Relationships Among Romantic Myths, Tolerant Attitudes Toward Abuse, and Teen Dating Violence Victimization: The Moderator role of Gender

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyze the direct and indirect relationships between romantic myths of love and teen dating violence victimization (physical and psychological), considering the mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse and the moderator role of gender. A sample of 467 adolescents who had a dating relationship at that time or in the previous 12 months (45.6% boys, M_{age} = 15.09, SD_{age} = 1.46) participated. Results showed that tolerant attitudes toward abuse was a significant mediating variable in the relationship between romantic myths and psychological dating violence victimization only in adolescent girls. Psychological dating violence victimization was also a mediating variable in the relationship between tolerant attitudes and physical dating violence victimization in adolescent girls. These findings highlight the relevance of tolerant attitudes toward abuse in understanding teen dating violence victimization, especially in adolescent girls, and the need to include these attitudes in prevention programs.

Keywords

romantic myths, dating violence victimization, adolescence, tolerance toward abuse, attitudes, gender

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Introduction

The first romantic relationships are normative experiences that have a strong influence on the psychosocial and affective development of adolescents (Beckmeyer et al., 2020; Lapierre et al., 2019; Smetana et al., 2006). In their first romantic relationships, adolescents learn to express new emotions, cope with new feelings, and resolve interpersonal conflicts with their partner, and these relationships are positive life experiences for most adolescents (Collins et al., 2009; Smetana et al., 2006). However, these romantic experiences are not always positive because different types of dating violence are also present in adolescent couples (Cava et al., 2021; Courtain & Glowacz, 2021).

Teen Dating Violence (TDV) is defined as physical, sexual, or psychological violence within dating relationships, including stalking (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), and it can have serious negative consequences for adolescents (Lee & Wong, 2020; Spencer et al., 2020; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). This violence is related to high levels of stress and anxiety, depressive mood, loneliness, low life satisfaction, poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, higher involvement in risky sexual behaviors, and substance abuse (Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Lee & Wong, 2020; Shorey et al., 2012, 2015; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). In addition, TDV is a strong predictor of subsequent dating violence in adulthood (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021; Jouriles et al., 2017; Sabina et al., 2016; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019).

The two most common types of TDV are psychological and physical (Debnam et al., 2014; Leen et al., 2013; Viejo et al., 2016). Psychological violence involves harm caused by acts or threats of acts, such as humiliating or insulting the victim, controlling what the victim can and cannot do, or isolating the victim from friends and family. Physical dating violence involves the intentional use of physical force that can cause death, disability, injury, or harm (e.g., pushing, hitting, and slapping). The prevalence of these two types of violence, especially psychological violence, is high in adolescent couples (Debnam & Mauer, 2021; Dosil et al., 2021; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Foshee et al., 2013; Francis & Pearson, 2021; Leen et al., 2013). The review by Stonard et al. (2014) showed that prevalence rates of psychological TDV victimization ranged from 51% to 55.5% in adolescent girls and from 45% to 54% in adolescent boys, and rates of physical TDV victimization ranged from 22% to 29% in adolescent girls and from 19% to 27% in adolescent boys. Although the percentages obtained varied depending on the measurement instruments used, these data are worrying and highlight the need to better understand the variables associated with this violence.

Some previous studies have pointed out that this high prevalence of TDV may be associated with adolescents' lack of previous experience in romantic relationships and use of clumsy and abrupt forms of courtship with the partner (Viejo, 2014; Viejo et al., 2016), their lack of resources to handle the new

emotions they feel (Lee & Wong, 2020), and their beliefs in the myths of romantic love (Carrascosa et al., 2019; Cava et al., 2020a, 2020b; Malonda et al., 2017). In the context of their first dating experiences, some adolescents might tolerate certain abusive behaviors from their partner and even perceive them as appropriate behaviors in a dating relationship (Cava et al., 2020a; Hielscher et al., 2021; Lee & Wong, 2020). Certainly, an interesting variable related to TDV victimization is adolescents' beliefs in myths of romantic love. These beliefs are highly influenced by the peer group and the social media, and they contribute greatly to adolescents' construction of their ideal concept of love (Bonomi et al., 2013; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Lelaurin et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021a). The myths of romantic love include beliefs such as the power of love to remedy all kinds of difficulties, the need to have a romantic relationship in order to be happy, considering jealousy a sign of love, the perception of love as suffering, and the existence of a soulmate as our one true love (Carrascosa et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013; Papp et al., 2017; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021a, 2021b). For adolescents who believe in these romantic myths to a greater extent, it might be more difficult to identify some aggressive and control behaviors performed by their partner as forms of violence. They might be more inclined to accept some abusive behaviors, thinking that if their relationship is "true love," these abusive behaviors will disappear, and their partner will change. In this line, positive correlations between adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths of love and TDV victimization have been observed (Cava et al., 2020a).

