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Technology and Dating Among Pregnant and Parenting Youth in Residential Foster Care: A Mixed Qualitative Approach Comparing Staff and Adolescent Perspectives

Heidi Adams Rueda
University of Nebraska at Omaha, hrueda@unomaha.edu

Megan Lindsay Brown
Arizona State University

Jennifer M. Geiger
The University of Illinois at Chicago

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Heidi Adams Rueda[1], Megan Lindsay Brown[2], and Jennifer M. Geiger[3]

[1]The University of Texas at San Antonio, USA
[2]Arizona State University, Phoenix, USA
[3]The University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the role of technology in the dating and sexual experiences of pregnant and parenting adolescent girls placed in residential foster care. Interviews with program staff ($N = 12$; 50% Hispanic) and focus groups with adolescent foster youth ($N = 13$; 46% Hispanic) were conducted to understand how technologies (e.g., cell phone, texting, and social media) influence youth's dating lives, including how youth navigate conflict with a dating partner in technology spaces and their experiences with cyber abuse. Both staff and youth emphasized technology as providing an outlet from the home and forum through which to meet, interact, and sustain intimate relationships, the latter including the father of (a) child(ren). Youth creatively collaborated to access technology and became involved in each other's relationships. Staff and youth discussed divergent risk contexts, staff emphasizing the risks posed to children (e.g., taken on online dates) and youth discussing online sexual solicitations, conflict with the child(ren)'s father in public and peer-involved online spaces, and cyber abuse. Helping professionals should be trained on the centrality of technology to youth dating and provide dating health education that includes attention to technology mediums.

Research has consistently shown that youth in the foster care system experience a number of challenges related to psychosocial functioning, including issues related to managing intimate relationships (Scott, Moore, Hawkins, Malm, & Beltz, 2012), higher incidences of teen dating violence (TDV; Jonson-Reid, Scott, McMillen, & Edmond, 2007), and pregnancy rates as high as double that of the general youth population by the age of 19 (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Most youth placed in out-of-home care have experienced abuse and neglect from within the family system (Pecora, White, Jackson, & Wiggins, 2009), which is important because previous research indicates the quality of family relationships in particular influences the quality of subsequent romantic relationships (Crockett & Randall, 2006). The romantic and sexual experiences of youth in foster care are understudied, although foster youth, like many young people, are engaging in dating via technology spaces (Fitch, 2012). Caregivers within the foster care system may be able to pro- vide trauma-informed approaches to healing and aid in relationship skill development (Hurley, Lambert, Van Ryzin, Sullivan, & Stevens, 2013). In this study, we explored the role of technology in the dating experiences of pregnant and parenting adolescent girls in residential foster care from the perspectives of program staff and adolescents.

Technology and Dating Among Youth in Foster Care

Foster youth, like many young people, are shifting their dating rituals to mediated spaces (Fitch, 2012). As developmentally appropriate, adolescents informally flirt and interact with peers and romantic partners using Facebook (Rueda, Lindsay, & Williams, 2015) and other social media platforms (Fitch, 2012). The Pew Research Center (PEW; 2018) found that 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, but that online habits vary based on income. Youth who were lower in socioeconomic status utilized Facebook more frequently than their peers, and all teens were more likely than adults to use multiple social media platforms including Instagram and Snapchat (PEW, 2018). Other studies have found that youth in residential foster care typically have at least limited access to the Internet through public resources and shared cell phones (Fitch, 2012; Pollio, Batey, Bender, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2013). Although practices vary by state, foster care systems are making cell phones and technology more available to youth

(Denby, Gomez, & Alford, 2015).

The limited research in this area has explored online risk behaviors and contexts. For example, Wolak, Evans, Nguyen, and Hines (2013) found that youth with a history of abuse are more likely to be targeted by sexual predators to engage in explicit sexual conversation. Another study similarly found that maltreated girls received online sexual solicitations, had posted provocative material, and were more likely to report unintentional exposure to sexual content on the Internet (Noll, Shenk, Barnes, & Haralson, 2013). Furthermore, 30% of the maltreated girls reported meeting at least one person offline whom they first met online (Noll et al., 2013). Negriff and Valente (2018) found that compared with youth who had not experienced maltreatment, those who had disclosed abuse reported more high-risk sexual behavior in their Facebook activity, including seeking sexual contact with online friends whom they did not know or did not know well. This may have been facilitated in part due to their greater tendency for disjointed social networks, meaning that they had many friends online who did not know one another. Increased attention to how youth in foster care may also utilize technology in ways that promote their well-being is an area ripe for future research.

Technology and Dating Among Pregnant and Parenting Youth

The romantic and sexual experiences of adolescents in residential foster care, including those who are pregnant or parenting, are governed by state and federal regulations. These contexts have historically precluded youth from rites of passage that might otherwise help them to develop autonomy, such as obtaining a driver's license and participating in extracurricular activities (Jacobson, 2016). These restrictions may also hinder relationship development with friends, other sources of parenting support, and romantic partners. Furthermore, adolescents are tasked with negotiating resources and services for themselves and their children (Silver, 2015). The latter can result in what Silver calls "dilemmas of representation," whereby youth are pressured to appear vulnerable enough to need services yet capable of meeting self-sufficiency standards that would allow them rights, freedoms, and custody of their children. In a qualitative study with primarily Hispanic parenting mothers, youth voiced that the adults and non-parenting peers in their lives made negative assumptions about their abilities to be

responsible and judged them negatively for parenting at a young age (Bermea, Toews, & Wood, 2016). Although unexplored, outsiders' biases may extend to include negative judgments about the youth's ability to make responsible choices when using technologies.

