



# Influence of beliefs about romantic love on the justification of abusive behaviors among early adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Romantic experiences during adolescence have an important influence on functioning later in life. Romantic love has been associated with the acceptance of abusive behaviors. This study examined the relationship between myths of romantic love and the perceived severity of different types of abusive behaviors, as well as the influence of gender.

**Methods:** The sample comprised 448 Spanish adolescents ( $M = 12.92$  years old;  $SD = 0.85$ ), of which 50.3% were male and 49.7% were female. Participants were evaluated in the school setting. The Perception of Abuse Scale and the Myths, Fallacies, and Misconceptions about Romantic Love Scale were administered.

**Results:** Statistically significant negative associations between the myths of romantic love and the perceived severity of abusive behaviors were found. Myths regarding possession, dedication, and exclusivity were associated with a lower perceived severity of abusive behaviors in adolescent males. Myths regarding the omnipotence of love were associated with a lower perceived severity of abusive behaviors in adolescent females. Believing in jealousy as a demonstration of love (myth of jealousy) and in the need to establish a steady union when you love someone (marriage myth) explained a lower perceived severity of abusive behaviors in regression models. However, being female and having these beliefs explained a higher perceived severity of abusive behaviors.

**Conclusions:** The myths of romantic love are already present during early adolescence. These beliefs are implicated in the construction of gender inequality and difficulties in the identification of dating abuse behavior severity. A gendered perspective is necessary to understand this issue. Early intervention strategies should address the cognitive and emotional components of intimate relationships.

## 1. Introduction

Love is a great biological and evolutionary phenomenon that has important affective and social functions (Langeslag & van Strien, 2019). This feeling plays a key role in the development of identity and intimacy during adolescence (Connolly et al., 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001). Children of all ages undergo experiences associated with love, although the concept of what being in love means changes with age through the development of personal and socio-cognitive skills (Brechet, 2015; Montgomery, 1998, Regan &

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Joshi, 2003; Sumter et al., 2013). Studies have shown that romantic relationships in early adolescence are of a social nature, do not involve deep psychological intimacy, and have functions relating to the search for support or companionship or “fitting in” (Scott et al., 2016). As adolescence progresses, romantic relationships gradually evolve, becoming more enduring and reciprocal and possessing a more intense nature with regard to both positive and negative aspects (Bajoghli et al., 2017; Lantagne & Furman, 2017). Despite the transformations that occur with respect to some of the characteristics of romantic relationships, early romantic experiences have an important influence on the functioning of adolescents and their future interpersonal competence (Adams et al., 2001; Collins, 2003; Gómez-López et al., 2019; Meier & Allen, 2009). Friends play a fundamental role in romantic relationships due to their close proximity, and provide a context where adolescents can test their interpersonal skills and a support network when adolescents initiate or end such relationships (Collins, 2003). These normative and complex experiences can also be influenced by gender. Some studies have shown that the transition towards romantic relationships and the dynamics involved differ between adolescent males and females (Giordano et al., 2006; Montgomery, 1998), whereas others have not found such differences (Connolly et al., 2014).

Myths of romantic love are socially accepted beliefs regarding the meaning of romantic relationships. These rules play an important role in socialization and guide expectations and behavior in the construction of romantic relationships in adolescence. The omnipotence of love is the most common myth regarding romantic love among Spanish adolescents and adults (Ferrer et al., 2010; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013). These beliefs associated with romantic love endorse stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and femininity (particularly with respect to male dominance) that intensify in early adolescence (Chiung-Tao et al., 2012; De Meyer et al., 2017; Kågesten et al., 2016; Nava-Reyes et al., 2018). The romantic interpretation of love has been associated with the acceptance of abusive behaviors such as control or jealousy. In fact, these behaviors have been found to be considered as expressions of love or concern with respect to the relationship in different studies focused on adolescents (Nardi-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Moreira et al., 2016), university students (Sanchez-Hernandez et al., 2020; Vllora et al., 2019), and adults (Lelaurain, Fonte, Giger, Guignard, & Lo Monaco, 2021; Papp et al., 2017). In turn, the justification of violence has appeared as an important risk factor for intimate partner violence in both adolescence and adulthood (Capaldi et al., 2012). Specifically, Lombard (2016) observed that a group of 89 individuals in early adolescence justified violence through heteronormativity, support for marriage, restrictive gender roles, and blaming women for violence.