Nevertheless, the link between romantic myths and TDV victimization needs to be further explored. Thus, for example, it is necessary to analyze to what extent this link is similar in physical TDV victimization and psychological TDV victimization. It is likely that the influence of these myths is greater in psychological victimization because some abusive behaviors, such as controlling the partner's social relationships and activities and making degrading comments in front of his/her friends, could be perceived less by adolescents as abusive behaviors, compared to physical assaults. However, this aspect has not been explored in previous studies. Furthermore, another issue that needs to be further analyzed is the possible existence of mediating variables in the relationship between adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths and TDV victimization. A possible mediating variable would be adolescents' tolerant attitudes toward abusive behaviors in their romantic relationships.

Attitudes of Tolerance Toward Abuse as a Possible Mediating Variable

The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) pointed out that attitudes toward a particular behavior (e.g., degree to which this behavior is positively or negatively evaluated), along with the injunctive (perception of others' approval or disapproval about performing it) and descriptive (perception that others engage in it) norms associated with it, influence behavioral

intentions, which in turn have a direct influence on the behavior itself. Attitudes, based on personal beliefs about a particular behavior, are strongly connected to that behavior. Using similar theoretical frameworks, prior studies have confirmed relationships between acceptance of violence and TDV perpetration (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020), between tolerance for dating abuse within the context of the peer group and TDV (Mumford et al., 2020), and between adolescents' beliefs about the understandability of dating violence under specific circumstances and adolescents' involvement in TDV (Courtain & Glowacz, 2021; Taylor et al., 2015; Temple et al., 2016).

Although these theoretical frameworks linking attitudes and behaviors have mainly been used to explain the perpetration of aggressive behaviors (Connolly et al., 2010; Courtain & Glowacz, 2021; Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020), they can also be useful to explain the maintenance of a romantic relationship characterized by abusive behaviors. Adolescents with tolerant or justifying attitudes toward dating abuse may be more vulnerable to TDV victimization because they are not fully aware of its potential negative consequences, and so their assessment of these behaviors would not be negative. These adolescents may not even perceive them as abusive behaviors, but rather as normal behaviors in a romantic relationship, due to the strong influence of some romantic myths of love. However, the possible role of these tolerant attitudes as a mediating variable between romantic myths and TDV victimization has not been empirically analyzed in previous literature.

Gender as a Possible Moderator Variable

The relationships between romantic myths, attitudes of tolerance toward abuse, and TDV victimization could be different in adolescent boys and girls. Previous studies have observed some gender differences in adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021b). In their study, Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2013) found that adolescent girls showed a greater acceptance of the myth of the omnipotence of love, whereas adolescent boys showed greater acceptance of the myths of jealousy as proof of love and the possible coexistence of love and abuse in a romantic relationship. These gender differences in adolescents' beliefs in the myths of romantic love might involve different attitudes toward some abusive behaviors in their romantic relationships and different vulnerability to TDV victimization. Moreover, gender differences have also been reported in the percentages of TDV victimization, with higher percentages of physical and psychological victimization in adolescent girls (Hebert et al., 2017; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). Finally, significant positive correlations between romantic myths and TDV victimization (physical and verbal-emotional) have been observed in adolescent girls, but not in adolescent boys (Cava et al., 2020a).

All these gender differences could imply that relationships between romantic myths, attitudes of tolerance toward abuse, and TDV victimization are different for adolescent boys and girls, and these possible differences

should also be considered.

The Present Study

Because dating violence victimization is a serious public health problem for adolescents, it is necessary to know more about the variables related to this violence in order to develop more effective prevention programs. Therefore, the objective of this cross-sectional study was to analyze the direct relationship between adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths of love and physical and psychological TDV victimization, and the indirect relationship through tolerant attitudes toward abuse. The possible moderator role of gender was also analyzed. To achieve this objective, the same moderated mediation model was tested for both physical TDV victimization and psychological TDV victimization. This model proposed a direct effect of romantic myths on TDV victimization and an indirect effect through tolerant attitudes toward abuse (mediating variable). Furthermore, gender was included in this model as a moderating variable in all these relationships. To control the possible effect of age and to consider the correlation between the victimization variables in our model, age and the other outcome variable (physical or psychological TDV victimization) were entered as covariates in each model.

The following hypotheses were proposed: (1) Romantic myths are expected to be positively related to both physical TDV victimization and psychological TDV victimization, with gender as a moderator variable in these relationships (stronger relationships are expected in adolescent girls than in boys); (2) Tolerant attitudes toward abuse are expected to be a significant mediating variable in the relationship between romantic myths and both physical TDV victimization and psychological TDV victimization, with gender as a moderator variable in these relationships (stronger indirect relationships through tolerant attitudes toward abuse are expected for adolescent girls than for boys).

Method

Participants

The reference population of this research was adolescents studying Compulsory Secondary Education in the Valencian region (eastern Spain). The participants were selected by cluster sampling, with the sampling units being secondary schools. Three public secondary schools with different sizes and located in different areas of this region were randomly selected. The sample size—ith a sampling error of ±3%, a confidence level of 90%, and $p = q = .5$, ($N = 28{,}1135$)—was estimated at 745 students. The initial sample of this study was composed of 861 adolescents from 13 to 18 years old (47.1% boys and 52.9% girls; $M = 14.90$; $SD = 1.47$). Of these adolescents, only those who had a romantic relationship at that time or in the previous 12 months participated in the present study.

