Original Research

"Help Me Realize What I'm Becoming": Men's Views on Digital Interventions as a Way to Promote Early Help-Seeking for Use of Violence in Relationships

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major global issue with huge impacts on individuals, families, and communities. It is also a gendered problem, with the vast majority of IPV perpetrated by men. To date, interventions have primarily focused on victim/survivors; however, it is increasingly recognized that men's use of violence must also be addressed. Despite this, there remain limited options for doing this in practice. In most high-income countries, men's behavior change programs (MBCPs) or their equivalent are the typical referral pathway, with men often mandated to attend by the criminal justice system. Yet, these programs have limited evidence for their effectiveness and recidivism and dropouts are major challenges. Moreover, an entire subset of men—those uninvolved with criminal justice settings—remain under-serviced. It is clear that a critical gap remains around early

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engagement with men using violence in relationships. This study explores the potential for digital interventions (websites or apps) to fill this gap through qualitative analysis of data from focus groups with 21 men attending MBCPs in Victoria, Australia. Overall, we interpreted men's perceptions of digital interventions as being able to facilitate connection with the "better man inside," with four sub-themes: (a) Don't jump down my throat straight away; (b) Help me realize what I'm becoming; (c) Seeing a change in my future; and (d) Make it simple and accessible. The findings of this study suggest that there is strong potential for digital interventions to engage early with men using IPV, but also some key challenges. Websites or apps can provide a safe, private space for men to reflect on their behavior and its consequences; however, the lack of interpersonal interaction can make it challenging to balance non-judgmental engagement with accountability. These issues should be considered when designing digital interventions for men using violence in relationships.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major global health and social issue (World Health Organization, 2013, 2021). Defined as any behavior by a current or former partner that causes physical, psychological, sexual or financial harm, it is characterized by patterns of fear and control (Stark, 2007) and is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in victims (World Health Organization, 2013). Although IPV is not exclusively gendered, on a global level, the vast majority has been reported as violence perpetrated by men against their female partners (World Health Organization, 2013) or in same-sex relationships (Jeffries & Ball, 2008; Oringher & Samuelson, 2011). Thus, although debates are still ongoing in regards to the drivers of IPV, it has been primarily understood as an issue related to problematic concepts of masculinity (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Oringher & Samuelson, 2011; Seymour et al., 2021), patriarchal values (Hunnicut, 2009; Tonsing & Tonsing, 2019), and deeply embedded gendered social norms (Forsdike et al., 2018).

Despite increasing attention to the issue of men's use of violence in relationships, progress in reducing its prevalence has been slow (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). There is a lack of evidence to support effectiveness of interventions for men's use of IPV (Arce et al., 2020; Grealy

& Wallace, 2013; Westmarland et al., 2010) relative to the number of interventions targeting victim/survivors (El Morr & Layal, 2020). The primary avenue for addressing men's violence in Australia and in other high-income settings has been "men's behavior change programs" (MBCPs) or their equivalent, into which men are often mandated after contact with the criminal justice system. These programs—which involve facilitated group sessions based on cognitive behavioral therapy (Smedslund et al., 2007) or feminist frameworks (Babcock et al., 2004)—typically focus on four main areas: (a) encouraging men to take responsibility for their use of violence, (b) changing harmful attitudes and beliefs, (c) development of empathy for the partner and children, and (d) development of skills for management of anger and other emotions (Velonis et al., 2020). These areas are based on the available evidence, yet, MBCPs have demonstrated mixed results, with some men desisting from using violence while others do not (Arce et al., 2020; McGinn et al., 2017). Lack of motivation and early dropouts are major issues (McGinn et al., 2017) and many men are highly resistant to attending MBCPs. Some are dealing with multiple complex issues that impede progress such as mental health conditions or alcohol and substance misuse (Morrison et al., 2018; Tarzia et al., 2020). Some researchers (Edin & Nilsson, 2014; Seymour et al., 2021) have even suggested that the format of the MBCP itself may be problematic, arguing that the pressure to "live up to" program or facilitators' expectations may lead men to attempt to avoid shame and approach their use of violence in ways that are unhelpful.

Recent research has acknowledged that change for men who use violence is extremely complex (Downes et al., 2019; Seymour et al., 2021). Indeed, there is no one universally accepted explanation for why individual men use violence in their intimate relationships or why it is so challenging to motivate them to stop. However, research does consistently indicate that men who *choose* to participate in a MBCP are more likely to succeed at making lasting change than those who are obligated to attend (McGinn et al., 2017). This suggests that self-motivation may be a key driving factor. Unfortunately, the evidence base for how to engage men in the community or health settings— who may be ready to voluntarily seek help—is weak (Tarzia et al., 2020), and there are no guidelines to support non-specialist service providers in encouraging or motivating change (Mousaco et al., 2019). This is a critical gap given that men in the community who have some awareness or insight into their abusive behavior could potentially be encouraged to seek help before violence escalates. Indeed, experts have argued that new, earlier pathways to help-seeking are urgently needed for men using violence in addition to MBCPs (Vlais et al., 2017).