As argued by Collins (2003), erroneous assumptions about romantic relationships and sexuality during adolescence have historically influenced scientific research. However, the manifestations of love in early adolescence are key aspects for understanding the challenges faced by developing individuals (Scott, McKenney, & Poulsen, 2016). Previous studies have mainly focused on examining the most frequent romantic beliefs and more serious abusive behaviors in middle and late adolescence, but the early adolescent population has received less attention. No publications have been found analyzing the wide range of beliefs relating to romantic love and the relationship with the perceived severity of abusive behaviors (physical, psychological and emotional, verbal, etc.) in early adolescence.

In line with previous studies, it is hypothesized that having beliefs about romantic love will be associated with reduced perception of the severity of abusive behaviors. Secondly, it is hypothesized that beliefs supporting the love–violence bond, jealousy, the power of love, or sexism will be associated with reduced perceptions of the severity of abusive behaviors, particularly in relation to the patent abusive behaviors. Thirdly, it is hypothesized that associations between myths of romantic love and the perceived severity of abusive behaviors will be different by gender. Reduced perception of the severity of abusive behaviors in adolescent males will be associated with beliefs about love-violence bond or jealousy, and in adolescent females will be associated with beliefs about the power of love or sexism.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The study sample comprised a total of 448 Spanish adolescents, of which 50.3% ( $n = 225$ ) were male and 49.7% ( $n = 223$ ) were female. The average age of the participants was 12.92 years ( $SD = 0.85$ ). The Spanish education system consists of a basic, compulsory, and cost-free education period up until 15 years of age. The assessed students were in their first or second year of a three-year general lower-secondary education program (ISCED 2 according to the International Standard Classification of Education) at public (62.3%) and charter (37.7%) schools. All in-school adolescents in their first or second year of general lower-secondary education were eligible for the study. All adolescents agreed to participate, with no objections raised by their parents (passive consent).

### 2.2. Measurements

The Perception of Abuse Scale (Luzón et al., 2011) is composed of 32 signs of teen dating abuse or violence and 6 control items (for example: “Having different hobbies”). Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (“I do not believe that this is abusive behavior”) to 4 (“I believe that this is completely abusive behavior”). The items are divided in two factors: the perception of patent abusive behaviors (16 items, for example: “Hitting or throwing objects during arguments”) and the perception of subtle abusive behaviors (16 items, for example: “Having control over places, people, or activities using worry as an excuse”). Additionally, the items assess 10 coercive strategies: sexual abuse, devaluation, domination, control, isolation, possession, emotional blackmail, intimidation, physical aggression, and the manifestation of sexist beliefs. The McDonald Omega coefficient ( $\omega$ ) of the total scale (0.96) and the subscales (0.89 and 0.95) was excellent.

The Myths, Fallacies, and Misconceptions about Romantic Love Scale (Luzón et al., 2011) is composed of 18 items that assess

romantic beliefs with an ipsative response format. Respondents make a comparative judgment between two statements at the same time, with one being a myth of romantic love, and choose the statement best describes what they think. A sample item is as follows: “The love of a partner is very important because it is necessary for feeling that you are complete in life” (mythicized belief = 1) or “The love of a partner is not necessary for feeling that your life is complete” (myth-free belief = 0). The items are categorized with respect to 4 factors. The first factor is the “Power of Love”, which refers to the concept that love conquers all. This factor is represented by 6 items (for example: “the fallacy of being changed by love” and “the normalization of conflict”). The second factor, which encompasses the idea that true love is meant to be, is referred to as “Love Predestined”, with 5 items (for example: “the better-half myth” and “the belief that there is only one true love in life”). The third factor is related to the idea that love is the most important aspect of life, requiring total dedication. This factor is referred to as the “Importance of Love” and is represented by 5 items (for example: “giving up privacy for love” and “love as a couple is the fundamental reason for existence”). The final factor, “Love with Possession”, considers that love implies possession and exclusivity, with 2 items (for example: “the myth of jealousy” and “the marriage myth”). The McDonald Omega coefficient ( $\omega$ ) was good for the total scale (0.72), moderate for the third factor (0.64), and poor for the first (0.46), second (0.48) and fourth (0.45) factor.