Gender Considerations

Online platforms afford youth opportunities to practice identity formation and intimacy in less governed spaces with increased opportunity to interact with peers and real or potential romantic or sexual partners. It may be that these experiences are particularly salient for youth who are housed together under the auspices of a child welfare agency. These youth may access computers or other devices such as smartphones for socialization purposes, and studies suggest that these experiences vary by gender. For example, a qualitative study of Mexican American adolescent youth found that girls were more affectionate in online spaces although also more negatively impacted by jealousy and perceived cheating (Adams & Williams, 2014). Another study using a large data set of ethnically diverse urban high schoolers found that sending and receiving sexual messages (i.e., "sexting") were common. In fact, over one quarter of youth had sexted, although sexting was associated with more sexual risk-taking for girls (Temple et al., 2012). Girls also experienced increased sexual coercion, pressure, and shaming around their sext message experiences (Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016).

Youth's social media interactions can be a way to build trust with a dating partner, essential to healing from trauma (Purvis, Cross, & Pennings, 2009). However, digital abuse is common among adolescents and may not be perceived as violence by youth themselves (Love & Richards, 2013). Furthermore, girls and boys differ in their perceptions of abuse. Specifically, girls are more likely to consider digital sexual coercion (e.g., sending or receiving an unwanted nude photo) as upsetting (Reed, Tolman, & Ward, 2017; Temple et al., 2012), and boys tend to consider digital monitoring (e.g., pressure to respond quickly to calls/messages, share passwords, or keep watch on partners' activities via social media) as most invasive (Reed et al., 2017). Studies find that young women experience a greater emotional impact when experiencing online abuse, particularly when from a romantic partner (Lindsay, Booth, Messing, and Thaller,

2016; Reed et al., 2017).

Guiding Framework

There has been very little research concerning how adolescents in foster care are engaged with online life and dating. A cultural competence framework asserts that in order to be effective, service providers should continually seek to understand clients' worldviews from their own vantage points, refine their skills in working with diverse populations, and ensure that practices and pro- grams delivered are responding to the needs and experiences of these populations (National Association of Social Workers [NASW]; 2015). The term "culture" includes various aspects of diversity, some of which afford more power and privilege in society than others (Garran & Werkmeister Rozas, 2013), and "competence" as a continual process of learning about diversity and difference with social justice aims of transformative practice (see Danso, 2016). Having been placed in foster care constitutes an important aspect of diversity that is understudied, creates a set of shared experiences, and assigns identity to such youth (i.e., as "foster child"; Samuels & Pryce, 2008, p. 1203). Service provision can be impaired or even harmful when there are differences, particularly unrecognized and without critical reflection, between the values, experiences, and worldviews of practitioners and the youth served (Danso, 2016; Silver, 2015).

The Present Study

The present study utilizes a cultural competence framework to explore the role of technology in the romantic and sexual relationships of pregnant and parenting adolescent girls in residential foster care by first soliciting the perspectives of the staff who serve them and then comparing these with the perceptions and experiences of the girls. Specifically, in alignment with the literature, we explored the types and nature of youth's online dating and sexual relationships, including experiences with relationship conflict and cyber abuse. We conducted in-depth interviews with staff and then also conducted adolescent focus groups. By offering a rich comparison of staff and adolescent perspectives, we hoped to identify strengths via shared viewpoints as well as explore discrepancies in dialogue in order that the culturally competent provision of

dating health services for youth may be enhanced.

Method

Sample and Recruitment

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the governing university institutional review board. This study resulted from close engagement with a residential foster care home serving primarily ethnic minority (43.5% Hispanic; 30.4% Black; 10.9% Mixed) adolescent girls. Youth were at the home primarily as a result of neglect, abuse, or other forms of trauma. Most were mandated through either Child Protective Services or the Department of Juvenile Justice. All participants were either pregnant (27.1%) or already parenting (78.0%), and a small percentage were both pregnant and had a child they were parenting (3.4%). Participants were between the ages of 14 and 22 (*M* = 16.65; *SD* = 1.32), and over half (54.5%) were in a dating relationship at the time of the study.

