pursuit, age 35) also questioned whether Lucas really liked Maya, even though that's what the story may have suggested: “Do we know that he really likes her or he just wants to not lose control?” Jade's comment suggests that for individuals who engage in any of the unhealthy tactics that were explored in this study (e.g., persistent pursuit of a love interest, isolation, possessive/controlling behavior, extreme jealousy), the desire to maintain a sense of control, which can often be lost following a breakup, can be confounded with love, attraction, or liking another

person. This conflation is also illustrated by Erika's response, who reflects on a real-life example where she had personally seen these dynamics:

I knew a girl that was kind of like Lucas. And I think she experienced this where she would go back to locations where her and her ex-boyfriend would hang out because she wasn't over it. And then she would try to relive the experience by going there. So I think maybe it's a way of coping, but then again, it's kinda like he's still having those stalker tendencies. (*Erika, FG6-Surveillance, age 20*)

Both Jade and Erika's comments suggest that the tactics in question, including stalking behaviors like surveillance and persistent pursuit, can be rooted in the desire to establish connection with a potential or former love interest (Sinclair, 2012; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2003; 2007).

Some participants, such as Alex (age 18) and "L" (age 26), both from FG2-Persistent Pursuit, believed that Lucas was continuing to pursue Maya following their breakup due to Maya's positive reinforcement of his pursuit behaviors. Specifically, both participants believed that Maya set a precedent in her former relationship with Lucas because she already agreed to date him in the past, even though she also had concerns about their compatibility then as well. Alex and "L" suggested that Lucas must have gotten the message that his persistence will eventually get Maya to say "yes" to him again. Indeed, according to "L", there's "history of this working." Thus, both participants believed that Lucas was responding this way (i.e., continuing to pursue Maya) because it's worked for him in his past relationship with her. Lizzie (age 20), another participant in Alex and "L's" group, adds that Lucas has already successfully worn Maya down in the past and has gotten her to agree to date him. For these participants, then, Lucas was operating on the belief that if his persistence has

worked for him in the past and worn Maya down, it'll eventually work to his benefit again. These participants' arguments are supported by research finding that pursuit behaviors may be consistent across the relationship cycle. Specifically, research suggests that approach behaviors (e.g., asking the target for a date), surveillance (e.g., showing up where the target is expected to be), and mild aggression (e.g., making threats) during courtship are positively associated with similar behaviors occurring once a relationship has ended (Williams & Frieze, 2005).

Another key argument for why Lucas' behavior was problematic was that couples in a dating relationship have certain rights to each other, which Lucas no longer had over Maya now that they were broken up. For instance, Jesper notes:

That seems immediately off...because if you're not in a relationship together, you have no say! [*Laughter*]...relationships I believe are about compromise and if you are working in a relationship together, then yes, you compromise on things. But if I am just your friend, you have no say on who I eat lunch with. (*Jesper, FG4- Isolation, age 35*)

Other participants similarly emphasized that the relationship context was important to consider—what would be acceptable when Lucas and Maya were in an established relationship would no longer be appropriate if they were broken up. According to Tessa, Lucas continuing to want to spend time with Maya alone during lunch is not problematic by itself. Rather, what's odd is if Lucas is responding this way if he and Maya are no longer in a relationship, in which case he has no reason to continue acting this way:

His preference to eat alone with her looks confusing. When they broke up and are just friends. Maybe he can tell her in advance, or text her. For example, "I want to reinstate our relationship today. That's why I ask you to go alone." Or

something like that. But if he doesn't want to do that, it's very strange.  
[*Laughter*] (*Tessa, FG4-Isolation, age 28*)

Tessa believes that Lucas isolating Maya from her friend if they are in a relationship is “not as bad” compared to if they are broken up. In fact, she believes that if Lucas wants to continue this behavior, it makes sense for him to ask Maya to reconsider their relationship.

Other negative reactions during this breakup phase were also common, with participants perceiving Lucas' behavior as controlling, inappropriate, and obsessive, and not an indication that he still liked Maya. Chloe (age 51), also in Jesper and Tessa's group, agreed with Jesper above, calling the breakup scenario “exhausting and unnecessary and much more alarming.”

Interestingly, a few participants focused on Lucas by explaining why his continuing to engage in the same tactics as before—including surveilling, isolating, or being possessive/controlling towards Maya, is particularly negative for him:

This is just obsessive, unhealthy behavior, honestly, at this rate, mostly for him, just because I've seen my friend do this too when she breaks up with someone. And it just doesn't let her focus on anything else. So looking at it from that perspective is also kind of interesting because something about needing that control back, and wanting to still feel like you're in control of the situation, even though you've been broken up with—it's an unhealthy way of coping with the outcome that you didn't want. And he's probably still checking it because he just wants to maintain some kind of control or – or inflated sense of being on top of the situation, even if he's not. (*Jennifer, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Jennifer's reference to how her friend is like Lucas in their social media surveilling of ex-partners post- breakup suggests just how common this type of reaction is. Indeed, a meta-analysis of 175 studies finds that stalking behaviors commonly occur within

the context of some sort of romantic relationship or between two individuals acquainted with each other (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Individual studies differentiate between whether unwanted pursuit is occurring in person or online, and between severity levels. For instance, Dardis and Gidycz (2017) found that 81% of their sample of 1,167 participants reported engaging in some form of unwanted pursuit behaviors (UPBs) after a romantic relationship had ended, with minor UPBs being more common than severe UPBs (regardless of whether they were enacted in person or online). The common occurrence of monitoring an ex-partner online is further supported when Jennifer shares how she herself responded like Lucas following a breakup, consistently checking up on her ex-partner's social media as well:

I actually did kinda do this in my unhealthy relationship when we were breaking up a hundred times, mainly because there was other girls involved. And so I was trying to see if they were interacting with him because some part of me wanted to be angry about it. Some part of me wanted to feel hurt. Some part of me wanted to have that kind of stimulation of being really "Ahh" about something, just feeling those really strong emotions. Something about that was almost addicting to me at the time, and I can't really tell you why... almost like I wanted to be sad or something. (*Jennifer, FGI-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Jennifer's experience of being in Lucas' shoes reveals an interesting insight: individuals who do not have the full story (in her case, whether her ex-partner was involved with other girls) often feel a lack of control. Monitoring someone's social media in this way, then, is an attempt to regain that control by gaining information.

## **Moving Beyond Insecurity, Towards Sexism and Victim Blaming**

During the breakup phase, participants were more likely to go beyond insecurity/lack of trust as an explanation for Lucas' behavior as had primarily been the case during the committed relationship phase. According to Page, the issue lies much deeper with Lucas:

I think that if the person is still trying to dictate what their ex significant other wears, even after they've broken up, it shows that there's probably a deeper problem than just insecurity in general with this person. I think that it shows that they have a chronic power dynamic issue [*laughter*] and problems letting go because they still clearly think they get to control this person that has presumably already broken up with them, whether or not that's how it worked out. And also, I would wonder, I think it brings up issues. Why does he think that it's her problem that men are looking at her? Why isn't he telling the guys to stop looking at her if that's his issue? Instead of just telling the guys to quit looking at her, like creeps, if that's what he's concerned about, he's more worried about her not wearing something to entice them, which in my opinion is just another of the many red flags he's throwing up [*laughter*] at this point. 'Cause I think it's really victim-blamey and sexist and he just comes out sounding even more like a misogynist. (*Page, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 28*)

Page believes that Lucas is a “sexist misogynist” who is blaming Maya for enticing other men. While participants like Alex, “L”, and Lizzie above took Lucas' perspective and suggested that Maya's response may be encouraging his persistent pursuit behaviors, Page shifted the focus away from Maya completely, and instead emphasized how Lucas should do better and confront other men who may be harassing Maya. I asked Page to elaborate, assuming that she would respond more favorably towards Lucas and perceive his behavior as romantic—or at least as more acceptable if he did confront the other men who were looking at Maya rather than telling her to change her dress:



I don't know that it's necessarily more romantic that way. I bring it up just because I think it's a double standard that Maya has to deal with it. It's her fault that this is happening to her, rather than the men using their eyes to look at her aren't to blame for this for whatever reason. I think if that were the case, the only time I can see it not being annoying, as long as he's not getting into fist fights or something, I guess ... I would still sit there and say, "Oh, you still don't think other men can look at me. I don't understand why you think you can control me like this." That's...still the case, but the only time I can think of it being not gross [*laughter*] is if the men were being inappropriate and trying to take advantage of her for some reason. But again, they're not taking advantage of her because of what she's wearing...At any point in this story, I don't think what she's wearing is the issue. It's what's happening around her and how people are behaving and reacting.

Overall, Page perceives Lucas' actions and the overall scenario quite negatively, even when she is considering other situations where it may be more understandable for Lucas to insert himself in this situation and (in his eyes) come to Maya's defense. Similar to Page, Mei believes that Lucas' continued commenting on Maya's clothing is not rooted in any actual liking and genuine concern for her, but rather in him being sexist. She explains this in terms of the social media commentary she's observed about women's clothing:

I also see comments online, random tweets of men being like, look at what she was wearing, and the guy doesn't necessarily know the girl at all. So I just think it's not necessarily that he likes her. It could be. I mean, I don't know Lucas, but I think it could also be a place of sexism. (*Mei, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 21*)

Indeed, rape myths, including those that associate women's sexual assault victimization to their clothing choices, have been studied extensively by researchers (Burt, 1980; Payne et al., 1999). Mei is also aware of these rape myths that link women's clothing choices to violence against them, as indicated in her response below:

Not to make this extreme, but I feel like in real life too, there are cases of maybe sexual assault, and then it's like, "Oh, well, it's her fault for wearing the revealing thing." I feel like Lucas is kind of doing that, but [laughs] he would probably be one of those dudes who says it's the girl's fault in that case, which is really dangerous to me. So...[laughs] I guess I would do the same thing as Erika, send all those links. Be like, "No, no, let me educate ya."

Mei recognizes that Lucas' commentary towards Maya's clothing is a form of victim blaming, and she suggests that this can set a negative precedent in the future—Lucas could blame Maya if she is assaulted by other men. If Mei was in Maya's position, her approach would be to educate Lucas by sending him informational links, as would her groupmate, Erika (age 20). Consistent with Mei and Page's evaluation of Lucas being sexist and endorsing myths that allow him to excuse his behaviors towards Maya, research finds that men are more likely to believe in these types of myths over women. For instance, research by Sinclair (2012) examining unwanted pursuit found that male participants were more likely to accept myths about stalking than were female participants. This study also found that endorsement of such myths was related to more negative attitudes (e.g., victim blaming) towards those who reject pursuit.

Indeed, while generally participants implicated Lucas for any issues they saw during the breakup phase, a small minority did outright blame Maya, making claims such as she should've known better than to be with Lucas:

**CC:** What you create, you allow. [laughs] It's plain and simple. If you don't want the behavior? Why she broke up with him? There is a reason... now he might be the best thing she's got even though she has no one. People break up and go back out. But what you create, you allow. Definitely.

**SK:** So, Cajunchic... you're saying that Maya allowed this in the beginning, and that's why it continued?

**CC:** Yeah. I mean, there's a reason they broke up. She was aware of how he was in the beginning. Stripes on the zebra don't change. She knows his ways. Again, it might not be a bad reason they broke up, but if he's still treating her the same way, one of them have not learned why they broke up. I'm glad Maya broke up. [*laughs*] (*Cajunchic, FG-9-Isolation, age 58*)

While Cajunchic is glad that Lucas and Maya broke up, she does put the responsibility of Lucas' actions throughout the course of their relationship, and now following their breakup, on Maya. Cajunchic focuses heavily on how Maya must have been aware of Lucas' character from the beginning because "stripes on the zebra don't change." According to Cajunchic, men—the "zebras"—cannot change, they are stuck in their ways. As a result, women must ensure they have not created a situation that would allow for this type of (mis)treatment by men.

Interestingly, while Cajunchic claims that Maya should have known better than to think she could change Lucas, other participants, like Erika believed that women in general know better than to be flattered by men like Lucas:

...In his eyes, he's doing what he thinks is right. He really does. But I think women know better than to know that this isn't right... I would react like educate him. I would send him some links...I'll tell him—just educate him like, "I know that you think you care about me or, care about this situation, but it's never the women's fault. It's the guys' predator behavior. It's them looking. We're not inviting their attention." I just, try to educate. But if that doesn't work... then I wouldn't be in that setting then. I shouldn't be in that setting. This is not my group that we would go together because this is very traditional views, of telling me what to wear. So bye, Lucas. (*Erika, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 20*)

Erika's response reflects a conflict/contradiction, where she frames the fact that women "know better" as a comment that appears seemingly positive and in favor of

women, particularly given her tone in this response. However, under the surface it suggests that women should “know better” than to find themselves in the situation that Maya is in, as Cajunchic had suggested. In other words, Erika’s comment can be seen as more benign on the surface and more indirect in tone compared to Cajunchic’s, but still holding women responsible for men’s abuse and inappropriate behaviors towards them. For Cajunchic, the responsibility lies with Maya and women like her to not find themselves in unhealthy relationships to begin with, while for Erika, the responsibility may lie with women to educate men like Lucas, who in their eyes really do think they are “right.”

### **Romanticizing Ex- Partners and Ex-Relationships (Theme 1; Code 2)**

Even during the breakup phase, participants’ romanticization of Lucas and his interactions with Maya was apparent in how they continued to give him the benefit of the doubt (even as he kept up with pursuing Maya through the same problematic tactics). This occurred when participants continued to cite “sincere like/attraction” as an explanation for why Lucas would still be pursuing Maya, despite her rejecting him. Additionally, participants endorsed more general, romanticized ideals (e.g., *Love Finds a Way*; Sprecher & Metts, 1989) in how they made sense of Lucas and Maya’s interactions. The conversation around Lucas and Maya’s breakup also facilitated participants sharing about their own breakup experiences. However, their accounts of past relationships, and the conversation in general, revealed conflicts/contradictions which centered on what it means to be involved with partners with both positive and negative qualities. A common response noted by participants in these discussions was

that it was difficult to focus on a partner's potentially toxic traits when there were also "good parts" to your relationship with them. Anne explains how she's faced this internal dilemma herself in a past relationship:

I have experience where my ex wasn't as good, and I would complain to my friends, and my friends would tell me, "Oh, you should dump him, he's not good for you etcetera, etcetera." But for me, I felt, oh my God, maybe I didn't say enough good parts, there are good parts too, and I was like they don't really know my relationship, maybe I'm just talking too much about the bad parts.

And... so [*sighs*] sometimes we keep thinking we're the ones at fault. So I was thinking if I was Maya's friend, I would be probably telling her about how horrible or creepy Lucas is. But if I was Maya herself, I might be, oh well, 'cause I'm sure they've had a relationship, there's still some lingering positive thoughts. So she might think, oh, maybe I just presented him in too bad of a light. (*Anne, FG6-Surveillance, age 19*)

Anne strongly identifies with the position Maya may be in, and she engages in classic, internalized victim blaming where in the past, she has faulted herself for retelling only the "bad parts" to her friends to protect her ex-partner and her relationship with him. Lena, another participant in Anne's group, shares how this resonated with her:

Sometimes there are lingering positive memories that you're not really sure how to weigh it in terms of what those otherwise really toxic traits could have been. So at the end, I don't know if she could weigh that against Lucas, but with all of this, it still seems like Lucas is kind of toxic in his obsessive tendencies. (*Lena, FG6-Surveillance, age 22*)

Anne and Lena take Maya's perspective in explaining how women may have difficulty reconciling their partners' toxic traits with the positive memories they hold of them. Indeed, both of their responses explain the conflict in having feelings for someone you may have had an unhealthy relationship with. Wood (2001) incorporates various narratives around romance and gender that provide insight into

conflicts experienced by heterosexual women who had experienced IPV in their former relationships. Specifically, participants explained how they defended and protected their partners from close others by avoiding sharing details about the abusive nature of the relationship. Wood (2001) also identified beliefs such as “it’s not as bad as” and the “good outweighs bad” in their participants’ accounts. Similarly, participants across the focus groups reflected on similar narratives when recounting their own story, sharing that they often felt conflicted with when considering both the good and bad in a current or former partner and relationship itself.

Other participants who observed the breakup phase from Lucas’ perspective did not identify these types of conflicts/contradictions for him. Instead, these participants believed that Lucas’ persistence towards Maya through the specific tactics he engaged in (e.g., jealousy, possessiveness/control) indicated that he still genuinely liked her and found her attractive, even during the breakup phase. For instance, Emma states:

I guess at this point, since he keeps telling her, you know, “This is too revealing,” it may look like he may still have feelings for Maya, from the looks of it. It’s like, “No, I don’t want you to catch the attention of other. I just want you to catch attention— my own attention.” So I guess, from his perspective, it does look like he still likes her. He just wants to keep, I guess, her attention to himself. I guess, in his own little way, does look like he’s... still has feeling for her in some way. And how I said it, just more insecurities from his point...he just worry that other people are gonna get her again  
(*Emma, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 20*)

Emma believes that Lucas’ behavior is being driven by his insecurities about losing Maya to other men, which is rooted in him having genuine feelings about her. Emma

does not necessarily situate Lucas' insecurities or his feelings for Maya (and his expression of those feelings), within the larger context of an unhealthy dynamic between both of them. She claims that Lucas does still like Maya and wants to save their former relationship, otherwise he wouldn't be pursuing her in this way. Like Emma, Emmy does not frame Lucas' behavior as outright problematic when viewing the scenario from his perspective. However, her response differs from Emma's as Emmy also considers Maya's perspective to explain why the same behavior may be perceived differently and more problematic:

I think he maybe genuinely likes her and doesn't want to lose her or something 'cause I don't think anyone would be that persistent, even if you've broken up. If they actually like you and they see you guys had a good thing going they'd try and save it, obviously... But for Maya, it depends. Maybe she's like, "Yeah, I said 'no' and now I'm getting the reason why I said 'no' in the first place. It's 'cause you're just being—I was just trying to get rid of you. I said 'yes' so that you can stop asking." So she didn't really see the relationship going anywhere. (*Emmy, FG8- Persistent Pursuit, age 25*)

When asked whether any of them would find Lucas' pursuit towards Maya romantic if it were continuing after they had broken up, one participant in particular, "L," tried to come up with the most romantic scenario in which Lucas' behavior would be acceptable in the name of love. While "L" does not outright claim that she shares this perspective, her continued role in her focus group of playing "devil's advocate" and pushing back against Lucas and Maya's relationship being problematic, her acknowledgment of why women would be flattered by this behavior, and her overall understanding and non-critical tone in these conversations suggests that "L" may, in fact, romanticize this type of scenario. For instance:

Maybe to some general audiences, this might be seen as the endless pursuit of

love, no matter what obstacles [*laughter*] there is. I guess the ideal of everlasting love sort of fuels that if you put this in this context of the story. Of course, it's a little different in a real-life situation, but I think you could maybe see that as a romantic situation. (*L, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 26*)

“L” furthers this conversation, suggesting to the other participants in her group that it is possible that there's an external reason why Lucas and Maya broke up that would explain why they are no longer together, rather than it being Lucas' persistent pursuit of Maya that was the dealbreaker:

The slight detail that I didn't get is what bothers me is why did they break up? I think the assumption that they're making here is it's because the relationship between those two didn't work out, but there could have been any external factors. Like maybe societal issues. Maybe their parents didn't approve of their relationship. But if I'm going off of the assumption that maybe it was their relationship, and there wasn't any external factors affecting their relationship, and it was just truly they ended up not being compatible or respecting each other, then I would say— I mean, sure he can still like her, to a certain extent, but that liking doesn't really mean that he's respecting her autonomy to choose to get out of the relationship.

It is noteworthy that “L” addresses both possibilities—that an external factor can be at play in keeping Lucas and Maya apart, or there may have been some internal issues within their relationship that played a role in their separation. When the rest of “L's” group was asked to contemplate whether an external reason for the breakup would change their responses in any way, other participants like Nina (age 20) argued that any reason outside of Lucas and Maya's relationship would not change the fact that Lucas' persistence in pursuing a relationship with Maya was toxic, especially if he was aware that Maya has difficulty establishing boundaries.<sup>7</sup> Another participant,

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<sup>7</sup> For FG2-Persistent Pursuit, establishing healthy boundaries in relationships was a major point of discussion. Several members of this group believed that Maya's boundaries were not being respected by Lucas, or that she had difficulty setting those boundaries in the first place.



Lizzie (age 20), agreed with Nina, and believed that it was likely Lucas and Maya would not be able to overcome any external obstacle, such as familial disapproval or physical distance if either one was to move away. “L” counters this by proposing what is perhaps, in her opinion, the most romantic scenario:

I’m trying to think of the most romantic case that isn’t the fault of [*laughter*] either of the two parties. And I’m thinking of something like Romeo and Juliet...They’re from the rival families. And I guess in that sense, the story could change, at least our perspective of the story because instead of blaming the guy in that case and his endless pursuit of the girl, the story changes to maybe this is more of a societal issue. Maybe the blame goes to somewhere else besides the man. I think that’s why I was thinking of the reason for the break-up could matter because instead of thinking it’s the guy’s fault, you could say, “Hey, maybe the society’s wrong for trying to break apart these two lovers.” ...but, of course, this is the most romantic case.