### 2.3. Procedure

The research group was asked by the Health Sector Council of a Spanish city to design a program with the aim of preventing teen dating violence. This body represents key community stakeholders, public officials from the Departments of Health and Education, school and health center managers, and parents’ associations. The Health Sector Council of the city reviewed the proposed study, which included a needs analysis of the adolescent population and the application of a preventive intervention. Approval was obtained from the local Health Sector Council of the city. Each of the school centers provided information to the parents by letter, and the teachers collaborated in order to inform the students. The assessment was carried out within the school setting over three months. Questionnaires were completed using pencil and paper over the course of 75 min. A group of psychologists supervised the completion of the surveys in the classrooms during the students’ tutor times. The confidentiality and privacy of the responses was ensured. The results were used for the design of a group intervention involving five sessions. A post-intervention evaluation was not carried out. The data presented in this study thus correspond to the pre-intervention evaluation.

### 2.4. Analysis of data

Descriptive statistics and frequencies were calculated in order to analyze the sociodemographic characteristics using SPSS Statistics V25. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test was implemented to examine whether the variables were normally distributed. Almost all variables had non-normal distribution ( $p \leq .05$ ), although two variables (subtle abuse and control) had a normal distribution. The means and standard deviations were thus calculated to describe the study variables, and the Mann–Whitney  $U$  test (non-normal distribution) or  $t$ -test (normal distribution) were used to compare gender differences. Cohen’s  $d$  and Rosenthal’s  $r$  were used to calculate effect size. Moreover, Spearman’s correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between myths of romantic love and the

**Table 1**

Means and Standard deviations and Mann–Whitney  $U$  test or  $t$ -test and effect sizes in the study variables.

	Total sample (N = 448)		Adolescent males (n = 225)		Adolescent females (n = 223)		U/t	r/d
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Perception of abusive behaviors (total score)	2.19	0.83	1.97	0.86	2.37	0.75	-4.665**	-.22
<i>Mechanism of manifestation</i>								
Patent abuse	2.67	0.99	2.39	1.01	2.93	0.88	-5.829**	-.28
Subtle abuse <sup>a</sup>	1.72	0.77	1.58	0.79	1.83	0.72	-3.058**	-0.33
<i>Coercive strategies</i>								
Sexual abuse	2.62	1.09	2.25	1.10	2.99	0.95	-7.185**	-.34
Devaluation	2.28	0.95	2.10	0.96	2.44	0.91	-3.643**	-.17
Domination	1.91	0.90	1.76	0.94	2.04	0.81	-3.675**	-.17
Control <sup>a</sup>	2.03	0.92	1.82	0.91	2.23	0.87	-4.470**	-0.46
Isolation	2.09	1.06	1.94	1.08	2.22	1.02	-2.829**	-.13
Possession	1.89	1.03	1.77	1.02	2.01	1.01	-2.306*	-.11
Emotional blackmail	1.69	0.90	1.63	0.88	1.74	0.91	-1.184	-.06
Intimidation	2.94	1.18	2.65	1.26	3.22	1.02	-5.060**	-.24
Physical aggression	3.00	1.29	2.62	1.29	3.37	1.10	-6.422**	-.30
Manifestation of sexist beliefs	2.84	1.12	2.56	1.16	3.08	1.02	-4.972**	-.23
Myths of romantic love (0–18)	9.03	3.12	9.56	3.00	8.49	3.18	-3.622**	-.17
Power of Love (0–6)	2.69	1.35	2.87	1.33	2.52	1.34	-2.683**	-.13
Love Predestined (0–5)	2.62	1.10	2.60	1.15	2.64	1.05	-0.009	-.00
Importance of Love (0–5)	2.42	1.44	2.76	1.37	2.08	1.43	-4.887**	-.23
Love with Possession (0–2)	1.28	0.73	1.32	0.75	1.23	0.71	-1.515	-.07

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

<sup>a</sup> Results correspond to  $t$ -test and Cohen’s  $d$  (normal distribution).

perception of the severity of abuse. Finally, hierarchical regression was performed using the enter method to identify explanatory variables regarding the perception of the severity of abusive behaviors (dependent variable). On the other hand, the McDonald Omega coefficient ( $\omega$ ) was calculated to examine the reliability analysis of the scales using the RStudio software (Zhang & Yuan, 2014).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Description of study variables

The average score with respect to the perceived severity of abusive behaviors was 2.23 out of 4 points in the total sample. Participants assessed behaviors with a patent mechanism of manifestation as being more serious than those of a subtler nature. Physical aggression, intimidation, and the manifestation of sexist beliefs were the coercive strategies that obtained the highest average scores (greater perceived severity), and emotional blackmail, possession, and domination obtained the lowest scores (lower perceived severity). Statistically significant differences by gender were observed for all variables except emotional blackmail. Adolescent females reported greater perceived severity with regard to all types of abusive behaviors as compared to adolescent males. A small–medium effect size was obtained (see Table 1).