In the context of IPV, technology has shown promise in promoting early help-seeking among women victim/survivors (Hegarty et al., 2019; Koziol-McLain et al., 2018; Tarzia et al., 2017). Interventions delivered via interactive websites or smartphone apps ("digital interventions") have been perceived positively by women experiencing violence (Tarzia et al., 2017, 2018), since they offer anonymity and privacy, as well as being accessible anywhere and at any time. Research by the authors suggest that even without input from a practitioner or other service provider, digital interventions can successfully raise awareness about abusive behaviors, help women make decisions about their relationship, and make them feel more supported (Hegarty et al., 2019; Tarzia et al., 2018). In other words, there is some evidence that digital interventions can be effective as a form of early engagement and function as a critical link between beginning to realize there is a problem and actually accessing specialist services. Naturally, there are also challenges associated with this form of support, including data security, inequities around access, the risk of seeming impersonal, and the inability to tailor responses to the individual nuances of women's circumstances and needs (Emezue, 2020; Tarzia et al., 2018). These problems, however, can be overcome with careful planning and survivor-centered design principles (Emezue, 2020).

Given the emerging evidence that digital interventions can be beneficial to victim/survivors, it is plausible to hypothesize that digital interventions could similarly shift men using violence from early awareness of their own behavioral problems towards active help-seeking. Yet, to date this potential remains largely unexplored. Indeed, the digital landscape is almost completely empty of interventions of any description for men who use violence. This dearth is clearly not related to men's reluctance to use digital interventions in general, since a substantial body of evidence supports their use in male-only populations, even for sensitive issues such as alcohol misuse, sexually transmitted infections (Nguyen et al., 2020), mental health problems (Drew et al., 2020; Hollis et al., 2015; Linke et al., 2008) and dating violence victimization (Emezue et al., 2022). We suggest that one reason for the lack of digital interventions in the perpetration space could be the perception of men's violence in relationships as a criminal justice issue alone, and that, by extension, digital interventions would be either useless or unsafe. Indeed, it is unlikely that using a website or app could prevent an extremely violent man from abusing his intimate partner. Yet, it is important to note that the vast majority of men using violence in relationships will never engage with the criminal justice system (Tarzia et al., 2020; Vlais et al., 2017) and, furthermore, that many men *are* willing to change their behavior. For these men, there is clear potential for digital interventions to function as a stepping-stone between an initial concern about their relationships and reaching out to specialist services,

similar to the awareness-raising role they played for victim/survivors (Hegarty et al., 2019). Studies suggest that there are numerous barriers to men's early help-seeking for their use of violence, including a lack of awareness that their behavior is "abusive," a tendency to wait until it is "too late" before seeking support, and the belief that help-seeking is incompatible with being a "real man" (Emezue et al., 2022; Forsdike et al., 2018). Digital interventions—if appropriately designed and carefully developed using the "right" messaging and language—could be a way to overcome some of these barriers.

In order to ensure that these critical elements of design and content are achieved, the voices of men who have used violence in relationships must be heard. McGinn et al. (2017) have argued that there is a dearth of men's voices in research around effective interventions; this is particularly the case around interventions that seek to engage men earlier in their trajectory of using IPV (Forsdike et al., 2018). Addressing this gap, in this paper, we report qualitative data from focus groups undertaken with men attending MBCPs in Victoria, Australia, to gain insight into their views on whether and how digital interventions could be used in the context of IPV to engage men earlier in help-seeking. Our research question for the study was: How do men attending MBCPs perceive the use of digital interventions as a way of engaging men early for their use of IPV?

Our approach to this topic was inevitably shaped by our theoretical understandings of men's use of IPV as a "wicked" problem (Young-Wolff et al., 2016). From this perspective, men's use of violence results from a complex array of intersecting individual, relational, community, and societal factors (Heise, 1998). These include, but are not limited to, gendered norms that associate masculinity with power and dominance; structures, laws, and policies that typically afford men greater status and resources compared to women; community attitudes that support the use of violence; gendered roles and dynamics within relationships; men's individual psychological and developmental histories; and psychosocial issues such as alcohol or substance misuse and the impacts of inter-generational or institutional trauma (Gibbs et al., 2020). We recognize that there are ongoing debates in this space about the "right" theoretical standpoint from which to best understand men's violence in relationships and acknowledge that this is a field that is still evolving.

Methods

Data were collected as part of the formative stages of a larger project aiming to develop a healthy relationship mobile-ready website for men who use violence and abuse in intimate relationships. Although the broader project

focuses on the development of a specific intervention, this initial qualitative phase of the study was exploratory in nature. We sought to determine the acceptability of digital interventions aimed at reducing men's violence in relationships *generally*, rather than seeking their views on specific elements of our intervention (which at the time was still in development).

