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UNLOVE: A Digital Game for Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Awareness

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Abstract: UNLOVE is an under-development digital game aiming the prevention and awareness of dating violence (DV), namely gender-based violence (GBV). Violence in intimate relationships (VIR) is a serious global problem, with a significant gender setting, given that most people who suffer from it are women. VIR profoundly affects physical, psychological, sexual, reproductive, social and professional development, with consequences on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. Different recent Portuguese and international surveys illustrate a worrying scenario in which the number of victims and perpetrators of VIR are very high. Additional studies, qualitative in nature, encompassing young people from diverse backgrounds, show the persistence of myths and gender stereotypes regarding DV, such as the compliance with the more traditional forms of male socialization, in the case of heterosexual couples, or the emphasizing of gender differences. Other studies underline the importance of developing innovative intervention and prevention initiatives adjusted to adolescents and teens, focusing on the prevention of health-compromising behaviours and encouraging a shift on attitudes, beliefs, myths and values. Digital games can have a strong role in this process supporting non-formal education prevention programs, considering their potential in attracting, engaging, and retaining participants. This paper discusses and describes the development process of UNLOVE, a digital game aiming to promote the acquisition of knowledge about this phenomenon, namely in what concerns: the training to recognize abusive intimate situations; the identification and production of changes in socio-cultural beliefs on which such violence is grounded; and the development of skills to manage a violence situation. UNLOVE is being developed as a non-formal education prevention program in the form of a real-time, narrative-based, point and click digital game, in which users impersonate different avatars that allow them to experiment and witness several DV situations. UNLOVE paradigm is based on the assumption that there are different scenarios, views and dimensions in approaching DV problem. Besides a description of the game concept and structure, the paper also presents preliminary results on the validation of the game design, implemented in three phases with final users (Portuguese adolescents and teens).

Keywords: gender and ICT, gender-based violence, youth and adolescence, digital game, prevention and awareness

1. Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious global problem, with a significant gender setting, given that most people who suffer from it are women. As stated by the European Institute for Gender Equality, it is a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination (EIGE, 2017). GBV profoundly affects physical, psychological, sexual, reproductive, social and professional development, with consequences on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, not only on the short term, but also on the medium and long terms, as it may lead, in extreme cases, to the victims' death. Additional problems may encompass physical injuries, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, gynaecological complications, sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV), posttraumatic stress syndrome, depression and suicide (WHO, 2010a; WHO, 2010b). There is scientific evidence that relates Violence in Intimate Relations (VIR) with various risk behaviours, such as smoking, alcohol and drug consumption and dangerous sexual behaviours (WHO, 2002) and there has been important and diverse research on this field, showing that violence against girls and women is a major global issue (Sigal & Denmark, 2013). Schools and universities are privileged spaces of intervention, considering that young people spend most of their time in those contexts where, usually, intimate relationships start (Matos et al., 2006).

A study in Portugal (Caridade, 2011), encompassing 4,667 young people, aged 13-29 (57.7% female), reported that 25.4% were victims and 30.6% were perpetrators of violence. In terms of victimization, emotionally abusive behaviour leads (19.5%), followed by physically abusive behaviour (13.4%) and severe physical violence (7.6%). Other studies conducted in Portugal point the average rate of violence among teens and young adults to 25% (CIG, 2008). Myths and gender stereotypes persist among college students and secondary school students, such

as the emphasizing of gender differences at a psychological level, with men represented as more aggressive, impulsive, resilient, cold, and sexualized than women, represented as more emotional, although more controlled, more vulnerable, more sensitive and less sexualized (Caridade, 2011). This disturbing reality gives us a measure of the urgency of extending and intensifying interventions with teenagers and young adults.

According to Laporte et al. (2011) negative childhood experiences of family violence influence differently adolescents' intimate relationships, depending namely on gender: it seems that victimized female adolescents are at greater risk for revictimization, but not aggression, during their dating relationships. Indeed, this scenario is more critical for women: according to a study by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, one in every three women in the European Union (EU) has been or will be a victim of at least one episode of sexual, physical or psychological abuse (Felicio & Pena, 2014). The largest studies on gender violence ever conducted in the E.U. (CE, 2011; EP, 2014) reveals the persistence of the problem and a strong gender bias: 97% of victims of sexual, psychological, or physical violence are women. This research also shows that there are "new or recent" forms of gender violence, which make use of new technologies, revealing that 20% of young women are vulnerable to cyber-harassment. Besides the sexual, physical, emotional and social violence, electronic aggression is a problem and many studies support the need to identify ways in which technology is used in dating violence (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010). According to these authors, electronic communication technology influences DV by redefining new boundaries between dating partners.