Moreover, the average score regarding the myths of romantic love was 9.03 out of 18 points in the total sample. Statistically significant differences by gender were observed for the total score as well as for the “Power of Love” and “Importance of Love” factors. Adolescent males obtained higher scores than adolescent females. A small effect size was obtained (see Table 1).

#### 3.2. Correlation analyses

Correlation analysis supported the first hypothesis. In the total sample, weak negative associations with statistically significant differences were found between the perceived severity of abuse and the total scores relating to romantic love myths, as observed in Table 2. In addition, higher scores in relation to the “Power of Love”, “Importance of Love”, and “Love with Possession” were significantly and negatively associated with the perceived severity of abuse, patent abuse, and subtle abuse. A weak correlation was observed. Moreover, there were significant associations between the factors of the myths of romantic love and coercive strategies. A weak correlation was observed.

#### 3.3. Hierarchical regression analyses

A hierarchical regression analysis partially supported the second hypothesis and supported the third hypothesis. Twelve hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test whether having romantic beliefs could explain the perceived severity of different types of abusive behaviors. In block one, gender was entered as predictor variable (see Table 3). The results showed that gender was a significant contributor to predicting the perceived severity of abusive behaviors, explaining between 1,1% and 10,5% of the variance depending on type of abusive behavior. In block two, the four romantic myths were entered: the “Power of Love”, “Love Predestined”, the “Importance of Love”, and “Love with Possession”. The results showed that together these variables produced a significant contribution to predicting the perceived severity of abusive behaviors, explaining between 2,3% and 11,8% of the variance depending

**Table 2**

Correlations between perceived severity of abusive behaviors and myths of romantic love for the total sample.

	Perception of abusive behaviors (total score)	<i>Mechanism of manifestation</i>		Coercive strategies			
		Patent abuse	Subtle abuse	Sexual abuse	Devaluation	Domination	Control
Myths of romantic love	-.16**	-.14**	-.19**	-.13**	-.09	-.20**	-.18**
Power of Love	-.13*	-.14**	-.12*	-.12*	-.07	-.15**	-.14**
Love Predestined	-.01	.02	-.08	-.03	-.00	-.11*	-.08
Importance of Love	-.17**	-.18**	-.14**	-.18**	-.09	-.17**	-.17**
Love with Possession	-.18**	-.12*	-.24**	-.09	-.12*	-.17**	-.19**
		Coercive strategies					
	Isolation	Possession	Emotional blackmail	Intimidation	Physical aggression	Manifestation of sexist beliefs	
Myths of romantic love	-.11*	-.19**	-.11*	-.11*	-.14**	-.13**	
Power of Love	-.13**	-.11*	-.11*	-.10*	-.17**	-.16**	
Love Predestined	-.00	-.03	-.01	-.03	-.01	-.00	
Importance of Love	-.12*	-.15**	-.12*	-.16**	-.13**	-.11*	
Love with Possession	-.14**	-.26**	-.12**	-.09*	-.11*	-.11*	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 3**  
Regression coefficients of perceived severity of abusive behavior.