Participants

The sample consisted of 21 men aged from 20 to 65 years, who had used violence and abuse in intimate relationships and had engaged in a MBCP. There were two main reasons for the use of MBCP participants in the study. First, we needed to access men who had already engaged in the process of change (to some extent), so that they could reflect back on what would have helped them earlier in their journey. Second, accessing men via MBCPs was perceived as a "safer" option for the research team, since we would be working with participants in a controlled environment and who at least had some insight into their own behavior.

The demographic profile of participants is reported below in the Results section.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were recruited via collaborations with two community health service partners who provide MBCPs. One service is located in suburban Melbourne, while the other is located in an outer suburb on the urban fringe. Both services' MBCP programs involve weekly group sessions over approximately 20 weeks. As per the standards set out by the State of Victoria, the programs are informed by a model focused on accountability, challenging men's use of violence and keeping women and children safe.

Focus groups were chosen as the method of data collection. This was partly for practical reasons and partly to facilitate discussion of ideas and perceptions with a group rather than being interviewed individually (Kitzinger, 1994). The men had already experienced group-based discussions as part of a MBCP; they were consequently already accustomed to speaking openly and providing in-depth opinions on the topic of violence and abuse in relationships in front of other men (Wellings et al., 2000).

The two focus groups were composed of men at quite different stages of change. In the first focus group, participants had all completed a 20-week MBCP but were still in contact with the service. While for some participants, it had been a number of years since they had completed the program, others had completed in the last year. Our contact person at the partner service

arranged to send out copies of the study information sheet and consent form. Interested men who were available at the scheduled time were invited to participate.

The second group were made up of men actively attending a MBCP, most of whom had completed at least half of the sessions. Men were informed by their program facilitators about the study and provided with the information sheet to review in their own time. The group discussed the project and any men who had concerns about participating were able to raise these. The group agreed to take part in the focus group as one of their weekly sessions and the researchers were invited to attend.

The two focus groups were held at the usual locations of the respective MBCPs. Each participant was provided with a consent form to sign prior to commencement of the focus group, and a brief survey which consisted of demographic questions. The focus groups were semi-structured in style, with some predetermined questions but also flexibility to explore topics and discussion points as they arose. The facilitators asked an initial question which was: "What do you think about the idea of using a website or app to encourage men who might be using violence in a relationship to get help earlier?" This was followed up with questions that asked men to reflect back on their time prior to attending the MBCP, exploring how a website or app could resonate with their early concerns about their behavior in relationships. The full interview guide is included as a Supplementary file, but in brief, discussion topics covered men's perspectives and opinions about the idea of using a hypothetical website or app to encourage help-seeking behaviors; facilitators and barriers to using a website or app; language and words needed to encourage men to seek-help early and critical elements to include in a digital intervention designed to help men using violence seek support early. Our focus was very much on the use of digital interventions as a form of early engagement (once violence has already started) rather than prevention (before any violence occurs).

Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 90 min and was jointly facilitated by a research member (MH) and MBCP mentor, with another researcher (MA) taking notes. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcribing service, which followed strict confidentiality protocols.

Ethical Considerations

The research topic had the potential to elicit distress and/or discomfort. To alleviate this, the research team developed resource cards, distress, and safety protocols as guided by best-practice standards for MBCPs and trauma-informed

care. In addition, the research team members leading the focus group discussions were joined by facilitators of MBCPs at each site to provide support to both participants and the research team.

The researchers made clear that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and would in no way affect the participants' standing in the MBCP. Men who did not wish to participate could have attended the session as observers, although none took up this option. Despite these precautions, we acknowledge that some men may nonetheless have felt obliged to participate in the sessions to avoid being perceived as "resistant" by the group facilitators. It is important to note that the topic and questions being asked about hypothetical digital interventions did not require the participants to divulge sensitive information. The researchers made it clear that the focus group was a non-judgmental space in which negative opinions about the topic were welcomed and that we wanted to hear their voices and opinions. The study received ethics approval from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee [#1750502.1].

Data Analysis

We analyzed the focus group data thematically, using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive approach. Authors 1 and 2 led the coding process, familiarizing themselves with the focus group discussions by reading the transcripts, coding the transcripts (facilitated by using NVivo software), and developing codes into themes that reflected core patterns in the data relevant to our research question. They then refined the initial themes by returning to the coded transcripts to ensure the themes were grounded in the data. Finally, they listened to the audio to confirm that themes represented the contributions of a range of focus group participants. Once a full draft of the analysis had been developed by Authors 1 and 2, the team met together to discuss and refine the themes and critically reflect on whether they told a meaningful story about the data.

