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How Social Contexts May Shape Online Participatory Violence Prevention Interventions for Youth? Views of Researchers and Practitioners

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Abstract: There is increasing interest in the possibility of delivering violence prevention interventions online. This interest has been intensified by the ‘stay at home’ mandates brought about by COVID-19, which has pushed violence prevention practitioners to find innovative ways to deliver violence prevention interventions during the pandemic. Our study sought to understand the ways in which social contexts may enhance or impede participatory interventions for youth online. We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with researchers and practitioners based in various parts of the world. Data were analysed using thematic network analysis. Results indicated that online participatory violence prevention interventions may on the one hand be undermined by material factors such as access to devices, familiarity with technology, Internet infrastructure, and recruitment strategies. On the other hand, young people’s preference for online engagement, the ability to reach those less inclined to take part in in-person interventions, and the potential for continued engagement in cases of participants on the move were raised. Online group-based participatory violence interventions are crucial for situations when in-person meeting may not be possible. We present initial thoughts on how social contexts might impact the occurrence of these interventions online. More evidence is needed to help us understand how the social contexts can shape the outcomes of online participatory violence prevention interventions.

Keywords: violence against women and girls; online; participatory interventions; social contexts; young people



Citation: Ndungu, J.; Ngcobo-Sithole, M.; Gibbs, A. How Social Contexts May Shape Online Participatory Violence Prevention Interventions for Youth? Views of Researchers and Practitioners. *Youth* **2022**, *2*, 113–125. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth2020009>

Academic Editor: Todd Michael Franke

Received: 25 January 2022

Accepted: 7 March 2022

Published: 31 March 2022

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1. Introduction

Preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) is identified by the United Nations as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5.2) and is a key goal of global public health. Consequently, an increasing body of research has focused on designing and evaluating interventions aimed at preventing VAWG through addressing its root causes—primary prevention [1,2]. Evidence suggests that effective VAWG primary prevention interventions are often rooted in participatory approaches that use strategies such as discussions, reflective activities, and role plays [2]. These primary participatory interventions are often delivered in in-person settings.

There is a growing research and interest in online violence prevention interventions. These interventions are often in the form of apps [3,4], social media messages on sites such as Instagram [5,6], and websites [7]. Notably these online violence prevention interventions are often geared towards emergency or protective solutions [8,9] or secondary prevention focusing on supporting women experiencing violence to leave an abusive relationship

(secondary prevention), as opposed to the primary prevention of violence [10]. Yet evidence suggests that violence prevention interventions that support behaviour change, group-based participatory interventions [2,11], are more likely to prevent VAWG.

There has been increasing interest in the potential to deliver group-based participatory violence primary prevention interventions online. This has been driven by the increased accessibility of the online world because of improved Internet connectivity and, in the past two years, the impact of COVID-19 [12,13]. There are potential benefits to the online delivery of group-based participatory violence prevention interventions. These include the possibility of bringing violence prevention interventions to scale because of their wider reach, with reduced human resources requirements and greater accessibility, which allows everyone to join from a location of their choice [14,15]. The delivery of online participatory violence prevention interventions also raises unique challenges, however, especially in low-income settings. Broader social contextual factors such as limited access to technological devices (e.g., phones), inability to afford data, poor infrastructure including lack of electricity to charge devices, or no cellular connectivity in some areas [8,13,16,17] could impact on violence prevention intervention accessibility and outcomes.

There is limited evidence on the possibilities of delivering small group participatory VAWG prevention interventions online [12]. Furthermore, the majority of online violence prevention interventions (in the form of apps, social media, and websites) have been implemented in Asia, Europe, and North America, with far fewer being implemented in sub-Saharan Africa [8]. The aim of our study was to understand how social contexts may impact on the online delivery of participatory violence prevention interventions to young people in South Africa. To achieve this, we interviewed a group of researchers and practitioners who have experience in designing and implementing participatory interventions to young people. Findings on interviews conducted with adolescents are reported elsewhere.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory VAWG prevention interventions are often framed around the concept of safe social spaces, and much research has focused on the establishment and effectiveness of safe social spaces [18–20]. These safe social spaces enable *transformative communication* to occur [21]. Transformative communication [21] is achieved via a range of activities, such as role plays and community mapping, that support critical reflection, enabling the emergence of *critical consciousness*—gaining an understanding of how social conditions create situations of disadvantage [22]—and in turn, leading to behaviour change.