The final sample was composed of 467 adolescents, 213 boys (45.6%) and 254 girls (54.4%), aged 13 to 18 years ($M = 15.09$; $SD = 1.46$). The M_{age} of boys ($M = 15.20$; $SD = 1.47$) and girls ($M = 15.00$; $SD = 1.45$) was similar. The highest percentages of adolescents were 14- (21.6%), 15- (21%), and 16-years-old (19.7%), with lower percentages of 13-(16.9%), 17-(15.6%) and 18-years-old (4.5%). Adolescents were asked to fill out the scales about their romantic relationships by referring to their most recent relationship. Regarding the duration of their relationships, most of the adolescents (50.7%) reported romantic relationships that lasted between 1 and 6 months, with lower percentages of romantic relationships that lasted less than 1 month (18.2%), between 6 and 12 months (14.1%), and more than 1 year (16%).

Procedure

First, we contacted the schools to inform them about this study and invite them to a meeting where the objectives of this research are explained in more detail. At this meeting, the teachers received detailed information about the study objectives, and their collaboration was requested. Parents of students were also informed about the objectives of this research by letter and in a meeting. They were also informed about the confidentiality of the data and that their children's participation was not obligatory. After receiving this information, they were asked to give their consent for their children to participate in the present study. Following the APA (2010) guidelines, approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. The data were collected by members of the research team, who were present in the adolescents' classrooms while the questionnaires were being completed. Before filling out the scales, students were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, their data were confidential, and they could drop out of the study at any time.

Measures

Myths of Romantic Love Scale (Carrascosa et al., 2019). This Spanish scale includes seven items that assess adolescents' beliefs in some myths of romantic love: soul mate ("We all have a single ideal partner, our 'soul mate'"); jealousy as a sign of love ("When my partner controls me, he/she shows me his/her love"); the omnipotence of love ("If I show him/her that I love him/her, he/she will change and make me happy"); the need to have a partner ("Breaking up with your partner is a failure"); and love-violence compatibility (e.g., "You can mistreat someone you love"). Adolescents answered these items on a Likert response scale with five options, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In this sample, this scale's reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .75.

Attitudes of Tolerance toward Abuse in Romantic Relationships Scale

(Cava et al., 2022). This Spanish scale consists of 11 items that describe different situations of aggression, manipulation, or control by the partner. Adolescents answered these items by indicating the extent to which they could forgive their partner for these behaviors (e.g., makes you cry, controls your WhatsApp, insults you, does not let you go out with friends, tells you what clothes to wear, and lies to you), with four response options: *never*, *once*, *several times*, *many times*. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of this scale in this sample was .85.

Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory [CADRI] (Wolfe et al., 2001; adapted into Spanish by Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2006). This scale evaluates different forms of violence perpetration and victimization in adolescents' romantic relationships. In this study, only two subscales were used: Physical victimization, composed of four items describing situations where the adolescent has received physical abuse from her/his partner, such as being pushed or hit (e.g., "My partner slapped me or pulled my hair"); and Verbal-emotional Victimization, containing 10 items describing situations where the adolescent has experienced emotional/psychological abuse from her/his partner, such as being insulted, threatened, or humiliated (e.g., "My partner insulted me with put-downs"). Adolescents answered these items on a scale with four options: *never* (has never happened), *seldom* (1–2 times), *sometimes* (3–5 times), and *often* (6 times or more). The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of these two subscales in this sample was .91 and .88, respectively.

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and Cronbach alpha coefficients for the total sample and Pearson correlations by gender were estimated using SPSS-26 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). To examine whether the correlations between the study variables were similar in both genders, a hypothesis contrast test was performed using the Fisher r to z transformation. The percentage of missing data was very small ($<0.001\%$). To examine the moderating role of gender in the direct associations between romantic myths and TDV victimization and in the indirect associations through tolerant attitudes toward abuse, two moderated-mediation regression models were run, one for each outcome variable (i.e., physical and psychological TDV victimization). These moderated mediation models were estimated using Model 59 in SPSS macro-PROCESS (see Models 1 and 2 in Figure 1). Age and the other outcome were entered as covariates in the analysis (in the model in which physical victimization was the outcome variable, psychological victimization was included as a covariate; in the model in which psychological victimization was the outcome variable, physical victimization was included as a covariate). The bootstrapping method based on 5,000 samples was used to estimate standard errors and 95% confidence intervals of indirect effects. If the confidence intervals do not include zero, the null hypothesis of no mediation is rejected, providing empirical support for the indirect effect (Hayes, 2022). Furthermore, a standard simple slopes

analysis was conducted to indicate the relations between significant variables for girls and boys separately.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations (Boys Above the Diagonal).