Reflexive thematic analysis is an ideal approach for topics where little is currently known (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Indeed, since this is the first such study worldwide, there is very little prior literature in which to situate our findings. Elsewhere (Forsdike et al., 2018), we have used frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explore the broader topic of men's help-seeking for their use of violence, however, here our aim was to specifically explore their perceptions about seeking help using digital interventions. We thus took an inductive, data-driven approach rather than using a theoretical framework to shape the analysis.

The authors' academic training includes sociology, health and violence, psychology, and social work. Two authors (KH and MM) have clinical/practice expertise in responding to IPV; MA has a background in working

directly with men using violence and MH has worked with men and families. Our approach to analysis was shaped by these disciplinary and practice backgrounds. Additionally, author MH has extensive cross-cultural experience as a person from a migrant background. Given that our disciplines are based in the health and social sciences (as opposed to criminology or law), we hold the view that it is important to engage with men earlier than the criminal justice system.

Results

Twenty-one men participated across the two focus groups (11 in one and 10 in the other). The mean age of participants was 42 years in both groups (range 20–65 years). Thirteen were married or in a de facto relationship and 12 had children under 18 years of age. Group 1 had 7/11 men in current employment and 5 who had not completed year 12 (final year of secondary schooling in Australia) compared to group 2 where 10/10 men were in current employment and 2 had not completed year 12. Across the two groups, 11 men had completed a university or technical qualification. A range of occupations were represented within the sample including construction worker, sales representative, business owner, laborer, electrician, and civil engineer.

Our findings strongly support the potential for digital interventions to promote early engagement with men using violence in relationships. Overall, we interpreted men's perceptions of digital interventions as being able to *facilitate connection with the "better man" inside*. Within this overarching theme, four sub-themes were described which are outlined below with supporting quotations from participants: (a) Don't jump down my throat straightaway; (b) Help me realize what I'm becoming; (c) Seeing a change in my future, and (d) Make it simple and accessible.

Don't Jump Down My Throat Straightaway

This theme outlines the importance of digital interventions tapping into men's current headspace and level of awareness rather than trying to challenge or confront them about their behavior before they are ready. This was perceived as being particularly critical in the initial stages of engagement. For example, the participants in this study suggested that the language used on a website's landing page needed to target broader concerns about stress or relationships rather than referring to violence or abuse:

> It might be: "Are you on struggle street again? Do you need some help? Is it money? Is it the wife? Is it the girlfriend? Is it the job? Is it alcohol? It is drugs? Any of these going on for you?" I might go, okay (FG 1).

[Asking] "Are you worried about your relationship?" is good. . . it's not asking, "Are you abusive? Are you violent?" (FG 2).

[Asking] "What do you want to fix? Less stress, less anxious, sleep better at night, whatever" (FG 2).

Participants agreed that men who used IPV typically believed that their problems were caused by others. They pointed out that men might have a "feeling that something might be wrong" (FG 1) and were often unhappy about their lives and relationships. Therefore, if a website/app was going to get their attention, it needed to use language that acknowledged these feelings of unhappiness and frustration. For instance, one participant said he would not have been receptive to a digital intervention that focused immediately on his own communication with his partner or how his partner was affected by his behavior. He said:

. . .I would be more receptive to being tapped into where my head space is at that point in time. My head space isn't in [men's behaviour change] program stuff. My head space is: "God my life is miserable and why are they [partner] making it that way?" (FG 1).

Participants suggested men might be engaged if the website/app targeted their feelings, by including questions like "How do you feel at home?" and "Are you angry and frustrated?" (FG 1). They also recommended tapping into men's perceptions of not being appreciated by their partner. For example, one said:

. . . I'm thinking about words like "respect" and "appreciation" because again, I came into this space as a victim. "Do you feel like you're not being appreciated at home? Find out why you're not being respected or why you're not feeling appreciated." Stuff like that, because all that [disrespect] was me committing family violence at home. Not realising, because I didn't know what it actually was—but that's what led to disrespect and a lack of appreciation and a lack of intimacy physically or emotionally (FG 1).

Men in this study felt that the process of engaging with men using violence needed to be gradual. They suggested that a website or app should first establish comfort before attempting to shift men's thinking about their behavior. Asking questions about men's use of violence too early in the user journey was perceived as being potentially confronting and disengaging; rather, the "hard stuff should come later" (FG 2). The men felt that if a digital intervention was able to overcome that initial hurdle, there would be a much greater chance of getting users to reflect on their behavior.

[You] can't jump down their throats straight away (FG 1).

Once you get them in there, I think unless they—pardon my French, unless they're total arseholes, something's got to sink in, but it's getting them there right at the beginning (FG 1).

Participants pointed out that many men using violence were in denial about their behavior and did not label themselves as "abusive." They were clear that digital interventions obviously targeting "someone who beats on his wife" (FG 2) would be unlikely to be taken up or utilized.

