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Teen Dating Violence among Italian High School Students: A Quantitative Study on Gender Differences

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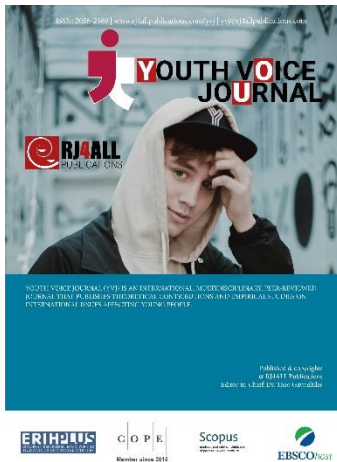
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Teen Dating Violence among Italian High School Students: A Quantitative Study on Gender Differences

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Abstract

Healthy relationships involve trust, integrity, respect, and cooperation. Unfortunately, teen dating violence is a serious problem and there has been a consensus that it has severe consequences on the victims' physical and psychological health. It can negatively influence the development of healthy sexuality, intimacy, and identity of adolescents as they transition into adulthood. This study examined the gender differences in teen dating violence among 336 Italian adolescent students from four secondary schools in Reggio Emilia, aged 14 to 20 years. The study used questionnaires for data collection and the results revealed that both genders have a significantly greater acceptance of control behavior when compared to their acceptance of aggressive behavior. In addition, boys accepted interpersonal violence more than girls. A significant high percentage of girls reported victimization, with physical, emotional, and threatening violence perpetrated more against them. Most of the teens were aware of TDV among peers, and an experience of TDV was among the causal attributions mentioned. Others reported the fear of losing a partner and reaction to a provoking behavior. The recommendations drawn included the importance of addressing masculinity models that see aggressiveness as part of their gender identity and the relevance of raising awareness of control behaviors as antecedents of teen dating violence.

Keywords: Dating Violence, Adolescents, Gender, Victimization, Perpetration

Background of the Study

Due to its prevalence and consequences, teen dating violence (TDV) is internationally recognized as a significant public concern. Teen dating violence refers to 'behavior directed towards a partner during or following a consensually initiated romantic relationship that results in emotional, social or physical harm' (Murphy & Smith, 2015). As adolescence is a critical period where gender identities and roles, attachment, and relational models are evolving, exploring TDV in adolescence is a critical step toward developing prevention programs. It is crucial to design and implement effective evidence-based prevention programs, not only as an attempt to prevent this form of violence amongst teenagers but also to avoid the spread of a culture that perceives gender violence as normative behavior. Furthermore, research on teen dating violence is crucial as it plays a vital role in the prediction and tendencies in adult relationships.

Several studies have been conducted to examine TDV, with a significant focus on its impact on the victims, and there has been a consensus that it has severe consequences on the victims' physical and psychological health (Muñiz-rivas & Povedano-d, 2019). Adolescents whose partners have been victimized have a higher risk for adverse health outcomes than those who have not. For example, they are at a higher risk of internalizing behavior such as anxiety, major depression, and suicidal ideations, and externalizing behavior such as risky sexual behavior, substance abuse, and eating disorders (Choi & Temple, 2016; Tomaszewska, 2021). Moreover, there is the support that TDV is tied to poor academic performance (Temple et al., 2013). Finally, teenagers who experience violence in their premarital relationships may suffer the highest risk of being abused or being abusers in their later intimate relationships (Temple et al., 2013).

Research has identified various risk factors predictive of TDV. For instance, acceptance of violence is a significant antecedent and one of the critical factors in predicting the perpetration of intimate partner violence. Furthermore, exposure to violence in one's inter-parental relationship or peer group increases the probability of perpetrating or tolerating the same violent behaviors (Clarey et al., 2010). This acceptance of violence is demonstrated through the justification of violence as self-defense, playing around, or revenge. Thus, peer influence has been identified as another predictive key factor of TDV (Leen et al., 2013). Directly assisting or reporting that a peer has committed TDV as a perpetrator (Barter et al., 2009; McDonnell et al., 2010; Sears et al., 2007) or has suffered TDV as a victim (Foshee et al., 2001) plays a sort of normative role that makes TDV more 'normal' for the teens. As an example, dynamic factors, such as information on how widespread is TDV among friends and peers, were found to be more strongly related to TDV perpetration when compared with witnessing inter-parental violence (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004); while a historical factor, such as parental influences cannot be modified through intervention" (Leen et al., 2013).