VIR is a complex issue, goes far beyond marital relationships and has strong socio-cultural roots, difficult to resolve. Different international organizations, such as the UN and the WHO, have been calling for the primary prevention of VIR, acting upstream, i.e. working with young people to raise their awareness about the problem. It appears that, as dating relationships extend through time, violence tends to increase, founding an antechamber of conjugal violence.

Dating Violence (DV) victims have their physical and emotional health and social well-being affected in a multitude of ways, being essential to develop innovative and exploratory research projects that can enhance awareness on the phenomena and from health care perspective can promote the reduction of its prevalence (Ismail et al., 2007). In Portugal, a study conducted by Ferreira (2011) has proven that DV victims express little help-seeking behaviours, which underlines the importance of developing novel prevention programs. Ferreira (2011) also stresses the need to conduct deeper research studies, specifically adjusted to this population needs and habits; a game like UNLOVE can play a very important role in this path.

GBV often begins in dating relationships (Caridade, 2008; Plauborg et al., 2012), which underlines the importance of primary prevention programs, targeted to teenagers and young students, focusing on the prevention of health-compromising behaviours and encouraging the change in attitudes, beliefs and values related to gender roles, masculinities, conceptions of love, intimacy and human rights (Foshee et al., 2009).

Considering that games are part of the social experience of teens, UNLOVE targets young students, between sixteen and twenty years old, being high-schools and universities the main contextual sets in which the research on the impact of the game will take place.

2. Digital games potential on dating-violence prevention

Dating Violence (DV) is a social problem, demanding scientific investigation to regard it as a public health and also as an educational issue, reinforcing the need to develop, implement and evaluate intervention and prevention initiatives adjusted to its target audience. Health is shaped by different experiences (Ismail et al, 2007), being fundamental to better explore the potential of non-formal education strategies to develop innovative solutions adjusted to adolescents and young students, focusing on the prevention of health-compromising behaviours and encouraging a shift on attitudes, beliefs, myths and values. In this framework, we believe that digital games potential should be better exploited, namely in what concerns its ability to support non-formal education prevention programs targeted at teens and young students.

It is also known that games can motivate and engage users towards behaviour change, creating dynamics that help them modify and shape new behaviours (Hunnicke et al. 2004; Marczewski 2012). Games as media of change are a powerful tool to support development of health promotion campaigns able to encourage behaviour change.

There are already some experiences in exploiting games potential to help teens and young students to better understand the problem of DV. Initiatives like the ones promoted by the “Jennifer Ann’s Group” (jenniferann.org), “Love is Respect” organization (loveisrespect.org) or “loveisnotabuse.com” and “breakthecycle.org” illustrate an interesting potential on this approach. The Jennifer Ann's Group already published the main findings on the effectiveness of their games, revealing that the majority of participants showed a change in attitude about negative relationship beliefs in only 20 - 45 minutes. According to Crecente (2014), the videogames produced under the scope of the “Life.Love. Game Design Challenge” were able to increase awareness about teen dating violence and provided educational information to assist adolescents, parents, and teachers in identifying abusive relationships.

Jouriles et al (2009) (2011) demonstrated the virtual reality potential on increasing the realism of role-plays used to teach college women sexual coercion and rape-resistance skills. This study has underlined, as Jones (2003) also indicates, that gaming technology offers an interesting platform to develop prevention programs targeted at teens and young students, considering its potential in attracting, engaging, and retaining participants.

Sorbring et al. (2015) also described the impact of an online, game-based large-scale intervention to support social workers that work with DV. Their main results show that the young people perceived the game as positive and interesting. The analysed game (“Green Acres High”) was created, designed and developed under the scope of the European project CAVA (Changing Attitudes to dating Violence in Adolescents).

More recently, van Rosmalen-Nooijens et al. (2017) presented the results of a randomized controlled trial and of a feasibility study of an Internet-based intervention (“Feel the ViBe”) targeted for adolescents and young adults exposed to family violence. The main results show that this was a promising intervention with potential as a public health strategy.