Thus, “L” goes to great lengths to find ways not to fault Lucas and his persistent behavior. She notes it is possible that Lucas still sincerely likes Maya, even if their relationship lacked respect or even if they were not compatible with each other. Moreover, her romanticizing of the relationship suggests some minimization of Lucas’ continued persistence towards Maya despite their breakup. According to “L”, the situation is “not as bad” if society is to blame for their separation. Her responses also reflect idealized beliefs about romance (e.g., love conquers all, idealization of Lucas by justifying his behavior that others in the group find problematic; Sprecher & Metts, 1989).

As noted, “L” was one of the participants who stood out across all focus groups due to her idealized romantic beliefs. Another participant who was similar in her romanticization of Lucas and his relationship with Maya was Tessa (FG4-Isolation, age 28), who often justified Lucas’ behaviors even when they were broken

up. For instance, when asked why Lucas would continue to want to spend time alone with Maya without her friends despite their breakup, Tessa attributed this behavior to his shyness and his discomfort in talking in front of others. Moreover, she believed Lucas was behaving this way because he's sincerely liked Maya for some time. This is consistent with research finding that men report experiencing positive responses to their unwanted pursuit behaviors following a breakup. Specifically, Dardis and Gidycz (2017) found that men's persistence—even when severe (e.g., threats of harm in person and online)—resulted in the reestablishment of former relationships. Participants across focus groups provided their own form of positive reinforcement for Lucas as he continued his pursuit towards Maya following their breakup by romanticizing his actions.

**Safety Concerns/Needing Other Protections (Theme 2, Code 4) and Conflicts/Contradictions (Theme 3)**

Perhaps one of the most prominent ways in which the breakup and no date accepted phase were discussed was in relation to safety concerns and conflicts/contradictions. As noted, participants generally responded positively to these changes in the vignette. They indicated that they would understand why Maya would reject Lucas to begin with, and they believed that such a response was actually more realistic than Maya being flattered and accepting a date. However, participants also expressed major concerns about Maya's safety, noting how men lash out at women who reject them. Interestingly, participants who expressed safety concerns indicated

that they would not necessarily be swayed away from men like Lucas, were they in Maya's position. Jennie expresses this contradiction:

I don't wanna give an opinion about someone before getting to know them and meeting them. I've just been brought with this initial situation though that I would be cautious, but I wouldn't wanna hold on not having at least a first date to see how this person really is first before I reject or make a judgment on him. Besides that, I would definitely let close friends or my support system know what's going on with Lucas just for my safety. If he were to have bad repercussions and stalked me in person, or if there were just any negative things that would come about a rejection, they could be aware if they see him, or if they would see any of his behaviors afterwards. Just having people look out for me, I'd like for that to happen, and just communicate with him that I'm still uncomfortable with this behavior and at least let him know that. (*Jennie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, No date accepted, age 25*)

Jennie's approach would be to at least give someone like Lucas one chance to decide for herself what she thinks about him, and she would offer this chance regardless of any safety concerns she may have. Rosie, one of Jennie's groupmates, also described how rejecting a date from a man elevates certain risks for women, and the need for women to take safety precautions due to potential retaliation, such as blocking a man on social media or changing their contact information:

I think in the case, where she turns him down, I 100 percent would understand where she's coming from especially because it's hard to trust people, including men. Mainly men for me. I have bad past experiences. Because he knows everything and he obsessively had been checking social media, I also would be worried about the repercussions of that. Maybe he could show up somewhere that you go and corner you. If I'm being completely honest, I think one of the reasons I would have accepted the date is because of what Sophia said. I would have been afraid of pissing him off. Just appeasing a guy in that moment, that's where my mind goes in the first place because I don't wanna get killed. Those kind of things do happen. They're not an everyday thing, but they do happen. I would be worried about him finding me, or maybe retaliating in a really bad way. Maybe if things looked like they were gonna go like that, you'd have to change some information. You'd have to, I don't know, change a number, block him on social media. Do something to keep yourself safe. That's where my

mind's going in this case. (*Rosie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, No date accepted, age 26*)

For Rosie, appeasing men and safety concerns are intertwined. Rather than being a reason to create distance, the fear of “pissing him off” and getting killed instead explains why Rosie would maintain proximity to a man in this situation, at the same time engaging in safety planning just in case the situation was to become more serious. When probed further, Rosie's response suggests that this situation could also be romantic:

**SK:** Is it more about that fear? Or is it that fear and also, “Oh, I'm interested. I'm curious. I'm attracted,” as well?

**Rosie:** I would say it's both. It's, “This is flattering,” and you don't wanna potentially miss out on something that could be good for you. That could end up being the one. And I try to never turn my back on an opportunity that could turn out to be good. But also at the same time, I would be worried that it could go the other way, and I wouldn't wanna make him mad. In the case where you go out with him not to make him mad, maybe you could have been wrong, and he's a really great guy. But I'd go into it with that mindset over the “Oh, this is flattering.” That whole flattering thing is more like a back-thought. Like it could potentially go well, but at the same time, I'm really scared and paranoid first. [*Laughter*]

Rosie invokes the belief in a “one and only” soulmate here (Sprecher & Metts, 1989), and while she suggests that the fear and paranoia of the situation would be stronger than being flattered, it is not strong enough to prevent her from at least giving the man in question a chance due to the possibility of “what if.” Rosie's romanticization of the situation if she were in Maya's place, in combination with her concerns for safety and appeasing Lucas, lead to a conflict and contradiction, where she would go on a date with a man just in case he's “the one”, while also having in the back of her mind that this man can potentially be dangerous—even going as far as thinking he

can kill her. Rosie also agrees with Jennie above, sharing how she would want advice from close others “just to make sure I’m doing the right thing and not going entirely into it with girl brain and not seeing the potential dangers of the situation”. Rosie ties in gender stereotypes which position women as lacking logic and being naïve to the risks such a situation would hold. Along with illustrating conflicts/contradictions, Rosie’s response also showcases how romanticization of potentially unsafe interactions can be intertwined with an internalization of gender stereotypes. This association with romantic beliefs and attitudes about gender and the heterosexual script has also been found across several studies (e.g., Hartwell et al., 2015; Seabrook et al., 2016).

Rosie’s concerns about potentially being murdered are not unfounded and were similarly expressed by Josie, who describes a real-life example of a murder-suicide involving her friend that occurred after her friend rejected a man. Josie starts off agreeing that it is good that Maya rejects Lucas’ date initially but reflects that this might not be enough to keep Lucas away. She then goes on to explain her personal experience with this situation, suggesting that this is a common occurrence:

**Josie:** I think it’s good for Maya. But it’s also—maybe you need to watch out for Lucas for a while because there are some men where, if you do turn them down, if you do say no, they can become more violent. And I’ve seen this with one of my close friends. It ended up bein’ a murder-suicide. Yeah, she rejected him, and he went crazy, and none of us noticed the signs. And he ended up bein’ very possessive to her. So it’s good that she said no. She stood her ground. But it’s also something that, maybe she does need to stay at a friend’s house or hide for a few days. And it’s kinda sad sayin’ this because— it makes you feel bad for sayin’ no.

**SK:** Can you say a little bit more about why a person would feel bad saying no in this situation?

**Josie:** Just because, personally, you're scared of what the situation's gonna be if he got mad and wanted to fight another man just for talking to you. He could still have that idealization in the mind where it's like, "Okay, we're gonna be together no matter what." "You told me no, but I'm still gonna have you." You're very scared, and you kinda feel bad sayin' no, but you know that's what you want. But it's also that fear in the mind where it's like, "Okay, does he know where I live?" "Does he know who I'm talking to?" (*Josie, FG 5-Jealousy, No date accepted, age 23*)

Like Rosie, Josie argues the need for safety planning when rejecting a man. Her response also reflects how jealousy can set a negative precedent for the relationship, leading to possessiveness, violence and eventually murder. Interestingly, Josie invokes a romantic belief to explain why someone in Lucas' position would behave in an aggressive, jealous, and possessive way. Being together no matter the obstacles—even if that obstacle is a direct "no" from the person being pursued, is similar to the *Love Finds a Way* romantic belief identified by Sprecher and Metts (1989). While Josie uses this belief to make sense of the perpetrator's behavior, it has also been used by victims of relationship violence who believed that their patience, sacrifice, and love for a partner would make the abuse stop—in other words, that their love would conquer the abuse (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013).

These safety concerns were invoked by other participants during the breakup phase as well. For instance, Miranda shares how she now perceived a new level of danger for Maya:

Something feels odd about the story even to be hanging out regularly one-on-one after a break-up... I would think that she wanted to break up, and he didn't and he's hanging on. And there's something a little dangerous and stalkery about—it feels like a new level of danger of him kind of making demands about them being alone. (*Miranda, FG9-Isolation, Breakup, age 47*)

Eliza's response provides additional context about why the same reaction, in her case Lucas' jealousy-related aggression towards a male rival, may be more alarming during the breakup phase compared to the courtship phase:

It's almost more dangerous than when they were just casually flirting because great, you made a boundary, and now they're crossing it. Where before, it was inappropriate, but it wasn't technically crossing a boundary she had explicitly made. It should be an assumed boundary that you don't do that. If for some reason he had in his mind that that was an okay behavior, then not whatever... that happened, it was bad, but now you're actually crossing a boundary of we're not together, and that's worse. (*Eliza, FG12-Jealousy, Breakup, age 19*)

According to Eliza, Lucas crosses over Maya's boundaries in the breakup phase when she's decided to no longer be in a relationship with him. This boundary did not exist in the earlier phases because Maya was either casually flirting with Lucas during the courtship phase or was in an established, committed relationship with him, suggesting at least some level of interest in Lucas. For Eliza, Maya's boundaries with Lucas had changed and been made more explicit following their breakup, and the fact that Lucas was crossing over that boundary now is what elevated any safety concerns she may have and why she perceived the situation as more dangerous.

### ***Considering Severity Levels, Reporting, & Other Safety Planning Options***

Amy (FG 12-Jealousy, Breakup, age 22) also shared how Lucas' behavior was worsening and how it was dangerous for Maya that he was continuing to express extreme jealousy despite being broken up. She shares that "just because she ended the relationship doesn't mean she ended his behavior, and it's scary to think that she has to watch her actions, even when she's not in the relationship anymore." These safety concerns led several participants to suggest that Maya should seek out official legal

and support services to report Lucas. For instance, Lena stated that Lucas was becoming more obsessive now that he and Maya were broken up, and him surveilling her in the way he did before, by showing up to her classes and other places she frequented, was “creepier” given that they were no longer a couple. Lena suggested making an official report in response to these safety concerns:

I think Lucas is exhibiting more of his obsessive tendencies, more than before, ‘cause now they’re not even in a relationship anymore. But he continues to try and keep her within the vicinity of his perception. It almost sounds like he needs to be reported or something for his behavior. ‘Cause that is really creepy. (*Lena, FG6-Surveillance, Breakup, age 22*)

The discussion around reporting Lucas or seeking help from others generated a few different perspectives about when it was necessary to do so and why in FG 7-Cybersurveillance. Jennie put herself in Maya’s shoes and reflected on how she’d feel if Lucas were consistently checking her social media accounts following their breakup. Jennie’s level of concern regarding this and her next steps was dependent upon how much time had passed since their breakup:

**Jennie:** It would depend how long after the relationship he’s still checking up. I’d give it some time before I would take an action. Maybe get help to have him understand, “I don’t want a relationship anymore, and I don’t want you to keep checking up on me since we’re over.” I hope that he fizzles out eventually and stops checking up on me. If not, I know I would have to take some sort of action ‘cause it’s very uncomfortable behavior if he continues.

**SK:** Jennie, just to make sure I have that right. You’re saying that if it was happening for a long time after you’d broken up, you would be more concerned?

**Jennie:** Yeah...After a break-up, I usually try to take time to myself and I don’t post on social media as often anyways. I would need time to heal from a break-up and get him out of my mind. After that time, if I noticed he’s still checking up on me, I’d take some action. I usually don’t post anyways, so



it'd be concerning after if he'd still be checking up. (*Jennie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, Breakup, age 25*)

For Jennie, the important question to consider was whether Lucas was keeping up with his pattern of checking her social media accounts, and how long after their breakup this pattern had continued. Because Jennie already takes time away from social media following breakups, she'd be especially concerned if she were to return to social media later and find Lucas still checking up on her. For Jennie, then, Lucas checking her social media immediately following a breakup is not as concerning as Lucas checking after a long time had passed.

Rosie, also in Jennie's group, mostly agreed with her. However, for Rosie another important consideration when determining her level of discomfort with Lucas' continued social media checking was how the relationship ended:

If it ended, and you guys agree that you're gonna be friends, I wouldn't mind if he's on my social media. If it ended in a bad way, and it's like, "I don't want anything to do with you," and you're still looking at every little thing I'm doing and every little update, that's concerning behavior. It seems very obsessive, and I would start fearing for my safety a little bit. You've gotta be able to let go, especially if I make it clear I don't want you in my life anymore. Yeah. It's a little concerning. I would block him, if possible, from everything, and then go from there. Hopefully, he'll get the message. (*Rosie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, Breakup, age 26*)

Rosie's response describes where she would draw the line between acceptable vs. obsessive behavior. If there's an understanding following a breakup that the two former partners will remain friends, then there's no issue with following and checking up on each other on social media. If the relationship ended badly, then Rosie would perceive Lucas' behavior as obsessive to the point where she'd need to block him.

Like Rosie, Izzy believed that whether ex-partners decided to remain friends following the breakup played an important role in assessing this type of situation. While Izzy's first instinct when discussing the breakup between Lucas and Maya was that it is "uncomfortable" and "annoying" for someone to continue following you around if you've broken up, she also recognized that it is important to consider other contexts. She drew from personal experience to illustrate this point:

I've also been in a situation where I was dating someone, and we broke up, but we had the same friend group. And so... I kept seeing him, if my friends had something, an event at my house, he would come. But...we had the same friend group, he wasn't necessarily following me, but he was still showing up in my life. But we had talked about it and we still felt that we could be friends after the relationship. So it didn't make me uncomfortable seeing him in some of my classes. So if they had talked about it and it was something they were comfortable with then it's fine, but it doesn't seem like that's the case here, so, in that case it's creepy and he should be reported [*laughs*]. (*Izzy, FG6-Surveillance, Breakup, age 20*)

Izzy was another participant across the study who effectively played "devil's advocate," bringing up examples where the same situation could be acceptable in one context, and problematic in another. In the above excerpt, Izzy fell back on her personal experiences, suggesting that these are common dynamics that individuals navigate in real life. She explained that communication between ex-partners about how boundaries will be respected, and their comfort level with having a presence in each other's life, is critical. She did not believe that Lucas and Maya had this conversation, and therefore they did not have a shared understanding of where they stood in each other's life. As a result, Izzy could understand why Lucas would be seen as a stalker and why he'd need to be reported. However, when putting herself in Maya's shoes, Izzy believed that she would not have these concerns herself (though

she can understand why her friends who observed the relationship from the outside might have concerns, and question whether she would be able to get over the relationship).

Izzy and Rosie's responses to Lucas and Maya's breakup indicate that several factors are at play when unpacking this phase of a relationship. Specifically, it matters how a relationship ended (on good or bad terms), it matters whether the ex-partners have had conversations about boundaries and whether both agree to still see each other in some capacity (e.g., as friends), and it matters whether both share the same friend group. Sophia, one of Rosie's groupmates, also agreed with Rosie and Izzy's stance on maintaining a friendly connection with a former partner, and shared her personal experience of checking an ex-partner's social media accounts:

I've definitely been through break-ups where I still occasionally check social media just to see what they're up to, but nothing crazy. I think that if you ended off on good terms, like you're still friends, then checking their social media every once in a while is normal as they were probably a big part of your life. (*Sophia, FG7-Surveillance, Breakup, age 20*)

However, Sophia found Lucas' checking obsessive, and she indicated that if she were Maya and the situation felt more serious to her, she would go beyond blocking him to perhaps filing a restraining order. Rosie added onto Sophia's comment, agreeing that it is natural to check up on your ex-partner following a breakup, but for her, the line was drawn between simply looking vs. taking some action on social media, such as messaging or commenting on a post:

You do kinda wanna see what your ex is up to. If they found somebody else? But you don't do anything based on that. If he's looking constantly, that's scary enough, but if he comments on it, or messages you based on what you post, that's where it gets more concerning. Like, "Oh, I see you're doing

this...now you're doing that...," and turning it into a threatening-scary-type intimidating thing. That's where the restraining order would definitely have to come in. (*Rosie, FG7-Cybersurveillance, Breakup, age 26*)

Ray also brought up the point that it is important to consider why a relationship ended when determining whether there are any safety concerns. She went further, and suggested that we need to consider how the relationship itself unfolded before the breakup, and what an ex-partner's behavioral pattern looked like during the relationship:

I'd consider why did we end the relationship. When we are in the relationship, did I read any signs? If this guy's hurt, what does he do? Is he the guy, the type to hurt people? To hurt himself? When you ask yourself such questions, that will determine what to do after the break-up. Should you report him? Would you block him? Because we all check social medias after break-up... You want to see if your ex moved on. What does his girlfriend look like? (*Ray, FG7-Cybersurveillance, Breakup, age 27*)

Safety concerns, in the way that Jennie, Rosie, Ray, and Sophia discussed them in FG7-Cybersurveillance, were not necessarily brought up to explain Lucas' behavior or Maya's response. In other words, these participants were not explaining away Lucas' online surveillance towards Maya by suggesting that he is doing so because he is concerned for his own safety. Rather, these safety concerns were brought up to describe general reactions towards the vignette. For these participants, this is a threatening and scary situation and one that requires some level of intervention—be it through reporting, blocking, filing a restraining order, or seeking out the advice and support of close others. The conversation between these participants also revealed that checking an ex-partner's social media is a common occurrence. According to Rosie—"You do kinda wanna see what your ex is up to... But you don't do anything

based on that.” Interestingly, this perspective suggests that there’s a socially prescribed way of surveilling someone’s online presence—you are supposed to follow them on social media covertly—without commenting or liking their posts.

Overall, the breakup/no date accepted phase brought about the most extreme reactions from participants, and this is when they felt the most comfortable and confident in naming Lucas’ enactment of problematic pursuit tactics as unhealthy, controlling, and obsessive. Participants felt that there was a much deeper issue with Lucas beyond what was being expressed in prior relationship phases (e.g., insecurity/lack of trust during the commitment phase). They felt that what would be acceptable pursuit behaviors in other contexts would not be following a breakup or if no official relationship had ever been established between Lucas and Maya. This is because both characters were not in a relationship, suggesting that the relationship context plays a key role in evaluating perceptions towards various pursuit behaviors that have been identified as precursors to IPV (Becker et al., 2021). While participants tended to make the least allowances for Lucas’ behavior during the breakup/no date accepted phase, romanticization still occurred, in combination with conflicts/contradictions, as several participants could relate to the difficulties in moving on after a breakup and the complications associated with holding onto positive memories of an otherwise problematic relationship and ex-partner. While gender role stereotypes did not feature as prominently during the breakup/no date accepted phases, this was an important code that shaped participants’ responses across other relationship phases. The gender role reversal discussion of the focus

group, described next, offered additional support to how participants understand and internalize stereotypical gender roles, and how these influence perceptions of unhealthy relationship dynamics and psychological/emotional abuse.

### **Gender Role Reversal**

In the gender role reversal portion of the discussion, participants were asked to consider how their responses to previous questions would change (if at all), if Lucas and Maya's roles were reversed and Maya was pursuing Lucas using the specific tactic described in each vignette. At the end of this reversed scenario, it was Lucas who became flattered and accepted a date from Maya. For instance, participants reflected on a situation where Maya was interested in Lucas and asked him out but wanted him to behave differently to avoid drawing attention from other women (possessiveness/control). In the isolation vignette, this was presented as Maya being the one who always wanted to be with Lucas alone and didn't want others around when they were spending time together.

When discussing this role reversal, several participants indicated that their responses would not change— they would similarly find the situation problematic regardless of who was enacting the tactic in question. For instance, Daisy (FG9-Isolation, age 32) argued, "I don't think it really changes anything. I don't think it is healthy for anyone, male or female, to be isolated from friends and family either before, during, or after a relationship." Similarly, Billy (FG12-Jealousy, age 22) claimed that her opinion about the toxicity of the situation would remain the same: "It's both red flags. It's not okay. It's toxic. It can lead to something else. It doesn't

matter who it is or who is doing what, it's the same thing for both." Although participants declared that their responses during this gender role reversal would remain consistent and they would still perceive the pursuit negatively if it were coming from Maya, a closer look at their responses revealed that many perceived the story differently based on the pursuer's gender.