Variables	Range	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Romantic myths	1-5	1.97	.69	—	.16*	.15*	.08
2. Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse	0-3	0.50	.47	.44**	—	.15*	.24**
3. Physical dating violence victimization	0-3	0.08	.38	.20**	.59**	—	.70**
4. Psychological dating violence victimization	0-3	0.38	.50	.18**	.52**	.55**	—

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

Results

Means and standard deviations for the total sample and correlations separately by gender are displayed in Table 1. An inspection of the scores shows that adolescents reported low romantic myths, low attitudes of tolerance toward abuse, and low physical and psychological TDV victimization. Positive correlations among all the analyzed variables were found, except for the correlation between romantic myths and psychological TDV victimization, which was not significant in adolescent boys.

The results of the gender differences in the correlations showed that there were significant differences ($p < .01$) in most of the studied variables. The correlations between romantic myths and attitudes of tolerance toward abuse ($z = -3.32$) and the correlations between attitudes of tolerance toward abuse and physical ($z = -5.62$) and psychological ($z = -3.54$) TDV victimization were higher in girls than in boys. By contrast, the correlation between physical TDV victimization and psychological TDV victimization ($z = 2.66$) was higher in boys than in girls. Finally, the gender differences in the correlations between romantic myths and physical ($z = -0.55$) and psychological ($z = -1.09$) TDV victimization were not significant.

Inspection of the moderated mediation model (see Models 1 and 2, in Table 2 and Figure 1) for physical and psychological TDV victimization revealed that the moderated effect of gender on the relationship between romantic myths and physical TDV victimization was not statistically significant, with a nonsignificant relationship found for boys ($B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.03$; 95% CI [−0.002, 0.107]) and for girls ($B = -0.03$, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [−0.103, 0.046]). In a similar way, the moderated effect of gender on the relationship between romantic myths and psychological TDV victimization was not significant, with a nonsignificant relationship found for boys ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [−0.065, 0.074]) and for girls ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.05$; 95% CI [−0.085, 0.103]).

Figure 2 also shows that, for both boys and girls, romantic myths were positively related to attitudes of tolerance toward abuse ($B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$;

Table 2. Mediation Models with Gender as Moderating Variable (Model 1 and Model 2), and Mediation Model Only for Girls With Two Mediating Variables (Model 3).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Physical dating violence victimization		Psychological dating violence victimization		Physical dating violence victimization	
	B	*t*	*B*	*t*	*B*	*t*
Predictors						
Romantic myths	0.05	1.89	0.01	.13	−0.03	−1.39
Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse	0.03	.78	0.12	2.52*	0.33	7.27***
Gender	−0.07	−2.35*	0.17	4.51***		
Romantic myths x gender	−0.08	−1.76	0.01	.08		
Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse x gender	0.07	.86	0.32	3.29***		
Psychological dating violence victimization					0.17	6.16***
Control variables						
Psychological dating violence victimization	0.47	15.60***				
Physical dating violence victimization			0.74	15.60***		
Age	−0.04	−3.74***	0.06	5.01***	−0.02	−2.23*
F	48.82***		57.61***		48.81***	
R^2	.43		.47		.44	

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse		Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse		Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse	
	B	*t*	*B*	*t*	*B*	*t*
Predictors						
Romantic myths	0.10	2.69**	0.10	2.59**	0.26	7.98***
Gender	−0.28	−6.69***	−0.24	−6.05***		
Romantic myths x gender	0.13	2.18*	0.15	2.61**		
Control variables						
Psychological dating violence victimization	0.26	6.89***				
Physical dating violence victimization			0.26	5.25***		
Age	0.02	1.85	0.04	3.25***	0.02	1.78
F	39.09***		33.92***		31.91***	
R^2	.30		.27		.20	

	Model 3	
	Psychological dating violence victimization	
	B	*t*
Predictors		
Romantic myths	−0.02	−.30
Attitudes of tolerance toward abuse	0.79	8.83***
Control variable		
Age	0.06	3.21**
F	35.73***	
R^2	.30	

Note. Gender was dummy coded such that male = 0 and female = 1.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

