



# When Play Gets Serious: Can a game-based mobile application serve as an intervention for preventing intimate partner violence among emerging adults?

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## Abstract

Games have been an approach used to facilitate increased knowledge and changes in attitudes and behaviors related to well-being and mental health. However, the design and application of games to sensitive topics such as intimate partner violence (IPV) needs more exploration. Therefore, this 120-minute game-based workshop aims to analyze the perceptions collected from stakeholders (emerging adults aged 18-24; N=19) regarding the acceptability of using games and mobile applications to raise awareness of IPV, through a qualitative cross-sectional study. This research presents a preliminary study to inform the development of a game-based mobile intervention designed to increase knowledge and prevent IPV among emerging adults. This study contributes to a better understanding of the application of games to IPV among emerging adults, also highlighting the value of digital tools, such as mobile applications. More studies are needed on the design of games and digital tools that respond to the IPV problem. However, this work is still preliminary, and the insights gained from it will help to improve future work.

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## CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **Applied computing** → *Psychology*; Interactive learning environments.

## Keywords

Games, Mobile Applications, Intimate Partner Violence, Prevention, Emerging Adulthood

### ACM Reference Format:

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## 1 Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a prevalent public health problem, with possible serious impacts on the mental and physical health of those involved [9, 33, 40]. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [9] is described as any act of physical or sexual violence, psychological aggression, or stalking by a current or former intimate partner. It can manifest itself in various ways, including in person, online, or through technological means [9]. Negative impacts associated with IPV include mental, physical,

and sexual health issues, as well as academic and social problems [8, 11, 12, 28, 37, 43].

The different types of IPV can be grouped: (1) physical violence, which occurs when one partner deliberately tries to hurt the other, using physical force; (2) sexual violence, when sexual photographs are shared without consent or there is coercion or attempted coercion for the partner to participate in unwanted sexual acts; (3) psychological aggression, which involves the use of verbal and non-verbal communication to cause emotional distress and exert control over the partner; (4) stalking, characterized by recurrent and unwanted contact that causes fear or insecurity on the part of a partner, and (5) cyber violence, which involves the use of technology to harass, humiliate and threaten the partner [9].

Emerging adulthood, conceptualized by Arnett [2] for emerging adulthood, is characterized by a period of transition between adolescence and adulthood, covering young people between the ages of 18 and 29 [2]. It is a phase marked by some instability and the exploration of intimate relationships with greater intimacy and commitment [1, 27], becoming predictive of well-being and mental health of emerging adults [16]. In addition, the intimate relationships play an important role in the social interactions of emerging adults, as they facilitate the development of social and emotional skills essential for initiating and maintaining adjusted intimate relationships [15, 17]. At this stage of development, individual, relational and contextual factors can contribute to a greater risk of victimization and/or perpetration, making these young people vulnerable to IPV [6, 23]. The prevalence of IPV varies widely, with values ranging from 15% to 80% [7, 13, 30, 38, 42]. Given the multifactorial nature and evidence of the high prevalence and negative implications of IPV, it is necessary to devote efforts to prevention [22, 25, 30, 40].

Digital technologies, particularly games and mobile applications, have shown growing potential as tools for behavior change and social impact [20]. As a result, there is increasing interest in exploring how these technologies can be harnessed to address complex social issues, including IPV. Games have the potential to impact learning and change players' behavior [4, 10, 20]. The literature suggests that preventive strategies based on technology or interactive resources (such as games, mobile applications, websites) are effective in increasing awareness of IPV and reducing the social norms and beliefs that underpin IPV [26, 29, 31, 34]. Games and apps, being an integral part of young people's daily lives, are also vehicles for learning, reflection and acquiring competences to reduce violent attitudes and beliefs [26]. Because games and mobile technologies are already embedded in the daily lives of young adults, they offer a promising and engaging for promoting topics, such as IPV prevention among emerging adults.

With this, the main objective of this preliminary research is to provide insights to inform the development of a game-based mobile intervention aimed at preventing IPV among emerging adults. To do this, we sought to understand the preferences of stakeholders (emerging adults) regarding the use of digital approaches to prevent IPV. Specifically, we conducted a game-based workshop to explore how emerging adults perceive and accept the use of games and mobile applications to address the issue of IPV. This paper aims to address the following research question: **Do emerging**

## adults think games and mobile apps are useful in preventing intimate partner violence?

By examining emerging adults' perspectives on the use of digital technologies for IPV prevention, this work offers insights into how playful technologies can be used to support awareness and behavior change.

## 2 Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Sample

The sample includes emerging adults university students (N=19, age range 18-24 years, M=20.05, SD=1.51), of which 84% were women (n=16) and 16% men (n=3).