Program staff interviews. In-depth interviews were first conducted with pro- gram staff. Gathering their perspectives reflected the notion that the staff, who met regularly and often on an individual basis with the girls, would have unique understandings of their dating experiences. The Clinical Director served as the primary point of contact for all recruitment activities in collaboration with the Principal Investigator (PI) of this study. Program staff is a term utilized by the home to refer to clinicians, educators, and administrators who provided direct mental health care services and support to the adolescents. We sought a purposive sample of program staff that represented multiple and various roles in the home. The Clinical Director created a list of those whom she felt could speak to the girls' experiences with dating and sent a list of job titles, names, and email addresses to the PI. A total of 12 email invitations were extended, and all were interested and scheduled for an interview during the fall of 2014. Interviews (*n* = 11) took place in offices at the residential foster home or in a private corner of a coffee shop (*n* = 1). All signed written consent for their participation (*N* = 12) and were administered a short exit survey at the end of the interview (see Table 1 for program staff demographics). We aggregated similar roles in order to protect the confidentiality of individual staff. The term Residential Instructors was used by the home to refer to those

who worked directly in the on-campus cottages with the girls. Educational staff provided support for middle and high school students who received their education on-site, college students attending surrounding junior colleges and universities, and students attending general educational development (GED) preparation courses and who worked full time. Parenting staff directly educated the girls with regard to parenting skills and provided support to young mothers, many of whom had their child(ren) with them at the home. Clinical staff provided individual and group therapy to the girls. The term Spirituality staff referred to those involved with confidential spiritual mentorship, including leading optional activities in alignment with the religious affiliation of the home.

Table 1. Participant Demographics From Program Staff Interviews.

Program staff	$N = 12$	%
Age		
20-29	3	25
30-39	6	50
40-49	2	17
50+	1	8
Race		
Hispanic/Latino	6	50
Biracial	3	25
White	2	17
Asian	1	8
Professional sector		
Residence	3	25
Education	3	25
Parenting	2	17
Clinical	2	17
Spirituality	2	17
Educational background		
Masters in psychology/counseling	4	33
Masters in social work	3	25
Unrelated field	2	17
Some college	2	17
N/A	1	8
Years of experience		
<1	3	25
1-5	2	17
6-10	4	33
>10	3	25

Interview questions were developed by the first author using input from key stakeholders at the home and also with the intention of yielding knowledge that would enhance existing empirical research. Questions for both the program staff and foster youth were kept consistent in order to make comparisons, and they pertained to the overarching research question concerning the dating and sexual relationship experiences of the girls (e.g., What types of romantic, dating, or intimate relationships do the girls at [foster care home] have? How do the girls handle conflict? How would you describe their experiences with TDV?). Program staff were not asked directly about the role of technology in the girls' dating and sexual experiences; however, this emerged as a salient and reoccurring area of importance during interviews. Following interviews, we also conducted a member-checking focus group with staff at the home to discuss the multiple themes that had emerged. Collaboratively, the PI and staff decided that technology would be explored subsequently via focus groups and surveys with the girls.

Table 2. Participant Demographics From Adolescent Focus Groups.

Residents	*N* = 13	%
Age		
14-16	5	38
17-22	8	62
Race		
Hispanic	6	46
White	4	31
Black	2	15
Asian	1	8

Adolescent focus groups and surveys. In the spring of 2015, we conducted two focus groups with adolescent mothers (*N* = 13). Staff invited girls to participate during what would have been another residential class. Groups were held by age as suggested by staff (14-16; 17+; see Table 2 for adolescent demographics). The PI led the focus groups; a Black female graduate research assistant helped to moderate one but was unable to attend the second. At the time of data collection, the PI gave a(n) consent/assent form to each adolescent and described the study to youth. All youth consented/assented orally to their participation. The same key questions asked of staff were asked of youth, except that youth were also asked directly about the role of

technology in their relationships. Participants were given snacks, a US$10 gift card, and at the conclusion of each group, a handout on healthy relationships containing TDV resources. Written surveys were also administered to residents between the spring of 2015 and the spring of 2017 ($N = 59$), which included measures of cyber abuse and TDV (see Table 3). We include these descriptives as context to the present study. Signed permission forms designating guardian consent were received from the foster home for youth under the age of 18 who were in their custody and participating in surveys. All youth signed written consent/assent forms.

Analyses

Aligned with a QUAL + qual methodological approach (Morse & Niehaus, 2009), separate but compatible paradigms were used to analyze two forms of qualitative data. Data from staff interviews formed the core component, meaning staff data alone were sufficient for a complete independent study. To enhance the richness of the study, data from youth focus groups were added in a supplementary manner, increasing the depth of the analysis by offering a multifaceted account for comparison of perspectives (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Themes from interviews thus formed a flexible template to explore, compare, and contrast youth perspectives (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Morse & Niehaus, 2009).

A phenomenological approach privileged staff's perspectives and sought meaning as they assigned it to youth's experiences (Padgett, 2008). Common in qualitative methods (Padgett, 2008), we were sensitized to technology use as it surfaced tangentially to the key questions asked. We henceforth utilized inductive content analysis to derive preliminary themes and subthemes, first carefully analyzing verbatim interview transcripts in their entirety for any mention of technology. This included all dialogue pertaining to texting, online messaging, use of online or cell phone applications, and social media. We then assigned more meaningful conceptual units. When coding data, priority was given not only to frequency but also to the use of examples, emotionality, and extensiveness of discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The codebook underwent numerous reiterations in order to ensure that themes and subthemes were clearly operationalized and reflected staff's telling of their experiences

with and perceptions of youth's experiences concerning technology. The final codebook was then checked for interrater reliability by an independent researcher (κ = .93).

