



“Some Handle It in Ways Others See as Insane:” College Individuals’ Meaning-Making about their Motivations for Severe Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors

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Abstract

Purpose Post-relationship pursuit can range from normative to problematic, including stalking. While there are some theories and research about motivations for engaging in unwanted pursuit behaviors (UPBs), most lack the first-person perspectives of people who pursue. Little is known about the ways these individuals make sense of their behaviors and their related motivations. No qualitative studies have examined such meaning-making in non-forensic, young adult datasets.

Methods In a larger survey study, 141 undergraduate students who endorsed a history of severe UPBs indicated their personal reasons for engaging in the UPBs. We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze patterns across the dataset.

Results Through our analytic co-creation of meaning, we conceptualized participants’ UPBs as located in narratives. Some participants understood their UPBs as instrumental ways to control their stories, using UPBs to grapple with (un)certainty or hold power over their former partner. Other participants understood their UPBs as powerlessly reactive in their story. A subset of participants denied ownership of their UPBs.

Conclusions Severe UPBs are entwined in personal and social narratives, with people who pursue making sense of the behaviors as having diverse roles and motivations. Meaning-making about UPBs creates social narratives wherein people who pursue create complex realities, including being both victims and offenders, among others. Both personal and social interventions, such as psychotherapy and education respectively, are warranted for the prevention and treatment of severe UPBs. Future research should use more in-depth qualitative methods to understand pathways of UPBs and related processes.

Keywords Unwanted pursuit behaviors · Motivation · People who pursue · Meaning-making · Reflexive thematic analysis · Narrative

Introduction

Although it is relatively common for people to contact former partners after their relationships end (Dutton & Winstead, 2006) and many cases likely include benign, normative contact, this behavior can escalate to include threatening behaviors that are socially undesirable and may reach legal definitions of stalking. Post-relationship stalking accounts for approximately half of stalking cases (Spitzberg et al., 2010) and, compared to people who stalk non-intimates, people who stalk current or former intimate partners tend

to engage in more threatening and violent behavior (McEwan et al., 2017). While some researchers have attempted to understand people’s motives for engaging in these behaviors (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014), such efforts often quantitatively correlate a range of predictors (e.g., self-control or attachment difficulties) with stalking, or examine victimized individuals’ perceptions of these motivations rather than directly assessing whether people who pursue consider these factors influential in their pursuit. By failing to account for why individuals stalk, efforts to develop effective stalking prevention and intervention strategies have been limited (Parkhill et al., 2022). Understanding pursuing individuals’ meaning-making around their conduct, particularly when it includes threatening or aggressive behavior, could better inform our understanding of ways to engage with people who pursue (or would pursue) in efforts to prevent and/or respond to engagement in these behaviors. Thus, the present

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study uses a qualitative design to query those who engaged in aggressive and/or threatening pursuit behaviors after their relationships ended as to their self-reported reasons or motivations for engaging in their patterns of pursuit.

Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors: Definitions and Frequency

After first entering the legal lexicon in the 1990s, definitions of stalking have varied considerably across U.S. states and jurisdictions, but typically require repeated contact from another that either results in: (a) emotional reactions or distress, either subjectively (e.g., fear, threat) for the victim or per the standards of a “reasonable person,” or (b) demonstrated intent to cause harm, threat, or distress on behalf of the person who stalked (see Gordon & Dardis, 2023). Thus, unlike standard definitions of rape or intimate partner violence, this definition often rests on subjective victim reactions to define the crime (rather than objective behaviors alone); as the social locations of survivors and their experiences might affect their subjective emotional responses to victimization, who is counted as victim or perpetrator could vary considerably across social groups (Owens, 2016).

Within research studies, assessment of “stalking” is therefore complex; while people who pursue can be asked whether or not they engaged in repeated unsolicited or unwanted contact, they may be unable to accurately assess whether people who they victimized were distressed, threatened, or harmed by their pursuit and may not answer honestly when asked if they intended to harm their victims (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). Thus, researchers often measure “unwanted pursuit behaviors” or “obsessive relational intrusion,” that is, the presence of a set of behaviorally-defined unsolicited and/or unwanted contact behaviors toward another (e.g., Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2005; Lanhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). However, as many of the potential post-relationship pursuit behaviors may be relatively benign and normative (e.g., giving gifts, showing up in places where your ex-partner might be), rates of engagement in repeated UPBs (i.e., two or more unsolicited or unwanted contact behaviors) are very high among former partners; across several quantitative studies, rates have ranged between 24–99% (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017, 2019; Dutton & Winstead, 2006; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000; Tassy & Winstead, 2014). Some researchers have distinguished between “minor” UPBs, which typically include forms of unsolicited or unwanted contact (e.g., giving gifts, showing up at an ex-partner’s work) and “severe” UPBs, which include forms of threat or aggression (e.g., threatening to or actually harming an ex-partner; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000). Severe UPBs would more likely represent stalking, as they represent some level of harm and threat that could be viewed as “intended.” Notably, UPBs and stalking can

also occur through technological forms (“cyberstalking” or “cyber UPBs”) and can also range from more minor contact behaviors (e.g., repeated or excessive calls or texts) to more severe surveillance or aggression (e.g., using GPS to track a former partner; threatening to or sharing embarrassing or humiliating information online; Dardis & Gidycz, 2017). While fewer individuals engage in severe UPBs after their relationships end (8–14%—e.g., Dardis & Gidycz, 2017; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000), those who engage in severe UPBs frequently also use a range of minor UPBs in the course of their pursuit (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017).

Why Do Individuals Engage in Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors?

In a review of studies assessing perceived motives for UPBs/stalking, Spitzberg and Cupach (2014) developed four categories of motives. *Expressive* motives were described as giving voice to emotions (e.g., love, anger, jealousy, grief) or personal desires (e.g., for contact, reconciliation, or difficulty in “letting go”). *Instrumental* motives included desires to control, harass, humiliate, or engage in revenge toward another. *Personological* motives reflected certain perceived internal deficits that motivated pursuit, such as substance use or mental health concerns, social skills deficits, attachment anxiety, or general criminality/deviance, whereas *contextual* motives included situational stressors and circumstances that might elicit pursuit, including break-ups, chance or incidental encounters, interdependencies (i.e., activities in common spaces with the victim), nostalgia (e.g., reaching out in response to special occasions), or reactions to the appearance of real or imagined rivals. While this remains the most comprehensive grouping of potential motives, among the 29 studies used to construct this typology, the vast majority were either (a) from the perspectives of victims ($n = 14$), or (b) based on clinical/forensic datasets, using either case file data or interviews with law enforcement or mental health professionals, who reported on stalking individuals’ perceived motives ($n = 14$). Just one study (Burgess et al., 2001) directly assessed pursuing individuals’ self-reported intentions qualitatively; among this forensic dataset of 165 batterers, self-reported reasons for stalking included communication (wanting to talk to the victim), love (missing/loving the victim), desires to reconcile, concerns about the person who they victimized or their shared children, special occasions, or due to returning the victim’s calls. To our knowledge, just one other qualitative examination of stalking individuals’ motives has been undertaken (i.e., Flowers et al., 2022). Using semi-structured interviews with seven men in the UK incarcerated for an IPV-related offense who had engaged in intimate partner stalking, Flowers and colleagues (2022) found five themes for perpetrators’ personal meaning of their stalking behavior using interpretive phenomenological