### **Normalization of Men's Pursuit of Women (Theme 1)**

One of the most prominent ways that participants made sense of this gender role reversal was by acknowledging stereotypical gender roles (SGRs) that required women to have better emotional constraint than their male counterparts. Additionally, SGRs which position women as harmless and nonthreatening beings were also identified by participants. They understood these as ultimately normalizing any abuse women may perpetrate against male partners. This is illustrated in Churro's response below, who reflected on a situation where Maya got jealous of another woman flirting with Lucas at a party and became aggressive as a result:

I feel like women..have, better control over their emotions... Not to generalize, but I feel like they're able to communicate better. I see something like that happen I'm like, "She's psycho. [*Laughter*]. And I feel like that's kind of bad because I feel like in men, we kinda see it as almost normal that they would become aggressive. But then, it's emphasized to be really negative for women. So that's something interesting that I thought of. I feel like with everyone else that my opinion didn't change, that I still feel flipped. Lucas needs to get out because she needs to work on herself too... (*Churro, FG5-Jealousy, age 20*)

Like Churro, other members of this group expressed that they would similarly perceive the situation as problematic before and after the gender role reversal. However, their responses suggested that it is in fact worse when women engage in these behaviors, due to gender stereotypes that claim that women have better control

over their emotions and are better at communication. Josie, also from FG5-Jealousy, starts off by claiming that “violence knows no gender.” However, her response to Maya exhibiting jealousy towards another woman who was getting close to Lucas was one of outright disapproval:

I also think it’s kind of embarrassing. Like, “Girl, why you actin’ all crazy and hoodlum—” ... you have no mind acting like that for a guy. It’s only gonna drive ’em further away. That is not like you. Or if it is like you, you might need to seek some help. And I would also question who’s enabling that behavior in her.” (*Josie, FG5-Jealousy, age 23*)

Complementary gender differentiation, a component of benevolent sexism within the larger Ambivalent Sexism Theory, claims that women complement men and are purer, refined, and cultured in comparison (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Research finds that college women themselves incorporate these gendered beliefs into their own understandings of what it means to be a woman, differentiating women as embodying communal traits that position them as more sensitive, caring, and emotional compared to men (Fields et al., 2010). Dominance and competitiveness, on the other hand, are normative parts of hegemonic masculinity (Mahalik et al., 2003). Moreover, studies suggest that men’s aggression is associated with their physicality, while women’s aggression is attributed to their emotionality, including, in particular, their feelings of fear and desire for self-protection (Scarduzio et al., 2017). However, participants in the study by Scarduzio et al. (2017) also explained how men’s violence is rooted in their anger issues and lack of control of those issues.

When asked to consider a role reversal situation where Maya told Lucas to change his clothes to avoid drawing attention from other women, Paloma also argued



that this was not a realistic situation due to the different socialization that men and women receive. According to Paloma, women are raised to appease men in their relationships, to avoid conflict, and to sacrifice:

I can't see any guy hearing that from a girl and being like, "Oh, okay, I'll change." I just think they would be like, "What? [*Laughter*]. What are you talking about? If other girls wanna look at me, I'm a let other girls look at me." I don't know a guy who would change his outfit to please someone. And I think, maybe that's because a lot of the time women are really raised as people pleasers, to do what is not going to get you in trouble or what is going to make someone else happy because you feel like that's what you're supposed to do. I don't think boys are raised the same way. I think they are raised that if you wanna do that and if you were gonna be a confident man about it, that's the right thing to do. So I think they grow up being more socialized with that kind of confidence. And I think if a girl tells them that, they might be like, "That's a weird thing for you to say to me. Why would you think you can say that to me?" (*Paloma, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 19*)

Paloma, Churro, and Josie's negative evaluations of Maya's pursuit appear to rely heavily on understandings and acceptance of these traditional gender norms.

According to these participants, women who fall outside of prescribed feminine gender role expectations and are not able to remain poised within social settings are branded as "psycho," "crazy," and "hoodlum," attributing any abuse they may perpetrate to their excessive emotionality (Walker et al., 2018). However, it is more natural for men to display social dominance and compete to win over the women they desire, which can ultimately minimize any jealousy and subsequent aggression they display. While this same behavior is acceptable for men who are interested in and pursuing women, women who behave the same will only "drive 'em further away." Churro's response also suggests a contradiction here—while she feels bad for calling women "psycho" and recognizes that it is unfair to women, she thinks women know

and should do better when it comes to displaying their emotions. Churro's focus on women needing to exhibit their emotions in socially prescribed, feminine ways, her negative perception of women who cannot contain their emotions, and her belief that it is normal for men to become aggressive all work together to normalize men's aggression towards women. Comparing male aggression (normal, in line with SGRs) to female aggression (problematic, out of line with SGRs) then works to minimize any potential abuse that women may experience from men.

Participants from other groups expressed a similar sentiment as Paloma, Churro and Josie. "L" believed that it is also worse for women to persistently pursue men despite being told "no", because doing so steps outside the traditional norm expected of heterosexual women. On the other hand, such an expectation is consistent with masculine norms within the dating context because men are supposed to pursue women:

We should say it shouldn't matter...but I think if we're thinking societally how this is viewed, I think this could be actually seen as a worst case based on the societal standards because at least we're used to the ideal of the man pursuing the woman...so that could be painted in a romantic light. But because the roles are reversed, we're not used to this idea of woman being the active pursuer of her partner...I think this could easily be painted as something creepy...as something more negative versus if a guy were to do it. (*L, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 26*)

Indeed, this type of socialization around who ought to pursue and be pursued is so engrained that women report not initiating a relationship with a man despite being interested in them (Jackson, 2001). "L" argues that because female pursuit is less commonly portrayed, it may be viewed less positively.

## **Normalizing Female Pursuit: Common Occurrences (Theme 1; Code 1) & Stereotypical Gender Roles (Theme 2, Code 1)**

At a different point in the discussion, “L” offers another perspective on women who engage in problematic behavior while pursuing a man, arguing that “we could easily downplay it saying, ‘Well, she’s not a threat,’ ‘it’s a not big deal.’ “And maybe she’s ‘weird,’ I guess would be one thing that people can think of. ‘She’s weird but she’s not threatening.’” Participants in other focus groups shared a similar perspective as “L”, noting how due to gender stereotypes, Maya’s behavior during the role reversal would actually be minimized. For instance, Luna believed that even though it would still be problematic if Maya controlled Lucas’ behavior or appearance in some way to avoid him receiving attention from other women, such behaviors on Maya’s part would be perceived differently by society and not taken as seriously:

I think people think it feels different because of the way women and men are socialized and how unhealthy relationships and abusive relationships tend to be talked about in our society, so when it's Lucas being the really possessive one and doing that, it's really easy to see this can escalate into further, more controlling, possibly abusive behaviors. When it's the other way around, I would still say, yeah, that can very well happen, but I think that as a society, people don't take that as seriously. They might think like ‘oh, that's cute that she's a little jealous’...which I don't think is necessarily right, but I think that happens a lot. (*Luna, FG-10 Possessiveness/control, age 29*)

Studies examining female-perpetrated IPV supports “L” and Luna’s argument that Maya’s pursuit towards Lucas would be minimized. For instance, a focus group study with female students similarly revealed that female violence towards men is seen as humorous and less severe given the perceived differences in physical size and strength, and as more acceptable if attributed to women defending themselves against

male violence and rejecting a victim identity (Walker et al., 2018). As discussed, Maya's pursuit towards Lucas brought up mixed reactions from participants. Some participants believed that society minimized women's pursuit of men through potentially unhealthy and abusive tactics to establish relationships with them, while others argued that it could be seen more negatively because such behaviors contradict feminine gender role socialization.

Regardless of where participants landed in terms of how women's pursuit of men is perceived by society, several were able to share real life situations of women they knew who engaged in questionable behaviors towards men they were interested in pursuing, or towards current partners. While some participants thought that men's pursuit of women is more common and accepted, others reflected on personal experiences with seeing female peers and close others pursuing men or enacting control within the relationship. Indeed, participants could personally relate to the scenarios they were presented with, and brought up examples of women they knew who exerted control over their male partners, including Chloe below:

My dad with his wife. My brother-in-law with both of his wives, you know, separately—where whenever they were talking on the phone to their mom, or to me, the wife has to be listening in. All the time...It has to be on the speaker all the time. My son was in that situation too with his girlfriend—and so his emails were getting monitored. He had to be on speaker all the time. So I feel like I've seen that quite a bit. (*Chloe, FG 4-Isolation, age 51*)

Like Chloe, Emma (FG11, age 20) from the surveillance group spoke about how she had seen women engage in controlling behaviors over their partners, and how in her experience, this may be associated with mental health concerns:

I definitely have experienced women overstepping in like very creepy ways into the lives of men that I'm close with and men in my family. I definitely have seen women go to lengths like these in ways that are uncomfortable and unhealthy and unsafe [*laughs*]. It's not this specific situation, but I do see women going to extreme lengths in ways that I think are not necessarily healthy nor appropriate in order to pursue men, but I also think that in those situations there's a lot of like mental health issues that are very prominent.

Both Chloe and Emma's examples underscore how control is maintained by female partners within the context of a relationship that has already been established.

Moreover, Emma links women's enactment of control over male partners to negative mental health. While this explanation can minimize any unhealthy behaviors they perpetrate by attributing it to mental health issues, it does so through the use of SGR's which claim that women are unstable and overly emotional (Walker et al., 2018).

### **Romanticizing Maya's Pursuit Towards Lucas (Theme 1, Code 2): Negating Stereotypical Gender Roles (Theme 2, Code 1)**

Interestingly, a small number of participants across the focus groups believed the role reversal in which Maya pursued Lucas would be even more romantic than the original scenario in which Lucas was the pursuer. Again, this was tied to traditional gender stereotypes that positioned men as the usual pursuers in dating contexts.

According to some participants, Maya taking upon the pursuer's role indicated that she and women like her were breaking away from these stereotypes:

**Tessa:** I think that it is absolutely normal situation in modern world because girls also can propose to date, and that's absolutely normal.

**SK:** Okay. So some of what I was hearing earlier is, it's kind of sweet that it seems like Lucas is shy, and Lucas has waited for all of this time to ask Maya out. So would that same situation similarly be romantic if Maya is shy and is waiting all these months to ask Lucas?

**Tessa:** I think yes. I think it will be even more romantic, because in our world, stereotypes that female must be shy and some male must not be shy. [Laughter] So it makes the story even more amazing if Maya is shy and waiting for a few months. (*Tessa, FG4-Isolation, age 28*)

Tessa argues that it is normal for women to pursue men in today's modern world, and that it is even more romantic when they do so because this contradicts gendered stereotypes. Chloe (age 51), from the same isolation group, agrees with Tessa, sharing that she'd be "stoked" if Maya was the one asking Lucas out because it feels like a "breakthrough" when it comes to gender roles. In other words, what makes women's pursuit of men more romantic and positively perceived to these participants is the fact that the act is rare to begin with. This perspective was similarly shared by Izzy:

I think that there is definitely a double standard when it comes to the perceived gender roles of a straight relationship. Where sometimes if a guy does something it'll be creepy, but if a girl is showing extra attention, it's like, "Oh, this girl just really likes me," because usually girls don't go out of their way to ask a guy out. (*Izzy, FG6-Surveillance, age 20*)

Izzy's comment underscores how romanticizing such situations, in which one individual is paying extra attention to another, can be minimized because this is perceived as being rooted in liking someone. The fact that this is not a common occurrence is another reason why such a situation would be more desirable. Importantly, Tessa and Chloe's responses suggest that it is more desirable and exciting when women initiate dates and pursue men. Unlike Izzy, they do not necessarily comment on how it is seen as acceptable for women to engage in problematic pursuit behaviors during this process. Indeed, the overall positive reaction to women "making the first move" is reflected in the widespread success and use of dating applications such as Bumble, which was created to challenge traditional

stereotypes about dating and relationships and puts women in the position of initiating a conversation when matched with a male user (O'Connor, 2017). Focus groups with female users of Bumble reveal how using the application provided women the opportunity to pursue more serious relationships in a safer and “less sexually aggressive” space (p. 8). Moreover, participants described how their experience on the application gave them more confidence in initiating conversations with men (Young & Roberts, 2021).

As discussed, the discussion around the gender role reversal in which Maya pursued Lucas elicited a range of reactions from participants. Some participants explained that women’s pursuit toward men is perceived more negatively because this scenario contradicts traditional gender stereotypes which claim men as the appropriate pursuers in courtship. Participants also believed that gender stereotypes which position women as harmless contribute to the minimization of any controlling or abusive behavior they may enact against a male partner. Interestingly, participants who perceived female pursuit positively also framed their assessment of the role reversal in terms of gender stereotypes—because women are not typically in the pursuer role, the role reversal is perceived more positively because this allows women to break free from stereotypes that restrict them to a passive role within dating and relationship contexts. Gender stereotypes played another prominent role in the role reversal discussion, specifically in relation to safety concerns, discussed next.

## **Stereotypical Gender Roles (Theme 2, Code 1) and Safety Concerns/Needing Other Protections (Theme 2, Code 4)**

During the role reversal across all focus groups, participants brought up the relationship between gender stereotypes as they pertain specifically to safety concerns for women—both in terms of physical and emotional safety. Anne and Miranda, who participated in FG9-Isolation, claimed that they were more concerned about the possibility that Maya would be in physical danger when she was being pursued by Lucas—a concern that did not extend to Lucas when he was being pursued by Maya. As noted, this can ultimately minimize female violence against men. Moreover, studies find that stereotypes associating men with violence impact support seeking by men who experienced female-perpetrated IPV (Walker et al., 2020). Miranda and Anne’s responses below speak to these stereotypes:

**Miranda:** It’s still problematic when it’s from a woman. I think the feeling around it is a little different, like when a man is controlling, there is more of a feeling of danger that I don’t feel from a woman. (*FG9-Isolation, age 47*)

**Anne:** I kind of thought the same too. Like when it was Lucas being controlling to Maya, I had this subconscious feeling of maybe she’s in physical danger...but if Maya’s doing the same...being controlling to Lucas, I still didn’t think it was right but I didn’t get this subconscious sense of maybe Lucas might be potentially in physical danger. (*FG9-Isolation, age 39*)

Other participants explained the “fear-inducing” sentiment that the role reversal brought up for them (Emma, FG11-Surveillance, age 20). Jennifer dives into this safety concern for women further, providing examples of what kinds of concerns they may be thinking through when presented with a potential new date:

I think women do it to try to scope out what kind of guy they’re with in terms of safety...like do you know other people that he hangs out with, and you know



that they're not good people...what does that say about him?... who he hangs out with, where he likes to go and hang out, if he does drugs...if he does stuff that's not compatible with what you would wanna do, you don't wanna be put in an unsafe position. That would just be my assumption if I saw that Maya was going through his stuff. I would just assume it was to see if he meets her standards in terms of feeling comfortable with him, versus the other way around. I would think it's more weird if Lucas was doing it to her. (*Jennifer, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Jennifer explains how women engage in cybersurveillance against potential partners as a harm reduction strategy. Interviews conducted with online dating application users (in the 30-40 age range) in Australia finds that men and women do indeed have different motivations for using these platforms, with men looking for casual hook-ups (at least initially), and women searching for companionate partnerships (Dwyer et al., 2021). Consistent with Jennifer's response, as well as other participants who attributed more safety concerns for women, only female users in Dwyer et al. (2021) spoke of potential and actual risks and strategies to mitigate any threats to their safety. As all participants in their study were between the ages of 34-49 and were seeking to repartner following the end of a significant relationship, this research suggests that safety concerns are likely to plague women across various ages and relationship experiences.

Indeed, safety concerns for women featured prominently during the role reversal for each focus group in this study, and tactics such as female-perpetrated cybersurveillance were minimized as risk-management strategies. Participants also spoke more generally about safety concerns being due to the fact that male perpetrated violence against women is more prevalent, including in the media:

And so even if a woman acts aggressive towards a man, they can't imagine that she'll do anything nearly as violent or abusive as a man would. I think even in media we're more used to hearing stories about men who do domestic abuse or sexual abuse and I rarely hear about stories, not nearly as often about women who are the perpetrators of sexual or domestic abuse. (*Lisa, FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 27*)

Several participants pointed to the fact that male perpetrated violence against women is more prevalent than female perpetrated violence against men. These assertions are supported by numerous studies that have consistently found disproportionately higher rates of IPV experienced by women compared to men and more frequent negative outcomes, including greater rates of physical injuries (e.g., Breiding et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2017; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Participants often reflected on this reality when arguing why men are more predatory, and thus why the role reversal in which Maya pursues Lucas is seen as less concerning. Erika's comment speaks to this reflection:

I feel like before, I was thinking Lucas has the wrong idea and is sexist or just has the wrong idea of that. So now, I feel like Maya would be more jealous and more insecure of herself... 'cause now, she's scared that other girls are tryin' to get at him. But I feel like since the roles reversed, girls tend to not be more predatory... when this reverse, it's predatory. Rape happens, sexual assault. But now it's reversed. I feel like Maya's now just insecure... feel like girls have less of a predatory violence toward [*laughter*] men. I think now, it's just insecurities. (*Erika, FG3-Possessiveness/Control, age 20*)

Erika's response brings up several important points. She believes that Maya's possessive and controlling behavior towards Lucas, in which she wants him to behave differently or change his clothing to avoid attention from other women, is minimized when compared to Lucas' enactment of this same behavior. Erika also implies that when considering the original scenario where Lucas is the pursuer, his possessive and

controlling behavior towards Maya can set a negative precedent in their relationship, leading to extreme violence such as rape and sexual assault. She does not have the same concerns when Maya is in the pursuer role and engaging in these tactics. Rather, Erika sees her behavior as rooted in jealousy and insecurity. Erika's response implies that women whose possessive and controlling behaviors are rooted in jealousy and insecurity are of lesser concern—they are less likely to lead to sexual violence in this case.

### *Emotional Safety*

Participants in FG8-Persistent Pursuit raised unique points in reference to the role reversal compared to other groups. A few participants personally related to this reversal and shared their experiences of pursuing men, some of whom were surprised by the women's initiative. As they did in other parts of the discussions and across other focus groups, participants also invoked gender stereotypes that position men as pursuers, such as Elly (age, 29) who believed that "It's a bit difficult for a lady to ask a guy out...most of how the society is at the moment, you feel that guys are more gifted in persistence." This group also raised the concern that women who pursue men may eventually be taken advantage of due to them being more emotionally involved. When asked to clarify what they meant by women being taken advantage, Jade explained how female pursuit of men can set a negative precedent for the rest of the relationship, and men who are pursued by women end up thinking they don't have to do the relationship "work":

I think that they're not entirely into that person...I think they will get the benefits of the relationship—the food, the sex, whatever—without being fully

invested and if something better comes along...and then they'll just move on... They give a lot less...They might not cheat on you, but mentally they might be thinking about their outs, eventually. (*Jade, FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 35*)

Emmy from the same group agreed with Jade and similarly claimed that men who are pursued by women are less committed:

For some reason, I tend to think...for example, you guys get in argument or something, they'll be like, "At the end of the day, it's not me who wanted you. It's you who wanted me, so you're here because you wanted me too. It's not like I wanted you." Some of them will take advantage. (*Emmy, FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 25*)

Jade and Emmy's suggest that women who initiate relationships with men are likely to end up with a partner who is less emotionally responsive. As indicated by prior research, traditional feminine gender role socialization emphasizes the importance of being in romantic relationships, and the responsibility for maintaining these relationships is often placed on women (Mahalik et al., 2005; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). This extreme pressure to be coupled can bring women to fear singlehood and settle for undesirable and unresponsive relationship partners, as well as play a role in their avoidance in ending an undesirable relationship (Spielmann et al., 2013).

Accounts of IPV by female survivors similarly reflect how this pressure shaped their understandings of the abuse they experienced (Wood, 2001). Taken together, this body of research explains why women are taken advantage of emotionally and experience unsatisfying relationships with uncommitted partners.

### **Barriers to Support Seeking for Men**

While this study is centered on women's experiences of unhealthy relationship dynamics and psychological/emotional abuse, it is also important to highlight the

ways in which men experience such dynamics, as well as how perceptions about the various tactics explored in the focus groups are gendered. During the role reversal, some participants acknowledged that when men are pursued in inappropriate or unhealthy ways by women, they may have more difficulty seeking support, which was another function of SGRs. According to Daisy, women benefit from better emotional support systems who call out unhealthy dynamics their friends are experiencing in their relationships. This support system is lacking for men, which is more complicated when non-physical, emotional abuse occurs:

And I feel like physical violence, it's very black and white but men don't necessarily, if they're being emotionally manipulated, they might not see it, or their friends might not see it, or their friends might not suggest that "Hey, you need to end things." I think that there's a certain level of self-reflection that some men are certainly capable of, and other men are more likely to put up with and let slide. (*Daisy, FG9-Isolation, age 32*)

As an outsider, I would be less likely to follow up with a male friend...I probably would question him differently, I'd be like, "Oh, so you like her?" Where with a woman, I'd be like, "Are you okay?" If it were a guy I'd be very judge'y probably, not purposely, but in a very casual chatting about this woman who did not treat you right, but why do you actually like her, maybe try to get him to talk. Where with a woman I'd be like, "Whoa, are you safe?" Just 'cause that's the reality I've experienced of what you need to do. (*Eliza, FG 12-Jealousy, age 19*)

Both Daisy and Eliza bring up several critical points about how men may perceive unhealthy relationship tactics enacted by women within courtship. Daisy comments on how emotional abuse is generally more difficult to pick up on, which can make these situations more difficult to identify and offer advice about. She also argues that men are less likely to have a social network where friends can call out this type of unhealthy behavior. As other participants before her, Eliza calls upon gender

stereotypes around safety which would impact the type of response she'd offer to Lucas if he experienced jealousy-induced aggression by Maya. Indeed, qualitative studies with men who experienced female-perpetrated IPV find that they also experience multiple forms of abuse, and that gender stereotypes facilitated further victimization by others (e.g., police), preventing access to supports and resources (Morgan & Wells, 2016). Additionally, men report similar barriers to disclosing their victimization as women do, including to their social network (family, friends) and law enforcement. These include feeling embarrassed, not realizing that what they were experiencing qualified as IPV and fear of not being believed (Walker et al., 2020). When they do disclose to police or family/friends, men report their experiences being minimized and even experienced a role reversal, where they were deemed to be perpetrators and faced consequences in place of their abusive female partner (Morgan & Wells, 2016; Walker et al., 2020).