3. UNLOVE design and structure

3.1 Game concept

UNLOVE is being developed as a real-time, narrative-based, point and click digital game, that allows users to impersonate different avatars that enable them to experiment and witness several DV situations. UNLOVE paradigm is based on the assumption that there are different scenarios (Figure 1), views and dimensions in approaching DV problem: it was therefore necessary to design a complex narrative structure to support the game. UNLOVE real-time and narrative-based nature is considered to be a very important asset in engaging and retaining participants throughout the gaming experience and during the prevention program.

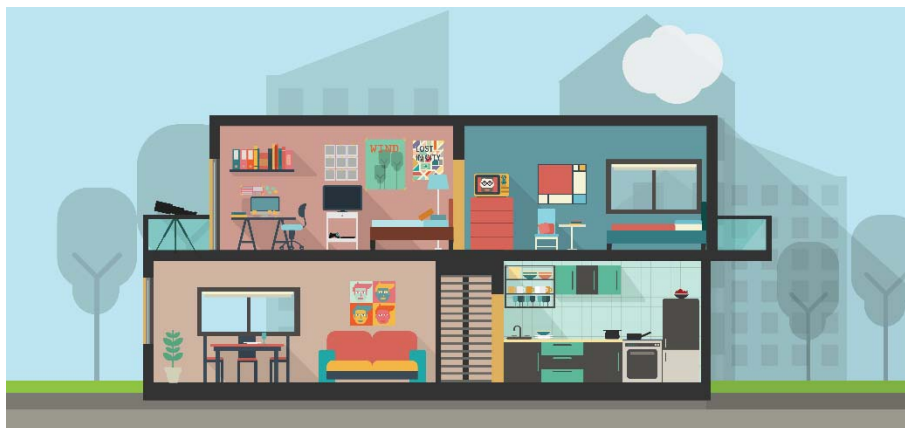


Figure 1: Scenario example (home)

The conceptual model of the game is based on a set of pre-established narratives that can be explored by point and click actions, through the selection of visuospatial scenarios, characters and objects with which the avatar interacts. Avatars can be male, female, homo or hetero and evolve, throw-out the real-time game, enabling the experimentation of different DV situations. The current database that supports the game is being drawn with future scalability concerns, to allow the easy integration of more complex narratives, objects and scenarios and, also, in order to allow the development of community-based features. Besides the narrative scenarios, the game interface also integrates different menu bars (Figure 2).

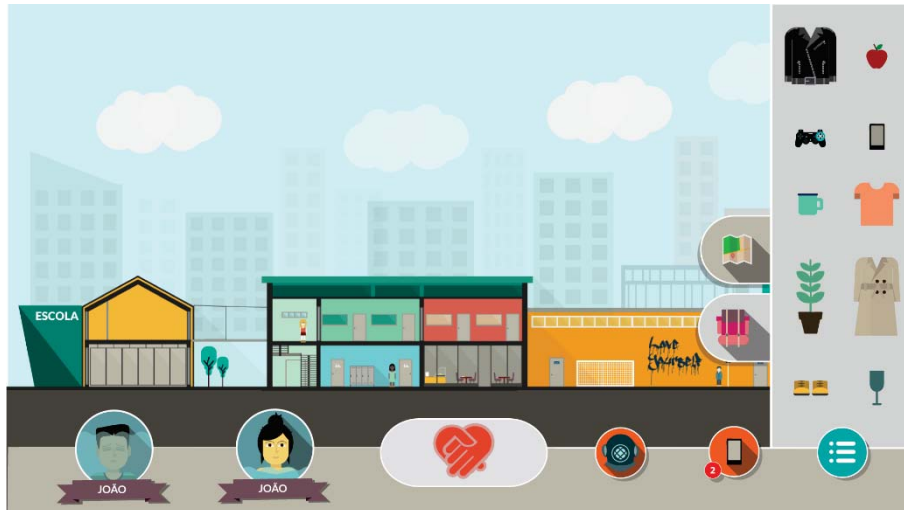


Figure 2: Game interface and main menu bars

3.2 Game main features

The game structure is composed of the following main components: avatar/player, partner, NPCs (Non Player Characters), scenarios, narratives, objects, dilemmas, progression mini-games, internal dive space, badges and gallery.

After personalizing both the avatar and his/her partner (Figure 3), and from a first global map, the player will explore and unlock different scenarios (home, school, shopping and bar/disco), in which, for each new game, a set of narratives can be explored enabling the interaction of the player with objects that must be collected in order to allow the access to the dilemmas. Scenarios are progressively unlocked as the player answers to the different dilemmas. The end of the game depends on the path of each player, being mandatory that all scenarios are unlocked.