### 2.2 The Game-based Workshop

The 120-minute game-based workshop (see examples in Figure 1) is designed to raise awareness and prevent IPV among emerging adults. The workshop brought together a combination of activities enriched with games (like quizzes with scores and winners) to create a learning environment. We chose Kahoot! and Genially to implement the activities in this workshop because of their ease in creating gamified and interactive experiences through personalized content, as well as their ease of use for emerging adults. The main objectives of the workshop were: i) to raise awareness of intimate partner violence; ii) to provide strategies for recognizing warning signs in oneself and others; iii) to raise awareness of the importance of everyone's responsibility in dealing with this type of situation and iv) to prevent intimate partner violence. Its development was based on the scientific literature on IPV (e.g., [8, 9, 11, 13]), and the process was reviewed by the authors guiding this research. Its contents were divided into five modules: 1) Relevance of the topic (with statistical and research data); 2) Definition and types of intimate partner violence; 3) Risk factors and consequences; 4) Maintenance factors; and 5) Specific guidelines on warning signs and seeking help if you are in or witness a situation of intimate partner violence.

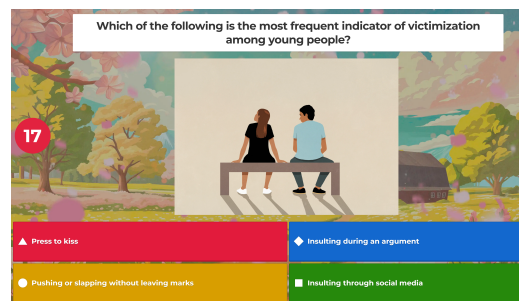


Figure 1: Example of a game applied during the game-based workshop

### 2.3 Data Collection

We used a questionnaire to collect sociodemographic data (gender and age) and six questions focused on the participant's perception about the workshop: 1) Did you like talking about the topic of intimate partner violence through a digital approach and games? 2)

Why? 3) What did you like most about the approach used in the workshop? 4) What did you like least about the approach used in the workshop? 5) Would you use a mobile application to learn more about intimate partner violence? and 6) Why?. We recognize that questions 1 and 5 can elicit positive responses due to their wording. We asked the questions in this way because we wanted to promote a safe environment and encourage spontaneous participation. However, in future studies, we intend to reduce possible biases, and to this end, we will ask questions in a neutral way.

## 2.4 Procedure

The participants were recruited from the university and the workshop was implemented in the classroom. Only two inclusion criteria were defined: i) being between 18 and 29 years old and ii) having and knowing how to use a smartphone. Before participation, all participants signed a consent form informing them of the anonymous nature and confidentiality of their data, and that it would be used exclusively for this research. In total, 19 participants were included in this study.

Two researchers led the workshop, which lasted 120 minutes. The participants had the opportunity to reflect on the games and the way the workshop was run. The workshop was held in a classroom context. Participants played individually on their cell phones, and the results and scores were visualized and discussed in the group aloud. This interaction was intended to promote a common sharing of interpretations and experiences, as well as encourage critical thinking about the issue. At the end of the workshop, a link with a sociodemographic data questionnaire and some questions about the workshop was shared through the Google Forms platform. All procedures performed in this study followed the ethical principles of psychologists and the code of conduct standards of the American Psychological Association, as well as the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

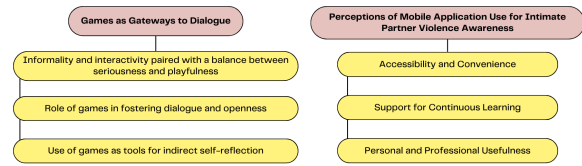
## 3 Results

### 3.1 Analysis

For the qualitative data, two researchers (A.S and B.J.P) performed a thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [5]. Initially, both researchers independently coded the data, developing their initial code lists based on the data. These codes were then discussed and compared to ensure consistency and address any discrepancies. Any differences in coding were resolved through collaboration, and a final codebook was created after iterative refinements based on ongoing discussions. After the coding process, the researchers grouped the codes into overarching themes. These themes were collaboratively reviewed, refined, and adjusted as necessary to ensure they accurately represented the participants' experiences. A final narrative summary of the participants' experiences was then composed based on the validated themes.

### 3.2 Qualitative Data

From the qualitative data, two main themes emerged (see Figure 2): (i) Games as Gateways to Dialogue and (ii) Perceptions of Mobile Application Use for Intimate Partner Violence Awareness.