A lot of people . . . are probably pretty ignorant to the fact of what has transpired in their relationship, or whatever reason they're in here. I know I wouldn't, I wouldn't really just go in and identify that I have done anything wrong and download an app because I think I have an issue. (FG 2)

Similarly, the following exchange between participants in Focus Group 1 highlights how men might respond to a digital intervention that is overtly addressing "violence":

Participant 1: . . .you go, "But I don't hit my wife!"
Participant 2: Not me.
Participant 1 : . . .that's not [for] me (FG 1).

Participants across the two focus groups felt that a website/app ought to address men's self-interest rather than emphasizing the impacts of their behavior on those around them. Thinking back on their own experiences prior to engaging with a MBCP, participants agreed that they had rarely reflected on how their behavior was affecting their family members. Instead, they had been focused on themselves, as this exchange from Focus Group 1 demonstrates:

Facilitator: So how often were you blokes thinking of that flow on effect other people's lives in that early stage? Were you thinking about it?
Participant 1: No.
Participant 2: No.
Facilitator: . . ..at that point, what are you thinking about?
Participant 1: Self.
Participant 2: Self.
Participant 3: Self.
Participant 4: Yeah.

Help Me Realize What I'm Becoming

A strong theme throughout the data was that a digital intervention needed to be able to raise awareness for men about where their behavior might be headed. Many of the participants felt that a website/app could play a key role in helping men to recognize their abuse before it escalated.

> We've got to grab them before they hit their wife, their partner, whoever it may be or their kids or they do something in the community that, you know. . . We've got to be able to stop them getting to that stage. We've got to grab their attention. Let's help them realise this is the person that they are, or they are becoming and it's not what society is going to accept nowadays, you know. (FG 1)

> If that [website] had been there, I think I would have had a better understanding of what I was guilty of earlier on and I wouldn't have. . .escalated and I probably wouldn't have ended up in front of court. (FG 1)

One recommendation for raising awareness was to include a self-assessment tool that enabled men to recognize their problematic thoughts or behaviors (and, if applicable, the urgency of taking action). A self-assessment that listed potential abusive behaviors without necessarily labeling them was perceived as being a way for men to "slowly but surely think about their behavior" (FG 1) and "see that there might be a problem" (FG 2).

> That'd be important in [sic] having some sort of assessment on it when you go in that gives you an understanding of where your level is. . .It might recommend that you access a face-to-face service as a priority or if you think you're starting to escalate. (FG 1)

> You answer a few questions and it'll give you a fair, broad-spectrum answer. Like, oh yeah, I have stood too close to my wife, yes, I have answered that. Yes, oh yeah, I did slam the remote control down. I did break a toy. (FG 2)

By using a self-assessment as part of a digital intervention, participants suggested that it might be easier for men using violence to spot the patterns in their own behavior. As one participant noted, there was a tendency for men to frame their behavior as a single incident of violence (e.g., in response to a "provocation") rather than an ongoing problem:

> It's [about] getting people to realise that it's an ongoing behaviour, rather than a one-off, "Oh I just blew my stack, but I'm okay. It won't happen again" (FG 2).

While some participants suggested that a website or app could draw men in by engaging with their sense of self-interest, many also felt that once a man

was using the digital intervention, an effective strategy could be to activate their emotional concerns about how their behavior was affecting their children. It was perceived that focusing on children was more likely to trigger an emotional response then the impact on their partner:

> A lot of dads would be worried that they've upset their kids more than their wife (FG 2).

> I know it's a bit of a—I don't want to say shot in the nuts but it can hit between the eyes, certainly hit a bloke's heart. You know, when there's a problem, do the kids come to you or is it straight to Mum? Do your kids trust you? Are you doing the wrong thing by them?. . .Straight away, that'd do my head in [if a website asked that]. I'd be like wow, okay, I need to have this conversation (FG 1).

To motivate men to change, participants suggested that a website/app should emphasize the potential personal consequences for men who continue to use violence in relationships. These included the legal and social consequences, as well as potentially losing their relationship with their partner and children. Participants believed that emphasizing the consequences might successfully shock men out of inaction:

> If I had been able to access something that could have avoided that [using violence] and the legal fees that go with it and the criminal record that goes with it and the punishment that goes with it and the loss of my occupation that went with it, then maybe that's a good starting point for selling it. . ..[The website should say] "This is what can happen. So, if you think you've got an issue, you probably have got an issue but do something about it before it spirals, because all of a sudden, you'll be on the wrong end of a stick" (FG 1).

> It's not. . .saying, "You've done this," or "You are this," it's saying, "These are the impacts, the broken relationships, the children were scared" (FG 2).