Evidence suggests that the social contexts in which interventions take place could undermine or support intervention outcomes [19] and the delivery of interventions [23]. Campbell and Cornish's prior work provided us with a framework for understanding how social contexts may impact intervention delivery and outcomes [21]. This framework proposed that social contexts within which interventions operate can be conceptualised in three interlinked spheres: material–political, relational, and symbolic contexts.

The *material–political* context focuses on how (i) *resource-based aspects of agency* (the extent to which people have access to resources), and (ii) *experience-based aspects* (opportunities for people to put their skills into practice) shape intervention implementation and outcomes [21]. For example, in communities with low employment rates (resource-based agency) people may struggle to attend intervention sessions as they prioritise job seeking.

The *relational context* refers to the way in which social relationships manifest and impact on intervention delivery and outcomes. The relational context is primarily characterised in terms of social relationships between peers, families, and interactions with external actors [21].

The *symbolic context* refers to how ideas and representations in the social world determine opportunities for change [21]. This comprises the meanings, ideologies, and world-views through which people understand themselves and other aspects of their lives [24], and it frames the ways in which different groups/people are valued and respected [21].

In interventions, representations (symbols) can provide opportunities for new subject positions to emerge.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Site and Research Design

The first author was based in South Africa, but experts (referred to as researchers and practitioners in this study) could come from anywhere in the world. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Our inclusion criteria were (a) having experience in developing, conducting, or evaluating group-based violence prevention interventions; (b) having conducted at least one intervention in a low-income country; and (c) being able to give informed consent.

We collected data through online in-depth qualitative interviews, either on video or in voice calls. The approximate duration of the interviews was 50 min (range 24–67 min). The interview questions concerned the challenges and potential for online participatory violence prevention interventions, e.g., “What do you think are the possibilities of online participatory violence prevention interventions in the field of violence prevention?” or “What challenges do you think one would encounter when delivering participatory interventions online?”.

2.2. Data Analysis

All interviews were conducted in English and all data were transcribed verbatim by a trained research assistant. The entire interview transcripts were utilised in the analysis. The first author first read through all the transcripts and listened to the interview recordings a second time to get a sense of the data. The first author then devised an analytical coding framework, which was derived from interrogating literature on the topic (e.g., availability of technological devices, access to the Internet, etc.) [25]. Data were then dissected into text segments using the pre-defined coding framework. Abstract themes emerged from these text segments. In the dissecting process, if new categories emerged, they were added to the initial coding framework.

Then, as proposed by [26], the emerging abstract themes were grouped into basic themes, which were derived directly from the textual data. These basic themes were then grouped into organising themes, where basic themes were grouped into clusters of similar issues. Finally, the organising themes were grouped into the global themes, which encompassed the principal metaphors in the data as a whole [26]. These themes were presented in a web-like fashion, illustrating the thematic networks [26]. The whole process was supported by the other authors through ongoing discussions.

3. Findings

In total, 20 participants, (8 from South Africa, 1 from ‘the rest of Africa’, 5 from Europe, 5 from North America, and 1 from South America) took part in this study. Participants had a wide range of experience from 2 to 25 years in their respective fields (Table 1).

We presented our findings under three global themes: (1) the material–political context, (2) the relational context, and (3) the symbolic context, and reflected on their implications for online participatory violence prevention interventions (Table 2). To the best of our knowledge, experts were speaking about their perceptions rather than direct experiences of online participatory violence prevention interventions. Thus, they were reflecting on how their experiences of face-to-face group-based violence interventions may translate to the virtual sphere.