analysis: (1) seeking to obtain attention and affection in the “chase” for one’s partner or obsessive desires to create connection with the person who they stalked, (2) conflicted aspects of identity, including viewing the self as powerful and powerless, engaging in violence that is also at odds with their self-views, and having difficulty coping with feelings of their life being out of control, (3) feeling as a “detached observer” to one’s own experiences and receiving mixed messages from the person who they stalked, (4) aspects of “gameplaying” or staying “one step ahead” by gaining control or knowledge of the victimized person’s actions and wanting to “win” in a battle of wills, and (5) intense emotional distress in the face of rejection and shifted focus from pursuit to revenge that escalated violence.

Other studies have assessed correlates of stalking perpetration in quantitative designs based on theories of stalking perpetration. For example, anxious/insecure attachment has been correlated with UPB/stalking perpetration (e.g., De Smet et al., 2013; Dutton & Winstead, 2006; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2000), as have difficulties in self-control or emotion regulation (see Davis et al., 2012 for a review). Some support has also been found for aspects of relational goal pursuit theory (Cupach et al., 2011; Dardis, 2022; Dardis & Gidycz, 2019; Spitzberg et al., 2014), which asserts that individuals pursue because they have linked their former partners to higher-order goals of happiness, base their self-worth on the relationship with the former partner, ruminate obsessively over the partner, and experience high-levels of emotional distress related to relationship loss. Some studies have further indicated that there might be differences in the predictors of more minor, compared to more severe, patterns of pursuit; for example, Dardis and Gidycz (2019) found that relational goal pursuit theory was associated with minor, but not severe UPBs, and that severe UPBs were more strongly associated with having perpetrated IPV during the relationship, findings later replicated by Dardis (2022). This reflects a broader literature implicating theories of coercive control in intimate partner stalking (see Davis et al., 2012, for a review), highlighting the overlap between IPV and UPBs.

In sum, extant research on stalking correlates and motives has frequently (a) been based on the perspectives of those other than the people who have pursued, and (b) been correlational and quantitative in nature, rather than inquiring directly as to an individual’s meaning-making about their pursuit. Meaning-making involves processes of constructing and making sense of themselves, others, interpersonal relationships, and events (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Brown, 2008). Qualitative approaches to inquiry are well suited for generating understandings of meaning-making processes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). First-person meaning-making processes around why people who pursue are engaging in the behavior are important, as this information could help to formulate

prevention and intervention strategies that are aligned with self-reported needs and circumstances of people who pursue. Understanding the ways in which people who pursue contextually make sense of their behaviors and motivations may illuminate sociocultural factors motivating them, which may highlight areas to consider in social interventions and policy.

Current Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine how participants make meaning of their own engagement in UPBs and motivations underlying them. As noted above, many UPBs are likely normative forms of contact after relationships end and definitional challenges make it difficult to ascertain whether one perpetrated “stalking.” Thus, in efforts to understand participants’ reasons for engaging in more serious or concerning patterns of behavior and meaning-making is about it, we limited our dataset to only those individuals who engaged in one or more “severe” UPBs that included some form of aggressive or threatening behavior, either in-person or through technology. In contrast to two prior studies assessing people’s self-reported motivations for and meanings attributed to perpetrating stalking (Burgess et al., 2001; Flowers et al., 2022), the present study seeks to examine these facets among a non-forensic, young adult dataset that is not restricted to perpetrators who are men. No studies have used qualitative methods that conceptualize researcher subjectivity as a resource in a constructivist and critical fashion (e.g., reflexive thematic analysis [TA]; see Analytic Method; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). This is notable, considering the prevalence of (severe) UPBs and the undoubtable emotional reactions about the socially undesirable behaviors and the power dynamics at play in these behaviors. Thus, in the present study, we aim to leverage our subjectivity as a tool through reflexive TA to facilitate co-creation of understandings about how participants make sense of their contextual UPB experiences and motivations.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate participants who reported a break-up with a partner within the past two years (to emphasize recent relationships) were recruited from the psychology research participant pool ($N = 821$) for a study titled “What Happens After Relationships End?,” which was framed as a study about “characteristics of relationship break-ups among undergraduates.” They were informed that they would be asked about feelings and behaviors before and after the end of relationships, including possible violent experiences. As continued post-relationship contact is likely normative

in some contexts (e.g., giving a gift for a birthday, showing up in places the ex-partner is with shared friends), and the present study aimed to examine reasons for more severe or potentially problematic pursuit, only those participants from the broader study (Dardis, 2022) who were engaging in “severe” UPBs (as defined by the Unwanted Pursuit Behavior Inventory and Controlling Partners Inventory, described below) were included in the present dataset ($N=141$; 17.17% of the full dataset). This dataset included 101 cisgender women (71.6%) and 40 men (28.4%); most participants identified as heterosexual (91.5%), while 5.7% self-reported that they were bisexual, 2.1% gay or lesbian, and 0.7% another sexual identity. With respect to ethnicity, 5.7% of participants self-reported being Hispanic or Latinx. With respect to race, participants were able to select all labels that applied; the most frequently selected label was White or Caucasian (64.5%), followed by Black or African American (34.0%), Another race (5.0%; write-in examples included “Hispanic” or “Black and White”), and finally, Asian or Pacific Islander (2.8% of the dataset). On average, relationships had lasted for 16.54 months ($SD=12.83$) and had ended 10.61 months ago ($SD=7.61$ months; range: 0–24 months).

Study procedures were approved by the institution’s Institutional Review Board. After providing informed consent, participants completed online surveys using Qualtrics. Participants were given partial course credit for participation. Participants were told to respond in reference to an ex-partner from the past two years. If more than one ex-partner was reported, they were instructed to respond about their “most significant” relationship.