Seeing A Change in My Future

The men in this study consistently stated that a digital intervention needed to provide support, help and hope that the user could change their behavior in the future. Participants in the focus groups acknowledged that many men who use violence are unhappy and feel that there is no way forward. As one participant described it:

> I've hit rock bottom and I'm reaching out. [An intervention needs to] drag me out of this abyss and help me climb. (FG 1)

Although participants acknowledged the potential utility of "shocking" men into action by highlighting the consequences of using violence, they also stated that a website or app should avoid *only* focusing on the negative repercussions, as this could risk exacerbating men's feelings of unhappiness and make them feel that trying to change was pointless. For instance, participants in Focus Group 2 commented that:

> For me the big thing is keeping it positive. Like we said, you don't want people clicking on there and just making them feel bad about themselves.. . .. Men that go in there [are] hoping to get something out of it, so then you really have sell that to them . . . It has to be positive. It's like saying I want to lose weight, they go onto an app and it's depressing, they may as well just give up straight away. It's the same thing with this. (FG 2)

> This is an app that's going to educate me in some way about maybe being a better person, or a self-learning experience, as opposed to a slap on the wrist. (FG 2)

Another bluntly stated that, "Once you think that you're a bad person you don't want a bar of it [intervention]" (FG 2).

The men in this study strongly felt that a digital intervention ought to provide a sense that change was possible and achievable, as illustrated by the below exchange:

> Facilitator: . . . How should this website make men feel when they use it?
> Participant: That there's hope (FG 1)

At the same time, participants acknowledged that digital interventions also needed to shift the victim mentality that men often have. They suggested that it should highlight men's accountability and the need to put in effort in order to change:

> Participant 1: You don't want to go in there with a victim's mentality. Because I came in here [to the MBCP] with one of those and it doesn't serve you. I think it . . . needs to be—you need to see that there's a change in the future if you want it, but you need to realise straight away that what you're doing isn't acceptable.
> Participant 2: And that there's work involved and commitment to that work . . .
> Participant 1: You only get out what you put in (FG 1).

In reflecting on how to motivate men to change, the discussion among participants focused on the masculine identity-related benefits of ending

abusive behavior. These benefits included being respected by male peers and being in control of their decisions. Participants felt that a digital intervention could encourage men to reflect on the kind of man they wanted to be and how they wanted others to perceive them:

> You can possibly hit a bloke within an app to make him think about who I want to be . . . Do I want to be the idiot. . . making the person I'm supposed to care about. . .feel like a piece of shit? Or do I want to be one of the blokes around the table who's brave enough to say "Mate, you are a dickhead and you need to have a good hard look at yourself"? (FG 1).

Offering hope of becoming a "better man" was perceived as an important function for a digital intervention. A key strategy for conveying this sense of hope was through the inclusion of stories from other men who had used violence and had successfully changed their behavior. The benefits of stories were that men could recognize their own abusive behavior by relating to other men's experiences, which could function as "part of the catalyst" for change (FG 2).

Make It Simple and Accessible

Men in the focus groups spoke about their reluctance to access some face-to-face services due to concerns about incriminating themselves. This highlighted a clear potential for digital interventions to provide a private space where men can assess and reflect on their behavior without having to directly engage in a discussion about it.

> It's a bit scary because you don't want to incriminate yourself. Even if you do realise, "I'm committing offences" or whatever, you're not going to sort of walk in and go, "I need some help". I wouldn't [do it] because I'd think they'll grab me. I'm going to end up in trouble here. So a website's good because it'll be an anonymous thing. (FG 2)

> [You can] take it [a digital intervention] somewhere very private, you don't have to tell anyone about it (FG 2).

However, at the same time, participants noted that most men were busy and had little private time to engage with a digital intervention. Given that they might only have a moment to look at it—which participants suggested might be the length of a cup of coffee or the length of a cigarette—it was critical that a website/app not present any barriers to access. For example, many participants emphasized that a digital intervention would need to utilize simple, everyday language in order to be accessible to the greatest number of men.

Some participants felt that the language and terminology used by professional services (such as MBCPs) could be alienating and that an intervention should avoid this for men who had not yet been exposed to "the system" (FG 2).

> Just simplify it. Because. . .there are going to be people who look at this app who are going to be university educated with PhDs and there's going to be blokes who have not even finished Year 9 and can't read and they're going to see a picture of a family with family life written over it and they're going to get [understand] what [it's] talking about (FG 1).

> One of the struggles I had when I first started this journey was the use of language. What the professionals were using, and what my wife and I were using [was very different]. . . you'd get really confused because that is one word and they think it meant that, and we think it meant [something else] (FG 2).

In addition to the use of language, not overwhelming the user with too many choices or potential pathways through the intervention was identified as another key part of achieving a simple user interface:

> It [digital intervention] needs to be nice and simple. . .you've got three options, which one am I going to do? There's not so much there that you're going to go ugh. . .[groans] (FG 1).

There was also a perception that different formats of digital intervention might need to be used to cater to both the older and younger generations.

> I think if you've got an app, you've got to have a website and they both work hand in hand. . .The younger generation, they're all on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, all that shit. . .So if you can get it in there and get them to see it, well that's a good start. Because then if something clicks, you know, have you got an issue or whatever and they might follow it on. Somebody may be older—[a] website [may be more appropriate] (FG 1).