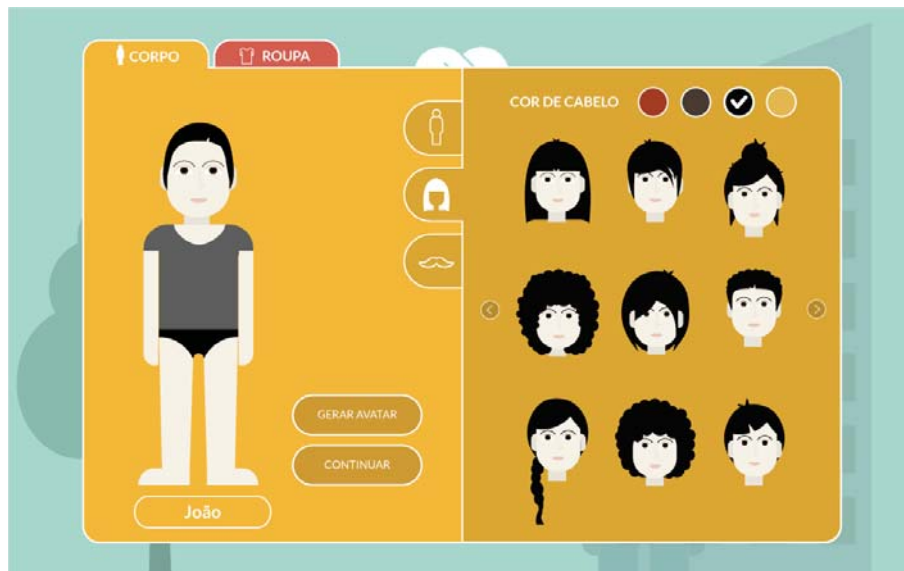


Figure 3: Avatar personalization

Dilemmas appear contextualized with specific scenarios, under the scope of a narrative, and must be resolved by the avatar/player during dialogues with his/her partner. For each dilemma, there are three possible answers/decisions: (i) aggressive, (ii) assertive/neutral (iii) or victimizer, allowing the exploitation of both aggressors and victims characteristics' as well as positions of affirmation or liberation.

Besides the dilemmas, the game also encompasses some “progression mini-games” that allow players to collect more objects or assets to better personalize the avatar and the partner. These mini-games appear contextualized

with the narrative aiming at increasing or relieving moments of tension. Some of these games (as the crosswords ones) have a clear pedagogical objective being used to clarify concepts (as consent or abuse, for example) inherent to the ongoing narrative.

Each narrative can be re-explored with a new game, in which new players and new partners can be created; at any moment, the game can be saved and be continued later. Game progression can be observed in the central icon of the main menu bar (Figure 2), in which two hands that draw the shape of a heart represent the cumulative quality of the answers/decisions on the dilemmas: the more closed they are, the best were those decisions. Besides this cumulative representation, each decision of the player as an immediate feedback in the menu bar: both the avatar/player and the partner icons get more or less filled with water as their emotion comfort decreases. Characters get more drawn (Figure 2) as they explore the game using more violent and/or victimizing attitudes/behaviours; the use of the assertive/neutral option maintains the water in the same level.

From a certain level of maturity within the game, the player can (or will be invited to) access the “internal dive space” (Figure 3) in which it is possible to retrospectively see the main moments of the previously explored game, augmenting the reflexion on the already experienced behaviours. The visual mood of this introspective space will be different according to the player previous behaviour, and allows him/her to access memories through the stereoscope images that link to the game most important moments (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Internal dive space and stereoscope (memories)

The quality of the game experience is also represented by the five badges (Figure 5) that the player can win: (i) “pro”, rewards the cumulative game experience (independently of the aggressive/assertive/victimizer answers given to the dilemmas); (ii) “cool”, rewards the assertive path; (iii) “solver”, rewards the good performance on the progression mini-games; (iv) “diver” rewards the ones that most voluntarily go to the “internal dive space”; and (v) “honey” that reward the most romantic players.