The past two decades have witnessed a deepened understanding of the multiple forms of violence, including *gender violence* as defined by the Istanbul Convention in 2011 (Meyersfeld, 2012), as well as an increase in programs to mitigate the onset or rise of the same (Debnam & Temple, 2021). The situation in Italy is particularly worrisome, because of a diffuse culture of sexist stereotypes. With 63.8 out of 100 points, Italy ranks 14th in the EU on the Gender Equality Index. Its score is the lowest among the founders of the EU. Moreover, this shows also in the rates of gender violence among teenagers. More than one in ten girls has experienced violence in the couple before age 18. Specifically, 16% (vs. 8% of males) suffered

severe and repeated psychological violence or persistent domination and control behaviors; 14% of girls (and 8% of boys) have suffered sexual violence or harassment. Furthermore, the new generations are increasingly exposed to cyberbullying. During COVID-19, the increase in gender violence (+73% of calls to the Italian national helpline) did not improve the management of violence issues. In fact, 42% of lawyers report that gender violence is taken into account only minimally when it comes to the separation or custody of children (Kering Foundation, 2021). Hence, more violence and secondary victimization are part of the cultural background of this study conducted on adolescents.

In this study, TDV is seen within the conceptual framework of Women against Violence Europe (WAVE), the Feminist Network Promoting Human Rights of Women and Children, and which inspired the intervention of the schools where the research was conducted. They aim to "raise awareness of the human rights violation that is violence against women and girls, and highlight the need for effective violence prevention". They consider aggressive and controlling behaviors in adolescence as a predictor of violence and aim to work on them as a form of prevention of gender violence.

Statement of the Problem

Although several adult studies have focused on TDV, most studies have been in the United States context. A systematic review of the studies in the European context has called for more research on violence in close relationships among adolescents, pointing out the importance of their healthy relationships to prevent other forms of violence, such as domestic violence (Leen et al., 2013; Tomaszewska, 2021). Since verbal and emotional violence has been associated with physical and psychological health problems for both genders in adolescence and can contribute to risky dynamics within an intimate relationship when referring to prevention, in this study we address physical and emotional/verbal violence.

On the other hand, there exist several controversies on the role of gender on TDV, with some studies indicating that it is reciprocal and others indicating that boys are more violent than girls. To attain a more complete analysis of teen dating violence, there is a need to consider the motivations that teens attribute to violence, their perceptions of it, and their beliefs about romantic relationships (Muñiz-rivas & Povedano-d, 2019). To address this gap, this study explores gender differences and similarities in how Italian adolescents experience and explain TDV.

Research Questions

1. What are the gender differences in the attitudes towards dating violence behaviors among adolescents?
2. What are the gender differences in the peer influence, perpetration, and victimization in teen intimate relationships?
3. What are the gender differences in the causal attributions of teen dating violence?

Hypothesis: there is a significant gender difference in the causal attributions of TDV (i.e., girls will justify their partner's violence because of their behavior vs. boys who will think that it is the girl's responsibility when she displays violence)

4. What are the connections between the suffered abuse and the displayed TDV or the attitude towards it?

Hypothesis: There is a significant relationship between TDV victimization and TDV perpetration.

Methodology

Study Design

This quantitative study was part of an educational program on preventing gender violence in schools conducted in Reggio Emilia-North of Italy. The program included four grammar secondary schools (each representing one specific kind of grammar program, as per the Italian high school system), with a sample of five classrooms from each school. A team of educators conducted three workshops per month with these secondary school students throughout the school year. The educators collected reports and workshop materials during the training, and they met to revise them at the end. In the following school year, the research team collaborated with the educators and analyzed all the reports of the training classes. They realized that five themes were the most significant and coherent with most of the analyzed literature: controlling and aggressive behavior, perpetration, victimization, and causal attributions of violent behavior. Thus they defined the five variables assessed through the questionnaires designed to measure attitudes toward TDV.