Measures

Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors (UPBs)

Consistent with prior factor analyses (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017), two measures were used to capture both in-person and cyber UPBs. In-person UPBs included 22 items from the Unwanted Pursuit Behavior Inventory (UPBI; (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Palarea, 2006) and cyber unwanted pursuit behaviors included 15 items from the Controlling Partners Inventory (Burke et al., 2011). Both the UPBI and CPI have two scales (minor and severe; Dardis & Gidycz, 2017). Participants were asked how often they conducted “unsolicited contact behaviors” toward their ex-partners after their break-up. The minor in-person UPB subscale includes 10 items reflecting primarily unwanted contact or following behavior (e.g., “Send/leave unwanted letters/gifts”, “Show up in places where you thought he/she might be”), while the minor cyber UPB subscale includes 5 items reflecting unwanted or excessive cyber contact (e.g., “Send excessive number of texts to him/her,” “Check his/her sent/

received email history”). By contrast, the severe subscales include items that describe engaging in aggressive or threatening behaviors after the break-up; for example, the severe in-person UPB scale includes 12 items assessing threat, harm, injury, kidnapping and property damage (sample items: “Cause damage to his/her property (e.g., home or car)”, “Threaten him/her with a weapon”), while the severe cyber UPB subscale includes 10 items assessing the use of threatening messages, threats to post/send explicit photos, and use of technology to surveil (e.g., GPS, webcam) the former partner (“Use spyware to monitor his/her activities”).

Responses were reported on a 5-point scale, 0 (*never*), 1 (*once*), 2 (*twice*), 3 (*3–9 times*), or 4 (*10 or more times*), and were summed to create a total frequency of pursuit. In efforts to capture those behaviors that would be most likely to meet the legal definition of stalking in the federal U.S. code (18 U.S. Code § 2261A, i.e., “causes, attempts to cause, or would be reasonably expected to cause substantial emotional distress” to those who were victimized), for the purposes of the present study, only participants who reported: (a) at least one severe UPB item (either in-person or cyber) and (b) a sum of at least two total behaviors (i.e., two separate behaviors performed at least once or one behavior performed twice or more), the minimum to be considered “repeated” behavior, were included in the present study ($N=141$). Most of these participants (85.8%, $n=121$) reported engaging in both in-person and cyber UPBs, while 7.1% ($n=10$) engaged in only in-person and 7.1% ($n=10$) engaged in only cyber UPBs.

Qualitative Prompt

After each of the sets of UPB items (UPBI and CPI), participants who responded affirmatively to having engaged in UPBs were asked about their reasons for engaging in the behaviors using the following prompt: “People might have many reasons to contact their former partners or engage in these behaviors after the relationship ends. Please explain why you think you engaged in any of the behaviors above. You may have different reasons for different behaviors. Please write ALL that come to mind.” The data were rich overall; they shared patterns of meaning across all responses (see Analysis). As the vast majority of participants engaged in *both* in-person and cyber UPBs, and we did not identify primary differences in the themes reported across the in-person and cyber domains, participants’ responses to these themes are described collectively below.

Analytic Method

We analyzed the data using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic approach that emphasizes interpretation of patterns across a dataset. We followed the six analytic

phases of reflexive TA as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The analysis was inductive and code development was grounded in the data. Code generation was iterative. We analyzed semantic and latent content through a constructivist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while also drawing on a critical epistemological approach. Both constructivist and critical approaches were appropriate to draw upon because we were interested in how meanings about UPBs were constructed and functioned, as well as how power dynamics may be at play. Such an approach can facilitate the use of researcher subjectivity as a resource, with participants and researchers being in dialogue and the analysis representing a valuable co-creation of knowledge that may illuminate sense-making processes and attend to power dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Both authors were involved in the analysis. The first author coded the data while both authors consistently met as a team to engage in active reflexivity and discuss conceptual material through consensual, reflexive, and open discussion. The second author had conceptualized the original research question (i.e., “What motivates people to engage in UPBs?”). Upon the first author’s engagement with the data, that research question was refined to the following: “How do people who engage in severe UPBs make meaning of their motivations for their UPBs?” Upon engaging with the data, we conceptualized the following secondary research question to facilitate analytic richness: “How do people who engage in severe UPBs make sense of those behaviors?” These research questions guided our analysis, as we consistently returned to them when generating codes and themes.

Reflexivity

We (i.e., both authors) are two scholars in a predominantly white institution. We engaged in this project from unique and convergent identities and experiences, both of which enriched its development and our analysis. This project and our analysis was inspired by our clinical and research work with people who have experienced trauma and violence, being motivated by our connection with those who have been on the receiving end of the phenomena of present study. From the beginning, our analysis was majorly informed from outsider experiences, not from being in connection with those who enact severe UPBs. Our own experiences in relationships (romantic and otherwise) illuminated the nonlinearity of relational endings. Thus, we decided that a qualitative, reflexive approach was appropriate to explore such messiness.

Reflecting on our social identities, we are both white, while we differ in many other identities (e.g., first author

being socialized as a man, second author being socialized as a woman). Our analysis was undoubtedly shaped by our Western, predominately white context. Our Western context initially facilitated a more decontextualized analysis wherein we viewed the participants as “other.” We partially attribute this initial “othering” research participants to the dominance of post-positivism in psychology, as well as our research training in that framework. We also grappled with “othering” participants due to our initial inclination to view participants fully as offenders and ourselves as non-offenders. By reflecting on our personal relationship experiences and our intersecting identities that could not be “cleanly packaged” (i.e., marginalized identities), we believed we were able to more deeply engage with the nuance in the data. For example, embracing our own messiness in the research process was the first step to understanding that people may act as both “victims” and “offenders” in complex ways. Further, accessing our emotional experiences throughout analysis allowed us to more richly connect with both semantic and latent data. We further led the analysis with our shared feminist values, understanding UPBs as individual and social in nature. We consistently practiced reflexivity to both facilitate analysis and to own and manage our perspectives.