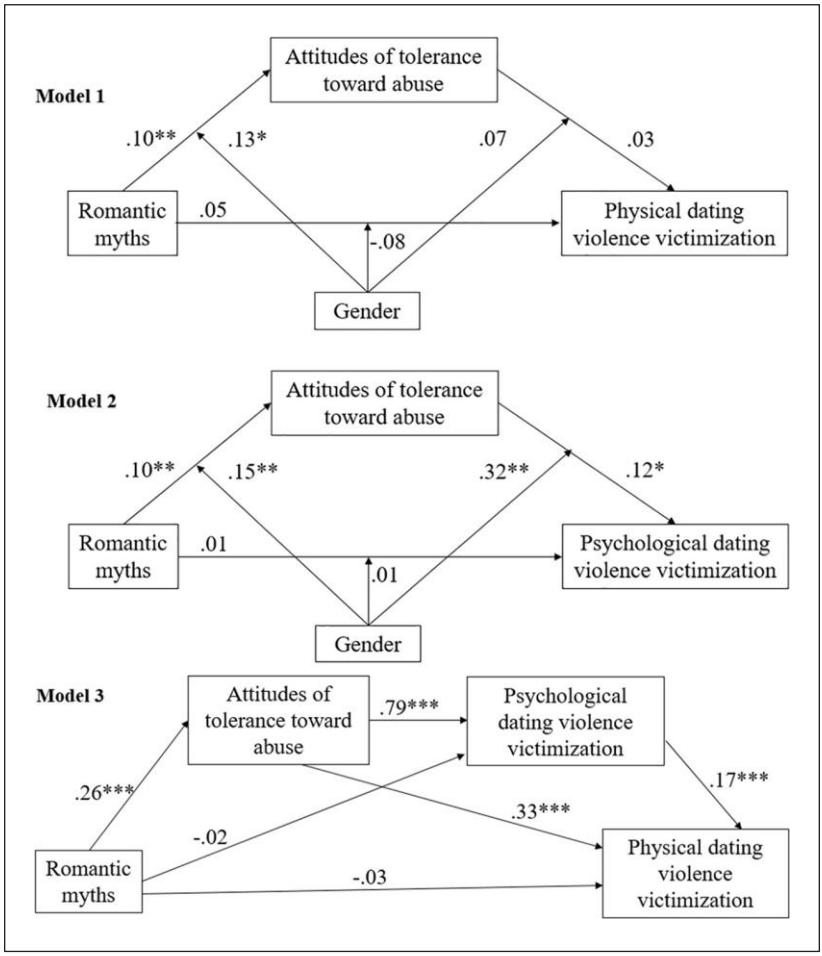

Figure 1. Unstandardized solution of the hypothesized models of the relationships between romantic myths, attitudes of tolerance toward abuse and dating violence victimization (physical and psychological). Models 1 and 2 were run with the total sample (boys and girls); Model 3 was run only with girls.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

95% CI [0.023, 0.172], and $B = .25$, $SE = 0.05$; 95% CI [0.160, 0.342], respectively). Results show that the slope was steeper for girls than for boys, suggesting that the aforementioned relationship was stronger in girls than in

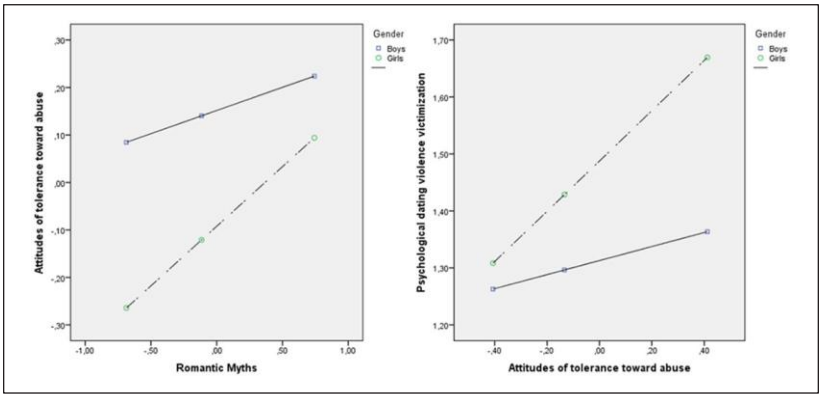

Figure 2. Associations between romantic myths, attitudes of tolerance toward abuse, and psychological dating violence victimization as a function of gender.

boys. However, for boys and girls, attitudes of tolerance toward abuse were not significantly related to physical dating violence victimization ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.04$; 95% CI [−0.046, 0.107] and $B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.07$; 95% CI [−0.040, 0.234], respectively), but it was significantly related to psychological dating violence victimization for both boys and girls ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$; 95% CI [0.027, 0.219], and $B = 0.44$, $SE = 0.09$; 95% CI [0.273, 0.610], respectively). Again, the figure plots show that the slopes were steeper for girls than for boys, suggesting that attitudes of tolerance toward abuse showed a stronger relationship with psychological TDV victimization in girls than in boys (see Figure 2).

Results of the moderated mediation analysis did not support the moderator role of gender in the indirect relationship between romantic myths and physical TDV victimization through attitudes of tolerance toward abuse (index of moderated mediation = 0.02, bootstrap $SE = 0.04$; 95% bootstrap CI [−0.057, 0.104]). Specifically, the mediated relationship was not significant for either boys ($B = 0.00$, bootstrap $SE = 0.01$; 95% bootstrap CI [−0.010, 0.019]), or girls ($B = 0.02$, bootstrap $SE = 0.04$; 95% bootstrap CI [−0.054, 0.104]).