Step	Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	$R_a^2$	F
Perception of abusive behaviors						
1	Gender	.37	.09	.22**	.048	16.7**
2	Gender	.31	.09	.18*	.068	5.4**
	Power of love	-.04	.03	-.07		
	Love predestined	.05	.04	.06		
	Importance of love	-.03	.03	-.06		
	Love with possession	-.13	.06	-.11*		
3	Gender	-.13	.29	-.08	.085	4.1**
	Power of love	.10	.12	.16		
	Love predestined	-.08	.14	-.10		
	Importance of love	-.07	.11	-.13		
	Love with possession	-.64	.20	-.57*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.10	.07	-.28		
	Gender x Love predestined	.08	.09	.21		
	Gender x Importance of love	.02	.07	.08		
	Gender x Love with possession	.33	.13	.52*		
Perception of patent abuse						
1	Gender	.50	.09	.26**	.065	25.8**
2	Gender	.42	.10	.22**	.082	7.3**
	Power of love	-.06	.04	-.08		
	Love predestined	.09	.04	.10		
	Importance of love	-.06	.03	-.09		
	Love with possession	-.05	.07	.04		
3	Gender	.02	.31	.01	.090	4.9**
	Power of love	.02	.13	.03		
	Love predestined	.01	.15	.01		
	Importance of love	-.03	.12	-.05		
	Love with possession	-.61	.23	-.45*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.05	.08	-.14		
	Gender x Love predestined	.04	.09	.10		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.01	.07	-.03		
	Gender x Love with possession	.37	.14	.48*		
Perception of subtle abuse						
1	Gender	.23	.08	.15*	.021	8.2*
2	Gender	.19	.08	.12*	.057	4.9**
	Power of love	-.03	.03	-.05		
	Love predestined	-.008	.04	-.01		
	Importance of love	-.01	.03	-.03		
	Love with possession	-.18	.05	-.17*		
3	Gender	-.17	.26	-.11	.074	3.9**
	Power of love	.14	.11	.25		
	Love predestined	-.16	.12	-.23		
	Importance of love	-.05	.10	-.11		
	Love with possession	-.60	.18	-.58*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.11	.06	-.37		
	Gender x Love predestined	.09	.07	.28		
	Gender x Importance of love	.02	.06	.07		
	Gender x Love with possession	.28	.11	.47*		
Perception of sexual abuse						
1	Gender	.70	.10	.32**	.105	45.2**
2	Gender	.62	.10	.29**	.118	11.1**
	Power of love	-.05	.04	-.06		
	Love predestined	.09	.05	.09		
	Importance of love	-.08	.04	-.10		
	Love with possession	-.03	.07	-.02		
3	Gender	.42	.33	.19	.137	7.6**
	Power of love	.15	.13	.19		
	Love predestined	.03	.15	.03		

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Step	Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	$R_a^2$	F
	Importance of love	.00	.13	.01		
	Love with possession	-.76	.23	-.51*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.14	.08	-.32		
	Gender x Love predestined	.03	.10	.06		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.05	.08	-.12		
	Gender x Love with possession	.49	.15	.58*		
Perception of devaluation						
1	Gender	.28	.09	.15*	.020	8.5*
2	Gender	.24	.09	.12*	.023	2.7*
	Power of love	-.04	.04	-.05		
	Love predestined	.04	.04	.05		
	Importance of love	-.02	.03	-.03		
	Love with possession	-.09	.07	-.07		
3	Gender	-.25	.31	-.13	.029	2.2*
	Power of love	-.07	.12	-.11		
	Love predestined	-.06	.14	-.07		
	Importance of love	.06	.12	.10		
	Love with possession	-.56	.22	-.43*		
	Gender x Power of love	.02	.08	.05		
	Gender x Love predestined	.06	.09	.15		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.05	.07	-.14		
	Gender x Love with possession	.31	.14	.41*		
Perception of domination						
1	Gender	.28	.08	.15*	.022	9.7*
2	Gender	.21	.09	.12*	.047	4.7**
	Power of love	-.05	.03	-.08		
	Love predestined	-.02	.04	-.02		
	Importance of love	-.04	.03	-.07		
	Love with possession	-.09	.06	-.07		
3	Gender	-.08	.28	-.04	.052	3.3*
	Power of love	.01	.11	.02		
	Love predestined	-.03	.13	-.04		
	Importance of love	-.06	.11	-.10		
	Love with possession	-.53	.20	-.44*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.05	.07	-.14		
	Gender x Love predestined	.01	.08	.02		
	Gender x Importance of love	.01	.07	.03		
	Gender x Love with possession	.30	.13	.42*		
Perception of control						
1	Gender	.36	.09	.20**	.038	15.4**
2	Gender	.30	.09	.17*	.064	5.9**
	Power of love	-.03	.03	-.05		
	Love predestined	-.01	.04	-.01		
	Importance of love	-.04	.03	-.07		
	Love with possession	-.14	.06	-.11*		
3	Gender	-.03	.29	-.01	.073	4.1**
	Power of love	.14	.12	.21		
	Love predestined	-.13	.13	-.16		
	Importance of love	-.11	.11	-.17		
	Love with possession	-.55	.21	-.45*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.11	.07	-.31		
	Gender x Love predestined	.07	.09	.18		
	Gender x Importance of love	.04	.07	.10		
	Gender x Love with possession	.28	.13	.39*		
Perception of isolation						
1	Gender	.26	.10	.12*	.014	6.2*
2	Gender	.20	.11	.09	.032	3.4*
	Power of love	-.08	.04	-.10		
	Love predestined	.08	.05	.08		
	Importance of love	-.03	.04	-.04		