Analysis

Through prolonged engagement with the data and our thorough reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we understood that the data were complex and multilayered. Indeed, participants understood their experiences as contextualized within several intertwined psychological and sociological processes; for example, participants descriptively understood their UPBs and motivations as related to emotions (e.g., fear, anger, hurt, jealousy, longing, care, love), cognitions, specific psychological problems, social space, interpersonal communication, and attempts at connection, among other domains. During the course of our analytic processes, we importantly recognized that participants understood their severe UPBs as positioned within both individual and social narratives. We developed three themes that hinge upon and are located within the conceptual underpinning that severe UPBs are located in those narratives: (1) Severe UPBs as Narrative-Controlling Devices, (2) Severe UPBs as Powerlessly Reactive, and (3) Denial of Ownership of Severe UPBs. Overall, participants viewed their UPBs as devices to control their narrative (e.g., achieve certainty, manage expected harm, manipulate an ex-partner), powerless reactions to their story (e.g., reactions to an ex-partner entering their space, their own psychological problems), and/or as not fully their own. See Table 1 for an overview. We chose participant quotes to reflect diversity, thematic nuance, and rich meaning, presenting each quote alongside that participant’s

Table 1 Themes and Subthemes with a Brief Description

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Severe UPBs as Narrative-Controlling Devices		Participants saw their UPBs as ways to instrumentally control their individual and social life narratives
	UPBs to Grapple with (Un)Certainty	Participants engaged in UPBs to achieve certainty in their stories (e.g., to obtain “the truth;” to get closure)
	UPBs to Gain “Power Over:” From Reconciliation to Revenge	Participants used UPBs to gain power over other individuals or external situations (e.g., to reconcile or maintain a relationship with a former partner; to control or manipulate)
Severe UPBs as Powerlessly Reactive		Participants understood UPBs as a disempowered function of a life narrative that was happening <i>to</i> them (e.g., unavoidable proximity to a former partner; in reaction to dysregulated emotions)
Denial of Ownership of Severe UPBs		Participants denied ownership of their UPBs by viewing the behaviors as not (just) their own (e.g., postulating about others’ motivations; normalizing UPBs)

UPB Unwanted Pursuit Behavior

unique study ID, as well as their self-reported race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Theme 1: Severe Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors as Narrative-Controlling Devices

The first theme that we generated was that participants made sense of their severe UPBs as tools they use to drive their stories in some way. As we understood participants’ behaviors as being within social narratives, some understood their severe UPBs as ways to instrumentally control the occurrence and shape of their stories on both individual and interpersonal levels. Along these lines, the data in this theme were characterized by an active quality. There were two significant patterns of meaning (i.e., subthemes) in Theme 1. The first subtheme, *UPBs to Grapple with (Un)Certainty*, includes participants understanding themselves as using UPBs to gain certainty or “closure” to the end of the relationship. We conceptualized the responses in Subtheme 1 to detail seemingly well-intentioned UPBs and motivations that are self-protective. The second subtheme, *UPBs to Gain “Power Over:” From Reconciliation to Revenge*, encapsulates a pattern of meaning wherein participants viewed themselves as attempting to gain power and control in exacting or telling their relationship stories. Indeed, some participants aimed to achieve control over their relationship narrative by means of having power over another person or their relational situation; strategies ranged from reconciliation and “making up” to revenge and manipulation. While many of the responses in Subtheme 2 could have been well-intentioned (e.g., wanting to “make it work” with their ex-partner), other responses

were underpinned by the intent to harm. At times, there were responses that detailed meaning-making that intersected through both subthemes.

Subtheme 1: Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors to Grapple with (Un)Certainty

The first subtheme explains a pattern of meaning-making wherein participants viewed their UPBs as instrumental ways to get answers and achieve certainty regarding the end of their relationship. Achieving certainty was often positioned as the only way a participant could own their story or move on from it:

The only reason I have to engaging in these behaviors is because I truly loved him and I knew he was moving forward with his life and whenever I would ask if he was with other people he wouldn't give me a response. I just wanted answers so I could really move forward with my own life. [P23; *Black/African American heterosexual woman*]

Some participants acknowledged that their narratives were incomplete and the holes in them needed to be filled (e.g., “He was a liar, and he joked a lot. I had to know the truth.” [P36; *Biracial (Black/African American and White) gay man*]; “I wanted to see if he would post anything about being single, about missing me, or even liking other girl's social media and whether or not he did while dating me.” [P20; *White heterosexual woman*]). These narrative holes were both past- and future-oriented regarding participants’ stories, indicating senses of confusion about the past and anxiety about the future. Conversely, other participants

understood their severe UPBs as ways to generate this knowledge and certainty in their past partners as well as themselves, such as communicating that they are doing “better” than that ex-partner and have “moved on.” Participants’ severe UPBs were also viewed as devices to resolve uncertainty in order to avert anticipated harm or discomfort. For example, one participant detailed that the anticipation of harm by their partner led to monitoring behaviors which confirmed their partner’s potentially harmful actions:

He cheated on me, lied to me, and I think after we broke up and got back together I began to get paranoid and was checking up on him a lot more. When he cheated on me, we had only been dating for a year. It took me 6 months to break up with him after he cheated, and I was doing these actions to figure out if he still was or was planning on [it] again, which is why we broke up not too long ago (because I saw through snooping that he was not being loyal). [P42; *White heterosexual woman*]

Some participants indicated that they used severe cyber-UPBs to monitor and avoid their ex-partner for fear of awkwardness (e.g., “I would track to see where he was so I didn’t run into him on campus, so it wouldn’t be awkward.” [P26; *White heterosexual woman*]). These severe UPBs were intended to control how their relationship narrative would play out.

On the other hand, some participants indicated that their severe UPBs were a way to shift their post-relationship narrative that they could not accept, such as being betrayed or the relationship ending, to reach conviction about it. UPBs functioned as nonacceptance of a messy, nonlinear ending. Participants rejected knowing that their story did not play out how they anticipated, or in a prescribed way: “I engaged in these activities because i was having a hard time accepting that he was cheating and with another girl the whole time” [P65; *White heterosexual woman*]. This nonacceptance was seen as fueling UPBs with the function of controlling or ensuring something about another person, and included both a large perceived emotional distance (e.g., “I saw my ex-partner for a period after the breakup because it was a somewhat unexpected breakup and hard for me to get over.” [P46; *White heterosexual woman*]) and physical distance:

I wanted to make sure... that he was staying true to what he was saying. We ended on good terms. He was 4 hours away in college and we could not do the distance. I wanted to make sure he was staying true to his word about not being with other girls and being sexually active with them. We still had feelings for each other. [P100; *White heterosexual woman*]

In the end, however, participants understood their UPBs as instrumental in their stories such that they would often

enact them to create a “true,” linear end. Closure and other breakup logistics were pinpointed as goals, highlighting participants’ storied conceptualization of severe UPBs as a device to obtain a “clean” or normative ending in their relationship. For example, one participant stated they enacted UPBs to achieve the certainty of closure in the way it was “supposed to be” for them, being ending the relationship in person:

I had chosen to see him twice after the break-up because we never got to talk about our issues and why we ended in person. We were both away at college and had to do the break-up over the phone. We also had some of each other's stuff so we wanted to give any personal item's back. I "stole" one of his hoodies by keeping it just because I love it so much. [P58; *Biracial (White and Black/African American) heterosexual woman*]

Indeed, participants’ stories being left open, uncertain, or “wrongly told” without proper closure was cited as one motivation for engaging in UPBs, where the behaviors were positioned as tools to achieve such certain resolution in their stories.