Results of the moderated mediation analysis supported the moderator role of gender in the indirect relationship between romantic myths and psychological TDV victimization through attitudes of tolerance toward abuse (index of moderated mediation = 0.10, bootstrap $SE = 0.03$; 95% bootstrap CI [0.052, 0.155]). The mediated relationship was positive and significant for girls ($B = 0.11$, bootstrap $SE = 0.03$; 95% bootstrap CI [0.067, 0.166]), but not for boys ($B = 0.01$, bootstrap $SE = 0.01$; 95% bootstrap CI [−0.002, 0.036]). That is, in girls, higher romantic myths were associated with higher attitudes of tolerance toward abuse, which in turn were associated with higher psychological TDV victimization. The models explained 30% of the variance in attitudes of tolerance toward abuse in Model 1 and 27% in Model 2, 43% of

the variance in physical TDV victimization in Model 1, and 47% of the variance in psychological TDV victimization in Model 2.

Finally, although it was not raised as an initial hypothesis, when observing these results, it was considered convenient to analyze a new mediation model only for adolescent girls using Model 6 in SPSS macro-PROCESS. Since significant positive correlations were observed between psychological and physical TDV victimization in girls ($r = .55$; $p < .01$, see Table 1) and previous studies have showed that psychological TDV victimization is associated with subsequent physical TDV victimization (Sabina et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2021), two mediational variables (tolerant attitudes toward abuse and psychological TDV victimization) were included in this new model (see Model 3, in Table 2 and Figure 1). This model was only tested with adolescent girls, because the mediating role of tolerant attitudes in the relationship between romantic myths and psychological TDV victimization was only significant for girls. Age was included as a control variable. Results showed a significant total effect of romantic myths on physical TDV victimization ($B = 0.08$, bootstrap $SE = 0.03$; 95% bootstrap CI [0.035, 0.140]). Thus, although the direct effect of romantic myths was not significant ($B = -0.03$, bootstrap $SE = 0.02$; 95% bootstrap CI [−0.077, 0.013]), it was supported its indirect effect through tolerant attitudes toward abuse and psychological TDV victimization ($B = 0.04$, bootstrap $SE = 0.02$; 95% bootstrap CI [0.006, 0.076]). This model explained 20% of the variance in attitudes of tolerance toward abuse, 30% of the variance in psychological TDV victimization, and 44.1% of variance in physical TDV victimization for adolescent girls.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to analyze direct relationships and indirect relationships through attitudes of tolerance toward abuse between adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths of love and TDV victimization, and test the moderator role of gender in these relationships. Firstly, results showed positive correlations between romantic myths of love and physical TDV victimization in adolescent boys and girls, and positive correlations with psychological TDV victimization only in adolescent girls. These results confirm the existence of relationships between adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths and TDV victimization, in line with previous studies (Cava et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021a; Víllora et al., 2019), and they also show interesting differences between adolescent boys and girls. A stronger link between romantic myths and psychological TDV victimization was observed in adolescent girls.

This gender difference could be related to different socialization patterns in boys and girls (Ferrer & Bosch, 2013; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013). Girls receive greater socialization in the relevance of the private space, including family and partner, whereas boys receive greater socialization in the public space of personal fulfillment (e.g., professional career). Thus, girls might place a higher value on romantic myths that express the need to

have a partner in order to be happy and the omnipotence of love in coping with all kinds of difficulties. Therefore, they might be more likely to accept some abusive psychological behaviors in their dating relationships. According to the theory of differential socialization (Ferrer & Bosch, 2013), girls receive more messages from relevant people in their social context and through social media, publicity, songs, movies, and TV series, giving more importance to the private sphere in building their identity. In this regard, the results of this study showed not only more significant correlations between romantic myths and TDV victimization in adolescent girls, but also stronger positive correlations between these myths and tolerant attitudes toward abuse and between these attitudes and physical and psychological TDV victimization in adolescent girls.

Regarding the mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse, our initial hypotheses posited that these tolerant attitudes would be a significant mediating variable in the relationships between romantic myths and TDV victimization (physical and psychological) in both boys and girls, although with stronger links for girls. However, the results showed that these gender differences were even broader than was hypothesized. Tolerant attitudes toward abuse were a mediating variable in the relationships between romantic myths and both psychological and physical TDV victimization only for girls, and not for boys. In adolescent boys, other variables could be more relevant in explaining TDV victimization. Previous work has linked TDV victimization to prior experiences of peer victimization (Brooks-Russell et al., 2013; Cava et al., 2021; Cuevas et al., 2014; Sabina et al., 2016), exposure to interparental violence (Earnest & Brady, 2016; Emanuels et al., 2022), and child abuse (Emanuels et al., 2022). These variables could be more relevant in explaining TDV victimization in adolescent boys. However, given that a positive correlation was also observed in this study between beliefs in romantic myths and physical TDV victimization in boys, it is also possible that other variables not included in this study could be significant mediators in the relationship between these two variables. Thus, for example, an unhealthy romantic relationship characterized by TDV perpetration and victimization, or a possible victimization due to partner self-defense, could be mediating variables in this relationship. In future studies it would be desirable to delve deeper into these possible mediating variables. A better knowledge about how romantic myths is linked to TDV victimization in adolescent boys is needed to develop more effective prevention programs.