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Step	Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	$R_a^2$	F
3	Love with possession	-.12	.07	-.08	.038	2.6*
	Gender	-.15	.34	-.07		
	Power of love	-.03	.14	-.04		
	Love predestined	.02	.16	.02		
	Importance of love	.06	.13	.08		
	Love with possession	-.70	.24	-.48*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.03	.08	-.08		
	Gender x Love predestined	.03	.10	.07		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.06	.08	-.14		
	Gender x Love with possession	.39	.15	.47*		
Perception of possession						
1	Gender	.23	.10	.11	.011	5.3*
2	Gender	.15	.10	.07	.076	7.2**
	Power of love	-.01	.04	-.02		
	Love predestined	.04	.04	.05		
	Importance of love	-.04	.03	-.06		
	Love with possession	-.34	.07	-.24**		
3	Gender	-.28	.32	-.14	.074	4.3**
	Power of love	.03	.12	.04		
	Love predestined	-.15	.14	-.16		
	Importance of love	-.07	.12	-.11		
	Love with possession	-.49	.23	-.35*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.03	.08	-.08		
	Gender x Love predestined	.13	.09	.29		
	Gender x Importance of love	.01	.07	.04		
	Gender x Love with possession	.09	.14	.12		
Perception of intimidation						
1	Gender	.56	.11	.23**	.054	23.0**
2	Gender	.48	.12	.20**	.064	6.2**
	Power of love	-.06	.04	-.07		
	Love predestined	.10	.05	.09		
	Importance of love	-.07	.04	-.08		
	Love with possession	-.03	.08	-.02		
3	Gender	.08	.37	.03	.061	3.7**
	Power of love	-.13	.15	-.15		
	Love predestined	.03	.17	.03		
	Importance of love	.01	.15	.02		
	Love with possession	-.39	.27	-.24		
	Gender x Power of love	.04	.09	.08		
	Gender x Love predestined	.04	.11	.07		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.05	.09	-.11		
	Gender x Love with possession	.24	.17	.25		
Perception of physical aggression						
1	Gender	.75	.12	.29**	.086	37.0**
2	Gender	.68	.12	.26**	.098	9.4**
	Power of love	-.12	.05	-.13*		
	Love predestined	.04	.06	.03		
	Importance of love	-.02	.04	-.02		
	Love with possession	-.05	.09	-.03		
3	Gender	.42	.39	.16	.104	5.9**
	Power of love	-.05	.16	-.05		
	Love predestined	-.01	.18	-.01		
	Importance of love	.14	.15	.16		
	Love with possession	-.70	.28	-.40*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.05	.10	-.10		
	Gender x Love predestined	.03	.12	.06		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.10	.09	-.20		
	Gender x Love with possession	.44	.18	.43*		
Perception of manifestations of sexist beliefs						
1	Gender	.45	.11	.20**	.040	16.9**

(continued on next page)

**Table 3** (continued)

Step	Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	$R_a^2$	F
2	Gender	.39	.11	.17*	.053	5.2**
	Power of love	-.11	.04	-.13*		
	Love predestined	.05	.05	.05		
	Importance of love	-.01	.04	-.02		
	Love with possession	-.06	.08	-.04		
3	Gender	-.07	.35	-.03	.057	3.5**
	Power of love	-.06	.14	-.07		
	Love predestined	-.11	.16	-.11		
	Importance of love	.06	.14	.08		
	Love with possession	-.54	.25	-.35*		
	Gender x Power of love	-.04	.09	-.08		
	Gender x Love predestined	.11	.10	.21		
	Gender x Importance of love	-.05	.08	-.11		
	Gender x Love with possession	.32	.16	.36*		

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .001.

Gender coded as: 1 = males, 2 = females.

**Table 4**

Simple slope for hierarchical moderated regression analysis.