Overall, participants' responses in the role reversal portion of the discussion were aligned with prior research finding that dating interactions and relationships, as well as understandings of unhealthy relationship dynamics and abuse, are highly gendered. Participants relied heavily on gender stereotypes to explain why both Lucas and Maya's questionable pursuit tactics towards each other would be minimized (as well as for men and women more generally). For male pursuers, this is minimized because the type of persistent and (at times) aggressive pursuit depicted in the vignettes are consistent with dating expectations which encourage men to pursue women in this way. However, participants acknowledged that this is highly

problematic, given that male violence against women is more severe and more prevalent. As part of these conversations, participants spoke at length about the safety concerns they have for women who are pursued by men and suggested that women's enactment of the pursuit tactics presented in the vignettes were an effort to assess risk and a way to prevent harm to themselves. For female pursuers, some participants believed that because pursuing Lucas in these ways violates feminine gender role expectations, that Maya's behavior would be evaluated more negatively. Yet others were thrilled that Maya was breaking away from these expectations and believed that female pursuit towards men should be encouraged. Importantly, throughout these discussions, participants' responses revealed the ways in which male victims who experience unhealthy relationship tactics and abuse by female partners are disenfranchised due to gender stereotypes equating masculinity with violence.

#### **Chapter 4: Discussion**

This study explored the phenomenon of romanticized abuse to examine under which contexts various tactics identified as unhealthy and potentially abusive are more likely to be perceived as normal, justified, and romantic by heterosexual women. Utilizing semi-structured focus groups, this dissertation explored several questions, including: 1) Do women perceive potentially abusive and unhealthy relationship dynamics as acceptable and desirable when they are romanticized? 2) How do specific contextual factors shape perceptions of abuse? Specifically, I explored whether women were more likely to perceive unhealthy dynamics as romantic and acceptable when they occurred during a hypothetical courtship phase

between two characters, Lucas and Maya. Participants were also asked to reflect on how their responses would change, if at all, if the same dynamics were present when a relationship had been established between the two (committed relationship phase), when it had ended (breakup phase), or if they had never dated in the first place (no date accepted). Additionally, this study examined whether participants were more likely to perceive unhealthy dynamics as romantic and acceptable when enacted by a male pursuer (Lucas), compared to a female pursuer (Maya).

The results presented in this dissertation reveal the varied responses participants had to romanticized unhealthy dynamics that have been identified as precursors to IPV, or as psychological/emotional abuse itself. Specifically, participants' responses to surveillance, cybersurveillance, jealousy, isolation, possessiveness/control, and persistent pursuit were explored. Overall, participants' responses were captured by three larger themes: 1) *Normalization*, 2) *Explaining Abuse/Unhealthy Behaviors*, and 3) *Conflicts and Contradictions*. In general, most participants perceived Lucas' pursuit towards Maya, using the previously mentioned tactics, problematic. They also felt uncomfortable with or outright disapproved of Maya's flattered response to that pursuit. This tended to be a general reaction even when participants were presented with Lucas and Maya's story during the courtship stage. Participants spoke at length about how these various tactics are common occurrences in relationships, and several participants could personally relate to having experienced these themselves.



The analysis also indicated that women do, in fact, romanticize these dynamics that have been identified as precursors to relationship violence. Moreover, the results suggest that they are likely to romanticize the dynamics in different ways depending on the relationship context and gender of the pursuer and person being pursued. Participants were most likely to romanticize Lucas' pursuit of Maya through surveillance, cybersurveillance, jealousy, isolation, persistence, and possessive/controlling behavior during the courtship phase compared to the other relationship phases. Additionally, they were more likely to make allowances for Lucas' behavior in the courtship phase, explaining that his behaviors were motivated by his shyness and lack of experience and his sincere liking of and attraction for Maya. However, these justifications were minimized in the committed relationship phase, as participants often saw Lucas' behavior as a sign of insecurity and lack of trust in the relationship. Once participants were presented with a situation where Lucas and Maya had broken up, but Lucas was continuing to engage in the same tactics, safety concerns for Maya were heightened. At this point, participants expressed that safety planning, such as filing a restraining order, blocking, or alerting a friend or family member would be important, as women who reject men are often at heightened risk for retaliation from them. Finally, participants minimized any abusive behaviors Maya engaged in against Lucas during the role reversal, arguing that there is less of a concern for Lucas' physical safety than there would be for Maya. Participants also justified that it is less concerning when women engage in these tactics, as they are likely doing so to assure their *own* safety and well-being.

### **Focus Group Interactions Facilitating Individual Moments of Insight**

Generally, the focus group discussions generated much agreement amongst participants about what constitutes a healthy or unhealthy relationship. Participants across all groups were similar in how they were perceiving Lucas and Maya's relationship, as well as the explanations they came up with for Lucas' use of the individual tactics (e.g., surveillance, jealousy, isolation) and Maya's response to these dynamics. For instance, overall participants perceived the relationship and dynamic between Lucas and Maya negatively, believing that across all relationship phases Lucas' behavior was problematic. They provided several explanations for his behavior, including that he was shy or lacking in experience, was insecure or lacked trust in his relationship with Maya, or had internalized gender stereotypes that encouraged him to incessantly pursue Maya and behave in a dominant manner when interacting with her. Participants also regularly agreed with each other that these same reasons could explain Maya's response of being flattered and accepting a date from Lucas in the original story which depicted their courtship. Thus, participants across all groups and within each individual group were similar in their assessment of the story and the characters, suggesting a shared understanding of gender roles and norms around dating and heterosexual relationships.

Moments of disagreement between group members were also common, however. Participants responded to these instances in a healthy and productive manner, giving space for disagreement or recognizing that they had not considered the story or characters in the way that another person did. One key example of this

was when participants, such as “L”, Tessa, or Izzy expressed high levels of romanticization in how they were perceiving Lucas’ behaviors and his overall relationship with Maya. These participants felt comfortable holding on to their original positive assessment of the story and of Lucas as the conversation unfolded, and as other participants expressed their disapproval. In some cases, they also expressed agreement with other participants’ arguments that put Lucas and his actions in a negative light, suggesting that at least during the discussion, they were incorporating insights shared by other group members. And in other cases, participants such as “L” felt comfortable pushing back against the conversation, stating that how her group members were responding reflected what we *should* say. Thus, any level of disagreement between group members were respectfully handled.

Importantly, the group level interaction and conversation brought several participants to have a clear moment of reckoning in which they realized why they were responding a particular way to Lucas, Maya, and their relationship. This insight is illustrated in the following excerpt by Phi:

I just thought it was really interesting that there is such a difference between my perspective and Izzy’s perspective. And I now see...how that really shapes how we would perceive the story. Throughout all of it we don’t know how Maya feels, but because we’re integrating our own personal experiences, it really changes how we think of Lucas. For me, I am not on good terms with any of my exes, I am not friends with any of them. So if I were Maya, I would be so uncomfortable to see Lucas again— knowing that he did this before we were dating, while we were dating and now it continues after, I’m sure there was a reason they broke up. But this could have been part of it, so I think it really ties back into what I said earlier, that he was more infatuated than actually liking her for who she is, because if he actually liked her he would respect her decisions to probably stop this kind of behavior around her. (*Phi, FG6-Surveillance, age 19*)

Prior to Phi's comment, Izzy, another participant in the same group, had explained that she would have fewer concerns about Lucas continuing to check up on Maya by visiting places she commonly frequents, even though they have broken up, because Izzy herself has remained friends with an ex-partner. Due to this personal experience, Izzy did not have the same concerns that Phi did. Phi had this realization that she and Izzy differ in their assessment of how uncomfortable they perceive the interactions between Lucas and Maya to be in the breakup phase due to their individual personal experiences; Izzy can personally relate to Lucas and Maya remaining in each other's life even when they are no longer dating, so she responds more favorably to this situation. Phi cannot personally relate, which leads her to assess the situation more negatively.

These moments of realization, where participants came to a certain understanding of why they were responding in a particular way to Lucas, Maya, and their relationship was expressed by others as well. The very first focus group of the study explored participants' reactions to cybersurveillance in which Lucas continuously checked Maya's social media across the different relationship phases in order to learn more about her. In the beginning of the conversation, Jennifer's first reaction was, "Oh, wow, that's a lot." She continues:

But then as we were reading through it, and then him saying that he did it to connect with her and get to know her more, that's technically not lying. If Maya chooses to be flattered by that, she puts all the information out there. It's public for anyone to go see, and she accepted, so I mean, if that's works for her. I feel like maybe if she knew the extent to which he went through her things, maybe she would not have been as into it. At least, if I was Maya...I would've been a little bit weirded out, but then again, I also probably wouldn't put that much information on social media. So overall impression,

kind of like, ooh, but then also kind of reminds me of some people that I know that do exactly that. (*Jennifer, FG1-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Later in the conversation, Jennifer realizes that she's been conditioned to think that this is not a big deal, and this realization is a function of the ongoing discussion she's been having with her group members:

I think I said at the beginning...I think I literally said, if the information's out there, then what's the big deal? But as we've been talking, I'm like, wow. That's like what I've been picking up from other people going through this, I was thinking about it more. I'm like, huh. Yeah, that's kind of not okay.

Qualitative research is ideal for the exploration of social phenomena, and the goals of such methodologies are not to generalize findings, but rather to contextualize individuals' experiences with a given phenomenon (Levitt et al., 2018). The participants in this study relied heavily on their own personal experiences to provide context for why they were romanticizing or problematizing the interactions between Lucas and Maya. Gender and romance norms are intertwined with women's experiences of relationship abuse (e.g., Wood, 2001) and these are commonly prevalent in various media and thus socially reproduced (e.g., Collins & Carmody, 2011). The focus groups in this study facilitated a conversation about how this shared cultural script is perceived by heterosexual women across a range of ages and relationship experiences. By engaging in these conversations, asking questions, and responding to each other's opinions, participants sparked each other's insights about IPV and psychological/emotional abuse specifically, as well as traditional gender stereotypes and idealized romantic beliefs (Morgan, 1997).

## **Implications for Support Seeking, Prevention, and Intervention**

Across the focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on how women in real life are impacted by men's extreme jealousy, surveillance, and possessive/controlling behavior, as well as the other dynamics that were explored through the study. Participants were also asked if women seek support if they are experiencing these dynamics in their own relationships. An exploration of their responses to these questions revealed that participants perceived several of the themes and codes presented in this dissertation as barriers to disclosure and support seeking. Several participants explained that women would not seek support, because these situations are not identified as problematic to begin with. For instance, Jennifer explains:

...I think that it's becoming normalized to the point where it's like, "oh, this isn't weird because everybody does it...It's not toxic because I also see where he is all the time on Snapmaps...people...often don't see it as something that needs support. (*Jennifer, FGI-Cybersurveillance, age 22*)

Another participant in Jennifer's focus group, Jacky, adds that while it's not women's fault, there are clear warning signs to be aware of before situations escalate:

...I guess because it's so normalized, maybe there's things where we should perceive as red flags, we kind of don't. And that's... dangerous in itself because there's clear warning signs, but we...turn it off and just ignore it, even though...it's right there. And I guess that's really bad, especially if it gets to the more extreme situations... They don't deserve whatever happens to them, but... sometimes there are warning signs. You need to pull away before anything else worse occurs. (*Jacky, FGI-Cybersurveillance, age 20*)

Prior research has found that 80% of women who experienced physical, psychological, or sexual IPV at the hands of their partner at the time of the study did not disclose their abuse to anyone due to believing it was "no big deal" (Edwards et

al., 2012). Such findings are supported by this dissertation, as normalization of the various unhealthy pursuit tactics by Lucas was an extremely common response. Participants across all focus groups could either point to their own personal experiences with these tactics, suggesting that they were a common occurrence, or they could speak to friends, family members, or acquaintances who had been in similar situations as those presented in the vignettes. As Jennifer and Jacky suggest above, cybersurveillance of potential, current, and former partners occurs so often that women do not identify it as an issue that they would seek support for. Moreover, engaging in the behavior yourself may also contribute to the belief that it is “no big deal.” As Jacky suggests, these situations are also “no big deal” until they become more extreme. For participants in this study, the breakup phase was considered the most extreme, and likely the stage at which participants believed women would, or Maya should, seek support.

Romanticizing unhealthy relationship dynamics can also serve as a barrier to support seeking and disclosing abuse. In this study, romanticization was another way in which participants either personally normalized Lucas’ pursuit towards Maya or identified this as a potential response by women like Maya and society more generally. Participants indicated that even if women express discomfort with being pursued in dating contexts, their discomfort may be minimized by others (e.g., romanticized by others). Jessica explained the unhelpful feedback women can receive in this situation:

...When they do bring it up, it’s downplayed how emotionally and physically exhausting it is to always, say “no” to somebody even though they won’t take

“no” as an answer. Sometimes the feedback that they receive is, “Oh, why don’t you just give ’em a shot?” (*Jessica, FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 20*)

Similarly, Grace believed that women who voice discomfort when being pursued are minimized, told to instead appreciate the attention they are receiving, and blamed for misinterpreting a man’s character. Her response suggests that minimization occurs through gender stereotypes that encourage women to be flattered in these situations.

However, this messaging can interfere with support seeking:

I think for the most part, a lot of women are afraid to seek out help for something like this because we get discouraged by “Oh, he was just asking you out? And then what happened? Oh, nothing? Oh, well then take it as a compliment and call yourself a lucky girl and go home.” It gets brushed off a lot...and then we get labeled sensitive and not trustworthy, just looking to throw a good guy under the bus kind of thing. (*Grace, FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 31*)

Research by Ahrens et al. (2021) found that minimizing reactions from friends, family, and acquaintances were commonly experienced by female survivors of IPV. As Jessica, Grace, and many other participants in the study expressed, minimization of abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics can be internalized or reinforced by close others. Eventually, this may put increased pressure on women to accept potential harm by a partner, remain in unsatisfying relationships, and negatively impact supporting seeking from close others.

Prior research finds that it takes women experiencing a “turning point” (Murray et al., 2015) before they begin to view their relationship differently and begin to strategize leaving an abuser. For several participants in this study, this “turning point” was most prominent when Lucas continued to engage in the same pursuit behaviors as before despite him and Maya being broken up, or when Maya



never accepted Lucas' date (and no official relationship had ever been established between the two). Participants identified these as the most extreme situations where their safety concerns were the greatest, and it was at these points when they would want Maya to seek official support and intervention—such as filing a restraining order. However, some participants also identified these “turning points” earlier in the courtship and committed relationship phases, arguing that the dynamics being depicted in the vignettes could set a negative precedent for Lucas and Maya's relationship in the future, leading to an escalation in boundary violations by Lucas. Thus, programs aimed at reducing IPV can benefit from examining how perceptions about abuse shift across different relationship phases, and support participants in establishing strategies to recognize and respond to warning signs and more subtle forms of abuse early on. Studies find that women who identify themselves as rape victims are more likely to make disclosures (Littleton et al., 2008), facilitating access to resources, services, and informal supports. This identification may be more difficult when it comes to psychological/emotional abuse, given its lack of physical injuries and due to its greater chances of being minimized (Belknap & Sharma, 2014). Thus, it is necessary for IPV prevention and intervention programs to target this type of abuse more strategically to facilitate identification and subsequent support seeking for victims.

### **Recommended Solutions from Participants**

To conclude each focus group discussion, participants were asked to reflect on one final question: “If you had the power to change how we as a society think about

dating, relationships, and love, what would that look like? Participants were informed that their response could be based on a point of discussion already covered in our conversation (in relation to Lucas and Maya's story), or it could be focused on an issue that we had not touched upon yet.

One of the most common ways in which participants believed that society could reinforce healthier relationships and interactions between men and women was through more effective education about romantic relationships. Mainstream media has been identified as a key educational tool that has important implications for how individuals are socialized about gender, romance, and abuse (e.g., Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006; Galloway et al., 2015). Indeed, the importance of media in educating viewers about healthy relationships was brought up by participants in several focus groups as a form of prevention, and they offered several suggestions for how current media can be improved. Specifically, participants believed that media should present relationships more realistically, and instead of always portraying the "honeymoon period" and "happily-ever-after", it should portray conflicts, challenges, and miscommunications within relationships and depict how characters revolve those issues. As "L" mentioned, "We usually see the pursuit, but we don't see what happens after" (FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 26).

Participants also believed that when it comes to media, unhealthy relationship dynamics (e.g., jealousy, cybersurveillance), and abusive behaviors perpetrated by attractive male protagonists, should not be romanticized. Participants believed that these healthier media depictions were especially critical for those viewers who may not

otherwise have exposure to healthy relationship models in real life, as well as younger viewers who might have more difficulty differentiating between real-life relationships and idealized versions of the same in media. One concrete way in which these suggestions could be implemented is through using specific media examples in prevention programming to promote how to identify and protect against unhealthy and abusive relationships. For instance, scholars argue that the successful *Netflix* series *You* can be used to educate viewers about the importance of implementing greater cybersecurity controls in order to prevent online stalking (e.g., password protecting devices, setting social media accounts to private, refraining from geotags to check into specific locations), as well as expose the multifaceted ways in which abusive dynamics can be romanticized (Chugh & Guggisberg, 2020). *You* was repeatedly brought up by participants across focus groups as an example of popular media that glorified an abusive character. Given how widespread exposure is to mainstream media where these characters are romanticized (Kelly, 2020), it is likely that such media can serve as effective tools for prevention education.

Another major recommendation by participants that was not just limited to media depictions was the need to challenge unrealistic expectations about relationships that lead them to be idealized. Some participants like Emmy hoped that the pressure for couples to look perfect would be eliminated, and instead people would realize how hard it is to make a relationship work:

...we should accept the fact that these ups and downs and relationships take commitment and a lot of forgiveness. You have to also learn if you actually want to be in a relationship, you have to accept that you have to adjust too. (Emmy, *FG8-Persistent Pursuit*, age 25)

Participants also noted that society (and media) should normalize and celebrate singlehood more for both men and women, as they believed the pressure to be in a relationship, settle down, and “fit into society” could drive unhealthy relationships due to how idealized they are. Some participants especially encouraged this perspective for women, who should be taught that they didn’t need men to complete them. Participants like Emma (FG11-Surveillance, age 20) believed that romantic relationships should be balanced with healthy friendships as well, otherwise “centralizing romantic relationships as the most important thing in one’s life...allows a lot of unhealthy behaviors [to] slide.” Indeed, scholars have highlighted how women are subjected to singlism (DePaulo, 2006), and how the fear of being alone is related to both men and women opting for a less desirable partner and relationship (Spielmann et al., 2013).

As another recommended solution, participants also suggested that communication in and about relationships more generally should increase. Within relationships, this could come in the form of being honest about one’s needs and wants in a relationship, communicating healthy boundaries to one’s partner, fostering healthy communication about conflicts and issues, and better understanding what your partner needs/wants. For some participants, such as Jennie, being open and honest about one’s intentions can also help prevent miscommunication and hurt feelings: “I always see people like friends, or people getting ghosted when it comes to dating, and it can really take a toll on people’s feelings and whatnot to continue dating” (Jennie, F7-Cybersurveillance, age 25). Participants also promoted communication more generally,

appreciating the conversations they had within the focus group discussion and hoping that others would have similar opportunities as well:

If I could change anything, just probably more conversations just like this, where people are open and talking about what they think, and how different scenarios are actually more common, the story we talked about is a lot more common than you would think. (*Anna, FG12-Jealousy, age 19*)

When it comes to education and communication around healthy relationships, participants believed that apart from media, parents and schools also played a key role. Participants argued that education in this area is generally lacking, and they believed that parents needed to talk with their children about these issues when they're young, teach them about empathy, and develop secure attachments with them so they are more likely to have healthier relationships as adults. Some participants commented that not being able to communicate with parents about these issues can serve as a barrier to disclosing about unhealthy relationships, and therefore conversations between parents and children should be normalized so children feel more comfortable coming to parents for advice when they are encountering relationship difficulties. Educational institutions were cited as another potential source for communicating healthier messages about relationships and consent, with Tessa (FG4-Isolation, age 28) recommending that all junior and senior students in high school should learn about the "Psychology of Healthy Relationships."