Table 3. Dating Violence Perpetration and Victimization.

Type of experience	Ever reported (%)	M (SD)
Online dating violence (CDAQ) (N = 59)		
Perpetration		
Aggression	31.4	1.34 (0.77)
Control	54.1	1.67 (0.98)
Total	58.3	1.49 (0.81)
Victimization		
Aggression	31.4	1.53 (1.07)
Control	59.5	1.99 (1.35)
Total	59.5	1.74 (1.15)
Dating violence (CADRI-SF) (N = 59)		
Perpetration		
Physical	32.1	1.48 (0.81)
Threatening	35.2	1.62 (0.96)
Sexual	15.1	1.22 (0.57)
Relational	24.5	1.36 (0.74)
Emotional	74.1	2.07 (0.97)
Total	75.9	1.55 (0.72)
Victimization		
Physical	24.5	1.49 (0.95)
Threatening	26.9	1.49 (0.87)
Sexual	18.9	1.33 (0.76)
Relational	24.5	1.39 (0.73)
Emotional	63.0	2.00 (0.98)
Total	64.8	1.55 (0.73)

Note. The Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire (CDAQ; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; 40 items) assesses online cyber perpetration and victimization using two subscales, aggression and control. Items range on a scale from 1 ("never") to 6 ("usually"), with each number corresponding to the frequency of victimization or perpetration within the past year (e.g., 2 = "not last year, but it happened before"). The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory–Short Form (CADRI-SF; Fernández-González, Wekerle, & Goldstein, 2012; 20 items) assesses dating violence perpetration and victimization within the past year via five subscales, physical, threatening, sexual, relational, and emotional. Items range on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 ("never") to 4 ("often").

Themes from staff interviews formed a flexible template from which to compare

and contrast adolescent girls' perspectives and experiences. Flexible templates are ideal for this purpose, as they can verify findings while highlighting areas of divergence and new insight (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This methodological approach was well suited to a practice setting as it allowed us to "go and see" (Morse & Niehaus, 2009, p. 112) whether staff's perspectives of adolescents' use of technology aligned with adolescents' own descriptions. Utilizing the codebook created from staff inter- views, the first author and a graduate research assistant analyzed for points of interface, meaning there was agreement between two data sets (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). We then added new themes and subthemes to the codebook where the girls' focus group dialogue reflected disagreement or offered divergent viewpoints from staff.

Multiple strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of this study's findings. Reflexivity was used throughout the research process, and flexible questioning routes allowed us to be open to new insights. In addition, the authors of this article came together to analyze data (e.g., observer triangulation; Padgett, 2008), sharing expertise on adolescent and young adult identity formation and technology use, youth foster care experiences, and adolescent dating and sexuality. Finally, we present youth's quantitative measures of violence as a form of methodological triangulation from which to further contextualize and confirm qualitative perspectives (Padgett, 2008). We use pseudonyms in presenting results to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Three overarching themes emerged from the interviews with program staff and as supported to varying degrees by the adolescent girls. First, technology use was central to the relationship experiences of the girls. For example, technology facilitated a means for organizing offline meetings and also to maintain contact with the father of their child. Second, teens became involved in one another's dating lives through the use of technology as relationship inter- actions often unfolded publicly. Third, there were risks as a result of using technology in dating contexts. Specifically, some teens brought along their children when meeting partners offline and described being victims and perpetrators of cyber and TDV.

Theme I: Technology Was a Central Component of Adolescents' Romantic and Sexual Relationships

This central theme was encapsulated by each of three subthemes, two of which were supported by focus group dialogue with youth.

Teens used technology to meet, interact with, and sustain intimate partnerships. Program staff described how many youth utilized the Internet (e.g., MocoSpace, Facebook) or phone applications to meet romantic or sexual partners, as described by Olivia:

> It's an outlet from here. I know the girls don't always want to be here, I mean it's a residential place. They have a very set schedule . . . They do have access to the computer, so they can utilize that to reach out and meet people.

Even among those who weren't allowed computer time or cell phone use, Jessica described how "You can't keep them off [line]. They can borrow another resident's phone." This ability to gain phone or Internet access allowed even those with very limited social privileges to have a technology- facilitated relationship: "Some of them are online dating relationships wherein their communication or their relationship is strictly just online or over the phone or via text" (Mary).

To many staff, this was perceived as a generational difference between the way that they grew up and the girls they worked with. Jessica described, "I think some of the girls have online relationships, and they're dating, but they've never met face-to-face or something like that, which is so foreign to me." In lieu of risks (later described), meeting and interacting with dating partners via phone (e.g., text, smartphone applications) and in online contexts was viewed by some staff as developmentally appropriate and as a way for pregnant and parenting youth in residential foster care to maintain a degree of normalcy. Jessica went on to say that "That's a big development milestone is starting to date and that sort of a thing. Really, they're denied that because they are teen moms, and they're in a placement facility."