Subtheme 2: Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors to Gain “Power Over:” From Reconciliation to Revenge

The second subtheme about participants viewing their UPBs as narrative-controlling devices explains a pattern of meaning that UPBs are used to gain control over their story by holding power *over* others and their relational situations. Some participants viewed their UPBs as an extension of “making it work” with their ex-partner— as an act of reconciliation (see Dardis & Gidycz, 2019). Strikingly, this reconciliation was not just to romantically “win back” their ex-partner (e.g., “I think I engaged in this behavior because I missed seeing him, and in the back of my mind I felt like I could win him back.” [P40; *White heterosexual woman*]), but also to maintain friendships with their ex-partner. UPBs were also understood as tools to facilitate reconciliation and/or maintenance of relationships with participants’ family members and friends. Some participants viewed their reconciliation-motivated UPBs, however, as explicit and intentional devices of manipulation and control: “to make them want you again, to get them back, to make them miss you, to manipulate them” [P28; *White heterosexual woman*]. Along those lines, one participant said: “I engaged in these acts because I did not want him to be with anybody else, but I also was not ready to be with him. I almost wanted him to ‘wait for me’ to want him again” [P66; *Race not disclosed, heterosexual woman*]. In that case, the participant explicitly discussed intent to manipulate reconciliation and/or their

partner, which indicated the intent to strip them of their agency and hold power over them.

Another way that individuals attempted to instrumentally hold or regain power over their relationship story through severe UPBs was for the goal of retaliation and/or revenge. When severe UPBs were understood as retaliatory, they were conceptualized by the actors through the lens of victim-offenders; that is, people understood their severe, often problematic UPBs as intentional and active behaviors that were born of falling victim to their ex-partner in some way. They understood their behavior as them actively using UPBs to get revenge for being wronged. For instance, “the only time I threatened him was because he threatened to post private information about me online” [P92; *White heterosexual woman*] and “I engaged in those behaviors because she lied to me about messing with other people when we were not dating, but told me she would never lie to me” [P83; *Black/African American heterosexual man*]. Accordingly, a subset of participants also understood UPBs as an equalizer such that they were able to intentionally employ them to force a shared emotional experience. These were often negative emotions that participants aimed to share, like pain: “I really wanted him to feel the pain he caused me” [P22; *Biracial (Black/African American and White) heterosexual woman*]. Those participants understood their aim of a shared experience as a way to hold power over their ex-partner, having control over their lived experience; severe UPBs were positioned as a way to achieve this “power over.”

Theme 2: Severe Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors as Powerlessly Reactive

While some participants understood their severe UPBs as instrumental, active ways to regain power over their story (see Theme 1), others understood those UPBs as powerless reactions to a narrative that was happening *to* them, which is a pattern of meaning explained in this theme. Overall, they viewed their UPBs as complex responses and products of their story, rather than efforts to control it or manage their awareness of it, indicating a certain disempowerment distinct from that described in the first theme. Participants made such sense of their severe UPBs as powerlessly reactive in several distinct yet interwoven ways.

Participants understood their severe UPBs as being reactions to unavoidable social proximity, such as encountering their ex-partner in mutual social situations: “we had all of the same friends and so I was forced to hang out with him if I wanted to see my friends, I would engage in a conversation with him only while others were around but it was clear he probably did not want to speak with me.” [P7; *White heterosexual woman*]. Others understood their UPBs as products of unavoidable physical proximity, such as living near their ex-partner or sharing spaces on their college campus (e.g.,

in class, living spaces) These participants viewed their UPBs as disempowered reactions to perceiving their space being infringed on by the other.

Some participants viewed their severe UPBs as a response to or product of their own life-narrative, which had been riddled with internal psychological problems. A subset of participants viewed these internal problems as normative. For example, *Participant 5* understood their UPBs as being facilitated by their lack of maturity, a rather socially normative developmental issue. Congruent with that participant’s understanding of their psychologically-catalyzed UPBs as socially acceptable, they also minimized their severe UPBs as “games,” indicating that they do not view their problematic UPBs as, in fact, severe. Conversely, others viewed their psychological problems as pathological and their subsequent reactive UPBs as “crazy.” For example, one participant described their severe in-person and cyber UPBs as driven by trauma and related psychopathology:

I think I engaged in these behaviors because our relationship wasn't healthy by any means, he was emotionally abusive and would play mind games and manipulate me which is why I think I got so attached and had such a hard time letting go. In a way, I feel as though I may have experienced a form of Stockholm Syndrome. I'm codependent and he is a narcissist, so our relationship was terribly unhealthy and I experienced a lot of social anxiety and possibly even Stockholm Syndrome. [P41; *White heterosexual woman*]

Similarly, some pinpointed their lack of emotion regulation as causes of their severe UPBs (e.g., “anger issues”). Participants often understood their severe UPBs as caused and/or compelled by their emotions. One participant noted that their UPBs were a release of anger: “I think I did the things I did to release and show my anger for what he did” [P64; *Black/African American bisexual woman*]. Other participants also identified singular and/or more simple emotional experiences that catalyzed their engagement in severe UPBs, including positive emotions of care (e.g., “I engaged in this behavior because i still cared about them, however I knew I needed to let go” [P61; *Black/African American heterosexual man*]). Others identified more complex, multi-layered emotional experiences as causes of those UPBs; for instance, one participant noted:

I was so upset, angry, hurt, and devastated and I felt like i had the right to call/text him until he picked up. I was so distraught over the breakup it was eating me up and he seemed so unbothered and I was literally heartbroken... I would also get so upset at him not answering I would blow his phone up with hopes that'd he'd finally pick up to talk or answer a text so that I

would stop. I feel like it also has to do with the fact that he cheated on me. [P71; *White heterosexual woman*]

That complexity was also viewed as being contained within emotional turbulence and inner conflict, with participants identifying their UPBs as products of being ungrounded in their own narratives. Those participants indicated a back-and-forth story such that they often enacted UPBs as a reaction. For example, one participant noted feeling torn: “Because I would feel as if sometimes, I still wanted to be together, and then other times I didn't.” [P80; *White heterosexual woman*].