Other issues that participants recommended that society should improve upon when it comes to dating and relationships is teaching individuals to pay attention to red flags and trusting their instincts to assess relationship risks properly and to better identify toxic traits in a partner. Finally, the need for society to do more to promote

equitable gender roles was cited often by participants. For several participants, recognizing that women can also be abusive and threatening towards men was important, as was bringing awareness to the different ways that women in particular may engage in abuse against their male partners—such as emotional manipulation. Indeed, research suggests that men experience multiple forms of abuse by female partners. Thus, prevention and intervention programs must recognize that male victimization by female partners occurs, and that biases against male victims are shaped by gendered expectations equating masculinity with aggression and further facilitated by various social structures (e.g., law enforcement) (Espinoza & Warner, 2016; Morgan & Wells, 2016). The need for society to reject traditional gender role expectations where men are expected to be aggressive and pursue women, while women are expected to be submissive and initiate a relationship was cited by some participants, such as Lisa, who indicated that she would like to see women “set the stage for the relationship” (FG10-Possessiveness/Control, age 27). For participants like Josie, it was important for men to be encouraged to share their “feelings without bein’ told to man up” (FG5-Jealousy, age 23).

This also included addressing victim blaming attitudes, a hope that was expressed by Eliza who explains how she wished her mother wasn’t so judgmental of her past relationships that did not work out:

I wish she wouldn’t be so like, ‘You have a bad taste in people, because you can’t make relationships work.’ I wish it was much more of a like, “No, I was actually smart and put a lotta effort into doing something, and it was really hard leaving someone. (*Eliza, FG12-Jealousy, age 19*)

Studies examining social reactions to IPV find that negative reactions from family and friends following a disclosure are common, such as minimization, blame, treating the survivor differently (e.g., by avoiding the survivor), and being told to leave the abuser (Ahrens et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2012). Prevention and interventions programs that address these negative reactions and their subsequent impact on survivors' further disclosures and support seeking is critical.

Participants like Izzy wanted society to work towards addressing misogyny and male entitlement that can make women feel pressured to say “yes”:

I know that sometimes as a woman, if a guy asks you out sometimes it can be intimidating or scary to say no even if you don't want it to happen, or don't wanna go on a date because you don't know what the other person could do.

Programs that teach setting and maintaining healthy boundaries must be aware of these obstacles that women in particular may experience in regards to their safety. Such programs must balance setting boundaries with safety planning, and recognize that for some women in abusive relationships, setting boundaries can actually escalate the abuse and cause more harm.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While the vignettes used in the study led to robust conversations amongst participants, they also posed a limitation that may have uniquely impacted particular groups. We paid careful attention to the creation of the vignettes and piloted them and their associated questions before data collection officially occurred. However, both times the study was piloted, we tested the materials with a younger sample of participants, most of whom were in college. While the vignettes may have been

relatable to this demographic, we recognized that the story about Maya and Lucas may not have been as relatable to the older women who participated in the story.

Participants in the isolation focus group (age range 32-58) who read and responded to the vignette where Lucas and Maya are described as friends attending the same college, seemed to be less engaged with the story, which may explain why they stood out as a group that had a less generative discussion.

Another limitation was the method of data collection. While this study was originally designed for in person focus groups, the study had to be modified to accommodate virtual data collection through Zoom conferencing software due to Covid-19. While this change allowed us to increase our recruitment pool and recruit nationally, it also brought its own unique challenges. For instance, a small number of participants, my RAs, and I experienced internet connectivity issues, including one instance where I was booted off from Zoom in the middle of facilitating a focus group. Additionally, the same level of privacy and confidentiality that would be available to the study team and the participants for in person focus groups could not be guaranteed for online focus groups, given that multiple individuals have had to co-work and learn in the same space due to social distancing guidelines. Archibald et al. (2019) evaluated the use of Zoom in online data collection and found that both researchers and participants perceived the platform to be effective in facilitating rapport and engagement during interviews, despite technical issues (e.g., internet connectivity problems) commonly experienced by participants. Moreover, conducting interviews via Zoom provides for greater accessibility to participants and perspectives spanning



across geography (Archibald et al., 2019). Indeed, if the focus groups were conducted in person as originally planned, the sample would have been limited to women from the larger Santa Cruz area who were willing and able to travel to campus for the study. Shifting to online focus groups conducted via Zoom allowed for recruitment to be expanded across the U.S., and ultimately led to a more representative sample of participants with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

This study was focused specifically on heterosexual women's perceptions of psychological/emotional abuse and unhealthy relationship dynamics because cultural romance narratives that facilitate abuse continue to be highly gendered (Glick & Fiske, 1996). However, processes of romanticization amongst both heterosexual women and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) may be similar, and should be explored in future research to examine key similarities and differences in this process. Hayes and Jeffries (2013) explored the discourses both heterosexual and non-heterosexual (specifically lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) female survivors of relationship abuse relied upon to make sense of their abuse. They examined these discourses through online social networking discussion forums, finding that the romantic love discourse was most likely to be invoked by participants. Future studies may conduct a similar analysis by comparing whether certain contexts (e.g., courtship vs. breakup phase of a relationship) are perceived in the same way by both heterosexual and non-heterosexual women and thus conducive to unhealthy situations being romanticized in the same way.

### ***Acknowledging the Role of Culture in Processes of Romanticization***

This dissertation focused specifically on Western notions of love and romance and the role of mainstream, Western media in socializing viewers about relationships and abuse. While all participants in the study were from the U.S., the sample was racially and ethnically diverse. Across some focus groups, a few participants did briefly bring up the role of culture as it relates to these issues. For instance, Alex (FG2-Persistent Pursuit, age 18) brought up how in her Hispanic culture, *telenovelas* commonly depict men pursuing women even when women continuously reject men. Regarding support seeking, Jade (FG8-Persistent Pursuit, age 35) shared how it is easier to find support when experiencing unhealthy situations in the Western, American context compared to the South Asian context. However, the analysis does not intentionally consider the cultural context of the romanticization of abuse. A more culturally nuanced analysis may be warranted in order to more intentionally highlight the role of participants' backgrounds in shaping whether they romanticized or problematized Lucas' pursuit towards Maya, to what extent, and under which contexts.

Manago et al. (2014) posit that romanticization is especially rooted in Western values that celebrate individual desire, personal responsibility and pursuit of romantic love. This is a shift away from interdependent values that tie sexuality to procreation and marriage as a way to fulfill familial obligations. Importantly, Manago et al. (2014) argue that values (e.g., traditional or modern, complementary gender roles or equivalent gender roles) are not always in direct opposition to each other. This may explain why across focus groups, participants who romanticized certain details about

Lucas' pursuit towards Maya would not necessarily perceive themselves as holding problematic and unhealthy views about relationships, so long as they set their own boundaries about what they are comfortable with. This is evident with participants who, for instance, explained that if they were Maya, they would listen to Lucas in the moment and change out of a revealing dress, but speak with him later on about the issue.

Anthropologists studying gender roles and marriage expectations in other cultures have similarly found that women experience conflicts and contradictions. These scholars highlight not only how women resist and accommodate to these expectations, but also how they actively negotiate them in ways that are best suited to their own goals in dating, marriage, and motherhood. Fieldwork by Matthews (2019) in rural Oaxaca, Mexico speaks to these conflicts and contradictions as they relate to the *respect* and *trust* schema. The respect schema claims that men are dominant, women sacrifice and suffer in marriage, and marriages ought to be arranged. The trust schema, on the other hand, reflects a companionate marriage where courtship, greater emotional and physical intimacy between couples, and active cooperation between wife and husband is present. The women interviewed by Matthews (2019) described various responses to these conflicting schemas, including ambivalence about how to resolve them and an integration where some elements of both were combined. A culturally nuanced analysis may also examine whether participants remain unaware of and ambivalent towards any conflicts/contradictions they hold or are able to recognize and resolve them.

### ***Highlighting Men's Romanticization Processes and Experiences of Abuse***

While most of the discussion during focus groups centered on male abuse and violence towards women, the gender role reversal portion of the discussion revealed key insights about men who may experience abuse at the hands of women. During this portion of the discussion, participants cited gender stereotypes that position men as more physically aggressive and as more likely to commit violence against women (e.g., Morgan & Wells). Participants across focus groups often noted that because women are more likely to be victims of IPV, they would have fewer concerns about them engaging in any of the tactics examined in this study. These conversations support research that finds that male victims of IPV experience numerous barriers to support seeking and disclosures due to traditional gender stereotypes. Studies find that being male victims of violence violates masculine gender norms that claim strength, dominance, and control for men (Mahalik et al., 2003; Walker et al., 2020). Moreover, men report similar barriers to disclosing their victimization as women—including to their social network (family, friends) and law enforcement. These include feeling embarrassed, not realizing that what they were experiencing qualified as IPV, and fear of not being believed (Walker et al., 2020). Studies also find that male victims may experience similar processes of romanticization that encourage them to remain in abusive relationships in the name of love (Corbally, 2015). Thus, future research may replicate this methodology with male participants to understand how they navigate expectations around masculinity within dating and sexual situations and the pressure of pursuing women. Such research can similarly present male participants with hypothetical

vignettes to explore where they draw the line between abusive and acceptable, romantic and problematic, and what they consider to be their “turning points” which would lead them to seek support if they experienced abuse.

Future studies may also explore different methodologies to examine the romanticization of abuse. As noted, some participants such as “L” heavily emphasized the point that Maya likes Lucas’ pursuit towards her. She noted that if this key detail was not provided, then it would be more obvious that the vignette in question presented a problematic dynamic between Lucas and Maya. Lippman (2018) found that participants who watched a film that presented persistent pursuit as threatening were less likely to justify stalking and perceive it more negatively. Similarly, researchers interested in extending this line of work can experimentally manipulate details in a hypothetical story, presenting a female target like Maya as romanticizing the pursuit in one vignette (as was the case for this dissertation), and as experiencing fear in another vignette. Such an experiment may reveal just how large of a role a female target’s response plays in whether bystanders perceive a pursuit scenario involving her as acceptable or problematic.

## **Conclusion**

Psychological/emotional abuse occurs at alarming rates in relationships (Smith et al., 2017), but given its non-physical nature, it continues to be minimized relative to other forms of IPV. This dissertation seeks to bring this form of abuse at the forefront and examine how heterosexual women within the U.S. perceive different forms of psychological/emotional abuse. Specifically, perceptions of surveillance,

cybersurveillance, isolation, persistent pursuit, jealousy, and possessiveness/control were explored across 12 focus groups. Participants were presented with hypothetical vignettes that romanticized a male pursuer's (Lucas) use of these tactics towards a female target (Maya) in order to establish a relationship with her. The findings reveal that while overall, women have negative reactions to these tactics, specific contextual factors also uniquely shape reactions in ways that minimize and romanticize these behaviors. Specifically, such tactics are more likely to be considered acceptable and romantic during courtship, with participants providing the most varied explanations for Lucas and giving him the most benefit of the doubt for engaging in these tactics. Participants were most likely to cite insecurity and lack of trust as an explanation for Lucas' continued use of these tactics during the committed relationship phase. When Lucas and Maya were no longer dating, participants cited the most safety concerns for Maya. When participants were presented with a gender role reversal with Maya engaging in these tactics to pursue Lucas, participants heavily relied on stereotypical gender roles to argue that it is more acceptable for women to engage in these tactics than men, given greater rates of violence towards women.

This dissertation makes several contributions to the literature. Previous studies that have explored the romanticization of abuse have done so within the context of various forms of IPV—physical, sexual, and emotional (e.g., Smith et al., 2013; Wood, 2001). This study is unique given its sole focus on psychological/emotional abuse, and specifically six different tactics that have been identified as precursors to IPV. Moreover, this study qualitatively explored how the relationship context in

which these tactics occur impacts participants' assessment of the dynamic between Lucas and Maya. Previous research (e.g., Power et al., 2006) has examined the romanticization of abuse in relationships that have already been established and ended, with participants reflecting back on their former abusive relationships. While this dissertation also examined how these abuse tactics would be perceived if they were occurring when Lucas and Maya were broken up, it prioritized the importance of the courtship phase in setting the stage for these tactics to continue over the full course of a relationship. The consideration of different relationship phases, and how these may impact perceptions of and responses to abuse tactics that are used to pursue a love interest, is critical for IPV prevention and intervention programs.

**Tables 1-12: Participant Demographics for Each Focus Group**

**Table 1: Focus Group 1-Cybersurveillance**

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Rosie (age 20)</i>	CA	Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Junior	Associate degree (two year)	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Jacky (age 20)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	Some college	Single and not dating	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Jennifer (age 22)</i>	CA	Caucasian/White	No	Graduated B.A. in 2020	Bachelor's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Neyu (age 21)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Senior	High school graduate	Single and not dating	3 or more relationships	Yes



**Table 2:** Focus Group 2--Persistent Pursuit

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Jessica (age 20)</i>	CA	Caucasian /White	Yes	Junior	Some college	Single and not dating	No dating/relationship experience	Yes
<i>Alex (age 18)</i>	CA	Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Frosh/Freshman	Some college	Single and not dating	No dating/relationship experience	No
<i>L (age 26)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Graduate Student	Bachelor's degree	Single and not dating	No dating/relationship experience	No
<i>Lizzie (age 20)</i>	CA	Caucasian /White	Yes	Sophomore	Some college	Single and getting to know someone	No dating/relationship experience	No
<i>Nina (age 20)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	High school graduate	Single and not dating	No dating/relationship experience	No

**Table 3:** Focus Group 3--Possessiveness/Control

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Mei (age 21)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Senior	Bachelor's degree	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	No
<i>Erika (age 20)</i>	CA	Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Junior	High school graduate	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	No
<i>Emma (age 20)</i>	CA	Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Junior	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	No
<i>Paloma (age 19)</i>	CA	Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Sophomore	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	No

**Table 4:** Focus Group 4-Isolation

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Tessa (age 28)</i>	CA	Caucasian/White	Yes	Senior	Bachelor's degree	Married	1-2 relationships	No
<i>Jesper (age 35)</i>	VA	Caucasian/White	No		Master's degree	Married	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Chloe (age 51)</i>	CA	Caucasian/White	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	Married	3 or more relationships	Yes

**Table 5:** Focus Group 5-Jealousy

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Lea (age 18)</i>	CA	Hispanic/Chicanx/ Latinx, Pacific Islander, East/ Southeast Asian	Yes	Frosh/ Freshman	High school graduate	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Josie (age 23)</i>	TX	Hispanic/Chicanx/ Latinx	Yes	Sophomore	Associate degree (two year)	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Churro (age 20)</i>	CA	East/ Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	High school graduate	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Alicia (age 21)</i>	CA	East/ Southeast Asian	Yes	Senior	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Wens (age 24)</i>	FL	African American/Black/ Caribbean	Yes	Graduate Student	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes

**Table 6:** Focus Group 6--Surveillance

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Lena (age 22)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	No		Bachelor's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Erika (age 20)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	Associate degree (two year)	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Anne Wang (age 19)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	High school graduate	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	No
<i>Izzy (age 20)</i>	CA	Middle Eastern	Yes	Senior	Some college	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Phi (age 19)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	Some college	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes

**Table 7:** Focus Group 7-Cybersurveillance

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Rosie (age 26)</i>	NJ	Caucasian/White	No		Associate degree (two year)	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Ray (age 27)</i>	NY	African American/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>May (age 28)</i>	CO	African American/Black/Caribbean	Yes	5th Year (or more)	Master's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Elton (age 26)</i>	NY	African American/Black/Caribbean	No		Bachelor's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Sophia (age 20)</i>	NY	Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Junior	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	No
<i>Jennie Ly (age 25)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	No		Bachelor's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes

**Table 8:** Focus Group 8-Persistent Pursuit

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Sandy (age 25)</i>	GA	African American/Black/Caribbean	No		Associate degree (two year)	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Tilda (age 28)</i>	NY	African American/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Elly (age 29)</i>	CA	African American/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Emmy (age 25)</i>	CA	African American/Black/Caribbean	Yes	Senior	High school graduate	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Jade (age 35)</i>	CA	South Asian, Punjabi American	No		Doctoral degree (PhD, EdD, PsyD)	Married	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Grace (age 31)</i>	IL	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	Yes

**Table 9:** Focus Group 9-Isolation

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/ Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/ Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Anne (age 39)</i>	CA	East/ Southeast Asian	No	Master's degree	Single and dating	3 or more relationships	No
<i>Skie (age 35)</i>	FL	Caucasian/ White	No	High school graduate	In a relationship	3 or more relationships	No
<i>Cajunich (age 58)</i>	MS	Caucasian/ White	No	Bachelor's degree	Engaged	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Daisy (age 32)</i>	MI	Caucasian/ White	No	Bachelor's degree	Single and not dating	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Miranda (age 47)</i>	UT	Caucasian/ White	No	Bachelor's degree	Engaged	1-2 relationships	No



**Table 10: Focus Group 10-Possessiveness/Control**

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Lisa (age 27)</i>	OH	African American/Black/Caribbean	No		Bachelor's degree	Single and not dating	1-2 relationships	No
<i>Page (age 28)</i>	ID	Caucasian/White	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	Single and not dating	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Luna (age 29)</i>	IL	Caucasian/White, Hispanic/Chicanx /Latinx	Yes	Graduate Student	Master's degree	Single and not dating	3 or more relationships	Yes

**Table 11:** Focus Group 11-Surveillance

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Emma (age 20)</i>	CA	Caucasian/White	Yes	Junior	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Gianna (age 20)</i>	NY	Caucasian/White, Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx	Yes	Junior	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	No

**Table 12:** Focus Group 12-Jealousy

	<i>U.S. State</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Current Student</i>	<i>Year in School (if student)</i>	<i>Highest Education Level</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Dating/Relationship Experience</i>	<i>Prior Abuse Exposure</i>
<i>Eliza (age 19)</i>	CA	Caucasian/White	Yes	Sophomore	Some college	Single and not dating	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Amy (age 22)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	No		Bachelor's degree	Single and not dating	3 or more relationships	Yes
<i>Anna (age 20)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Junior	Some college	In a relationship	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Trisha (age 21)</i>	CA	East/Southeast Asian	Yes	Senior	High school graduate	Single and not dating	1-2 relationships	Yes
<i>Billy (age 22)</i>	CA	Caucasian/White	Yes	Sophomore	Some college	Single and not dating	3 or more relationships	Yes

## Appendix A: Recruitment Scripts

### **Email Solicitations (to academics and other professionals engaged in gender, health and violence work).**

Hello,

My name is Sona Kaur and I am a PhD candidate studying Social Psychology at UC Santa Cruz. I am looking for participants for my dissertation study, which involves several online focus groups about how women perceive dating and relationships. I would really appreciate it if you could forward the message below and attached study flyer to your networks, your students, or anyone you know who may be interested and eligible for the study.

Please let me know if there are any questions. Thank you!

---

Hello,

My name is Sona Kaur and I am a PhD candidate studying Social Psychology at UC Santa Cruz. I am conducting a focus group research study about the way women think about dating and relationships. I will be holding several online group discussions hosted through Zoom. You will be asked to complete a demographic survey before participating in the focus group. Groups will last between 1.5-2 hours. These will focus on:

- What defines healthy relationships
- Media's portrayal of relationships
- Unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics
- Direct or indirect experiences with both healthy/unhealthy relationships

To be eligible for the study, you must:

- Identify as female
- Identify as heterosexual
- be 18 years or older
- have stable internet access and video webcam

**Each participant will receive a \$25 amazon.com gift card.**

This study is being supervised by faculty sponsor and principal investigator, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen. This study has been approved by the UCSC Institutional Review Board (#HS3730).

For more information, please email the study account at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu).

## **Online Postings**

Hello,

My name is Sona Kaur and I am a PhD candidate studying Social Psychology at UC Santa Cruz. I am conducting a focus group research study about the way women think about dating and relationships. I will be holding several online group discussions hosted through Zoom. You will be asked to complete a demographic survey before participating in the focus group. Groups will last between 1.5-2 hours. These will focus on:

- What defines healthy relationships
- Media's portrayal of relationships
- Unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics
- Direct or indirect experiences with both healthy/unhealthy relationships

To be eligible for the study, you must:

- Identify as female
- Identify as heterosexual
- be 18 years or older
- have stable internet access and video webcam

**Each participant will receive a \$25 amazon.com gift card.**

This study is being supervised by faculty sponsor and principal investigator, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen. This study has been approved by the UCSC Institutional Review Board (#HS3730).

For more information, please email the study account at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu).

**Personal recruitment emails/messages (language used by RAs is included in parentheses)**

Hello,

I am conducting (I am working on) a focus group research study about the way women think about dating and relationships. I'm (We're) in need of study participants. Could you please pass along this message and attached study flyer to anyone you know who may be interested/eligible for the study?

---

We will be holding several online group discussions hosted through Zoom. Participants will complete a demographic survey before taking part in the focus group. Groups will last between 1.5-2 hours. These will focus on:

- What defines healthy relationships
- Media's portrayal of relationships
- Unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics
- Direct or indirect experiences with both healthy/unhealthy relationships

To be eligible for the study, you must:

- Identify as female
- Identify as heterosexual
- be 18 years or older
- have stable internet access and video webcam

**Each participant will receive a \$25 amazon.com gift card.**

This study is being supervised by faculty sponsor and principal investigator, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen (and being conducted by Psychology Ph.D. candidate and graduate student investigator, Sona Kaur). This study has been approved by the UCSC Institutional Review Board (#HS3730).

For more information, please email the study account at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu).