Adolescent dialogue. Adolescents, and particularly those aged 17 and older, described their online relationships differently than staff. Rather than welcoming opportunities to meet new partners, they described numerous instances of unwanted sexual solicitations. The girls agreed that being pregnant or already having a child gave

men/boys the idea that they were looking for sex or that they were more appealing sexually: "I got constant messages on Facebook. 'Oh, you're a sexy preggo. What would you like to do?'" (Esmeralda); "There's guys that'll be like, 'Oh, you're pregnant . . . they say the pregnant ones are more crazy in bed'" (Lettie).

A spirited conversation emerged among the 17 and older group as multiple girls talked over one another and offered stories of having been targeted online through social media by unknown individuals: "They're like, 'Give me your address, I'll send you some money' . . . Literally, a random person can send you a message through [Facebook] messenger" (Nadia). Opposite to the staff's perception that the girls were engaging in conversation and meeting these boys offline, conversation demonstrated that it was uncommon—or at least unpopular—to admit to having such relationships:

> I lied. I'm like, "I'm in a relationship and I'm pregnant with his baby . . . He's like, "Oh, I just want to be friends, babe." . . . I was like, "I don't even know you." He sent me a picture . . . I'm like, ". . . you can leave me alone now." (Meg)

When probed about whether they were ever tempted to talk to these boys, the girls responded that they were not and that they blocked them from being able to contact them again: "That's why my block list is probably six pages long" (Esmeralda).

Technology facilitated meeting dating partners in offline spaces. Staff also described how online relationships developed into face-to-face contexts, often during their time away from the foster home grounds. A majority of staff described these offline meetings with new partners as risky, happening very quickly, and at a point when the adolescent did not know her partner well enough to trust him. Gloria used this example:

> They'll meet guys on different websites, social networking sites, and they will just meet them downtown. They don't know this person . . . they will meet them without even thinking twice.

Even girls without privileges to go out would find ways to meet partners whom they had met online in face-to-face contexts during supervised field trips: "We do field trips . . . so a lotta times, they'll contact them through Facebook and say, 'Hey, I'm gonna be at this Walmart during this time range. Meet me there'" (Jessica). Often, meeting a partner online was viewed negatively, even as contributing to a second pregnancy: "Even their second baby's daddy [was] through social media" (Olivia).

However, the staff did not have a means through which to address dating relationships directly since they were discouraged as part of the rules and policies set by the home. Girls in focus groups did not discuss ways in which technology facilitated meeting partners offline.

Teens maintained contact with their child's father using technology. Aside from meeting and interacting with partners via technology-facilitated spaces, staff described how the girls in care utilized technology to communicate with their child(ren)'s father. Such dialogue should be considered in light of the rules which disallowed boys on campus. Furthermore, girls often traveled from various locations in order to stay at the home:

> There are some residents who are still actively in touch with the baby's father . . . and they're not together or anything, but they talk to them all the time, like via phone, text, or on Facebook or something, but he's not in the child's life at all. (Cara)

Adolescent dialogue. Girls of both age groups described various ways that their "baby dad" stayed involved in their child(ren)'s life via technology. Often, the girls would send pictures or Skype to keep their partner in the know about their pregnancy or child(ren): "We Skyped for a little while. I showed him my belly and all that kinda stuff, the sonograms" (Trish). For some youth, technology fostered feelings of closeness and hope for the family that they desired to have:

> Whenever I send him a picture of [daughter], he puts a sad face, wishing he was there. . . I say, "One day you will, but you have to fix your problems first." You know what I mean? I tell him, "I'll do it with you. I'll go to classes with you . . . I'll do whatever it takes to try again to be a family, like we supposed to." (Trish)

Technology also alerted the girls to the father's lack of involvement or care for their new family, as they learned that he hid his fatherhood from other peers or potential dating partners:

> Even after she was born . . . if I would tag him on something on Facebook with her [daughter's] picture, he would hide it from his timeline. "Oh, I don't have a daughter. She's freaking crazy . . . She's obsessed with me." Then this girl sent me screen shots of him saying that. (Lettie)

Taken together, dialogue from the girls' focus groups demonstrated technology as a means through which to enhance their father's relationship with themselves and the child, and also as contributing to conflict as girls learned of his public denial of fatherhood.

Theme II: Teens Became Involved in One Another's Dating Lives via Technology

Staff noted ways that technology facilitated involvement of peers in the girls' dating lives. Three subthemes emerged within this larger theme to include the public nature of the adolescent girls' relationships, the perceived normalcy of involving peers in their dating lives via technology, and the ways in which third parties fueled relationship conflict via technology. Each subtheme was supported by dialogue from focus groups with the teen residents.

Relationships were public. People outside of the girl's relationships and including personnel at the residential home were often able to gain access to information concerning the dating relationships of the girls. Paula described how "Information was primarily available on Facebook because their pages are public." Maria described how staff became privy to relationship conflict between same-sex resident couples: "I've even looked on their Facebooks .. there's a lot of romantic comments . . . 'Good morning, beautiful'   I think that upsets [resident #2], the girl that likes [resident #1] right now." Many staff felt that the documented and public nature of social media contexts posed a challenge to building trust.