Theme 3: Denial of Ownership of Severe Unwanted Pursuit Behaviors

Strikingly in this third theme, some participants fully refrained from owning their severe UPBs and/or related motivations as part of their story. Only one participant indicated that they were completely unsure of the motives behind their severe UPBs. Others denied ownership of their behaviors or their underlying motivations. These participants did so in several ways, including de-identifying with their behaviors or theorizing their ex-partner as a mutual actor in the UPBs and, thus, sharing ownership.

De-identification with behaviors appeared in striking ways, with participants responding to the question of why they personally engaged in UPBs in the third person or second person. One participant responded: “Maybe some people need to see to be able to get over the relationship. On the other hand people maybe obsessed and cant get over the ex” [P21; *Black/African American heterosexual woman*]. In this case, they postulated potential motivations about why people generally engage in UPBs, rather than offering a reflective account of their own motivations and/or behaviors. Others seemed to reflect on their behaviors and motivations without taking ownership of them in the first person: “When someone you love hurts you, it can make you do things you didn't even know you had in [you]” [P2; *White heterosexual woman*]. Interestingly, others shirked ownership of their behaviors by speaking to the social normalization of severe UPBs (e.g., “Wanting to know what your ex's up to is normal after a breakup, even if you are the one who initiated it” [P79; *Biracial (Black/African-American and White) heterosexual woman*], thus sharing ownership with society as a whole. Conversely, one participant neglected to reflect on their behaviors and motivations behind them, instead normalizing the pain underneath severe UPBs and acknowledging that some may attempt to manage this pain with socially undesirable behaviors, including severe UPBs: “Going through break ups and experiencing heartbreak can cause people to feel and do crazy things. Some handle it in ways others see as insane” [P78; *White heterosexual woman*].

A subset of participants also denied ownership of their severe UPBs by assuming reciprocity of the UPBs and motivations between themselves and their ex-partner. Some spoke about reciprocated behaviors and mutual UPBs, suggesting they refuted full accountability and understood their UPBs as shared. Strikingly, some participants conceptualized their severe UPBs as play, indicating a mutual minimization of the severity of these behaviors: “Would play around and slap each other” [P1; *White heterosexual woman*]. These participants fully denied the intent to harm, contextualizing this within the mutuality of their relationship with their ex-partner; for example, one participant described:

I never physically or purposefully hurt my 'x'. The boy i used to date is the one I date now. We have been off and on for two years now. When we weren't together, we usually kept in vague contact but two times. Once we completely stopped talking to one another and the other, we stayed very close and sometimes acted as boy and girl friend but had no title. We are very open and honest with one another and have never done anything to try and hurt one another. [P52; *Black/African American heterosexual woman*]

While responses did not detail why people were inclined to deny ownership of their severe UPBs, they were more deeply stuck in social narratives than in individual ones. Reflecting on these data in this theme, we believed that our own emotional reactions and personal narratives provided a depth in understanding the social location and striking lack of ownership by those who make meaning of their UPBs through such lenses. The data in this theme uniquely highlighted a stark disconnection between sense-making of their individual UPB-related narratives and their parallel social narratives.

Discussion

We engaged in the present study to explore and better understand motivations for engagement in severe UPBs — threatening and aggressive behaviors that would likely arise to definitions of stalking. The present study included individuals who endorsed a history of repeated and severe UPBs. We employed reflexive TA to analyze participant free-text responses to an open-ended survey question about their motivations for their UPB engagement to explore related meaning-making. Through a robust, reflexive analytic process, we developed three themes that are all located through the thread of participants understanding their severe UPBs and motivations for them as complex parts of individual and/or social narratives. First, they viewed them as tools to control their story (i.e., managing certainty and uncertainty, holding power over others and their external situation). Otherwise,

they understood their UPBs as powerless reactions to their story (e.g., personal psychological problems). Some participants de-identified from their behaviors when asked about their own motivations, understanding their behaviors as not only their own. Our analysis highlights the unique and nuanced meaning-making about pathways of severe UPBs, including motivations and the behaviors themselves.

Self-identified motives for severe UPBs varied, congruent with the concept that such pursuit may serve different functions or be enacted because of different motives (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). In their review, Spitzberg and Cupach (2014) conceptualized motives for UPBs as expressive, instrumental, personal, and contextual; our analysis contained motives that can be explained by these categories. For example, motives that may be classified as instrumental (e.g., control others, get revenge) were clear in our analysis (see Theme 1, Subtheme 2) and motives that would be classified as personal (e.g., one's own personal deficits such as mental illness) were also present (see Theme 2), among other motives. With our analysis, we further these understandings of UPB-related motives by conceptualizing that participants made meaning of their motives in similar ways, though with a first-person narrative level of complexity. It is our hope that highlighting the meaning-making processes of people who enact severe UPBs facilitates awareness and areas of intervention.

Addressing the View of Severe UPBs as Instrumental Narrative-Controlling Devices

In the present study, we understood participants to view their severe UPBs as instrumental ways to have control over their stories, such that these behaviors were active devices to maintain or regain control. In fact, there were two views that participants had about their UPBs and underlying motivations, being tools to (1) manage uncertainty and truth, and (2) obtain power over a situation or person. We discuss these two views below.

Our analysis included the idea that participants believed their severe UPBs were ways to manage uncertainty and truth, as well as the social pressure for certainty in relationships. For example, the analysis indicates that people who enact severe UPBs may do so, in part, due to their meaning-making regarding their intolerance of uncertainty (e.g., the view that they need to know the truth about an ex-partner's infidelity) or general nonacceptance about factors regarding their relationships (e.g., not accepting the truth about the breakup). This theme is similar to Dardis (2022), who found that denial-based coping with the break-up was positively associated with engagement in severe post-relationship pursuit behaviors, while acceptance-based coping was not. The intolerance of uncertainty has been identified as a factor involved in many types of distress (e.g., psychopathologies