3.1. Material–Political Context (Experience-Based Agency)

3.1.1. Familiarity with Technology

One challenge raised by many researchers and practitioners was participants’ levels of familiarity with technology. Although access to, and familiarity with, technological devices has improved over the last few years, some researchers and practitioners felt that online

participatory violence prevention interventions might be challenging for those who are less familiar with the technology:

“So, we’re working with indigenous populations in [name of the place] and the rates of illiteracy, especially among women, is huge. Most women have not gone to school. And so, you have this population that might be using phones, but they’re using them in a totally different way than like the texting. So, it’s a little bit about thinking about how we can adapt the ways in which we’re using technology as well to allow people to interact on their own terms. And still get their perspective out there.” (Expert 020)

Others felt unfamiliarity with technology could impact on participants’ ability to engage in discussions online and suggested testing these interventions with learners and getting their perspective on this:

“What I’m less sure about is whether people who would be much less familiar with the technology would feel as free about doing that [having discussions online], and I think that is certainly something that you would need to find out through testing it and trying to get feedback from learners about how they feel and whether it makes them feel a bit stranger, self-conscious or whether they can relax.” (Expert 005)

Furthermore, researchers and practitioners were worried that there may be recruitment bias, as those who were not as familiar with technology or those who were not active often online, might be left out of interventions:

“There’s going to be people who are more active in that [online] space. And those are easy people to recruit. It’s a little bit of that, then sort of sets you up for recruitment bias, and so there might be many, many people who have really interesting perspectives that are not included in that recruitment profile. And so, who are you missing out?” (Expert 020)

Table 1. Descriptions of the experts.

Expert N ^o	Male	Female	Academic	Intervention Expert	Africa	Europe	North America	South America
1		×		×	×			
2		×	×	×	×			
3		×		×	×			
4		×		×	×		×	×
5		×	×	×	×			
6		×		×	×			
7		×	×	×	×			
8		×		×	×			
9		×	×	×	×	×		
10	×			×	×		×	×
11		×		×	×		×	
12		×	×	×	×	×		
13		×		×	×			×
14		×		×	×			
15		×		×	×			
16		×	×	×	×		×	
17		×		×	×			
18		×	×	×	×	×		
19		×	×	×	×	×		×
20		×	×		×			

Table 2. Findings on how social contexts may impact delivery of violence prevention interventions.

Global Theme	Organising Theme
Material–Political context (Experience-based agency)	(a) Familiarity with technology
Material–Political context (Resource-based agency)	(b) Access to devices (c) Power (d) Internet connectivity and infrastructure (e) Video access
Relational context	(f) Recruitment of participants (g) Mobile relationships
Symbolic context	(h) Navigating stigma associated with violence prevention interventions (i) Young people online

3.1.2. Levels of Literacy

Researchers and practitioners were also concerned that low levels of literacy may impact on people's participation in online discussions if text messaging/writing was needed. This revolved around two issues: one, people's ability to properly express themselves in written form, and two, people's ability to read and interpret messages correctly:

"It's difficult to learn from each other online [in the intervention]. Because much of this requires one to read and, in our schools, and depending on which school you go into, the level to which people's handwriting and ability to spell out exactly what they mean, also gets curbed if they're going to type things up. Having to type anything, any medium that comes in the way of how one expresses themselves is the issue. They may be conscious that other people are going to worry about, you know, raise issues about their spelling mistakes etc. Or I can't read this, you know how children can be. For them I mean, they're still in identity formation stage even then, so self-confidence can also be impacted." (Expert 002)

Other researchers and practitioners felt that literacy would not be such an issue in online participatory interventions. For example, one expert who has worked on online participatory violence prevention interventions with a variety of groups thought that with a little bit of creativity, there were ways to generate discussion among groups with different levels of literacy:

"Journaling may or may not work for you [depending on level of literacy]. It may, for some. In other places and more oral cultures, finding ways for people to just audio record, like do a one-minute story or like, you know, do a stream of consciousness to answer this question and then share those with the small group. You know, or real time breakout sessions on some platform that people can discuss. I think there's plenty of opportunities for reflection and discussion, both in written and oral if we can figure out how to use the platforms well." (Expert 004)

3.2. Material–Political Context (Resource-Based Agency)

3.2.1. Access to Devices

A recurring issue raised by all the researchers and practitioners was that smart phones or laptops may not be available to all young people, limiting people's ability to participate in online participatory violence prevention interventions:

"I would say the key thing that comes to mind for me, is really around consistent and equitable access to participating in the intervention and that could either

come in the form of access to phones or computers. So really ensuring that access is not a hindrance, will be a main challenge, as well as considering how that access might vary based on different social dimensions or otherwise, to ensure that they are still equitably accessed across your programme participants.” (Expert 012)