In contrast, the mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse in the relationship between romantic myths and TDV victimization (psychological and physical) was supported in adolescent girls, as initially hypothesized. Furthermore, the effect of romantic myths on physical and psychological TDV victimization in adolescent girls took place entirely through their tolerant attitudes toward abuse. The mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse was full for adolescent girls, thus showing the relevance of these attitudes in explaining TDV victimization in girls. Psychological TDV is frequent in adolescent couples (Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Francis &

Pearson, 2021; Leen et al., 2013; Sabina et al., 2016; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021), and adolescents' widespread acceptance of the romantic myths of love (Carrascosa et al., 2019; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021a, 2021b) could favor their tolerant attitudes toward psychological abuse and explain the high prevalence of this type of TDV, especially in adolescent girls. Psychological TDV could be less perceived as an abusive behavior by adolescent girls, who might be less aware of its negative consequences. A greater internalization of romantic myths in girls, differential socialization patterns that give more value to maintaining a romantic partner, and a possible greater influence of social norms on tolerating abusive behaviors by the partner in adolescent girls could explain these gender differences in the mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse.

Regarding physical TDV victimization, the mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse in adolescent girls was also supported, as hypothesized. However, our initial hypothesis (initial proposed model) had to be reformulated to include a new mediating variable. In girls, the relationship between romantic myths and physical TDV victimization was not only mediated by tolerant attitudes toward abuse, but also by psychological TDV victimization. Numerous previous studies have shown that prior victimization is a vulnerability factor for subsequent victimizations (Cava et al., 2021; Cuevas et al., 2014; Sabina et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2021). In this sense, the mediating role of psychological TDV victimization observed in the present study provides support for connections between these two types of TDV victimization in girls. It is likely that many adolescent girls do not tolerate any form of physical TDV victimization in their romantic relationships; but they may be more inclined to accept some psychological abusive behaviors because of their beliefs in romantic myths and their more tolerant attitudes toward this type of abuse. Their lower initial awareness and assertiveness regarding psychological TDV victimization could make them more vulnerable to later physical TDV victimization. Nevertheless, since this study is cross-sectional, these possible causal relationships cannot be verified; and future longitudinal studies are required.

An important issue that these data clearly show is the need to implement early interventions to prevent TDV victimization by helping adolescent girls not to tolerate any form of TDV in their romantic relationships. Adolescent girls show a wide acceptance of the romantic myth of the omnipotence of love (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013), and this belief could favor them to develop attitudes of tolerance toward some abusive behaviors. They might think that these behaviors will eventually disappear due to the power of love, and they might be especially tolerant of some psychological abusive behaviors. However, since initial victimization is a risk factor for subsequent victimization, it is important to discuss with them their romantic beliefs about love and their tolerant attitudes toward some abusive behaviors. But it is not only girls who should need to be involved in these types of TDV victimization prevention programs. Their beliefs in romantic myths of love and their tolerant attitudes toward abuse need to be discussed with adolescent boys and

girls in intervention programs designed to prevent TDV victimization. Both boys and girls should participate in these prevention programs, as it is important for both to develop positive and healthy romantic relationships; and their beliefs in some romantic myths of love may make it difficult for them to build healthy relationships. Socio-cognitive theoretical frameworks, such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), provide a theoretical basis for this type of interventions, and previous studies have also reported significant associations between attitudes of tolerance and justification of violence and adolescents' involvement in TDV (Courtain & Glowacz, 2021; Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020; Mumford et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2015; Temple et al., 2016).

These prevention programs should pay special attention to changing tolerant attitudes toward abuse in adolescents, especially adolescent girls, and provide them with more resources to develop healthier romantic relationships. As has been previously suggested (Cava et al., 2022; Hielscher et al., 2021; Lee & Wong, 2020), it is necessary to help adolescents build healthier romantic relationships that really enhance their psychosocial and affective development. The first romantic relationships are significant experiences for adolescents that have a great influence on their affective and psychosocial development and on their future dating relationships in adulthood (Beckmeyer et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2009; Exner-Cortens et al., 2021; Lapierre et al., 2019; Smetana et al., 2006). Therefore, it is essential to carry out interventions during early adolescence aimed at helping them to build healthy romantic relationships. Although the results of this study have only supported the mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse in adolescent girls, romantic myths have a strong impact on boys and girls (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013; Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021a, 2021b), and both need to learn appropriate ways to build healthy romantic relationships. In this regard, some TDV prevention programs have been developed in school contexts, aimed at helping adolescents develop a healthier concept of love, improve their socio-emotional skills, and increase their awareness about all forms of partner abuse (Cava et al., 2022; Hielscher et al., 2021; Lee & Wong, 2020).

Limitations and Strengths

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the context of some limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow us to establish causal relationships between the analyzed variables. Although beliefs in romantic myths are interiorized early in boys and girls, and these beliefs are integrated into their ideal concept of love during adolescence (Ferrer & Bosch, 2013; Lelaurin et al., 2021), it would be advisable to carry out longitudinal studies that allow a better understanding of the relationships between these variables. The observed relationships between psychological and physical TDV victimization in adolescent girls require longitudinal studies to further explore how one variable influences the other. Proposed explanations suggesting that initial psychological TDV victimization may increase the risk

of subsequent physical TDV victimization are only tentative explanations, and future longitudinal studies are needed.