and harmful behaviors (e.g., problematic substance use; Carleton, 2016). It would not be surprising, then, for the intolerance of uncertainty to drive severe UPBs. Indeed, uncertainty may plague life after the loss of relationship (Kenen, 2021). To address intolerance of uncertainty and nonacceptance individually, it may be prudent for therapists working with individuals who engage in these behaviors to consider therapies to address jealousy, anger, and rumination (Purcell & McEwan, 2018), including third-wave cognitive-behavioral approaches (e.g., acceptance and commitment therapy [ACT]; Hayes et al., 1999) to learn to manage their distress around uncertainty. Notably, acceptance-based approaches have shown promise in programs designed for intimate partner violence offenders as well (Murphy & Richards, 2022). In such psychotherapeutic work, these individuals could learn that feeling the need to know or impulse to commit severe UPBs does not compel the behavior itself (i.e., cognitive defusion; Assaz et al., 2018; Hayes et al., 1999). On the individual scale, acceptance-based interventions could shift the way people make sense of their pathways to UPBs such that they would no longer experience uncertainty or nonacceptance as compelling the severe UPBs. At a broader level, exposure to media depictions of relationships that romanticize continued pursuit in the face of rejection can normalize persistent pursuit and stalking (Lippman, 2018). Programs designed to develop healthy relationship skills, which have had some positive effects on reducing rates of teen dating violence (Niolon et al., 2017), might be enhanced with skills on healthy relationship dissolution and coping with relationship loss, as well as by combating socialized beliefs that persistent pursuit is to be seen as completely benign behavior. Further, as perceptions of social norms supportive of stalking are related to higher self-reported likelihood of future stalking behavior (McNamara et al., 2023), approaches to address and modify such social norms, such as social norms marketing campaigns portraying that most individuals do not support unwanted pursuit behavior may be effective (Menicke et al., 2021). Further research regarding the efficacy of such approaches in reducing norms and beliefs about stalking are needed.

Many participants in the current study understood their UPBs as instrumental strategies to obtain power over another individual or circumstance. These participants either sought reconciliation with their previous partner, such as wanting to re-establish a romantic relationship, or revenge for the purposes of gaining "power over," such as desiring that their ex-partner feel pain like the participant. This explicitly power-seeking motivation aligns with previous theories about instrumental motivations for perpetration (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). Indeed, theories of coercive control as a motivation remain relevant for consideration regarding ways that individuals who enact severe UPBs (e.g., stalking) understand the underpinnings of their own behaviors

(Davis et al., 2012). Our analysis aligns with that of Flowers and colleagues (2022), as both explain that perpetrators may view their motivations for perpetration as a way to gain “power over;” this analytic similarity may suggest some commonalities in pursuit-related meaning-making between Flowers et al.’s (2022) forensic participant group and the undergraduate participants in the present study. In terms of treatment, it may be prudent for therapists working with individuals with this conceptualization of their UPBs to consider a trauma-informed feminist psychotherapy that seeks to facilitate healing by raising feminist consciousness and grapple with issues of power and powerlessness (Brown, 2008; Pressman & Sheps, 1994). Purcell and McEwan (2018) further recommend the use of cognitive-behavioral approaches to challenge potential expectations and beliefs about perceived entitlement to the victim’s time and attention that may drive stalking behaviors. These cognitive-behavioral approaches can also address other maladaptive expectations and beliefs about intimate partner relationships that drive efforts to obtain power through anger or retaliation (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). Future research may explore and highlight the pathways of severe UPBs, as well as the most effective forms and times of interventions.

Grappling with Powerlessly Reactive Conceptualizations of UPBs

Some participants understood these severe UPBs as behaviors that powerlessly occurred in the course of their life story. While there are some self-identified reasons for the behaviors related to personal (e.g., mental deficits), contextual (e.g., interdependencies), and expressive motivations (e.g., releasing emotions; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014), we also introduce a more nuanced thread of meaning about these motivations related to UPBs being powerlessly reactive. In the present study, these powerlessly reactive conceptualizations of UPBs were also characterized by a passive nature, encompassing participants that understood their severe UPBs as disempowered behaviors. Feminist narrative approaches may be helpful for these types of people who pursue in reclaiming their stories so that their UPBs do not arise from such disempowered narratives (Lee, 1997). Holding a particularly feminist lens in psychotherapy may help people shift their meaning-making in an empowered way (Brown, 2008). For example, UPBs may be discussed as particularly disempowered behaviors when they arise out of emotion regulation difficulties; thus, emotion regulation skills may be imparted to promote empowerment and prevent UPBs.

Consistent with this theory, a focus on emotion regulation difficulties within offender-focused programs related to partner violence and violent offending has shown some efficacy (Murphy & Richards, 2022). Likewise, based on research

documenting higher rates of borderline personality disorder (BPD) and general emotion regulation difficulties among people who stalk, Rosenfeld and colleagues have tested the use of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993) as a treatment strategy for stalking offenders; compared to published rates of stalking recidivism, participation in DBT was associated with lower rates of stalking re-offense (Rosenfeld et al., 2007, 2019). However, DBT was not superior to CBT-based anger management among a forensic sample (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). These findings suggest that strategies to notice and modify distressing emotional responses and cognitions might be associated with reductions in stalking behavior.

Some of the UPBs explained by this powerlessly reactive conceptualization were situational (e.g., monitoring an ex-partner due to close physical or social proximity). Professionals (e.g., psychotherapists, social workers) working with individuals who face disempowerment and enact UPBs through these situational circumstances may consider crafting non-UPB plans for dealing with the situation while continuing to maximize safety of all people involved. Best practices for working with those who stalk have included considering antecedents of stalking, such as social contact, and addressing and modifying these aspects of the social milieu to reduce chance encounters with the victim (Purcell & McEwan, 2018). In addition, if stalking behaviors appear to occur in the presence of others, peers and friends may be able to intervene to stop the UPB, a process referred to as bystander intervention. While the research on bystander interventions has primarily focused on sexual violence and IPV, bystander intervention training in high schools or on college campuses can include training to intervene in stalking behavior; there is preliminary evidence that such programs are associated with reductions in stalking perpetration on campuses that receive these programs (compared to control campuses that do not; Coker et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2019).

Denial of One’s Severe UPBs

In the present study, we conceptualized that some participants denied full ownership of their severe UPBs, often postulating about the reasons others may be motivated to enact them (see Theme 3). One possibility is that they are intentionally and consciously de-identifying from their behaviors so as to avoid accountability and/or navigate internal experiences that would come alongside ownership of their severe UPBs. Should this be the case, our analysis may elucidate the ways in which denial functions as it pertains to perpetration (Burgess et al., 2001; Freyd, 1997). Denial and minimization of the abusiveness of violent acts is not uncommon within other forms of violence; for example, within the intimate partner violence (IPV) literature, a past history of IPV

perpetration has been associated with decreased perceptions that physical, sexual, and psychological violence constitutes abuse (e.g., Dardis et al., 2017). Through our analytic co-creation of meaning, denial or negating full ownership of the severe UPBs functioned such that roles between victims and offenders were muddled and conflated by participants while often normalizing UPBs.