Categorical moderator	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Perception of abusive behaviors					
Males	-.34	.08	-4.032	<.001	[-.52, -.17]
Females	-.02	.08	-0.303	.762	[-.18, .13]
Perception of patent abuse					
Males	-.29	.09	-3.009	.003	[-.48, -.10]
Females	.03	.08	0.412	.681	[-.13, .21]
Perception of subtle abuse					
Males	-.36	.07	-4.944	<.001	[-.51, -.22]
Females	-.11	.07	-1.527	.128	[-.26, .03]
Perception of sexual abuse					
Males	-.27	.10	-2.731	.007	[-.48, -.07]
Females	.08	.09	.895	.372	[-.10, .26]
Perception of devaluation					
Males	-.27	.08	-3.115	.002	[-.44, -.10]
Females	.01	.09	0.118	.906	[-.16, .19]
Perception of domination					
Males	-.31	.08	-3.739	<.001	[-.48, -.15]
Females	-.04	.08	-0.605	.546	[-.20, .10]
Perception of control					
Males	-.35	.08	-4.217	<.001	[-.51, -.18]
Females	-.09	.08	-1.046	.297	[-.26, .08]
Perception of isolation					
Males	-.33	.09	-3.409	.001	[-.52, -.14]
Females	-.03	.10	-0.360	.760	[-.23, .16]
Perception of possession					
Males	-.44	.09	-4.906	<.001	[-.62, -.26]
Females	-.29	.09	-2.958	.003	[-.48, -.09]
Perception of intimidation					
Males	-.20	.11	-1.808	.072	[-.43, .01]
Females	-.00	.10	0.024	.981	[.19, -.20]
Perception of physical aggression					
Males	-.30	.12	-2.500	.013	[-.54, -.06]
Females	-.01	.10	-0.102	.918	[-.22, .20]
Perception of manifestations of sexist beliefs					
Males	-.27	.10	-2.596	.010	[-.48, -.06]
Females	.00	.10	0.015	.988	[-.19, .19]



on type of abusive behavior. Gender and “Love with Possession” appeared as significant predictors of almost all variables related to the perceived severity of abusive behaviors in these regression models. In block three, interaction terms between gender and each romantic myth were entered. The results showed that together these variables produced a significant contribution to predicting the perceived severity of abusive behaviors, explaining between 2,9% and 13,7% of the variance depending on type of abusive behavior. There was one significant interaction between gender and “Love with Possession” that predicted almost all variables related to the perceived severity of abusive behaviors. This interaction revealed that adolescent females who scored higher for “Love with Possession” had a greater perception of the severity of abusive behaviors. The slope coefficients for gender imply that the examined relationship was statistically significant in adolescent males. That is, adolescent males who scored higher for “Love with Possession” had a lower perception of the severity of abusive behaviors (see Table 4). No variable appeared as a predictor of the DV of intimidation. Furthermore, the F-test result for the regression analysis of the DV of emotional blackmail was not statistically significant ( $p = .209$ ), and for this reason it is not included in Table 3.

#### 4. Discussion

Love is a universal feeling that transcends time and culture. The prototypical conception of being in love is already present during early adolescence, as indicated by Montgomery and Sorell (1998), Adams (2001), Collins (2003), and Connolly (2014). As Collins (2003) states, research on this population has focused on the frequency or consequences of romantic relationships, but studies on the nature of romantic relationships and the cognitive and emotional processes involved are still very limited. Therefore, our study shows the relationship between myths of romantic love and perceived severity of abusive behaviors among Spanish individuals in early adolescence, two factors that are closely related to the teen dating violence phenomenon (Capaldi et al., 2012).

Firstly, our results have confirmed the first hypothesis that myths of romantic love are negatively related to the perceived severity of abusive behaviors. Other publications assessing the same variables among adolescent populations have been not found. Previous studies such as those of Chiung-Tao et al. (2012), Moreira et al. (2016), or Lombard et al. (2016) have observed that among adolescents of various cultures, violence in romantic relationships is justified by sexist beliefs, the normalization of jealousy as a way of experiencing love, and the endorsement of marriage. One possible explanation may be that the internalization of beliefs regarding romantic love contributes to the understanding of romantic experiences based on the social construction of love. Gender inequality and unequal romantic relationships prevail in the cultural conception of love. This conception determines the extent to which certain behaviors are tolerable and acceptable in the romantic context, as observed De Meyer et al. (2017). According to a systematic review by Kågesten et al. (2016), these attitudes are a key influence during early adolescence. Another possible explanation is that romantic beliefs interfere in abuse risk assessment, thereby increasing the likelihood of dysfunctional relationships which are not perceived as such. Accordingly, Langeslag et al. (2019) observed that romantic attachment puts a cognitive dampener on aversive events that may occur in a relationship.