Furthermore, where smartphones or laptops were available, the functionality of the device might make it hard for a person to become involved in an online participatory violence prevention intervention:

“So, for your low income, we are finding that although people might have access to a smart phone, it might be a hand me down or a very low entry level kind of smartphone. And they aren’t necessarily using these online platforms, like a person from a higher income socioeconomic status.” (Expert 009)

3.2.2. Power Dynamics in a Household

Researchers and practitioners felt that where smartphones or laptops were not easily accessible, especially for children, people’s access to devices, and consequently the intervention, may be mediated by more powerful actors in the household:

“Uneven access to these sorts of devices. You know, by socioeconomic status etc. Just thinking of like, there might be a family where the parent has a mobile phone and then the teenager might have access to it sometimes and other times not. And then the kind of power dynamics attached to that.” (Expert 019)

Researchers and practitioners also cautioned that providing participants with personal phones as a way to enable them access to an intervention may be risky, especially in highly patriarchal societies where women are disempowered:

“What [the phone] you’re giving—in a very vulnerable community that’s highly patriarchal with social norms that don’t empower women in any way whatsoever—one of the most expensive things that anybody in that household may have ever seen, to a woman? So that created tension in the households and the women had the phone taken from them.” (Expert 001)

3.2.3. Internet Connectivity and Infrastructure

The researchers and practitioners were also concerned about how the high costs of data and broader Internet structure may limit young people’s ability to access an online participatory violence prevention intervention: “*I think the data is a bigger issue [than access to devices]. In the sense that data is expensive.*” (Expert 021). High data costs would potentially mean uneven access to the intervention, unless interventions provided data:

“We also find that it’s the, there is a belief that researching violence against women using mobile technology will reduce some of the inequities, but actually can increase your bias inequities because people don’t have data.” (Expert 001)

Poor infrastructure including limited bandwidth and erratic electricity were also raised as a factor that could potentially exclude participants:

“*There’s either been electricity failures, no electricity, or there’s just no network. It just isn’t there that day, and then when she manages to get online, she hardly hears anything, and we don’t hear her. So, I think a lot must be done with the cell phone companies to ensure an adequate connection. We’re still depending on a national infrastructure that isn’t there yet.*” (Expert 003)

Other researchers and practitioners, however, felt that the issue of connectivity was improving: “*The one good thing that has come out of COVID is that there is a lot more connectivity all round than what there was before.*” (Expert 021). Furthermore, they also suggested that there may be ways around challenges related to electricity:

“There are ways around that. You know, we’ve proven that in deep, deep rural areas, where we’ve put it up, solar charging stations, etc. And the most remote

of remote areas, you can only reach it with a 4 × 4. That is how bad the road surfaces are, and there you will have solar charging stations, sitting on top of a mountain and charging devices.” (Expert 021)

The impacts of poor connectivity and electricity outages were concerning because they could impact on intervention delivery, leading to very different dynamics in group sessions as compared to face-to-face discussions: *“It’s very different from when you could see and you interacting with people directly, right? The conversation breaks at times. They [the facilitator and participants] have to be OK with, you know shifting and being flexible and adaptable to the circumstances.”* (Expert 007). Such breaks in discussions caused by poor connectivity could interfere with the natural flow of conversation:

“You know how on the line you have these breaks of, you know, your internet connection for somebody isn’t great. They’re speaking and then you can’t hear exactly what they’re saying. The laughter is delayed.” (Expert 002)

Such disruptions in communication could slow down the building of relationships online, leave some people out of a discussion, and disrupt participants’ sense of being in the ‘same space’ as others, which are all important aspects of participatory interventions.

3.2.4. Video Access

An important strategy in building trust among participants in an online group intervention was having people use their videos so people could see one another:

“We always jokingly say; “OK, switch on your video you know, so that I can see your face and know that I’m not talking to robot or whatever”. Now, I mean that’s a very elementary way, but that that could be one way, at least, of establishing that rapport albeit a slightly different rapport, but having at least video interaction so that you are not deceived by the person that you are speaking to. Because you speaking to a faceless individual.” (Expert 021)

Videos can help build a sense of community online: *“I think that that connection is facilitated by the video link. I think that the video thing for building communities is quite important. Especially when you’re working at a more like emotional and personal level.”* (Expert 003).