**Recruitment and Screening Email (sent after participants make initial contact with study account)**

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in “Let’s Talk about Love: A Study about Relationships.” Please read this email carefully, as it contains important information about this study.

This study will involve you completing a demographic survey and participating in focus group discussions about your relationship beliefs, including your beliefs about healthy and unhealthy relationships and what you think is acceptable and unacceptable in romantic and dating contexts. We will ask how you came to have these relationship beliefs, and how you perceive media portrayals of relationships. We will also ask about your own personal experiences with healthy and unhealthy relationships, and if you have been exposed to such relationships in other ways (e.g., if you know of a family member or friend who’s experienced a healthy or unhealthy relationship).

Before participating, you should know that this group interview could be difficult at times, particularly if you are uncomfortable discussing unhealthy relationships or if you have experienced an unhealthy relationship yourself. If you know you will feel uneasy in this situation, please do not participate because we want participants to feel comfortable talking about different types of relationship dynamics (even unhealthy ones) in a group setting. However, even if you participate but find yourself feeling uneasy during the group interview, you can skip any question you do not want to respond to. Please note that if you disclose that you are currently perpetrating sexual or physical abuse against another person, we will report that to the police.

The focus groups will be facilitated over Zoom and are expected to last between 1.5-2 hours. All focus groups will be video and audio recorded. We ask that you keep your video on to make the sessions more comfortable and to make it easier for us to interact with each other. All focus groups are expected to have anywhere between 2 and 5 other participants. **Each participant will receive a \$25.00 amazon.com gift card or 2 hours of research credit following participation.**

The focus groups will be led by Sona Kaur, the graduate student investigator for this study, and 1-2 undergraduate research assistants who will help run the session on Zoom. These focus groups are being conducted as part of Sona’s Psychology PhD program at UC Santa Cruz. Sona also works for the Title IX office at UC Santa Cruz, which is charged with preventing and responding to sexual harassment and violence, as well as any gender-based harassment and discrimination. However, any information shared during these focus groups will NOT be reported to the Title IX office. Sona is conducting this study as a PhD student, and not as a Title IX



employee. The only exception is if you report that you are currently engaging in physical or sexual abuse against another person. This study is being supervised by faculty sponsor and principal investigator, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen. This study has been approved by the UC Santa Cruz ethical review board (#HS3730).

**Eligibility:**

As a reminder, to be eligible for this study, you must meet all of the following criteria:

- 1) Identify as female
- 2) Identify as heterosexual
- 3) be 18 years or older

You must also have stable internet access and video webcam.

**Confidentiality & Risk:**

All online sessions will be video and audio recorded. However, only the audio file will be used by the study team for transcription and analysis and following your focus group, the video file will be deleted. All data collected in this study, including your email, demographic information, and transcripts will be handled confidentially. No personally identifiable information will be shared in any study report, and your responses will not be linked to your real name. Instead, we will ask you to come up with a pseudonym (fake name) to use in place of your real name.

Because this study involves focus groups, we ask that each participant in the group respect each other's privacy and keep any information shared during the session private. However, we cannot guarantee that all participants will respect this request. If the study team observes or is made aware of an incident that was deliberately intended to be offensive and make another participant uncomfortable, we will report that incident to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Information Technology Services (ITS), and the Equity and Equal Protection Office at UC Santa Cruz as needed.

**Zoom practice:**

If you do not have a Zoom account and do not want to download it for the study, you can still participate in the study by joining the session from your browser. However, you will want to ensure beforehand that you are using a browser that supports using your computer's audio device. Certain browsers, such as Chrome, Firefox, and Chromium Edge may work better for Zoom.

If you join through your browser, please make sure to follow all instructions when you click on the meeting link. You will be taken to the official Zoom website, and you will be asked to type in your name and ensure you are not a robot.

If you are not familiar with Zoom, please take some time to practice it beforehand (e.g., test the computer volume and microphone to make sure it is working, practice the mute/unmute and “raise hand” feature).

If you have any questions about using Zoom, or experience any technical issues before joining, please email us at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu) as soon as possible.

**Next steps if you would like to participate:**

1. Please respond back to this email and confirm that you meet all eligibility criteria.
2. Provide informed consent (link sent after you confirm eligibility)
3. Fill out demographic questionnaire (link provided in consent form)

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please email us at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu). To contact Sona directly, please email [skau15@ucsc.edu](mailto:skau15@ucsc.edu).

Thank you,  
The Relationships Study Research Team

## Scheduling Focus Group Sessions (Initial Email)

Hello,

Your focus group session for “Let’s Talk about Love: A Study about Relationships” is scheduled for:

Provide date, day of week, time of session

To join the Zoom session, please click here:  
(Insert all Zoom info here)

To ensure the focus group runs smoothly, please make sure you have a quiet room where you can participate free from distractions. We ask that you join the meeting several minutes early so we can start on time.

Please also remember your pseudonym (fake name) that you entered into the demographic form. You will be asked to change your name on Zoom to this pseudonym when you join the session.

If you have any questions, concerns, or don’t remember your pseudonym, email us back at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu).

Thank you

The Relationships Study Research Team

### **Reminder Email (Sent Day Before Scheduled Session)**

Hello,

As a reminder, your focus group session for “Let’s Talk about Love: A Study about Relationships” is scheduled for:

Tomorrow, Provide date, day of week, time of session

To join the Zoom session, please click here:  
(Insert all Zoom info here)

To ensure the focus group runs smoothly, please make sure you have a quiet room where you can participate free from distractions. We ask that you join the meeting several minutes early so we can start on time.

Please also remember your pseudonym (fake name) that you entered into the demographic form. You will be asked to change your name on Zoom to this pseudonym when you join the session.

If you have any questions or concerns, or don’t remember your pseudonym, email us back at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu).

Thank you

The Relationships Study Research Team

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyers



Each participant receives a \$25 [AMAZON.COM](https://www.amazon.com) GIFT CARD!

**Project Description:** Complete a demographic survey and participate in online group discussions about your beliefs about dating and relationships. Focus groups will last 1.5-2 hours. Conversations will focus on what you think about:

- What defines healthy relationships
- Media's portrayal of relationships
- Unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics
- Direct or indirect experiences with both healthy/unhealthy relationships

**Eligibility:** 1) identify as female, 2) heterosexual, 3) 18 years or older. You must also have stable internet access and video webcam to participate.

**Email** [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu) to participate.

Sona Kaur, PhD Candidate in Social Psychology, is student investigator on this project (skau15@ucsc.edu). Faculty supervisor and principal investigator is Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen. This study has been approved by the UCSC Institutional Review Board #HS3730



Each participant receives a \$25 [AMAZON.COM](https://www.amazon.com) GIFT CARD!

**Project Description:** Complete a demographic survey and participate in online group discussions about your beliefs about dating and relationships. Focus groups will last 1.5-2 hours. Conversations will focus on what you think about:

- What defines healthy relationships
- Media's portrayal of relationships
- Unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics
- Direct or indirect experiences with both healthy/unhealthy relationships

**Eligibility:** 1) identify as female, 2) heterosexual, 3) 18 years or older. You must also have stable internet access and video webcam to participate.

**Email** [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu) to participate.

Sona Kaur, PhD Candidate in Social Psychology, is student investigator on this project ([skau15@ucsc.edu](mailto:skau15@ucsc.edu)). Faculty supervisor and principal investigator is Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen. This study has been approved by the UCSC Institutional Review Board #HS3730

**LET'S TALK ABOUT *LOVE*:  
A STUDY ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS**  
**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!**



EACH PARTICIPANT RECEIVES  
A \$25 [AMAZON.COM](https://www.amazon.com) GIFT  
CARD!

**Project Description:**

Complete a demographic survey and participate in **online** group discussions about your beliefs about dating and relationships. Focus groups will last 1.5-2 hours. Conversations will focus on what you think about:

- What defines healthy relationships
- Media's portrayal of relationships
- Unhealthy and problematic relationship dynamics
- Direct or indirect experiences with both healthy/unhealthy relationships

**Eligibility:**

1) identify as female, 2) identify as heterosexual and 3) be 18 years or older. You must also have stable internet access and video webcam to participate.

Email [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu) to participate.

Sona Kaur, PhD Candidate in Social Psychology, is student investigator on this project ([skau15@ucsc.edu](mailto:skau15@ucsc.edu)). Faculty supervisor and principal investigator is Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen. This study has been approved by the UCSC Institutional Review Board #HS3730

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**\*This consent form was uploaded to DocuSign**

### UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

BERKELEY • DAVIS • IRVINE • LOS ANGELES • MERCED • RIVERSIDE • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO



SANTA BARBARA • SANTA CRUZ

UCSC IRB Protocol #: HS3730

Let's Talk About Love: A Study About Relationships

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Introductory section:** You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Sona Kaur and Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen from the department of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Before you decide whether or not to participate in the study, you should read this form and ask questions if there is anything that you do not understand.

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to understand what we think about different types of relationship dynamics and how we define healthy and unhealthy relationships.

**Decision to quit at any time:** Your participation is completely voluntary; you are free to change your mind at any time and quit the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Whatever you decide will in no way penalize you or result in loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. You will still receive full payment or credit for the study.

**What you will do in the study:** If you decide to take part in this study, here is what will happen: You will be interviewed as part of a group through Zoom, a video conferencing software. The interview will focus on how you think about healthy and unhealthy relationships, how you came to have certain relationship beliefs, and your indirect and direct experiences with relationships. You will be asked about the role of media in how you think about relationships. You will respond to a hypothetical romantic situation and share what you think about it and what you think other women would think about it. Before the focus group session, you will complete a demographic form. You will be video and audio recorded. Groups may include anywhere from 3-6 total participants.

**Time required:** Participation will take approximately 1.5-2 hours.

**Risks or discomforts:** There is a risk that your personal information could be



accidentally disclosed; however, the researchers are taking measures to protect your data. Your group interview data will be stored on a password protected UCSC server, a UCSC Google Drive, or in encrypted form on Sona's computer. No identifiers, beyond email address, audio voice, and video will be collected and link you to this study. We will not connect your real name to your data, and we will not report on any information that might reveal your identity. When reporting on the data in presentations or publications, we will use the pseudonym you come up with. No other participant in the focus group will be able to record the session through Zoom. Following your focus group session, the video recording will be deleted, and the audio recording will be used for transcription.

Although unlikely, potential breaches of confidentiality include inadvertent disclosure of your personal information through data loss or theft.

Even though we will tell all participants in the study that the comments made during the focus group should be kept confidential, it is possible that other participants may repeat comments outside the group. It is also possible that a participant in the group takes a photo or records the session through another device like their phone. All participants will be asked not to do this and to respect each other's privacy, but we cannot guarantee that all participants will respect this request. We also ask that you not take photos or record the session yourself. If the study team observes or is made aware of an incident that was deliberately intended to be offensive and make another participant uncomfortable, we will report that incident to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Information Technology Services (ITS), and the Equity and Equal Protection Office at UC Santa Cruz as needed.

Because this group session covers romantic relationships, it is possible that the interview could lead to psychological distress, particularly for people who have experienced or been exposed to relationship abuse. If you believe that you could feel upset or traumatized from taking this study, you cannot participate. If you participate but find yourself feeling uncomfortable, you may share as much or as little as you would like. You have the right to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You may also discontinue your participation at any time and for any reason; this might include remaining silent or leaving the Zoom meeting. If you disclose that you are currently perpetrating sexual or physical abuse against another person, we are required to report that to the police. There are no expected potential physical risks.

**Benefits of this study:** No direct benefits to participants are anticipated. However, should you choose to participate, you will be given a resource list about services to support those impacted by relationship abuse. You may also find it beneficial to reflect on your own attitudes about relationships and dating. Finally, your data will contribute to the scientific understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationship dynamics.

**Rights and Concerns:** If you have questions about this research, please contact Sona Kaur, Ph.D. Candidate: 1156 High Street, Social Sciences 2, room 102; 831-459-4559 or at skau15@ucsc.edu. You may also contact the faculty member and principal investigator supervising this work, Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen: 1156 High Street, Social Sciences 2, room 361; 831-459-5736; zurbrigg@ucsc.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance Administration at the University of California at Santa Cruz at 831-459-1473 or orca@ucsc.edu.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your name or other personal information will not be used in any transcript or report. Identifiable research data will be stored on a password protected UCSC server and in encrypted form on the password protected computer belonging to Sona.

To help maintain privacy during the online focus group sessions, we would like you to come up with a pseudonym (a fake name) that we can refer to you by. Your responses will be linked to this pseudonym that you will personally select. Your responses from the focus group and your demographic information will be stored separately in an encrypted file on Sona's password protected computer and stored on a password protected UCSC server. Only the researchers will have access to the files on the server.

The researchers will follow procedures to maintain your confidentiality, such as using Zoom settings that allow for greater privacy. However, as with any internet activity, we cannot guarantee confidentiality of interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

With your permission, we would like to video and audio record this interview so that we can make an accurate transcript. Following your focus group, the audio recording will be uploaded to a password protected UCSC server, and the video recording will be deleted. The audio file will be used by the research team to verify the accuracy of transcripts. Once these have been verified, the audio files will be deleted from any password protected computers belonging to other members of the research team. However, the audio file may still be stored (in encrypted form) on a password protected computer belonging to Sona. The audio files will also be stored on the password protected UCSC server when not being immediately used. We will retain the audio recording and transcript indefinitely to allow for future analyses. Your real name will not be in the transcript, our notes, or any resulting study reports. Rather, these will include your personally selected pseudonym.

Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt by the researchers to do so and your data will be reported keeping your name confidential.

**Future Research:** Audio recordings, transcripts of audio recordings, and demographic information will be retained for use in future studies or reports without additional consent. Audio recordings will only be accessible by current or future research teams and will not be used in presentations or otherwise made accessible to the public. However, your real name will not be attached to any data you provide us. No reports will include your name or other personal information. This data will be stored on a password protected UCSC server or encrypted on Sona's password protected computer.

**Compensation:** You will receive a \$25 amazon.com gift card or 2 hours of course credit for participating in this study (if you participate through the UCSC psychology subject pool).

**Alternative to Course Credit:** There are alternative means of earning credits without participating in research. Speak with the course instructor to learn about alternative ways of earning equivalent credits without research participation.

**Participant Agreement:**

I have read over this consent form and understand what is being asked of me and what this study will require. I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study, and they have been answered for me. By signing below, I indicate my voluntary consent to participate in the research described above. I also agree to be interviewed in a group setting, be video and audio recorded, and have my data retained and used in future studies.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the pre-focus group form at <https://forms.gle/KJUArRCBYm9ruEhP6> to provide us with demographic information and help us schedule your focus group session.**

## Appendix D: Demographic Google Form

These demographic questions were completed through a Google form created from the study Gmail account (<https://forms.gle/KJUArRCBYm9ruEhP6>)

### Let's Talk About Love: A Study About Relationships (IRB # HS3730)

Thank you for your interest in this study! This study is being conducted by Sona Kaur (Psychology Ph.D. candidate and graduate student investigator) and supervised by Dr. Eileen Zurbriggen (Principal investigator).

We are interested in what you think about healthy and unhealthy relationships, how the media portrays relationships, and your direct or indirect experiences with relationships. You will receive a \$25 amazon.com gift card or 2 hours of research credit for participating in a 1.5-2 hour group session.

To help us get to know you better and to help us with scheduling the focus groups, please answer the questions on this form. Please note that your response to each question will remain confidential.

#### 1. Email

---

#### 2. Pseudonym (Fake Name)

We are asking each participant to come up with a pseudonym (a fake name) that the rest of the group members will refer to you by. This is to help ensure privacy in the group discussion. Make sure to remember this name on the day of your focus group. You will be asked to rename yourself on Zoom with this pseudonym as soon as you join the meeting. Please come up with a pseudonym now and type it here.

---

#### 3. Age:

---

#### 4. Which U.S. state do you currently live in?

---

#### 5. Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply)

- African American/Black/Caribbean
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Chicanx/Latinx
- Middle Eastern
- Native American/ Native Alaskan
- North African
- Pacific Islander
- East/Southeast Asian
- South Asian
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Are you currently a student?**

- Yes
- No

**7. If you are currently a student, what is your year in school?**

- Frosh/Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- 5<sup>th</sup> Year (or more)
- Graduate Student (including professional and doctoral degree programs)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**8. If you are currently a student, what is your major or program of study?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**9. What is your highest level of education?**

- No formal schooling or less than high school
- Some high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- Associate's degree (two year)
- Bachelor's degree (four year)
- Master's degree
- Professional degree (JD, MD, MBA)

- Doctoral degree (PhD, EdD, PsyD)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**10. What is your current relationship status?**

- Single and not dating
- Single and dating
- In a relationship
- Engaged
- Married
- Separated/Divorced
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**11. How would you describe your current level of dating and relationship experience?**

- No dating/relationship experience
- 1-2 relationships
- 3 or more relationships

**12. I have been exposed to relationship abuse, either directly (through personal experience) or indirectly (witnessing someone close to me experience abuse).**

- Yes
- No

**13. How did you hear about this study?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Availability**

Please provide your general availability to help us schedule the focus group sessions. Indicate what time blocks you are usually available from 9am-7pm for each day of the week (for example: Sunday: 9am-12pm; 3-5pm). Sessions will be scheduled for a 2-hour period. If you are not available on any particular day, please write "N/A." Details about your session will be sent to the email provided in this form.

**Sunday:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Monday:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Tuesday:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Wednesday:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Thursday:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Friday:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Saturday:** \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything else we should know regarding your availability?

\_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions, please contact Sona Kaur at [skau15@ucsc.edu](mailto:skau15@ucsc.edu) or at [relationship\\_study@ucsc.edu](mailto:relationship_study@ucsc.edu).

## **Appendix E: Debriefing Script/Statement**

Thank you for participating! Now that the discussion is over, I want to say a little more about the purpose of this research study. I am interested in how people define boundaries within relationships. Some of us may have different ideas of what we think is healthy, unhealthy, romantic, desirable, and normal in relationships, and I am curious about what kinds of things may affect these ideas. I am also curious about what role the media has played in shaping your ideas about relationships. Another question I am really interested in is how people respond to unhealthy relationship dynamics when these things are not obviously problematic and present alongside other forms of abuse that are considered more severe (like physical violence). My hunch is that when these dynamics are romanticized, we are less likely to think it is a problem. I also think that people might find certain types of dynamics—like jealousy, stalking, controlling behavior—more or less acceptable, so I will be exploring these in separate focus groups. Do you have any questions or comments for me? Or any thoughts on how to improve the group experience for future participants?

Great! I also want to ask you to forward our contact information and study flyer to any eligible and interested individuals you may know that would be willing to participate. However, please do not share the details of this study with others so that the research data will not be compromised.

I will be sending each of you an email with a resource and debrief sheet that will also have my contact information, the contact information for my PhD advisor, and UCSC's research ethics office. If this study brought up any anxiety, anger,



sadness, or anything else that you need to process, please reach out to one of the resources listed on the sheet. You can also contact me if you have questions or comments about the interview, but please note that I am not trained or licensed to provide mental healthcare.

You should also be getting an email with the code to your \$25 amazon.com gift card (unless you were recruited from the UCSC psychology subject pool). Please be on the lookout for these emails. Thank you again for your time today!

End session



Let's Talk About Love: A Study About Relationships  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The purpose of this study was to understand what people think is healthy, unhealthy, romantic, and normal behavior in relationships. We also wanted to know more about how media has shaped your ideas about relationships. Additionally, we wanted to explore how people responded to potentially abusive and unhealthy relationship dynamics that are presented as romantic, and whether people have had any experience with these types of dynamics themselves (or know anyone who has).

We ask that you assist in our research efforts by **NOT** sharing any information regarding the nature of this study to others. We are still collecting data for this study and want to prevent any future participants from having prior knowledge of the study to avoid compromising the data. If for some reason you were to share your experience participating, you can say that you took part in a study about dating and relationships.

As I had mentioned, the responses you provided in the discussion groups will be handled confidentially and we will not directly link these to you in any way. If you know of anyone else who might be eligible and interested in being a participant for this study, please do not hesitate to give them our contact information or study flyer!

Finally, we do not expect that you will experience any negative effects from your participation and believe that we have taken several measures to prevent this from happening. Regardless, if you experience any discomfort as a result of this study, please contact the graduate student investigator, Sona Kaur ([skau15@ucsc.edu](mailto:skau15@ucsc.edu)). You may also contact the faculty member and principal investigator supervising this work, Dr. Eileen Zurbruggen ([zurbrigg@ucsc.edu](mailto:zurbrigg@ucsc.edu)) or the Office of Research Compliance Administration at the University of California at Santa Cruz (831-459-1473, [orca@ucsc.edu](mailto:orca@ucsc.edu)) if you have any concerns about the study.

If you have experienced, are currently experiencing, or know someone who is experiencing relationship abuse, and you would like additional support, please refer to the resources provided in this email.