Adolescent dialogue. Dialogue in support of this subtheme was embedded within girls' discussions of their relationship challenges, including their partner's or ex-partner's public flirting behavior on Facebook. Some girls complained that their ex-partners would taunt them online by posting status updates such as Dulce's example: "He would always post about how he's single   always say 'Who wants to talk on the phone? Girls only', or 'Who wants to chill?'" Finally, dialogue suggested that the girls carefully represented their public representation of their relationships online, including moving some conversations out of the public eye: "On Facebook, my ex—I haven't blocked him, but we conversate through email . . . On social media . . . we make it seem like we don't want nothing to do with each other" (Keesha).

Teens involved friends in their relationships using technology. Staff felt that the girls were very enmeshed in one another's peer and dating lives, as Cara described: "Looking through each other's phones, but that's normal . . . I don't have a clue what's on my best friend's phone." For this particular therapist, this represented a larger issue of boundaries and was reflective of relationship skills that the girls lacked. The nature of peer involvement was also contextualized by rules. Given that some of the girls were not allowed to or did not have phones, they would utilize one another's to contact the other's partner, including to resolve arguments by having their friends chime in: "Sometimes it's hard for them to resolve that conflict because . . . they'll go find a friend who has a cell phone and say, 'You better call this person and tell them this, this, and this, okay?'" (Gloria).

Adolescent dialogue. Although the girls did not discuss sharing phones, their dialogue highlighted numerous instances of relying on one another while using technology to help resolve romantic conflict. Often, this involved trying to catch their child's father either flirting with another girl or denying that he had a child (e.g., "'Cause at the very first of my pregnancy, he didn't wanna own up to our son . . . I had the girls here message him . . ." [Dulce]). Friends also became involved with one another's dating lives using technology as a tool to help set one another one up (e.g., "He was texting his cousin, 'Hey, where's that girl?' . . 'I'm sorry, bro. She doesn't wanna f*&# tonight'" [Esmeralda]) and in handling third-party involvement as detailed in the following subtheme.

Relationship conflict resulted from technology-facilitated third-party involvement. Given the public and recorded nature of relationship information in online spaces, and the ease with which peers could involve themselves, relationship conflict was often fueled by third-party involvement, whereby same- or other-sex peers flirted with, interacted with (e.g., "liked" a picture posted online), or attempted to break another couple up via technology-facilitated spaces. Typically, staff described these interactions as purposefully manipulative, bullying, or mean-spirited:

> She will befriend other . . . girls' boyfriends or baby's fathers online and try to tell them bad things about the other girls . . . of course they use Facebook. If they have a cell phone, they're text messaging, and then the guy gets involved.

(Marcela)

It was not uncommon for online conflict stemming from third-party involvement to be a topic of therapeutic discussion.

Adolescent dialogue. Adolescents' experiences were supportive of staff perspectives. Youth offered examples of how their (ex-)partner (often their child's father) and peers forged bonds that were fashioned in online spaces: "Then, there was a time where one of my ex-best friends . . . she did the most hurtful thing, and she hit him up on Facebook, and he started flirting back" (Dulce). Third-party involvement made trusting a partner difficult:

> I was like, "We have to work on our trust . . . There's probably seven other
> females in your inbox, flirting with you, and you're flirting back." He was like, "Well
> . . . just cuz I flirt with them don't mean that I want them." . . . You should be like, "I
> have a girlfriend. I have a baby mama. She's the mother of my child." (Dulce)

Theme III: Potential Risks Were Involved by Utilizing Technology in Dating Contexts

The third and final theme pertained to risks of technology in dating contexts. Two primary subthemes emerged within this theme; first, given the online nature of meeting partners, little was known about them, and this put children at risk as girls would meet a partner out publicly to spend time alone. The second emerged primarily from girls' dialogue: Stalking, surveillance, and attempts to control a partner's online behavior were discussed as forms of online dating violence.

Teens brought children to meet unknown partners offline. Staff described numerous instances whereby teens had met someone online and then taken their child or children, often unaccompanied, to meet in unsafe places: "A girl met a gentleman online, met him downtown, slept with him, and the child was present. It's like, 'You don't know who this male is. You can't put your child in those situations'" (Gloria). Numerous staff voiced that youth in foster care were desirous of love, which put them at risk of getting hurt from those who may not have their best interests at heart. Gloria went on to describe, "I think that's a little scary 'cause I feel they put their children in danger . . . but it's just whoever's willing to care and love for them . . . "

Adolescent dialogue. The girls did not discuss meeting people whom they did not know offline. In fact, their dialogue suggested that they understood the risks in doing so:

"I'm just like, 'I don't even know you . . . and then blocked him'" (Jen). This may suggest such sexual encounters as less frequent than staff perceived and/or as a source of shame, whereby open discussion among peers was not socially sanctioned.

      Teens were victims and perpetrators of cyber abuse. Supported primarily by adolescent dialogue, this subtheme captured behaviors that are commonly described as online dating violence or cyber abuse. Girls in focus groups engaged in lively discussions concerning how jealousy and mistrust resulted in looking through a partner's phone or private messages, monitoring their partner's online behaviors, and setting technology rules in an attempt to control a partner's behaviors. The girls told multiple stories of finding out about a partner's cheating via technology. For example, Lettie described,

> I was in labor with his daughter and . . . he was texting girls, "Oh, I'm in the hospital. My cousin's having her baby . . . Talk to you later, babe." Four or five different girls. A message pops up on his Kik [instant message application], "Babe, I miss you . . . How's your cousin?" . . . Then so I texted all of them back. I sent selfies of myself. "I just pushed out his daughter. Do I look like his cousin to you?" They were like, "I didn't know he had a girlfriend."