**Figure 2: Themes and categories that emerged from the data analysis**

**3.2.1 Games as Gateways to Dialogue.** From the feedback of the participants regarding the approach used in the workshop, three sub-themes emerged: (i) informality and interactivity paired with a balance between seriousness and playfulness; (ii) the role of games in fostering dialogue and openness; (iii) and the use of games as tools for indirect self-reflection.

A large majority of participants (84%) highlighted how the informal and interactive nature of the workshop created a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. This sense of emotional safety was critical in supporting engagement with the sensitive topic of intimate relationships and dating violence (e.g. *“It felt closer to our reality, like something we could actually relate to”* (P7)). Rather than trivializing the issue, the game-based format was seen as a deliberate strategy that made the content more accessible and encouraged meaningful personal engagement. Participants consistently reported that the playful tone of the activities enhanced, rather than diminished, the seriousness of the topic. All participants (100%) acknowledged that the workshop successfully balanced an engaging, informal delivery with the gravity of the subject matter. Although the activities were light-hearted in form, the content was mentioned by participants as respectful and purposeful. This careful equilibrium between emotional comfort and thematic seriousness was seen as essential to the intervention’s impact.

In addition to fostering a safe learning environment, the game-based structure was also instrumental in facilitating openness and discussion. A majority of participants (63%) stated that the games made it easier to talk about intimate relationships and the complex issues surrounding them. The interactive nature of the workshop served as a conversational bridge, helping to reduce stigma and anxiety associated with the topic (e.g. *“It made it easier to speak about it”* (P12), *“The games helped open up the topic”* (P9), and *“It allowed us to think about situations we might face or are already facing”* (P17)).

Finally, the games facilitated indirect self-reflection. Several participants (42%) described how the use of hypothetical or fictional scenarios allowed them to reflect on personal experiences, social dynamics, and common risks without the pressure of disclosing personal stories. This emotional distance was perceived as important in enabling honest, thoughtful engagement (e.g. *“It was fun, but also made us think seriously”* (P11), *“It helped me realize how common unhealthy behaviors actually are”* (P13)).

**3.2.2 Perceptions of Mobile Application Use for Intimate Partner Violence Awareness.** Many participants (68.4%) reported that they would use such an application, whereas fewer participants (31.6%) indicated that they would not. Three sub-themes emerged regarding the interest in using an app: (i) Accessibility and Convenience,

(ii) Support for Continuous Learning, and (iii) Personal and Professional Usefulness.

First, many participants (53.8%) emphasized the accessibility and convenience of having relevant information available in a single and practical platform. The application was seen as an efficient tool that could consolidate knowledge and allow for easy, continuous access (e.g. *“It would be something practical and accessible”* (P7), *“It would be easier to have all the information gathered in one place”* (P5)).

Second, several participants (46.2%) highlighted the potential of the application to support continuous learning and reflection. They indicated that the app could help individuals reflect on past experiences and better understand whether certain behaviors might constitute abuse. (e.g. *“Sometimes by reflecting on something that happened to us, we could clarify whether it was abuse”* (P14)).

Third, having an application was perceived as having both personal and professional value. Participants studying or working in psychology or related fields referred to its usefulness as a reference tool in their future careers, especially when supporting individuals who may be affected by violence (e.g. *“As a psychology student, I will certainly come across various individuals, and it’s important to be aware of domestic violence and know how to act accordingly”* (P8), *“Because I am interested in helping victims in this area if necessary”* (P9)).

In contrast, the smaller group of participants who indicated that they would not use a mobile application gave two primary reasons. A few participants (33%) mentioned a general lack of personal interest or motivation to engage with the topic through an app (e.g. *“I’m not interested”* (P2) or *“I don’t know”* (P1)).

Meanwhile, 67% expressed a preference for alternative digital formats, such as websites, which they considered more practical or effective (e.g. *“An app might not be that useful, I think a website would be more practical”* (P4), *“If there was a website with well explained information on the topics addressed, I would visit it to increase my knowledge”* (P11)). The participants did not indicate any other negative points about the use of mobile applications and games to address IPV.

## 4 Discussion

This paper aims to provide information to guide the development of a game-based mobile intervention to prevent IPV in emerging adults. With this, the study findings reveal how game-based interventions and mobile applications can play a crucial role in promoting awareness and preventing IPV among emerging adults. The responses of the participants highlighted that the games served not only as entertainment activities but also as important tools to initiate conversations about difficult topics in a way that felt emotionally safe and relatable. This supports the existing literature suggesting that this type of approach creates a safe space to discuss sensitive topics such as IPV, as well as promote awareness of the issue [3, 18, 32]. In addition, these games can encourage the recognition of unhealthy relationship patterns [3].