## Appendix F: IPV Resources

### LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE: A STUDY ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS RESOURCE SHEET

#### UCSC Campus & Santa Cruz Community Resources:

UCSC CARE Advocate Office:

- ❖ <https://care.ucsc.edu/>
- ❖ 831-502-2273

UCSC Title IX Office:

- ❖ <https://titleix.ucsc.edu/>
- ❖ 831-459-2462

UCSC Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS):

- ❖ <https://caps.ucsc.edu/>
- ❖ 831-459-2628

Walnut Avenue Family and Women's Center:

- ❖ <http://www.wafwc.org/domestic-violence>
- ❖ 1-866-269-2559 (24-hour bilingual domestic violence crisis hotline)

Monarch Services:

- ❖ <https://www.monarchsc.org/>
- ❖ 1-888-900-4232 (24-hour bilingual crisis line)

#### California State Resources:

California Title IX:

- ❖ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/di/eo/genequitytitleix.asp>

For a list of domestic violence organizations in California:

- ❖ <https://www.cpedv.org/domestic-violence-organizations-california>

#### National Resources:

loveisrespect:

- ❖ <https://www.loveisrespect.org>
- ❖ 1-866-331-9474 (to speak to peer advocate)

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN):

- ❖ <http://www.rainn.org/>
- ❖ 24-hour hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

National Domestic Violence Hotline:

- ❖ <https://www.thehotline.org/>
- ❖ 24-hour hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

## Appendix G: Vignettes

(Each focus group was given only one of these vignettes to respond to)

Lucas and Maya attend the same university, and Lucas has liked Maya for a while now. Lucas wants Maya to notice him so he enrolled in some classes he knows she will be taking. He also hangs out at Maya's favorite places downtown because he knows she'll be there. Lucas also learned when Maya takes her lunch breaks during work, and he tries to eat lunch at the same location during the same time as well. Maya realizes that she's often running into Lucas wherever she goes. During one of these instances, Lucas tells Maya that he figured out where she likes to go, hoping that eventually Maya would notice him. Lucas then asks a flattered Maya out on a date, and she accepts. (**surveillance**)

Lucas and Maya are acquaintances, and Lucas is romantically interested in Maya. Lucas often checks Maya's various social media accounts to learn more about her, checking for updates several times throughout the day. For instance, he has gone through her timeline and posts on Facebook and knows who she follows on Instagram. Lucas has learned a lot about Maya through her social media activity, such as her favorite places to eat and hangout and who her closest friends and family are, as well as details about their lives. Lucas tells Maya that he followed her on her social media to connect with her and get to know her more. This flatters Maya. Lucas then asks Maya out on a date, and she accepts. (**cybersurveillance**)

Lucas and Maya go to school together and are in some of the same classes. Lucas has liked Maya for several months now but has not asked her out yet. For the past five weeks, they have eaten lunch together after one of their classes. One day after class, Maya runs into a friend who asks her out to lunch. Maya asks Lucas if the friend can join them. Lucas tells Maya that he likes that it's "just the two of us" during lunch and that he doesn't want to share her with anyone else. Maya is flattered by how much Lucas likes her and tells her friend that she'll eat with them another time. Both head out to their usual lunch spot, where Lucas asks Maya out on an official dinner date and she accepts. **(isolation)**

Lucas and Maya have been casually flirting for several weeks. Lucas wants to date Maya but has yet to ask her out officially. They both attend a party with their respective friend groups, where Lucas notices another man getting close to and flirting with Maya. Lucas becomes upset, getting mad at Maya and becoming aggressive towards the other man. Maya is flattered that her talking to another man would upset Lucas this much because she realizes how much he likes her. Maya tries to calm Lucas down at the party, and after some time Lucas asks her out on a date, which she accepts. **(jealousy)**

Lucas has been consistently asking Maya out for the past three months, but Maya believes that she and Lucas are not compatible and thus she has been rejecting his advances. Lucas believes that "opposites attract," and he really likes Maya and thinks that their relationship can work, so he continues to ask her out in different ways.

Maya realizes that she likes that Lucas didn't give up and has continued to pursue her for several months no matter how many times she said "no" to him. Maya believes that Lucas really likes her and wants to date her, so she accepts his offer for a date the next time he asks. **(persistent pursuit)**

Lucas and Maya are friends, and Lucas wants to date Maya. He has been dropping hints to her for several months. Lucas has asked her out twice, and while Maya flirts back, she has not agreed to date him yet. Maya and Lucas are getting ready to attend a party together. Maya wears a dress she bought recently. Lucas prefers Maya not to wear the dress, telling her it is too revealing for the party and that he wouldn't want other guys to stare at her. Maya is flattered that Lucas doesn't want another guy's attention on her and realizes he is trying to protect her. She tells him this and then changes to an outfit that he picks. After the party, Lucas asks Maya on a date for the third time, which she accepts. **(possessiveness/control)**

## **Appendix H: Focus Group Discussion Guide**

This includes questions for all groups. Questions that are specific to each group depending on which abuse tactic (vignette) they responded to are indicated in bold.

### **Study Introduction**

Thank you all for being here today. Before we start and do introductions, please take a moment to rename yourself on Zoom to the pseudonym (fake name) you came up with for today's session, if you haven't already. This should be the same name you typed into the online demographic form you completed. If anyone wants to respond to you or ask you a question, they can do so by using this name. We've posted the instructions to rename yourself in the chat:

To rename yourself on Zoom:

- 1) Click on the "Participants" tab at the bottom of the Zoom screen
- 2) Hover over your name with your mouse
- 3) Click "More"
- 4) Click "Rename"
- 5) Enter in your fake name.

As a reminder, we will be using these fake names to help maintain privacy during these group sessions. These names will be used to help us later identify who is speaking at any given time when we review transcripts from the recorded session. Only these pseudonyms, instead of your real names, will appear in any study reports.

Before you respond to any question from here on out, please state this fake name first so we know who is speaking. If you forget, we will remind you to repeat this name.

Thanks! My name is Sona Kaur and I am the graduate student investigator for this study. My research focuses on gender socialization, intimate partner violence, and how these issues are portrayed in the media. (Have RA(s) introduce selves by sharing name, major, role during focus group sessions).

The goal of today's discussion is to hear what you all think about different relationship dynamics, setting boundaries within relationships, and what you find okay and acceptable in relationships—both for yourself and more generally. We're also interested in hearing how you learned about healthy vs. unhealthy relationships and what you think about how media portrays relationships. I will also be asking about your own experiences with certain types of relationships—whether you've directly experienced them or know someone who has.

Before we begin, I wanted to quickly go over some things:

- a. The discussion portion of today's session will take approximately 90 minutes. We will take a 5- minute break about halfway through in case anyone needs to stretch or use the bathroom.
- b. I will be asking some questions to get us talking, but I encourage you all to ask each other questions as well. We want this to be really interactive between everyone here. The goal of these sessions is not for me to take the lead and talk a lot, but really to hear from you all about your thoughts and observe your interactions with each other. So, let's work together to keep this conversation going. If you notice the conversation is quieting down, if you notice that not all



participants have shared their thoughts, or if you want someone to elaborate on a particular point, feel free to ask them questions.

- c. In our discussion, particularly when we are talking about unhealthy relationships, someone may bring up an abusive experience—either their own or that of someone they know. Please be supportive and respectful of each other's experiences. You may share as much or as little as you'd like in response to each question. There are no right or wrong answers. We hope you will feel comfortable sharing your views, even if they are different from another person's views. We are interested in multiple perspectives.
- d. Please note that if you disclose that you are currently perpetrating sexual or physical abuse against another person, we will report that to the police.
- e. If you don't feel comfortable answering a particular question, that is fine. You can skip any question that you want, but if we haven't heard from you for a few questions, we may check in and ask if you'd like to share anything. You can stop participating at any time. If this happens, you will still receive the \$25 gift card or 2 hours of research credit.
- f. This session will be video and audio recorded. There are always risks to conducting studies in a group setting, but we will take measures to protect your identity. Any recording files and data will be handled confidentially. Your video file will be deleted, and only the audio file will be used for transcription and analysis. We also ask for your help in maintaining confidentiality. Please don't share what was discussed in these sessions with anyone outside of today's group.

Please do not record or take photos of this session from another device. Respect each other's privacy. If you talk about a friend, family member, or someone else in the discussion, please don't say their real name to maintain their privacy.

Please also be careful not to state your own real name to maintain your own privacy. If you end up accidentally saying your real name, we will not include that in any study report.

- g. Give everyone a chance to talk. If we feel like you have shared a lot, we may ask you to wait to respond, in case others have anything to share. We'll need to work together to make sure we are not talking over others and only one person is speaking at a time. When you are not speaking, please make sure your audio is muted. Unmute if you would like to say something. You can also use the "Raise Hand" feature so we all can see who would like to say something. You can see who is unmuted or has raised their hand in the "Participants" window. Please keep this window open during the discussion. You do not need to wait for me to pick on you to speak. If you have a response to a question, simply unmute yourself and share what you have to say.
- h. Please be fully present during this time. Please do not multitask (e.g., no checking email or being on phone)
- i. Does anyone have any questions or other guidelines we should use to make sure today's session runs smoothly?

1. Now that you know a bit about us and this study, we want to hear from you. Let's begin with an icebreaker. We have two questions written in the chat. Please pick the one you like best and we'll go around and share out loud (not in the chat box). Please remember to state your fake name first.

- a. If you could be in any film, which would it be?
- b. Who would play you in a film?

### **Section 2: General beliefs about love and relationships**

**\*Note: These questions were only asked in focus groups 1-6**

Great, thank you for sharing. I will begin recording now.

Start Recording here

1. To start us off in our discussion, people have many different ideas about what a healthy vs. unhealthy romantic relationship is.
  - a. In your opinion, what does a healthy relationship look like?
    - i. Have you ever seen a healthy relationship like this? For instance, you may have been in a relationship that you thought was healthy or know someone whose relationship you thought was healthy. Describe what that looked like.
  - b. In your opinion, what does an unhealthy relationship look like?
    - i. Have you ever seen an unhealthy relationship like this? For instance, you may have been in a relationship that you thought

was unhealthy or know someone whose relationship you thought was unhealthy. What did that look like?

2. How do you think you came to have these beliefs about what an unhealthy or healthy relationship is?
  - a. Further probing: And when did you first begin thinking about relationships in this way? Was there a particular moment or experience where you had a realization about dating and relationships or made you pay more attention to them?
  - b. Further probing: Was there a specific moment that made you think, “That’s a healthy or unhealthy relationship”?
3. When thinking about the media, what is your favorite love story, couple, or relationship? This can be a relationship that you admire and may want for yourself. This can be in real life—like real life celebrity couples or something you’ve seen in a movie or a TV show romance.
  - a. What do you like about this love story/couple?
4. When thinking about the media, what is a love story, couple, or relationship that you dislike? This would be a relationship that you would not want for yourself. Again, this can be in real life—in terms of a celebrity couple or a movie/TV show romance.
  - a. What do you dislike about this love story/couple?

### **Section 3: Response questions to each vignette & characters**

Now we're going to switch gears a little bit. I'm going to be reading out a story that I'd like for us to discuss and share our thoughts about. This story has a male and female lead character— Lucas and Maya. The story is intentionally vague, so make all the assumptions you want about the characters and what is happening in the story.

(insert RA name here) will be sharing her screen now so we can all see the story about Lucas and Maya. Please follow along as I read aloud the story. If you need a few more minutes to review the story, just let me know. We will leave the story up through the screen share feature, so you'll be able to reference back to it throughout the discussion.

Read the story aloud, have participants follow along.

1. Now that we have each read this story, what are your overall thoughts/feelings about it? What do you think is happening in this story?
2. **(surveillance)** Pretend that what's happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive. You consistently run into a man that you find attractive at work, school, or just when you are hanging out. He tells you that he wanted you to notice him, so he figured out where you spend your time. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine that your partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

- a. Further probing: So, like Maya you keep running into this man that you find attractive everywhere you go. He tells you he was going to these places on purpose. He asks you out, which flatters you, and ultimately, you accept a date with him. Does this sound like how you would react?
- b. If you would have responded differently, what would that look like?

**(cybersurveillance)** Pretend that what's happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive. Someone that you think is attractive consistently goes on your social media like Lucas is in this story. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine that your partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

- a. Further probing: So, like Maya you find out that someone you are attracted to goes on your social media a lot. He tells you that he wanted to know more about you through your social media. You are flattered and accept a date from this man. Does this sound like how you would react?
- b. If you would have responded differently, what would that look like?

**(isolation)** Pretend that what's happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive. Someone that you

think is attractive prefers that most of the time, you spend time alone with each other without anyone else. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine that your partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

- a. Further probing: So, like Maya you ask this man that you are attracted to if one of your other friends can join you both for lunch. He says he prefers to spend time with you alone, which flatters you and ultimately, you accept a date with him. Does this sound like how you would react?
- b. If you would have responded differently, what would that look like?

**(jealousy)** Pretend that what's happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive and flirt with sometimes. This man gets upset when he sees another guy getting close to and flirting with you at a party. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine that your partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

- a. Further probing: So, like Maya you calm down this man who is upset and got aggressive at a party after seeing you around another man. You are flattered that he got upset, he asks you out, and you accept a date with him. Does this sound like how you would react?

- b. If you would have responded differently, what would that look like?

**(persistent pursuit)** Pretend that what's happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive. Someone that you think is attractive is consistently asking you out like this even though you've said "no" a few times. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine that your partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

- a. Further probing: So, like Maya you keep rejecting this man's advances because even though you find him attractive, you think you both are not compatible for some reason. He keeps asking you out, which makes you realize he does like you, and ultimately, you accept a date with him. Does this sound like how you would react?
- b. If you would have responded differently, what would that look like?

**(possessiveness/control)** Pretend that what's happening to Maya is really happening to you in real life, and Lucas is someone that you find attractive and flirt with sometimes. This person is telling you that they don't want you to wear a revealing dress to a party because he doesn't want other guys to stare at you. If you are in a relationship currently, you can even imagine



that your partner was acting like Lucas when you first met. How would you respond to this situation if it were happening to you?

- a. Further probing: So, like Maya you are friends with and flirt with this man but have not yet agreed to date him. You go to a party together, and he tells you to change into something less revealing because he doesn't want another guy's attention on you. You think he is being protective, feel flattered, wear something that he picks, and ultimately, you accept a date with him. Does this sound like how you would react?
  - b. If you would have responded differently, what would that look like?
3. Is there anything you like, or find romantic or desirable about the story or either character?
  4. Is there anything you dislike, or find unromantic or undesirable about the story or either character?
  5. Do you find this story realistic/normal? What is realistic (or unrealistic) about this story?
  6. Do you believe this situation is healthy? What is healthy (or unhealthy) about this situation?
  7. How do you think other women would respond to this story?
    - a. (Further probing): Do you think they would have responded in a similar way as Maya?

8. Thinking more generally, why do you think someone like Lucas would engage in this type of behavior?
- a. **(surveillance)** The story suggests that Lucas is consistently showing up where he expects Maya to be because he likes her and wants her to notice him. In your opinion, do you think Lucas' behavior indicates that he likes Maya? Why/why not?
- (cybersurveillance)** The story suggests that Lucas consistently goes on Maya's social media to get to know her more because he likes her. In your opinion, do you think Lucas' behavior indicates that he likes Maya? Why/why not?
- (isolation)** The story suggests that Lucas prefers spending time alone with Maya because he likes her. In your opinion, do you think Lucas' behavior indicates that he likes Maya? Why/why not?
- (jealousy)** The story suggests that Lucas gets upset seeing Maya around another man because he likes her. In your opinion, do you think Lucas' behavior indicates that he likes Maya? Why/why not?
- (persistent pursuit)** The story suggests that Lucas is consistently asking out Maya even though she has said "no" several times because he likes her. In your opinion, do you think Lucas' behavior indicates that he likes Maya? Why/why not?
- (possessiveness/control)** The story suggests that Lucas wants Maya to change before the party because he is being protective and because

he likes her. In your opinion, do you think Lucas' behavior indicates that he likes Maya? Why/why not?

9. Thinking more generally, why do you think someone like Maya would be flattered and accept a date in this situation?
10. Have you seen these kinds of dynamics portrayed in another context (e.g., in the media, someone that you know whose relationship looks like this, or maybe you have personally experienced these dynamics in your own relationships)? Please share how you can relate to the story, such as whether you have been in Maya or in Lucas' position.
  - a. What do you think is the impact of these kinds of relationship dynamics on women? Do you think women seek support from others when they experience these dynamics in their relationships? Why/why not?
  - b. Further probing:
    - a. What was the impact on the woman (if talking about media or another's relationship) OR what was the impact of this relationship on you (if talking about own experience)?
11. Do you have any other thoughts about the story?

## Section 4: Contextual Questions

### Phase of Relationship

1. Now we're going to change some details about the story. How would you respond to the story if Maya did not accept Lucas' date? In other words, pretend that everything in this story remained the same, but Maya did not accept Lucas' date. So, in this case, no future relationship was established.
  - a. If you found Lucas' actions even a little romantic before, would you still find them romantic even if Maya did not say "yes" to the date at the end? Why/why not?
  - b. Does your opinion of either Lucas or Maya change given this new situation?
  
2. **(surveillance)** Pretend that Lucas and Maya are now in a committed relationship. Lucas still enrolls in Maya's classes and tends to show up where he knows she'll be.  
**(cybersurveillance)** Pretend that Lucas and Maya are now in a committed relationship. Lucas still checks Maya's social media accounts throughout the day and sees what she is posting or liking online.  
**(isolation)** Pretend that Lucas and Maya are now in a committed relationship. Lucas still prefers that he and Maya eat and hang out by themselves without anyone else.  
**(jealousy)** Pretend that Lucas and Maya are now in a committed relationship. Lucas still gets upset when Maya is friendly with another guy and becomes

aggressive with other men at times. Maya often calms Lucas down in these situations, reminding him that she likes him.

**(possessiveness/control)** Pretend that Lucas and Maya are now in a committed relationship. Lucas still tells Maya to change clothes that he thinks are too revealing and will invite other men's attention.

a. What do you think about the situation?

**(surveillance)** Why does Lucas still go wherever he knows Maya will be?

**(cybersurveillance)** Why does Lucas still check Maya's social media like this?

**(isolation)** Why does Lucas still prefer to spend time with Maya alone?

**(jealousy)** Why does Lucas still get upset when Maya is around other guys?

**(possessiveness/control)** Why does Lucas still tell Maya to wear different clothing when in public?

b. Do you find this situation romantic?

c. Does your opinion of either Lucas or Maya change given this new situation?

d. **(surveillance)** Do you think Lucas still enrolling in Maya's classes and always going wherever she is expected to be suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(cybersurveillance)** Do you think Lucas still checking Maya's social media in this way suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(isolation)** Do you think Lucas still preferring that he and Maya spend time alone all the time suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(jealousy)** Do you think Lucas still getting upset and aggressive with other men because of Maya suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(possessiveness/control)** Do you think Lucas paying attention to Maya's clothing and wanting her to change to avoid male attention suggests he is protective of her and likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

3. **(surveillance)** Now pretend that Lucas and Maya have broken up, but Lucas still enrolls in Maya's classes and frequently goes where he knows she'll be.

**(cybersurveillance)** Now pretend that Lucas and Maya have broken up, but Lucas is still going on Maya's social media to see what she is up to.

**(isolation)** Now pretend that Lucas and Maya have broken up. Both have remained friends and still like to eat lunch together from time to time. Lucas still prefers that he and Maya eat alone and does not like it when Maya invites other people to hang out with them.

**(jealousy)** Now pretend that Lucas and Maya have broken up, but Lucas still gets upset when he sees Maya be friendly with another guy and becomes aggressive towards other men.

**(persistent pursuit)** Now pretend that Lucas and Maya have broken up, but Lucas is still trying to get Maya to get back together with him and is consistently asking her out, even though she's unsure whether they belong together.

**(possessiveness/control)** Now pretend that Lucas and Maya have broken up. They are not that close but remain cordial. When both are in the same setting and Lucas thinks Maya's clothing is too revealing and will invite male attention, he lets her know.

a. What do you think about the situation?

**(surveillance)** Why does Lucas still go wherever he knows Maya will be?

**(cybersurveillance)** Why is Lucas still checking Maya's social media in this way?

**(isolation)** Why does Lucas still get upset when others are around when he and Maya are hanging out?

**(jealousy)** Why does Lucas still get upset seeing Maya with other guys?

**(persistent pursuit)** Why does Lucas still keep asking Maya out?

**(possessiveness/control)** Why does Lucas still share his opinion with Maya about her clothing?

- b. Do you find this situation romantic?
- c. Does your opinion of either Lucas or Maya change given this new situation?
- d. **(surveillance)** Do you think Lucas still enrolling in Maya's classes and hanging out where she is expected to be, even though they are broken up, suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(cybersurveillance)** Do you think Lucas still checking Maya's social media in this way, even though they are broken up, suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(isolation)** Do you think Lucas getting upset when others are around when he and Maya are spending time together, even though they are broken up, suggests he still likes Maya? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(jealousy)** Do you think Lucas still getting upset and aggressive when he sees Maya be friendly with another guy, even though they are broken up, suggests he still likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

**(persistent pursuit)** Do you think that Lucas still asking Maya out, even though they are broken up, suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?



**(possessiveness/control)** Do you think Lucas still sharing his opinion about what Maya does, like the clothing she wears, suggests he likes her? If not, what does it suggest to you?