Researchers and practitioners also clearly recognised that having a video connection was not always an option for intervention delivery: *“but videos on is a real impossibility for a lot of locations to make it doable.”* (Expert 004). An IT specialist, however, felt that there are possibilities for video communication, even in areas with low bandwidth, if the correct platform is used:

“And we have found, well we’re using different technology to you know, it’s not the [names of online platforms] and those things. So, we’ve been using something that uses low bandwidth and is light on data. So, I think it depends on the platform that you use. So, I think if one looks at the particular platform that is low on bandwidth and low on data, that could also work.” (Expert 021)

3.3. The Relational Context

Researchers and practitioners explained how the processes of online recruiting for an intervention may change who gets recruited, and this may impact the emergence and nature of relationships within an online participatory violence prevention intervention group. Researchers and practitioners also discussed how online interventions could potentially reach otherwise hard to reach groups such as those on the move or those with functional limitations (disabilities).

3.3.1. Recruitment of Participants

There were conflicting views about how recruitment of participants for an online participatory violence prevention intervention would differ from face-to-face recruitment, and how this may change the composition and group dynamics. Some researchers and

practitioners raised concern about how online recruitment may lead to participants who had vastly different lives being in the same group: *“But then you know those people might look quite different from you know, a cross section of people in a physical community.”* (Expert 019). Such differences in the make-up of the intervention group could impact on group dynamics, as they undermine a key aspect of participatory approaches, which is that people are similar and like-minded. Others, however, felt that if participants were self-selecting into the intervention, then some similarity may be achieved: *“If students are self-selecting into it, it’s that they have some sort of openness or readiness to engage with the content for some reason. I mean the students that will self-select are students that are already switched on.”* (Expert 004).

Some interviewees felt that recruitment via online platforms could allow for new types of groups to be reached: *“I suppose the virtual sphere opens you up to connecting like a young person in Mpumalanga with a young person in the Northern Cape and with a young person even further afield.”* (Expert 003). The implications of this were unclear; it could enable people from very different settings to see how challenges in their lives were not ‘their fault’ but driven by larger social processes, or it could make it difficult for them to relate to one another.

3.3.2. Increased Accessibility and New Relationships

Several researchers and practitioners felt that online participatory violence prevention interventions could enable relationships to form in contexts where they may not normally be easy to establish or maintain in the long run. Three specific ‘groups’ were identified by researchers and practitioners: those in humanitarian settings, people living with disabilities, and women in abusive relationships. Although having very different contexts, they all may struggle to access ‘face-to-face’ participatory interventions over long periods of times.

The two respondents who worked primarily in humanitarian contexts felt online participatory violence prevention interventions had the potential to enable refugees who were on the move to remain in an intervention:

“How the project (an online intervention that is being implemented in humanitarian settings) initially came about was that we were thinking about acute crises. How do you deliver a 16 week or 8 week in-person intervention when people, when there are refugees, who are like on the move? You know, they’re, they’re fleeing a conflict.” (Expert 015)

The other humanitarian practitioner also felt that online participatory violence prevention interventions would provide continued interaction with the intervention, even when contexts made in-person engagement impossible:

“In humanitarian studies, what excites me about technology is you can continue to work with adolescents or your target group even if they’re on the move and so they’re not restricted to one physical location but you can provide some form of continuity, of engagement regardless of where somebody is and I think that can be quite important especially again for those adolescents who are on the move or potentially fleeing different types of conflict re-displacement but just having that on-going opportunity for engagement is promising.” (Expert 012)

The continuity offered by online access to an intervention means that once a group for a participatory intervention is established, the engagement can continue regardless of participants’ locations.

There were also discussions on how accessible online participatory violence prevention interventions would be for people living with disabilities. An expert working with computer technology felt that adapting communication to simultaneously reach people with different forms of disabilities is possible:

“They developed a sign language app that allows you to type, and it signs at the same time. But OK, if your person is deaf, then they would be able to read text on the screen. So, one could put subtitles on, on that [that communication], but then you have to also look at using for example, for people who are visually impaired.