Finally, some participants emphasized the necessity of advertising a digital intervention so that men were aware of it early in their relationships. They rightly pointed out that a digital intervention would be largely ineffective if men did not know how to access it. Participants suggested that identifying multiple touchpoints where information about a digital intervention could be provided might be a useful way to promote it and increase uptake:

> When you go and get married, when you get your pack, it's got your marriage licence, all that sort of stuff in it, there should be notes about this sort of stuff. When you first have a child, when you get your parenting pack about what it's

like to be a dad, that [digital intervention] needs to be in there. I think it needs to be at footy clubs, I think cricket clubs, where kids can see it and they start seeing it from a young age, this is stuff I need to be aware of (FG 1).

The government needs to really spend money on an advertising campaign, definitely through TV, about violence and that men could get help early (FG 2).

Discussion

Finding new ways to engage early with men using violence in relationships is critical. In Australia, the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022) has acknowledged the need for interventions to target male perpetrators, yet, to date there remain few options other than MBCPs. This has meant that an entire subset of men using violence—those currently uninvolved with justice settings—have remained largely under-serviced. The potential for digital interventions to fill this gap is supported by the findings of this study, which suggest that a website or app has the potential to help men connect with a better version of themselves, described by participants as the hypothetical "better man inside." To our knowledge, it is the first study worldwide to explore this topic.

The importance of tapping into men's current frame of mind and engaging with their level of self-awareness was strongly emphasized by the participants in this study. Men suggested that a digital intervention needed to draw users in by focusing on broader feelings of stress, unhappiness or frustration rather than seeking to address their use of violence from the outset. Not doing this risked alienating users before they had a chance to engage with the content. Indeed, studies consistently show that many men are either not aware that their behavior is abusive or seek to deny, justify or normalize their use of violence (Flink & Paavilainen, 2008; Forsdike et al., 2018; Seymour et al., 2021). This highlights an important challenge that would need to be considered by digital intervention developers. MBCPs and other interventions targeting men who use violence are constantly plagued by the dilemma of how to balance engagement with accountability (Pallatino et al., 2019). This is a particularly salient issue for digital interventions, given that disengagement is easy and consequence-free. For example, a recent study of 400 websites across nine industries found that almost half of visitors left after viewing only one page (Contentsquare, 2020) and studies of mental health apps and websites have identified user dropout rates of between 50%–74% (King et al., 2019; Richards & Richardson, 2012). In contrast, a face-to-face program facilitator can build a relationship over time with an individual man to overcome any tendency to avoid responsibility for his actions. Thus, for digital

interventions, first impressions are critical (Lingaard et al., 2006). Initial messaging needs to be carefully crafted so that it addresses men's genuine feelings of unhappiness or frustration whilst not colluding with the idea that he is a victim. For example, "Are you worried about your relationship?" was suggested as a possible question that might encourage men to access a digital intervention rather than "Are you using violence?".

Once men were engaged with the website or app, participants in this study felt that it could help raise awareness about their use of violence and highlight the potential consequences and implications of continuing this behavior. Participants suggested that a digital intervention might function as a circuit breaker, avoiding escalation of men's behavior before it became serious enough to involve the criminal justice system The literature on MBCPs similarly supports the need to raise awareness about abusive behaviors in order to motivate change (Soleymani et al., 2018; Velonis et al., 2020), usually through group discussion or didactic education. In the context of a digital intervention, the role of self-assessment questionnaires was specifically flagged by the participants as a potential strategy for increasing awareness, particularly for non-physical behaviors. Our previous research on digital interventions for women victim/survivors of IPV similarly emphasizes the awareness-raising benefits of self-assessment (Hegarty et al., 2019; Tarzia et al., 2017). Many women who participated in our study evaluating an online healthy relationship tool claimed that they did not realize their relationship was abusive until they were asked about specific behaviors (Hegarty et al., 2019). It is clear that a digital intervention for men could potentially achieve the same goal, providing that feedback is given sensitively (Camp, 2018). Yet, Velonis et al. (2020), in their realist review of MBCP strategies and mechanisms, also suggest that information or knowledge alone is insufficient to trigger self-awareness. They argue that participants need to be able to engage in critical self-reflection, relating the information they receive about abusive behaviors to something or someone that matters to them. Consistent with this, men in our study suggested that a digital intervention ought to encourage men to consider the impacts of their behavior on their families, particularly their children. Asking questions about the level of trust and safety in a man's relationship with his children was suggested as a possible strategy to trigger an emotional response and shock a man out of inaction.