### Role Reversal

1. How would you respond to this story if Lucas and Maya's roles were reversed?

**(surveillance)** For instance, if Maya was the one who liked Lucas first, wanted him to notice her, hung out where he did in the hopes of running into him, and asked him out?

**(cybersurveillance)** For instance, if Maya was the one checking Lucas' social media throughout the day, learning about him based on what he posts or what pictures he is tagged in?

**(isolation)** For instance, if Maya was the one who wanted to always be with Lucas alone and didn't want others around when they were hanging out?

**(jealousy)** For instance, if Maya was the one who got upset and became aggressive because another girl was getting close to and flirting with Lucas?

**(persistent pursuit)** For instance, if Maya was the one who kept asking Lucas out and didn't give up on him even when he said he couldn't date her?

**(possessiveness/control)** For instance, if Maya was the one who was interested in and asking Lucas out, and tells him to wear something different to a party or do something different because she was afraid of the attention he would receive from other women?

- a. Would you find this new situation romantic? Why/why not?
- b. Does your opinion of either Lucas or Maya change given this new situation?
- c. **(surveillance)** Can you think of an example where a woman pursued a man in this way by hanging around places he went, spending time learning about him, telling him that she went to these lengths to get him to notice her, and then asking him out? This can be an example from the media or in real life.

**(cybersurveillance)** Can you think of an example where a woman was checking a male love interest's social media in this way? This can be an example from the media or in real life.

**(isolation)** Can you think of an example where a woman always wanted to be with her male love interest alone, and didn't like when others were around when they were together? This can be an example from the media or in real life.

**(jealousy)** Can you think of an example where a woman got upset in this way and became aggressive towards other women who were flirting with a man she was interested in? This can be an example from the media or in real life.

**(persistent pursuit)** Can you think of an example where a woman was pursuing a man in this way, by asking him out several times before he said "yes"? This can be an example from the media or in real life.

**(possessiveness/control)** Can you think of an example where a woman pursued a man in this way, and tried to get him to change his behavior to avoid receiving attention from other women? This can be an example from the media or in real life.

#### Additional Contexts

1. Is there any other context under which you believe your perceptions of the situation, or of Lucas or Maya, would change?

#### **Section 5: Closing**

1. We've talked a lot about what you think of relationships and where you draw the line between what's healthy and unhealthy in a relationship. If you had the power to change how we as a society think about dating, relationships, and love what would that look like?

End recording

## **Appendix I: Coding Manual**

### **Relationship Study Coding Manual**

This coding manual will be used to analyze focus group data from “Let’s Talk about Love: A Study about Relationships.” Responses that speak to how participants perceive the hypothetical vignette in each group (including the overall story and characters, Lucas and Maya) will be coded. Additionally, we will code responses to the question of what participants would like to change about dating and romantic situations.

#### **Primary Research Questions:**

- 1) Do women perceive potentially abusive and unhealthy relationship dynamics as acceptable and desirable when they are romanticized?
- 2) How do specific contextual factors shape perceptions of these dynamics? What explanations do participants give for the behavior/dynamic, and how do these vary by context?
  - Are women more likely to perceive certain types of relationship dynamics as romantic (e.g., jealousy vs. possessiveness)?
  - Are women more likely to perceive these dynamics as romantic when:
    - they occur during the courtship phase of the relationship (compared to when the relationship has been established, or when it has ended)?
    - enacted by a male pursuer (compared to a female pursuer)?
    - the pursuer is described as attractive?
- 3) What would participants change about how society thinks about dating, relationships, & love?

#### **Coding Guidelines:**

- We will primarily be coding written text from the transcripts for each focus group. When needed (e.g., if additional context would be helpful), you may listen to the focus group audio. For instance, it may be useful to hear participants’ tone of voice to determine what their response means, or the energy and interactions between participants to know how much they agree or disagree with each other.
- Code at both the semantic and latent level. This means that we will code the explicit content (semantic) and use additional context as needed (latent) to explore the underlying meaning behind responses. For instance, a participant may explicitly state they support survivors and believe women should be

empowered, but additional context would suggest that the participant is not expressing beliefs that empower women and survivors (e.g., if their tone of voice is judgmental of women who stay in unhealthy relationships).

- Multiple codes can be applied to the same text segment (e.g., a code of Common Occurrence, Romanticization, Empowering Women, and Conflicts/Contradictions can apply to the same response).
- Complete all coding in MAXQDA. All memos should be recorded in your MAXQDA coding file (see below).
- While coding each transcript, we will memo to capture ongoing thoughts, questions, and conclusions about the data. In these memos, include anything else that is interesting in the transcript or specific segment you are coding, including reactions to certain participants or interactions between participants, or anything about the overall focus group that seems relevant (e.g., tone of the group, overall impressions, similarities/differences/conflicts you share with participants, how well you relate to their personalities, experiences or the vignette and Lucas and Maya).
  - If you observe additional themes in the data around abuse, dating and relationships, gender roles, or any other relevant concepts that are not already captured in the manual, include it in the memo.
  - You can also include justifications for coding in these memos.
- Code for any presence of a code in responses—regardless of the magnitude of that code. For instance, a participant who describes a situation as unhealthy without further elaboration, and a participant who has stronger reactions to an unhealthy situation and provides much explanation can both be coded as “General Negative Reactions.”

### **Organizing Codes**

When possible, mark specific segments of text based on the following:

#### **Relationship phase:**

Organize participants’ responses to Lucas’ behavior and Maya’s reaction under the following contexts (or men & women in general, who are in these types of situations).

#### **No date accepted**

Code when participants respond to Maya not accepting Lucas’ date

### **Courtship phase (original vignette)**

Code when participants respond to initial vignette, where Lucas pursues Maya

### **Committed phase**

Code when participants respond to Maya & Lucas dating

### **Breakup phase**

Code when participants respond to Maya & Lucas being broken up

#### **Attractiveness:**

Code responses where participants reflect on how they would respond to Lucas' actions and the situation if they were in Maya's position (and Lucas is someone they find attractive)

#### **Support seeking:**

Code responses where participants are asked how women who are in unhealthy or difficult situations respond, how they are impacted, and whether Maya (or women like her) seek support when experiencing difficult relationships

#### **Role reversal:**

Code when participants respond to Maya engaging in the same behavior as Lucas (i.e., Maya is the pursuer, Lucas is on receiving end)

### **Normalization (Theme 1)**

#### **Common Occurrence (Code 1)**

Suggests the behavior or response to the behavior in question is typical/common in general (in terms of prevalence). Code when participants:

- Describe having personally experienced something like (or similar to) the vignette or know someone who has.
- Explain that the story in the vignette, including Lucas' behavior or Maya's response, is realistic. This suggests that Lucas and Maya's behaviors reflect real life dating behaviors
  - E.g., during courtship, it is common to spend time alone with partner without others and be in your own bubble--thus participants may not see this as an issue
- Indicate that certain behaviors are common to certain situations (e.g., they commonly occur at school, at a certain point in the relationship, etc).

#### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- "My friend had this same thing happen to her"
- "I read about a girl whose boyfriend stalked her then murdered her"

- “If we are talking about the college setting, this is pretty normal. I see the same people everyday and don’t think anything of it.”
- “I think this is realistic. I can see this happening in real life.”
- “I think in some cases things like this are normal. Like it’s just normal to see the same people at the same places if it’s a small town.”

### Romanticization (Code 2)

Code for romanticization any time participants perceive a specific dating/relationship behavior or dynamic positively, as desirable, or romantic, either for themselves, for Maya, or for others. Participants may see Lucas’ behavior as sweet or like it for another reason, or they may agree and identify with Maya’s response (e.g., they’d be flattered too). Code for this even if it’s only desirable in a certain context or phase of the relationship, or participants have otherwise negative reactions to the vignette. For instance, participants may romanticize based on:

- Sincere like (e.g., feeling the behavior in question suggests true liking or commitment)
- Relationship phase (e.g., overwhelming, exciting emotions associated during courtship, which prevents objective thinking)
- Being attracted to the pursuer
- Perceiving male protection positively

**Note:** There may be some overlap with this code and codes for explaining abuse/unhealthy behavior, as participants can simultaneously have negative and positive reactions to the same behavior (see conflicts/contradictions)

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “It’s romantic when a woman asks a man out because it doesn’t happen very often”
- “stalking shows that he’s invested in her”
- “she’s playing hard to get to see if he will stick around”- codes if participants suggest this means Maya is romanticizing/likes Lucas (despite not personally romanticizing it)

### **Don’t code:**

- Responses to ‘icebreaker’ questions, asking about favorite love stories, couples, or relationships in the media.

## **Explaining Abuse/Unhealthy Behavior (Theme 2)**

### Stereotypical Gender Roles (SGR) (Code 1)

Code when participants discuss normative, gendered behaviors or roles in dating/romantic situations. This includes responses suggesting that Lucas and Maya, or men and women more generally, act according to stereotypical and

expected/socialized roles. Code responses discussing broader cultural messages about dating and relationships (even if specific sources for those messages are not mentioned). Participants may describe how men and women have naturally gendered tendencies that are ingrained in their personalities/behaviors and internalized (e.g., men are naturally more aggressive, strong; women as harmless, emotional, low self-esteem). Responses about men and women being socialized differently also code here (e.g., women taught to be polite, issues setting boundaries, men as providers/initiators). SGR can look like benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, or general hostility/distrust between men and women (e.g., adversarial sexual beliefs). Additionally, responses may code if participants talk about how it is perceived negatively for women to enact traditionally masculine behaviors and roles and vice versa.

**Note:** Code responses even if participants rebuff SGR and perceive them negatively. As long as participants identify SGR to make sense of the vignette or dating interactions more generally, the code applies (e.g., participants can identify these roles, talk about how they are normalized by others, and also personally resist these).

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “He’s just doing what he’s been taught, and she’s also just doing what society has told her too.”
- “I know many people feel like they have to be in a relationship--that’s the message we get. Maybe that’s why she’s giving him a chance even though he’s being creepy”
- “I expect more from women, so I don’t think they should pursue men. I just know women are raised a certain way and held to a higher standard.” (subtle)

### **Don’t code:**

- Statements suggesting non-stereotypical gendered roles or expectations for women and men
  - “I wish that women asked men out more often”

### **Media (Code 2)**

Code anytime participants refer to the media when making sense of the vignette or dating/relationships more broadly. Responses that discuss media as a source of relationship beliefs/ behaviors or critiques of media and a desire for changes in media content code here. Additionally, participants may state that the vignette or characters remind them of media messages, or they believe they (or Lucas/Maya) may be influenced by media.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “I know the media is always romanticizing things like stalking. If Maya’s watching all of that and thinking this is normal, it’s no wonder she likes this.”



- “I think the media should portray relationships more realistically. They are not always rainbows and butterflies. We need to see more of that.”
- “I remember watching a movie that depicted this exact thing.”

### Appeasing Men (Code 3)

Code when participants say they would go along with Lucas (or men, in general) and not confront him/them (even if momentarily), while also expressing some discomfort with their behavior. Participants may talk about confronting the behavior later (or not at all). Appeasing can also be attributed to safety concerns (see below), though this is not necessary (e.g., can instead be due to just wanting to move on with the situation and it being convenient, being annoyed, not wanting to be rude, etc).

**Note:** may also overlap with Stereotypical Gender Roles and Conflicts/Contradictions

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Maya might be giving “soft no’s” because she’s worried about rejecting him directly.”
- “I’ve ghosted people before--it’s just easier in the moment and you feel like you don’t owe them anything if you don’t know them.”

### Safety Concerns/Needing Other Protections (Code 4)

Code when a response attributes Lucas, Maya, or men and women’s behavior as coming from a place of concern about being harmed or unsafe. This includes a fear of retaliation or danger, feeling threatened, or other discomfort with saying “no” to Lucas or disagreeing/rejecting him (or men in general). Additionally, participants may talk about various strategies to ensure safety and prevent harm while dealing with Lucas (or men like him).

**Note:** It is likely that Maya’s behavior (or women’s behavior, in general), will be discussed in regards to safety concerns, though responses may also suggest that Lucas, or men in general, can also be in unsafe situations

This may overlap with female burden (e.g., if focusing on all the steps women take to protect themselves against harm).

These concerns may also be more likely under certain circumstances (e.g., during gender role reversal, when a relationship is not established or is dissolved--though this is not necessary).

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “She may accept because she's afraid to say no”
- “Lucas may be stalking her because he’s just trying to protect himself and be prepared.”

- “Sometimes it’s easier to say yes in the moment because you don’t know how he’ll react”
- “I would worry and try to take steps to feel safe. I’d tell someone where I was going and with who, have my mace on hand, and know who to call if I needed to make a report.”

### Negative precedent (Code 5)

Code whenever participants express that Lucas’s behavior is habitual and may continue into the relationship or escalate and become more dangerous over time. Language such as “red flag” or “alarm bells” may indicate that the behavior is seen as a warning of potential danger and an abusive/violent relationship.

**Note:** This code may occur during any relationship phase, although most likely to occur during the Courtship Phase. Additionally, participants may bring in other types of unhealthy behaviors to explain how the situation may get worse (e.g., if the specific vignette being discussed is on isolation, participants may bring up how isolation can lead to stalking).

This code may overlap with safety concerns.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Maya must have ignored that warning sign from the beginning.”
- “Who knows what Lucas could be capable of later on?”
- “I’ve heard of stories where women stay in abusive relationships and end up getting killed by their partners.”
- “I wonder if this is a pattern for Lucas instead of just a one-time thing. If it’s one time, it can be forgiven.”

### **Don’t Code**

- When a participant says that Lucas’s behavior could continue in the future, but do not describe this as dangerous or problematic.

### Shyness/Lacking experience or maturity (Code 6)

Code anytime participants describe either Lucas or Maya, or people in general, enacting certain behaviors due to little dating or social experience (e.g., socially awkward, being a loner). This can further be attributed to younger age or a lack of healthy role models or other perspectives on dating/relationships (e.g., parents not having a healthy relationship for Lucas or Maya to look up to). Additionally, dating behaviors may be attributed to naivete and lacking the education or feminist ideals necessary to have healthy relationship beliefs.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Maya has never had this type of attention before. If she did she wouldn’t be so excited.”

- “I think people who haven’t been in a relationship before probably look more to the media.” (overlap with media code)
- “Lucas might not know any better. He might not have learned how to communicate his interest so this is all he knows. I think he’s just shy and nervous.”
- “When I was younger, I thought the same way, that him being jealous meant he had a crush on me. But now I know better.”

### **Insecurity/Lack of Trust (Code 7)**

Code anytime participants attribute either Lucas or Maya’s behavior (or people’s behavior, in general) to being insecure or lacking trust. The lack of trust could be in the other person or be more general (e.g., having trust issues). Insecurity can be a general insecurity or being insecure in the context described in the vignette.

#### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “He checks her social media a lot because he has been cheated on in the past”
- “He is jealous because he is insecure about their relationship”
- “Maya has low self-esteem. She probably doesn’t want to be alone.”

### **Sincere Like/Attraction (Code 8)**

Code when participants attribute Lucas’ behavior to him genuinely liking Maya (or men liking women), or Maya’s response to simply liking the behavior and enjoying it, or women in general liking the person enacting such behaviors. This suggests that people just have certain preferences for partners and enjoy particular relationship dynamics. Participants may also suggest that certain behaviors are more acceptable because the person enacting them is perceived as attractive.

**Note:** For this to code, participants must not express any sarcastic tone or judgment in their response. It must be clear that they truly believe people have certain preferences (and there’s nothing wrong with that, in their opinion).

#### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Obviously he is enjoying doing what he’s doing. Maybe he just wants to get to know Maya. He’s been taught to put in the work, and that’s fine.”
- “Everyone has their own preferences. It could be that she just likes it. She is flirting back.”
- “I think Lucas genuinely likes Maya. He may not be acting right, but he’s coming from a good place. I like his intentions.”

## **Conflicts/Contradictions (Theme 3)**

### **Conflict/Contradictions**

Code whenever a participant makes a statement that opposes or is inconsistent with another statement they made (either at the time or earlier in the discussion).

Participants may or may not be aware of the fact that they hold multiple opposing beliefs, and they may accept or struggle with this fact. Additionally, code whenever a participant's tone seems to conflict with what they are saying on the surface.

Ambivalence in responses, or some form of accepting the behavior or response to the behavior (with hesitation) can also code.

**Note:** Participants may not be aware they are contradicting themselves. You may need to look at what a participant says earlier in the discussion to realize they are contradicting themselves.

\*Always add conflict/contradiction code whenever false empowerment is coded

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- Finding Lucas' behavior romantic, while also finding issues with it (e.g., being scared, discomfort, but also flattered).
  - "I think he does like her. Why else would he be going after her like this? It is a bit uncomfortable though. I'm not sure how I'd feel about this, looking at it as an outsider. (overlap with romanticization, sincere like, general negative reactions)
- When participants feel conflicted about Lucas' behavior and are uncomfortable, but end up normalizing it
  - "It's a little weird, I'll admit. I guess I'd be hesitant and take things slowly cuz I'm creeped out. I'd give him a chance to explain. Maybe it's fine." (overlap with reluctance to name, general negative reactions)
- Statements that claim to be feminist on the surface but are actually judgmental of Maya
  - "I'm a feminist, so I think Maya should have stood up for herself and said 'no' more harshly."

### **Don't Code**

- When participants change their mind or opinion during the discussion
  - "Actually, after listening to you all speak, I changed my mind."
- When participants note how they can identify with Maya/Lucas and/or have engaged in specific behaviors before, but wouldn't do so today.
  - "Honestly, I've been like this. I used to think these things meant a guy liked me. But I don't think that anymore today. I wouldn't be flattered."

## Additional Codes

### Barriers to Support Seeking

Code anytime participants identify a barrier to support seeking for both women and men in unhealthy situations. This includes barriers to seeking informal support (e.g., friends/family) or more formal processes (e.g., filing a restraining order). Because many existing codes can help explain why people would not seek support, there may be some overlap between codes.

**Note:** This code can apply even if participants simply state that they (or people in general), would not seek support, without explaining why

#### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “I don’t think women would seek support for this. It’s so normalized that it wouldn’t even be seen as something to get help for.” (can overlap with normalization codes)
- “It’s hard to even see it being an issue in the first place. Especially in the beginning, when everything’s all nice and exciting and you like the person and attention you are getting” (overlap with romanticization, relationship context codes)
- “I didn’t ask for help when my ex was being controlling. I didn’t want people to say ‘I told you so.’ But also, I barely had anyone to talk to because I lost touch with everyone when I was with him.” (overlap with subtle victim blaming)
- “I think it’s easier for women to seek support than men. This kind of stuff is always minimized when men are experiencing it.” (overlap with stereotypical gender roles)

### Participant Recommendations

**Note:** Responses that code here will likely come from the last question of each focus group, where participants share what they would like to change about dating, relationships, and love in today’s society.

#### Communication

Code whenever participants suggest that better communication would improve relationships. This includes talking about feelings, being open or understanding, encouraging honesty, and working through conflicts with a partner. This includes when participants talk about relationships taking work to be successful.

#### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Men should be able to discuss their feelings”

- “You’re not always going to get along, you can have a disagreement and still be in a good relationship if you talk it through.”
- “I just wish people were more open and honest about what they want, what they need in a relationship.”

### Education

Code when the thing that needs to change or be improved is the lack or quality of education surrounding relationships and abuse. This would include education concerning forms of abuse less typically addressed, such as emotional abuse, as well as women being potential abusers. This can include better education and messaging from the media and from parents.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “I think that high schools should teach their students about healthy relationships.”
- “More parents need to talk to their children about how to avoid unhealthy relationships.”

### Expectations

Refers to expectations held by an individual, friends or family, or expectations perpetuated in the media, including the pressure to be in a relationship. This code might challenge ‘perfect’ portrayals of couples which are unrealistic, encourage presenting a real-life (rather than idealized) version of relationships on social media, or may present as a blaming of the media for giving false expectations. Additionally, participants may challenge the normalization and romanticization of unhealthy relationships by claiming expectations need to change.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Everyone wants that fairytale ending, but that’s not real”
- “People should know that there are many different types of relationships and ways to be in a relationship.”

### Self-care/Protection

Self care/protection refers to actions that an individual can take to be healthy, safe, and promote self-love and self-worth. Code whenever participants suggest an action such as maintaining friendships outside of the relationship, having appropriate boundaries, or working on/knowing oneself before entering a relationship. Also code when an action is taken with the goal of preventing emotional or physical harm in mind, including heeding red flag warnings and really knowing who your partner is. Responses suggesting that people should focus on themselves, and enjoy being single and avoid the pressure to be in relationships, can code here.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “It’s important to maintain your sense of individuality outside of your relationship.”
- “Women should trust their gut, since their date could turn out to be dangerous.”
- “It should be ok to be single”
- “I think that more women should know their worth and not let their partners treat them badly.”

### **Support for women**

Refers to when participants express the ways that more support for women is needed. These can be a specific or generalized statement about supporting women. Believing women survivors of abuse and/or violence would code here, as well as empowering women to be independent and autonomous within and outside of relationships.

### **Representative Hypothetical Examples**

- “Society should stop blaming women for getting into abusive relationships.”
- “It should be more okay for women to initiate relationships.”

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