Extant literature has supported that denial serves complex social (e.g., Harsey & Freyd, 2020, 2022) and personal (e.g., Rosenthal & Freyd, 2022) functions for offenders and victims. For instance, perpetrators may manipulate unwanted pursuit-related stories and, thus, deny their offense, engage in personal attacks on victim credibility, and assume a victimized role while positioning the true victim as the offender (i.e., Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender [DARVO]; Freyd, 1997). Harsey and Freyd (2020) conducted a study about DARVO and found that with DARVO in play, people perceived victims to be less believable, more responsible for the violence, and more abusive; DARVO also led participants to judge the perpetrator as less abusive and less responsible for their behavior. Educating about how people make-meaning of severe UPBs and motivations may be helpful in helping people who have been pursued, people who pursue, and the public recognize harmful patterns, halt them, and empower victims. Such strategies for centering victims may include raising consciousness about power and oppression and recognizing its manifestations. For example, in the study by Harsey and Freyd (2020) about DARVO, people who were educated about the meaning-shifting strategy viewed victims as less abusive and more trustworthy, while they viewed perpetrators as less credible. Burgess and colleagues (2001) implored future investigation to explore denial and suggested it may serve several purposes (e.g., avoid legal action, manage anxiety or shame); more research is needed.

Another possibility to explain the meaning-making processes involved in participants' de-identification from their behaviors is that participants felt disconnected from the behaviors, whether they were intending to deny accountability or not. In Flowers and colleagues' (2022) phenomenological study, some people who enacted stalking subjectively experienced themselves as detached observers of their perpetration. No other studies have conceptualized that individuals who enact UPBs may de-identify from the pathways of their behaviors as a way to make sense of those behaviors; however, some people report feeling disconnected from themselves and their behaviors while engaging in IPV, which may go as far as experiencing dissociative IPV (e.g., being unable to remember perpetration; Daisy & Hien, 2014; Webermann & Murphy, 2019). It could be that people who enact UPBs similarly feel disconnected from their behaviors and, thus, create meaning through de-identification.

Future research regarding UPB denial may illuminate areas for future research and intervention. Regarding interventions, it may be helpful to individually provide education about the problematic nature of these severe behaviors while increasing social interventions to raise public awareness as well. The intersections of UPB-related meaning-making and denial require future qualitative research.

Methodological Reflections and Future Research

The present qualitative online survey-study allowed for a valuable (reflexive thematic) analysis. Using a free-text, online survey design allowed us to generate meanings about how people relate to their severe UPBs and their motivations to complete them. Our survey questions facilitated an open and flexible exploration of motives for often socially unaccepted behaviors; in turn, the dataset of the present study may comprise more open responses than in studies with more identifying methodological procedures (e.g., in-depth interviews). However, without opportunity for us to probe for depth, the present design resulted in a relatively superficial analysis. While we generated meanings grounded in the data and socially-located narratives, the inability to interrogate depth delimited our capacity to explore the full complexity of *what* these narratives are and the complex contours of *how* they are constructed. The relative lack of in-depth responses hinders trustworthiness of our analysis; in the present study, we balanced this trustworthiness by using a team-oriented approach, extendedly engaging with the data, and carefully illustrating our analysis in this write-up. In addition, a limitation shared with prior studies of people who pursue is that participants may be unaware of, or disinclined to report, their true motives for severe UPBs, particularly when they may involve revenge or intentions to harm. Further, as most participants described a course of pursuit encompassing both cyber and in-person UPBs, we were unable to examine distinguishing features among the two courses of conduct, a subject which would be of interest in future qualitative research. Additionally, due to the context of the data being generated in a predominantly white university, our analysis may comprise features, like being located in a privileged, Western institution, unlike those of other populations. Ultimately, the important insights that we gained and created during our analysis contextually highlight meaning-making about UPBs and motives underlying them.

We chose to only analyze responses from participants who indicated "severe" UPBs as defined by past quantitative research (Dardis & Gidycz, 2017), both limited and enriched the present study. We made this decision to remain within the population and phenomenon of interest, being people who complete *severe*, even socially undesirable UPBs and

the meanings made around them, such that we were able to reach our research aims. As noted above, we recognized that using quantitative “factors” to delimit the dataset may challenge methodological integrity while using a constructionist, reflexive TA approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Levitt et al., 2017); we reflected on this and leveraged our subjectivity to support this choice with a theoretical rationale. The second author, an expert in the study of UPBs, supported this decision with a nuanced theoretical rationale, continuously owning her perspective throughout such decisions to enrich fidelity and, thus, ensure integrity.

Our methodological reflections have several implications for future research designs, especially the much-needed qualitative designs; more qualitative research regarding (severe) UPBs is necessary to explore and emphasize the complexity behind and around these behaviors and their motivations. For example, narrative approaches to analysis may dually investigate the *how* and *what* of UPB-engagement through a contextual, storied approach to further explore narratives surrounding UPBs (Polkinghorne, 1988; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Further, these approaches lend themselves to the incorporation of subjectivity and creativity (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), similar to our reflexive TA in the present study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While we did not conceptualize differences in conceptualizations and intentions related to severe UPBs by social identity, it is notable that many women engaged in severe UPBs, which subverts traditional gender norms of passivity and nonviolence. Further exploration of the ways that social power and oppression frame unique meaning-making regarding UPBs, using theory-generative methodologies, such as critical-constructivist grounded theory, may help explore identity-related UPB pathways. It is critical that qualitative methods integrate in-depth approaches such as semi-structured interviews into their approaches so as to interrogate depth. Such depth could further elucidate meaning-making about UPBs and related motivations. Interdisciplinary approaches could also be useful.

Conclusions

The present study investigated how individuals who engage in severe UPBs made meaning of their pursuit and motivations for it. Through our reflexive TA, we co-created themes explaining how people construct meanings about their severe UPBs, understanding them as instrumental narrative-controlling devices, powerless reactions, or denying them as part of their life-narrative. Our analysis provides a window of understanding the functions of and motivations behind severe UPBs, as well as processes of meaning-making about UPBs and related motivations. Distinct psychotherapy and preventative educational approaches are indicated and can

directly address these meaning-making processes in order to shift those processes and address problematic and likely harmful pursuit. An integrated constructivist and critical lens may be helpful to understand such behaviors and related motivations, as it was in the present study. More in-depth qualitative research investigating individuals’ UPBs and their motivations for completing these UPBs from their own perspectives is needed.

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Data Availability Data are not available to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Towson University.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Competing Interests The authors report they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

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