You should be able to read out the subtitles and make use of the technology to do that. So that is a possibility. I mean that is not very difficult to do. I have many examples of things that we've produced, you know, that makes use of that, so that it caters for people who are hearing impaired and visually impaired." (Expert 021)

A number of interviewees also mentioned that online participatory violence prevention interventions may improve access for women in abusive relationships, who could then access interventions from their house: "[The] possibility for women who are not living with their partners, but their partners are controlling and might want to control their [women's] access to intervention, then you know an online connection is going to help." (Expert 003).

3.4. The Symbolic Context

3.4.1. Young People Online

A supportive aspect within the symbolic context was the sense that young people's lives were increasingly led online, and they were more likely to be willing to engage in online activities than older people. According to researchers and practitioners, this is facilitated by young people being more comfortable disclosing personal issues in online arenas: "I think youth have found and feel much more comfortable with a whole variety of online only connections with other people and they feel that and are fine with it." (Expert 004). The anonymity provided online could be a reason for this comfort, as suggested by some researchers and practitioners:

"You might reach young people who you otherwise don't reach because they wouldn't participate in something like that [the intervention]. I think sometimes they will be more open to tell you things or talk about things that they otherwise wouldn't because there is some more anonymity around it." (Expert 013)

3.4.2. Navigating Stigma Associated with Attending Violence Prevention Interventions

In the opinion of a few researchers and practitioners, the accessibility of online participatory violence prevention interventions for VAWG may help address the stigma that violence prevention interventions are for 'other people':

"The elite group is missing out. They do not want to participate in the community level activities. So, the online intervention will catch all these people across the board. The ones in the communities, everyday people, as well as the so called, 'elite group'. We could even pull in some of these taboo spaces. I call them taboo spaces because they pretend to be holy, and they don't engage in these conversations. The so-called religious leadership. They need to be part of this conversation." (Expert 019)

Indeed, other researchers suggested that online participatory violence prevention interventions could be more convenient, which would suit people's time and space: "I think you can do delivery at a time as well, not just the space, but at the time that suits participants rather than suits the infrastructure around them" (Expert 003).

4. Discussion

In this discussion, we focus on how social contexts may shape access to and delivery of group-based online participatory violence prevention interventions for young people, through applying a framework assessing the material-political, relational, and symbolic social contexts [19,21]. We found that factors such as familiarity with technology, access to technological devices and the Internet, and recruitment shaped the possibilities of conducting group-based online participatory violence prevention interventions. We also found that online interventions provided new opportunities for people who are constantly on the move or had accessibility challenges. We discuss each in turn.

A key theme that emerged in this study was young people and their familiarity with new technologies, and this straddled the symbolic and material-political contexts.

Young people were described by study participants as being more familiar with new on-line technologies—*experience-based agency*—which would likely support young people's confidence and involvement in online participatory violence prevention interventions, as has been described in research on other topics [27]. Indeed, people who are not comfortable with complex technology often look for simpler technologies to communicate or avoid technology altogether [28,29]. As such, online participatory violence prevention interventions should use platforms or tools that target groups are already using online for communication, and build on them as delivery mechanisms. Training participants on the platform being used prior to the implementation of the violence prevention intervention could also prove beneficial for intervention engagement.

A major concern among researchers and practitioners was whether young people would have access to devices to enable their online participation. Lack of access to devices has been previously found to exacerbate existing inequalities [30], and as such this could lead to differential access to intervention programmes. Understanding how young people access the Internet, when they do this, and through what devices is important in understanding how online participatory violence prevention interventions may differentially engage groups.

Poor Internet infrastructure emerged as a major theme. Specifically, there was concern that poor Internet connectivity would limit the dynamics of online participatory violence prevention interventions and consequently undermine transformative communication. Many described how the weak Internet infrastructure would limit online activities such as video links and discussions, as there could be constant lagging and freezing of the feeds, reflecting previous work [31]. The ongoing lagging and freezing could distract participants and undermine their ability to engage in spontaneous discussion and dialogue, as posited by [12]. Furthermore, while video feeds have been described as important for the emergence of trust, building of relationships, and enabling people to read each other's nonverbal cues online [32,33], with a poor Internet connection this is not possible. As such, the overall lack of a good Internet infrastructure may impact on enabling of key aspects of transformative communication in online participatory violence prevention interventions.