Although the participants in this study identified the potential for a digital intervention to illuminate the consequences of their use of violence in relationships, they also felt that a digital intervention needed to provide users with hope for the future. In the context of MBCPs and other therapeutic interventions, Ward and Brown (2004) have similarly suggested that intervening in offending behaviors is not sufficient; positive alternatives need to be provided if an

intervention is to have a lasting effect. Camp (2018) and others (Loeffler et al., 2010) argue that whilst accountability is important, "dignity-enhancing interventions" that provide space for positive change are likely to be more effective than those that focus on shame. Our findings support this research and highlight that the need to avoid shame also extends to the early engagement period. The men in this study felt that a digital intervention could help facilitate connection with a better version of themselves, but only if it avoided labeling or stigmatizing them. Thus, a website or app—like a MBCP—would need to tread a fine line between holding men accountable for their behavior and emphasizing the negative consequences for themselves and their families, whilst also avoiding making men feel that they were inherently "bad" and cannot change. This is challenging to achieve without the feedback and interaction typically available in a MBCP or a one-on-one counseling session. Some potential strategies for striking this balance could include ensuring that feedback on behavior and consequences is tempered with messaging that change is possible; incorporating real stories from men who have successfully changed their behavior; and retaining a focus on the man's behavior rather than asking questions about a partner's actions. It is important to remember that the context we propose for a digital intervention is *early engagement*; the aim is not to provide therapeutic support or to replace programs such as MBCPs or one-on-one counseling. The balance of accountability versus hope for change therefore needs to be informed by the end-goal of encouraging a man to seek help for his use of violence. Developers of digital interventions ought to undertake extensive review by end-users in order to ensure that this is achieved successfully.

The anonymity and accessibility of a digital intervention addressing men's use of violence in relationships was perceived as being able to potentially overcome some barriers to help-seeking, alleviating the need to incriminate oneself or risk judgment. Indeed, while studies confirm that men struggle to seek help from face-to-face services for their use of violence in relationships for a variety of reasons, distrust of practitioners and personal shame feature prominently (Flink & Paavilainen, 2008; Forsdike et al., 2018). The participants in our study also acknowledged, however, that in order to be successful a digital intervention needed to be simple and relevant to men with different backgrounds. They pointed out that men often had only the length of a cigarette break to view a website or app, highlighting the need to avoid complicated language or concepts that might take too long to absorb, as well as having too many pathways through the intervention.

Our findings offer important insights into how digital interventions could provide an alternative pathway to behavior change for men using violence in relationships. However, there are some limitations to this study that merit acknowledgement. First, as all participants were recruited from MBCPs, the

views of men who had not sought help to change their behavior are not represented within the data. Second, the fact that one of the focus groups (FG 2) took place within an established MBCP means that some men may have responded in ways that they thought would be more well received by the facilitators rather than giving their honest input (although major differences were not apparent in terms of the responses provided from the two groups). Finally, we did not collect data on cultural background (although a degree of cultural diversity is likely to have been present in the sample given that Melbourne is a very multicultural city), sexual orientation, or whether participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Thus, whilst the sample was relatively diverse in terms of age, occupation, level of education, living situation and location (urban/semi-rural), it is unclear whether our findings are also applicable for different cultural contexts and for non-heterosexual men. Future research should explore the perspectives of diverse groups such as these to determine whether additional factors might influence their views on digital interventions for IPV.

Implications for Practice

There are clear implications of our findings for those interested in developing digital interventions for men using violence. Our research is also relevant for those seeking to promote early engagement with men using violence via other methods. As discussed above, key points to consider in the development of digital interventions for early engagement include:

- Avoiding the use of explicit language around "abuse" or "domestic violence" in the earliest stages of engagement and focusing instead on men's broader feelings of unhappiness, stress, or relationship difficulties.
- Once the user has been engaged with the intervention, incorporating self-assessment exercises to raise the user's awareness of his own behavior as abusive and linking these to a broader reflection on impacts of the behavior on families/children through targeted questioning.
- Avoid labeling or shaming the user to reduce risk of disengagement.
- Provide hope for positive change whilst keeping the focus on the man's behavior and its consequences.
- Ensure a simple user interface with clear language that is accessible to a wide range of men.

These recommendations are, of course, provided cautiously, with the acknowledgement that further research needs to be done in this space, particularly with

diverse populations. Furthermore, we recognize that, even in face-to-face settings such as MBCPs, there is no "one size fits all" approach to engaging with men using violence (Velonis et al., 2020). At the same time, our work with victim/survivors demonstrated that additional tailoring and interactivity of digital interventions does not necessarily lead to improved outcomes (Hegarty et al., 2019) when compared to more static information. Given that an early engagement intervention is about encouraging men to seek help from other sources rather than providing therapeutic support directly, it may be that highly individualized feedback and support is not as critical.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that there is potential for digital interventions to engage early with men using violence in relationships, as well as a number of challenges. Websites or apps can provide a safe, private space for men to reflect on their behavior and the consequences of their use of violence. However, the lack of interpersonal interaction can make it challenging to find the right balance between non-judgmental, compassionate engagement and accountability. Developers and researchers need to consider these issues carefully when designing digital interventions for men using violence in relationships to ensure uptake and use is maximized.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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