Moreover, qualitative methodologies should be included, such as interviews or discussion groups with adolescents, in order to obtain more in-depth knowledge about the influence of romantic myths on their perception of couple relationships. It would also be interesting to work with them to analyze how they interpret and perceive different physical and psychological abuse behaviors in their romantic relationships and explore the influence they think the social context and mass media have on the formation of their beliefs and attitudes. In addition, considering the strong influence of the peer group during adolescence (Smetana et al., 2006) and the relevance of the perceived subjective norms (e.g., adolescents' perception of the way their reference group—other adolescents—evaluates particular behaviors), as indicated in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), variables related to the peer group should be analyzed more. In this regard, an interesting variable to include in future studies is adolescents' perception of the degree of tolerance other adolescents in their reference group have toward abusive behaviors in their romantic relationships.

Future studies could also expand the sample, both in size and age range, to analyze possible changes in the influence of romantic myths and tolerant attitudes toward abuse across the different stages of adolescence. There are important differences in romantic relationships at different stages of adolescence (Collins et al., 2009; Smetana et al., 2006), early adolescence (ages 10–13), middle adolescence (ages 14–17), and late adolescence (18 until the early twenties), and variables related to TDV victimization could also be different at each stage. In this study, most of the participants were in middle adolescence. Therefore, an analysis based on stage of adolescence could not be performed. Nevertheless, as age, even within the same stage, could have some influence on the relationships between the variables analyzed, the effect of age was also controlled. The data in this study refer mainly to middle adolescence, a stage in which some studies have observed a peak in the prevalence of TDV (L. Fernández-González et al., 2014; Foshee et al., 2009). In future studies, it would be useful to delve deeper into the possible differences according to age in the relationships observed in the present study. In addition, future research should also analyze the extent to which romantic myths and tolerant attitudes toward abuse are related to TDV victimization in sexual minority adolescents. In this regard, other limitation of this study is that possible differences based on adolescents' sexual orientation or gender identity were not analyzed. Most research on TDV has been carried out with a binary approach, which limits knowledge about TDV in sexual minority adolescents. These adolescents are at increased risk for TDV victimization (Petit et al., 2021; Reuter et al., 2015), so it would be necessary to explore how their beliefs in romantic myths of love and tolerant attitudes toward abuse are associated with TDV victimization. Future research should pay more attention to the study of TDV in sexual minority adolescents, and design prevention programs that take these adolescents into

account to a greater extent.

Finally, another limitation of this study is related to family and peer variables that might be associated with adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths, their tolerant attitudes toward abuse and their TDV victimization, which have not been included. The recent review by Emanuels et al. (2022) has shown that family-of-origin factors (parental attachment, witnessing interparental violence, and experiencing abuse as a child) are significantly associated with TDV victimization. Likewise, prior experiences of peer victimization and peer attitudes that justify TDV have also been associated with TDV victimization (Brooks-Russell et al., 2013; Cava et al., 2021; Hunt et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2021). Therefore, a more comprehensive analysis of variables that increase the risk of TDV victimization should consider personal variables, such as adolescents' beliefs and attitudes, along with family variables (Choi & Temple, 2016; Emanuels et al., 2022), peer-related risk factors (Hunt et al., 2022), and situational vulnerability factors, such as alcohol use (Brooks-Russell et al., 2013). How adolescents' beliefs in romantic myths of love are associated with these family and social variables may be useful in obtaining a broader understanding of TDV victimization.

However, despite these limitations, the data provided in this study are novel and suggest interesting variables for the prevention of TDV victimization. The data confirmed the relationship between beliefs in romantic myths and TDV victimization in adolescent girls, highlighting the mediating role of attitudes of tolerance toward abuse in the relationship. The mediating role of these tolerant attitudes in girls is a noteworthy result of this study. Although both adolescent boys and girls can experience TDV victimization (Hebert et al., 2017; Leen et al., 2013; Stonard et al., 2014; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021), the variables that increase their vulnerability may be different, and it is necessary to better understand these gender differences in order to implement more effective intervention programs. The data provided in this study highlight stronger links among beliefs in romantic myths, tolerant attitudes toward abuse, and psychological and physical TDV victimization in adolescent girls, suggesting that these beliefs and attitudes might be a greater risk factor of TDV victimization in adolescent girls.

Conclusions

This study has confirmed strong links between adolescents' beliefs in myths of romantic love and TDV victimization, with a significant mediating role of tolerant attitudes toward abuse only in adolescent girls. These variables explained a significant percentage of variance in TDV victimization in adolescent girls. Thus, these findings highlight the need to intervene in adolescents' tolerant attitudes toward abuse, especially girls, when developing TDV prevention programs. Intervention programs focused on the prevention of TDV should pay more attention to gender differences, both in designing activities and in assessing their effectiveness.

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