Cheating led the girls to set rules so that they could monitor what their partner said and did in technology-facilitated contexts: "Well, my baby's daddy, he wasn't allowed to have no [private] accounts . . . I made him give me the passwords" (Lettie). Monitoring a partner's phone ultimately contributed to Trish's use of physical dating violence: "It got to the point where I hit him ... Cause all the stuff that I had found out from his phone . . . when I found out that he was messing around with someone else." Also concerning dating violence, Keesha described the use of technology by her child's father to harass and stalk her:

> Then all the text messages I have, "Are you with another guy? . . . What are you doing? How come you're not answering me? I need to know about my damn daughter . . ." 'cause I have his mom's number on my phone, and then he'll try to act like it's her. When I answer it, it's not her . . . "I have to hang up real quick." Sometimes I go to classes. I'm like, "Leave me alone. Why would I want a guy like you? . . . and now my son's more traumatized 'cause of you." Then I don't

want my daughter around that.

Discussion

Normative adolescent development includes dating and sexual relationships, and technology has become a central part of these experiences. Helping professionals are in a unique position to offer relationship modeling, guidance, and healing from past trauma. A culturally competent approach in foster care calls for understanding how both professionals and adolescents perceive technology's role in adolescent dating experiences. In this study, we inter- viewed program staff from a residential foster home serving pregnant and parenting adolescent mothers and compared these perspectives with those of the girls themselves.

Concurrent examination of staff and adolescent perspectives demonstrated shared viewpoints and also highlighted discrepancies concerning the role of technology in youth's dating lives. Shared viewpoints emphasized technology as central to the girls' dating lives and as "an outlet" from the home to connect with potential and current romantic and sexual partners. Both staff and residents also described the public nature of relationships and the important yet often challenging role of peers in shaping youth's romantic and sexual experiences in technology spaces. Furthermore, both described relationship-building opportunities made possible via technology. For example, instant communication (e.g., Skype) facilitated face-to-face communication and sending pictures which helped to maintain regular contact with the child(ren)'s father. Numerous differences between staff and adolescents' perspectives also emerged. Staff viewed the girls as initiating and maintaining voluntary online dating relationships, whereas the girls described unwanted sexual solicitations that they felt were a direct result of their pregnancy and parenting status. Youth also grappled with their "baby daddy" denying his paternity publicly in order to attract other girls and further shared experiences with cyber abuse.

A culturally competent framework calls for an active examination of the beliefs and assumptions of helping professionals while striving to obtain new insights and knowledge of the populations served (NASW, 2015). This collaborative study was a purposeful approach by the agency to gain under- standing of staff and youth

perspectives in order to improve trauma-informed services. As described by Silver (2015) in her study and advocacy efforts for young mothers involved in the child welfare system, staff's viewpoints may reflect differences between them and the youth in generation, class, sexual orientation, and/or race and ethnic traditions. Staff are therefore challenged, often within bureaucratic confines, to resist racial and oppressive stereo- types and practices that marginalize by judging youth's behaviors as either "good" or "bad." That is, differences in perception alone are not necessarily reflective of a lack of cultural competence; however, attitudes reflective of bias are problematic as they hinder effective service provision. For example, youth in our study discussed themselves as targets of unwanted online sexual solicitations, whereas some staff assumed that youth were intentionally and actively engaging in sexualized conversations. This blame of youth counters a trauma-informed approach to care by serving as a deterrent to sharing and hinders healing through an otherwise trusted relationship with a caregiver (Purvis et al., 2009).

There are a number of additional factors which are likely to influence the extent to which youth in foster care feel comfortable sharing information with staff and which may help to explain why discrepancies emerged in this study. Youth in general prefer to talk to their peers about relationship challenges, reflecting both normative autonomy development and fear of being told what to do or being reprimanded by parents (Rueda, Williams, & Nagoshi, 2015). Furthermore, youth who have experienced abuse either directly or via witnessing violence in their homes may not have recognized the unhealthy dynamics of their relationships, including in technology spaces, as meriting conversation with an adult (Noll et al., 2013). Even if they did recognize a need for help, foster youth may have felt that poor judgment of their behaviors could result in unfavorable court proceedings, less time with their child, or even a severing of their parental rights (Silver, 2015). Finally, some youth may have chosen to withhold this information. They may have perceived their placement out of home as a negative repercussion of authorities learning of violence in their homes or even received messages not to share information from their parental figures who feared the role of police or of child protective services.