Online participatory violence prevention interventions allow people to remain engaged even when meeting in person is not possible (e.g., for people with functional limitations, who are refugees/migrants, or who are in lockdowns). Beyond allowing them to participate fully in an intervention, this extended online interaction can also provide sustained supportive mechanisms and ongoing social relationships after any 'formal' intervention has ended. The potential for online social relationships where in-person meeting is not possible has been found in other studies where online relationships were proposed to potentially provide alternative means of socialisation for people with less face-to-face interactions, including people living with disabilities [34]. Thus, where social relationships in 'face-to-face' spaces are either transient or hard to achieve, online groups can provide participants with alternative ways of maintaining social relationships with and like-minded peers.

A concern raised was how the process of recruitment for online participatory violence prevention interventions may differ compared to that of in-person interventions, and how this may impact on transformative communication. Online recruitment enables reaching participants outside of the same physical communities, that would normally constitute face-to-face intervention. In a carefully facilitated intervention, this may enable participants from other areas who are experiencing similar issues, which would help the participants to view issues as being malleable to change [35], thus facilitating critical thinking and reflection. Studies have suggested, however, that differences within groups may pose a challenge because transformative processes work best in groups where participants can relate to what their peers are saying [36–38]. Researchers and practitioners should consider a more purposive form of recruitment, where participants who are recruited online undergo a preliminary session geared towards finding and grouping people in a way that enables constructive discussions.

This study has a number of limitations. First, the pool of participants recruited for this study was limited, as we recruited participants we knew, and then we used snowball sampling to expand it, thus likely accessing people with similar views. Secondly, while our study focused on group-based participatory sexual violence prevention interventions for adolescents, some experts generalised their views to VAWG online prevention interventions with any population, and thus, we may have missed some specific adolescent issues. Thirdly, in this paper we did not include the perspectives of young learners, which are crucial to understanding the feasibility of group-based participatory interventions for their generation. We presented an analysis of adolescent perspectives in another paper. Finally, while the thematic network analysis provides three-level themes, we presented only two levels as there were too many basic themes to describe in one manuscript. However, we ensured that all basic themes were represented in the organising themes.

5. Conclusions

For effective online participatory violence prevention interventions to be successful, researchers and practitioners need to consider how the wider social contexts in which interventions are implemented may impact on online delivery and intervention outcomes. Previous research has highlighted how social contexts such as poverty and unemployment shape face-to-face intervention delivery [39], and how wider social contexts may undermine participants' attempts to translate intervention activities into their day-to-day lives [19,21]. This paper explored how social contexts can shape online participatory violence prevention intervention delivery and transformative communication. We found that major structural challenges for online participatory violence prevention interventions include poor Internet infrastructure, limited access to devices, and lack of familiarity with technology. Working with communities to co-develop solutions and use technologies with low bandwidth to ensure transformative communication in interventions is critical.

While there are many contextual constraints to online participatory violence prevention interventions, there are opportunities to build and achieve transformative communication. Young people are more adept and engaged online and willing to discuss sensitive topics online. Furthermore, the opportunities afforded by sustained online engagement where participants are mobile or where in-person meeting is an impossibility creates new possibilities. Building on these opportunities and developing interventions that harness these opportunities is key.

As access to the Internet increases, particularly among young people, there is a need to develop online participatory violence prevention interventions. Co-development of interventions with those targeted is critical to minimising negatives and maximising positives. As this occurs, there is a need to recognise the role social contexts play in shaping the possibilities for intervention delivery. More research is also needed on video technology in low-bandwidth settings to enhance the possibilities of transformative communication online.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization: J.N.; Data curation: J.N.; Formal analysis, J.N.; Investigation, J.N.; Supervision, M.N.-S. and A.G.; Writing—original draft, J.N.; Writing—review & editing, J.N., M.N.-S. and A.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: J.N. was funded by Nelson Mandela University Post Graduate Research Scholarship and the South African National Research Foundation; Grant UID 113404. A.G is funded by the South African Medical Research Council.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Nelson Mandela University (protocol code H19-HEA-PSY-012; obtained October 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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