The participants emphasized that the playfulness of the workshop did not undermine the seriousness of the topic. Instead, the combination of participation and emotional safety helped reinforce learning by making the topic more approachable and personally

relevant. This aligns with some studies that have shown that games facilitate dialogue and make IPV conversations more engaging [36].

The theme of emotional distance as a catalyst for honest reflection aligns with Siuda [35], which reinforces that the process of reflection during the game can lead to a greater understanding and awareness of IPV. In addition, involving players in emotional stories or scenarios can lead to conversations about how relationships work [35].

In addition to the positive reception of game-based methods, this study also explored how participants viewed the use of mobile applications for IPV awareness. A significant majority expressed interest in having access to such an app, mentioning its accessibility, practicality, and potential for continuous learning. The participants’ interest in using a mobile application reinforces the trend identified in the literature, which highlights that mobile applications have the potential to offer description and accessibility, characteristics valued by the young population, as well as offering safe and effective spaces to approach and learn about IPV [19, 21, 39].

However, not all participants were enthusiastic about using a mobile app. Some expressed disinterest, while others preferred other digital formats, such as websites. This variability in preferences underscores the importance of offering multiple, complementary formats to ensure accessibility and engagement. The literature indicates that combining several approaches can increase involvement, participation, and effectiveness [40, 41].

Overall, the findings contribute to emphasizing the potential of game interventions in raising awareness about IPV and supporting prevention efforts. Based on the participants’ responses, we can highlight some implications that contribute to the design of digital interventions in the context of IPV, namely: the use of realistic narratives that allow for indirect reflection and identification; including and mixing lightness and seriousness with interactivity and gamification, to provide learning and emotional comfort and, finally, guaranteeing help guidelines for those who recognize abusive behavior in their relationships. Digital methodologies are promising in overcoming some technical barriers, such as involvement, interactivity, confidentiality, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness [14, 24]. By integrating game-based learning with digital tools like mobile applications, educators and practitioners can offer youth engaging and effective ways to understand and reflect on their own relationships and social environments.

## 5 Limitations and Future Work

In this section, we discuss the main limitations of our study and present opportunities for future research.

### 5.1 Sample Size and Sample

The main limitations relate to the size and characteristics of the sample. The imbalance between the number of male and female participants makes it difficult to generalize the results. In addition, a larger sample could allow for a broader exploration of the participants’ perceptions. In future research, we will use other dissemination and recruitment strategies to address these limitations and ensure a more representative sample.

## 5.2 Design and Evaluation

In this study we did a workshop with emerging adults, however future research will involve developing the game-based mobile intervention through co-design studies bringing together stakeholders (emerging adults and psychologists), designers, developers and other professionals related to art and culture. In this sense, the prototype of the game will be created, based on the literature and the results obtained from the previous studies, which will be systematically reviewed by experienced professionals. In addition, a group of emerging adults will play the role of consultants during the development of the prototype.

This is followed by usability testing of the prototype version. At this stage, participants will have access to the game and will be instructed to conduct their own use, so that it is as close as possible to real use. In order to obtain more information about the platform during this session, we will use the Think Aloud Protocol, where participants will be asked to express their thoughts aloud during use, and notes will be taken for later analysis. At the end of the session, participants will fill in a usability test scale.

The last phase includes the study to assess the feasibility, acceptability and preliminary effectiveness of the pilot version of the mobile game-based intervention, through a pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT), with evaluations through online questionnaires at three time points: baseline (T0), post-intervention (T1) and 6-month follow-up (T2). The efficacy evaluation involves analyzing the impact of the game on beliefs about IPV, the occurrence and frequency of IPV behaviors, affective empathy, and dyadic functioning. The results of this study will inform the changes needed to establish the final version of the mobile game-based intervention. In the long term, it is intended that this IPV prevention game will be adopted by health and education services.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper provides preliminary but meaningful insights into the potential of games and mobile applications to raise awareness about IPV among emerging adults. By exploring participants' perceptions, our results suggest that interactive digital approaches can foster deeper engagement, support critical reflection, and create emotionally safe spaces for dialogue around sensitive and complex issues. Games, in particular, were seen as compelling entry points for learning encouraging exploration, empathy, and self-reflection through play. Although mobile applications were not the preferred format for all participants, they were seen as valuable when designed with attention to user needs and context. Importantly, preferences for alternative formats such as websites point to the value of offering flexible, multi-platform solutions. Ultimately, empowering individuals to recognize and challenge IPV requires interventions that are accessible, engaging, and adaptable to diverse needs and contexts.

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