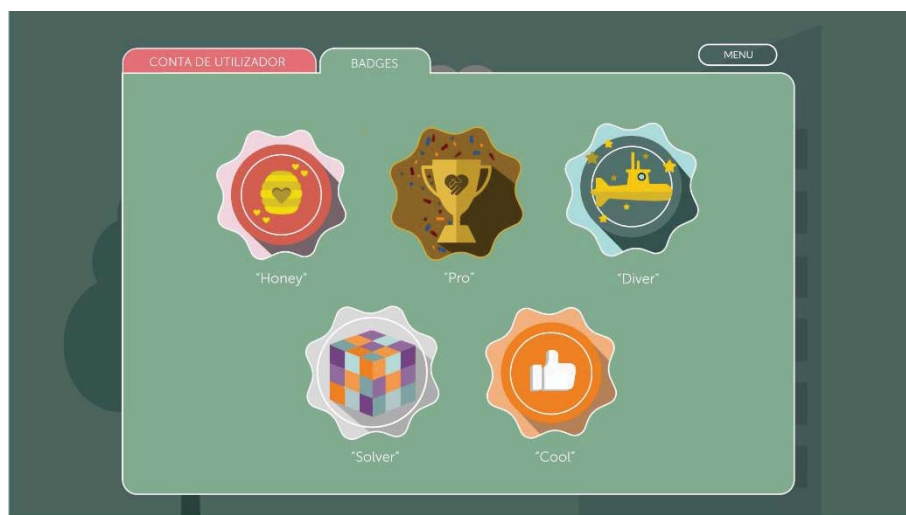


Figure 5: Badges

There is also a gallery, in the form of a shared board that allows players to post experiences and opinions. Only logged players can post in the gallery and themes can be tagged. Posts can be further discussed in an online forum that can be accessed in the project web page, being possible to directly access this forum from the gallery.

4. Preliminary results

The current stage of development of the game enabled the conduction of some workshops. These allowed not only the collection of important data regarding the adjustment of the game to final users' expectations and preferences, but also the preliminary validation of the game design and structure.

4.1 First phase

In a first phase, six workshops were held with 186 male and female (50.3%) Portuguese students, from 9th to 11th grade, aged 14 and 20, most of them in between 15 and 17 years old. Students were invited to participate orally suggesting the description of behaviours, situations and scenarios they would like to see in the game.

All the students surveyed responded favourably to the game, regarding its thematic and design style. The mini-games that this first version contained were one of the elements that aroused the main interest. The possibility to customize both characters/partners was also discussed in these workshops, being one of the key issues for the students. The fact that the game has a narrative base, being similar to SIMS on allowing choices and the construction of the game path by the action of the player, was often referred as positive.

As spaces of courtship, the school was often referred to as the space responsible for the beginning of dating relationships, being said that normally "couples" attend the same school. Other suggested places for dating were Dance Clubs, restaurants, bars, the beach, and urban outdoors. Jealousy was the more referred source of aggressive behaviour in dating relationships. Students reported that disagreements between lovers often extend to social networks, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

4.2 Second phase

In a second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Portuguese students (two groups of five, both with 3 girls and 2 boys), from the 12th grade of a public Portuguese High School. The interviews focused on collecting data in order to increase knowledge of the teen dating relationships, its motivations, contexts, spaces and social life. These interviews were based on a protocol which script was structured in three main themes: (i) beginning of a relationship and communication day by day; (ii) conflict situations; and (iii) decision making.

The suggested dating scenarios confirm the choices of the first phase. Regarding themes (i) and (ii), the results show that boys seem to be more often accused of worrying about the physical image, being that the most important issue; however, boys and girls stated that they equally value sharing of interests and tastes with their boyfriend, as well as their smile and their look. Boys and girls felt equally judgmental criticism of physical characteristics and jealousy was once again identified as the main source of conflict; friends were also recognized as a jealousy reason, namely as participants stated that it was difficult to manage the time dedicated to a relationship without ceasing to be with friends. Control over the partner was also identified as sometimes being exercised through friends, who are often inquired by one of the pairs about the whereabouts and life of the other. Control was still mentioned as being exercised through the mobile phone, with constant and inquiring messages. Jealousy extends to social networks and participants stated that there is the need to "hide" the profile of a jealous boyfriend, and of exposure of private arguments on the Internet after the end of a relationship.

In what concerns theme (iii) it was possible to observe that difficult decisions are those associated with the termination of a relationship, and the period after that decision. Participants reported that it is often very long process, which in severe cases arrive (and usually only then) to the family knowledge.