Secondly, our results partially confirm the second hypothesis. The myths of romantic love supporting the love–violence bond, jealousy, the power of love, or sexism reduced the perceived severity of abusive behaviors. However, beliefs about possession appear to be the best factor explaining the lower perceived severity of abuse in early adolescence. Lennarz et al. (2017) showed that jealousy is a normative emotion in the adolescent period because of the increased importance of friends and special relationships. Negative feelings arise when a valuable relationship is perceived to be threatened by others, and thus jealousy may be of an adaptive nature during this period. However, the myth of jealousy indicates that jealous behaviors are a main component of true love. In this sense, abusive behaviors are recognized as being less serious because they are a demonstration of love and concern (Lantagne & Furman, 2017). On the other hand, marriage is a social institution that lives in the collective imagery from childhood. For example, in a study by Manning et al. (2007), 76% of adolescents expected to be married in the future. Support to marriage also appeared as an idea associated with the justification of violence in Lombard’s (2016) study among individuals in early adolescence. Believing that true love must lead to the steady union of the couple could be a possible explanation that abusive behaviors are normalized to ensure that the assumed permanence continues (Hall, 2006).

Thirdly, our results confirm the third hypothesis. According to studies such as those of Montgomery and Sorell (1998), Sumter et al. (2013), or Connolly et al. (2014), there are no gender differences with regard to the characteristics of romantic relationships during early adolescence. However, there are gender differences in beliefs about love due to gender socialization processes. Gender stereotypes transmit the inferiority of femininity and the superiority of masculinity in romantic relationships, generating inequality in this context (de Meyer et al., 2016; Chiung-Tao et al., 2012). This is particularly the case during early adolescence (Kågesten et al., 2016). In our study, the types of romantic beliefs correlated with a lower perceived severity of abusive behaviors were not found to be the same for male and female adolescents. Although weak–moderate associations were found, the trends of the findings can be discussed. In adolescent males, the legitimization of violence was associated with ideas regarding possession, exclusivity, and the importance of love, while in adolescent females it was related to ideas about the compatibility between love and abuse, the capacity of love to overcome any obstacle, and changing for love. In this sense, adolescent females may believe in an altruistic and sacrificial love, while adolescent males may believe in a true and perfect love that they need control, possibly due to insecurities or a lack of confidence in interpersonal interactions (Lantagne & Furman, 2017; Scott et al., 2016). It should be noted at this point that, as summarized by Lagarde (2000), in this context males are “living for themselves” while females are “living for others”. Moreover, female status and a greater belief in jealousy as a demonstration of love and the need to establish a steady union when you love someone explain the higher perceived severity of abusive behaviors. Nardi-Rodríguez et al. (2018) found ambiguous attitudes towards a certain type of abusive behavior among adolescents. The authors argued that adolescents coexist with a large variety of referents. It is possible that the coexistence of favorable and unfavorable attitudes towards abusive behaviors depends on the perspective from which these are

assessed. For example, in the study by Sanchez-Hernandez et al. (2020), female university students were able to better identify violence when they adopted the observer role as compared to the protagonist role.

As an observational and cross-sectional study, this study has some limitations, including no causal evidence and sample size. However, the results enable us to suggest etiological hypotheses with regard to the legitimization of violence during early adolescence. Moreover, other relevant variables such as the prior experiences of romantic relationships or the influence of peers and the media have not been considered. Finally, the modest coefficients obtained in some of the subscales should be addressed in depth, because they may be related to the type of administration of the instrument, the sample size or the few items to represent a construct with greater conceptual breadth. Our results have implications for the school setting. School and peers provide an important learning context for adolescents, representing a suitable environment for the development of teen dating violence prevention strategies. Firstly, it is important to implement gender equality promotion programs beginning in childhood, with a gendered perspective. Curricular contents can provide a starting point in order to break gender stereotypes, reflect on equal rights and opportunities, and build the concept of equal relationships. Secondly, it is necessary to create transversal programs starting from early adolescence to provide life skills with regard to, for example, critical thinking about messages regarding romantic love, the components of love, and the characteristics of a healthy romantic relationship, or the identification of signs of abuse in a romantic relationship. Other areas of address could relate to empathy towards the victim and the provision of support, or problem-solving skills in order to seek help and negotiate or leave romantic relationships. Finally, these preventive strategies should be designed through the methodology of meaningful learning, in which adolescents play an active role in their own change.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no known conflicts of interest.

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