There is an opportunity for residential agencies and staff to address policy and practice related to improving communication and relationships among staff and youth in

daily residential life as well as individual and group clinical settings. First, we suggest that helping professionals advocate for policies that recognize romantic and sexual experiences as developmentally normative, as well as to openly acknowledge the importance of technology to youth's dating lives. Indeed, stemming in part from these results and also in alignment with recent policy change (Jacobson, 2016), our study site changed their in-home policy to allow youth to date and encouraged them to talk about it. Second, research with non-foster youth has found that parental monitoring can reduce the risk of youth experiencing online harassment (Khurana, Bleakley, Jordan, & Romer, 2015), and that the benefits of monitoring depend on the quality of the parent-child relationship (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011). Staff of youth in foster care are disadvantaged in their attempts to build rapport given their lack of history with the child, the temporary nature of placements, and their dual position as both caretaker and professional authority. Creating purposeful technology-friendly environments within residential foster care settings might be one way in which to build rapport with youth, teach skills, and facilitate healing from a trauma-informed perspective. Practitioners can learn about cyber and other forms of digital dating abuse by directly asking about stalking, solicitation, partner monitoring, and rule-setting in technology platforms while in their individual counseling and therapeutic group sessions with youth, and through TDV prevention programming (Reed et al., 2017). We suggest that dating relationship programs include content related to the risks and benefits of meeting, sustaining, and terminating relationships via technology platforms. Contexts such as those described herein, for example, online soliciting and stigma related to pregnancy and parenting, should be included for parenting youth.

Furthermore, consideration of technology suggests important avenues for relevant help-seeking. It is important to note that, despite lacking private devices, youth creatively collaborated to access technology. By sharing phones, they were intimately involved in one another's dating lives, thus bonding while also serving as one another's primary sources of advice and help-seeking/help-offering. Future research should continue to examine how technology can play a positive role in creating social capital for youth in foster care. Knowing that the girls are likely to turn to one another for help, staff should be proactive by showing them how to create safety plans using apps and

websites such as myPlan, a dating safety app designed for young women (Alhusen, Bloom, Clough, & Glass, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2013). Moreover, staff were already having discussions with the residents concerning how peers can create challenges for dating couples. We suggest that they build from these conversations to help youth navigate both the supportive and conflictual nature of peer relationships, including through mediated communication. Importantly, staff across all levels of service should be trained to recognize how youth's behaviors—including as happening in technology spaces—are often indicative of deeper needs, including for connection and to keep them- selves safe (Purvis et al., 2009). They are called upon to model healthy relationships and to facilitate conversations with youth concerning how technology can be used to connect with others to promote healing and well-being.

Study Limitations

Utilizing a mixed qualitative method facilitated a rich understanding of the centrality of technology in adolescents' relationships as perceived both similarly and divergently from staff versus the youth themselves. Conducting in- depth interviews with staff highlighted their perspectives as the core data analysis component. This did, however, yield less data from youth. Conducting individual interviews with youth would offer a more nuanced understanding of how youth's dating lives intersect with technology, as well as how their multiple identities as a parent and resident of a foster care home intersect with technology challenges, barriers, and strengths. Technology was not the original focus of this study, and rather emerged tangentially in staff interviews; future studies should assess the emergent themes from this study and others more directly. Finally, these data were collected in 2015, and we recognize that technology and online cultures rapidly change. Although adolescents' involvement in mediated spaces will likely continue to reflect a crucial part of relationship research, these data reflect a snapshot in time.

Conclusion

This study delineated several similarities and discrepancies in the perspectives of residential foster care staff and pregnant and parenting adolescent residents related to

technology use and dating. Staff did not recognize that the girls were actively navigating sexual solicitations, often times tied to their pregnancy and parenting status, and negotiating challenges online related to co-parenting. A trauma-informed approach to care centralizes healing through safe and nurturing relationships (Purvis et al., 2009), whereas this lack of understanding may reflect lost intervention opportunities in salient contexts to youth. Policies and programs should focus on explicitly including technology within trauma-informed and culturally competent models of care. This aligns with the promotion of a normative developmental framework with regard to dating and sexual relationships for foster youth (Jacobson, 2016). Furthermore, in practice, there is an opportunity to incorporate technology to improve communication among staff and youth, thereby building healthy staff-youth relationships in the residential milieu and therapeutic setting, and reducing risky and harmful behaviors.

ORCID iD
Heidi Adams Rueda https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4321-1943

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Author Biographies

Heidi Adams Rueda's research focuses on adolescent dating and sexual relationships within ecodevelopmental contexts, particularly among understudied youth populations including Mexican American youth, pregnant and parenting youth in foster care, and among adolescents with disabilities. Within a holistic approach to dating health, her work aims to prevent teen dating violence and to foster strong foundations for healthy adolescent and lifelong partnering. She utilizes mixed methods to inform the design and evaluation of effective preventive interventions and social work practice with adolescents.

Megan Lindsay Brown's research focuses on the use of information communication technologies (ICT) and the impact of mediated spaces on human development, specifically young adult women. Her work has examined young adult dating relationships, online harassment, interventions using ICT, and the ways ICT interaction impacts individuals' perceptions during development. She is currently researching the impacts of technology-based abuse within intimate relationships.

Jennifer M. Geiger's research focuses on youth aging out of foster care, specifically how they are able to access and succeed in postsecondary education. She is also interested in how to support and prepare families to care for children and youth in foster care.