4.3 Third phase

The third phase enabled both the validation of the demo of the game, and the collective writing of the narratives' dialogues and dilemmas. Four creative writing laboratories were promoted, all with Portuguese adolescents/youths: the first one with 11 participants, seven girls and four boys of a vocational school, aged between 12 and 16 years old; the second with 15 master's students of editorial studies; the third had the participation of 17 students of a 12th grade catechesis/religious education class (12 girls and 5 boys, aged 16-18); and the fourth one with 7 of the 11 first session participants' (3 boys, four girls, all 16 years old).

The first three laboratories were semi-structured as follows: (i) Get to know UNLOVE by watching a demo of the game, in order to get into its universe and to understand its mechanics how this determines the stories to tell; (ii) Explore the topic of teen dating, focusing on raising awareness for DV, and on the behaviours, attitudes and contexts that can be more interesting to explore in the game, sharing some of the results collected in the first and second phases; (iii) Collect opinions and reviews about the demo; (iv) Understand the typology of dialogues and dilemmas to create, according to the moments of the game and the possible scenarios; (v) Collaboratively write the texts in groups, assigning scenes or micro scenarios to each group.

In the fourth laboratory, changes or adaptations made to what had been written by in the first lab were explained and some doubts in the construction of the dialogues / dilemmas were clarified. During this session, the young participants contributed with drama, beyond simple writing of dialogues. As most of these participants were students of a drama course on performing arts, they were invited to use representation to create new dilemmas that were registered in small video sketches.

During these labs, the collected dilemmas were contextualized with the following scenarios: school (classroom, playground, bar, gym, restroom), disco/bar, and shopping (movie theatre, shop, pizzeria).

Globally, and throughout the four labs, the created dilemmas ought to follow the answers/decisions dilemmas' types (A – aggressive, N – neutral assertive, V - victimized /submissive). Some of the dilemmas created suggested extra answers that were rewritten after laboratory and others had to been rewritten in order to more correctly adapt its contents to the types A, N, and V, although most of what was written by the youngsters in laboratory was used in the game. Sometimes it was difficult to some of the participants to define the A - assertive response, mostly because they confused it with a merely positive/cool answer. Confusion between being firm (that sometimes gains an aggressive passive character) and being a victim was also observed. Most of the participants showed easiness and speed in the exemplification of aggressive behaviour.

Beyond the narratives and dilemmas suggestions, participants of the fourth laboratory also proposed mini-games for the initial phase of the game, as they stated that couples should start to know each other before starting to date; according to the participants' opinions this initial mini-games and first conversations could have an important role in this stage of the relationship.

In what concerns the game design and structure, participants revealed an easy understanding of its dynamics, intuitively responding to how they would act before the dilemma. It is worth mentioning that some participants of the second group suggested that characters should not be static; during the four labs it was not always clear that the dilemmas have to be always answered by the player.

5. Conclusions and future work

The process of developing a digital game aiming the prevention and awareness of gender-based violence demands for a multi-dimensional approach and for a collaborative effort, using a trans-disciplinary team. The main findings already achieved underline the importance of studding this phenomenon with a transversal perspective, exploring digital media potential in diverse fields, as e-health, game design and participatory evaluation methodologies.

Observing the current trends in the ubiquitous use of digital resources, and acknowledging the role that social media and audio-visual contents have on the daily routines of adolescents, it seems relevant to deepen the knowledge in this topic, researching on how solutions like UNLOVE can support the design and development of health promotion campaigns able to promote sustainable and long-lasting behaviour change.

Concerning future work, and besides continuing the ongoing research on the game design and structure, the next stages of the project will encompass the evaluation of the game final version, implementing it in a school/university set, aiming to study its impact on the prevention and awareness on myths, behaviours, cultural beliefs and attitudes modification. Complementarily with these filed trials, a deep analysis of the game-generated data (both on the game and on the online forum connected with the gallery) will also be performed.

This large scale validation in field will be fundamental to allow a full comprehension of the effects that a digital game like UNLOVE can have in approaching gender-based violence in intimate young relations. Moreover, those

final validation stages will enable a better understanding of the role of digital technology in preventing violence and abuse in adolescent relationships, as recommended by Bowen & Sorbing (2018). It is in this context that it's worth to conclude that solutions like UNLOVE can support a more clear insight of the impact of digital media in social and educational contexts, namely when gender issues are in discussion, as in the case of Dating Violence.

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