Participants of the Study

The questionnaires were administered to a group of students who had not been part of the workshops, i.e., five other classrooms from each of the four secondary schools. All students from the selected classrooms participated; thus, no sampling criteria were applied. A total of 336 adolescents

attending five different classes in the four secondary schools participated in the study. Only students in the 11th and 12th grades were chosen to be a part of this study because the 13th-grade students were busy with the final State exams.

Ethical Considerations

The participating schools' Boards (where also parents' representatives sit) were informed of the research's scope and methodology: they had to approve its compliance with the school's ethical standards. Because of the presence of minors (<18) amongst the participants, each participant's parents were asked to fill in and sign an informed consent, which presented the study's nature and aims. Otherwise, the students of age read and fill in the consent form. Also, they were informed that participation in the current study was voluntary, no names were included in the data collection sheets, and anonymity and confidentiality for each participant were protected by allocating a code number for each participant. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the study without giving any reason. No one dropped out.

Data collection Tools

The following measures were used to collect the data:

1. *Socio-Demographic Data Profile:*

Socio-demographic data were collected regarding age and gender.

2. *Perception of Gender Violence in Intimate Relations among Teenagers Questionnaire (Male-to-female version and Female-to-Male Version):*

As previously mentioned, this questionnaire was designed according to the content analysis of reports and materials from workshops run in the previous school year, with different classes.

The two versions (*The male-to-female version and the Female-to-Male Version*) are very much the same except for item No.11. In the female version, the question is about the strategies used to avoid being a victim of violence, while in the male version, the question is "to fight violence against women, what do you think you can do from yourself". The questionnaire with closed and multiple answers scores from the two versions of the scales have adequate internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.757 for the male-to-female scores and 0.722 for the female-to-male scores.

The questionnaires consist of a total of 11 items to assess the five variables as described:

a. *Attitudes about violence*: it consists of two items. Item No.9 was used to measure adolescents' acceptance of aggressive and control behaviors as attitudes of dating violence and was rated on a 5-point scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree), and item No. 11 as explained previously.

b. *Peer influence*: This was measured using items No. 2, 3 & 6. Questions asked included: "Do you know any case of dating violence or any case that you will label as violence among your friends and peers against girls? If yes, please indicate the two types of violence that, according to you, are the most frequent." Participants were asked to choose from the following list of behaviors: unwanted sexual behaviors (verbal and physical), controlling behaviors, physical aggression, stalking, personal devalue/spreading untruths and/or confidential information without consent, spreading personal video/photos without consent. The same two questions were asked again to examine TDV against boys.

c. *Perpetration of TDV*: This was assessed through items No. 4 & 5 to measure the active behavior that was defined as violent or violence related (even if unintended), such as were measured: physical abuse ("I slapped him/her", "I kicked him/her", "I punched him/her"), verbal/emotional abuse ("verbal harassment", "I ridiculed/humiliated him/her", "I insulted him/her"), sexual abuse, threatening abuse ("threats" and "blackmailing") and stalking. Participants had to select the ones they had perpetrated (perpetration scale) at least once in their lifetime dating experiences.

d. *Victimization*: This was measured using items No. 7 & 8, such as: "have you suffered from any of these violent or controlling behaviors?"

e. *Causal attribution*: This was assessed through items No. 9 and 10, which included the following questions: "Why do you think this happened?" In the case of victimization, participants had to choose among the following options: "It happened 'because of his/her jealousy', 'because he/she wants to be the one to decide', 'because of use of drugs/alcohol', 'because I provoked him/her', 'others'. In the case of perpetration, they chose among: It happened 'because of myself being possessive', 'because of the fear of losing him/her', 'because of the use of drug/alcohol', 'because I must have the relation under control', 'because of him/her provoking me'."

Data Analysis

A descriptive analysis was used to analyze the demographic characteristic of the participants. Thematic analysis was performed to identify the most relevant behaviors to adolescent relationships by selecting the behaviors that occurred more often in class groups' discussions. Independent Sample T tests were conducted to examine the relationships between gender, the suffered abuse (victimization), and

displayed abuse (perpetration). Principle Component Analysis (PCA) was applied to determine the component Structure of TDV attitudes.

Results

i. Demographic characteristics of participants

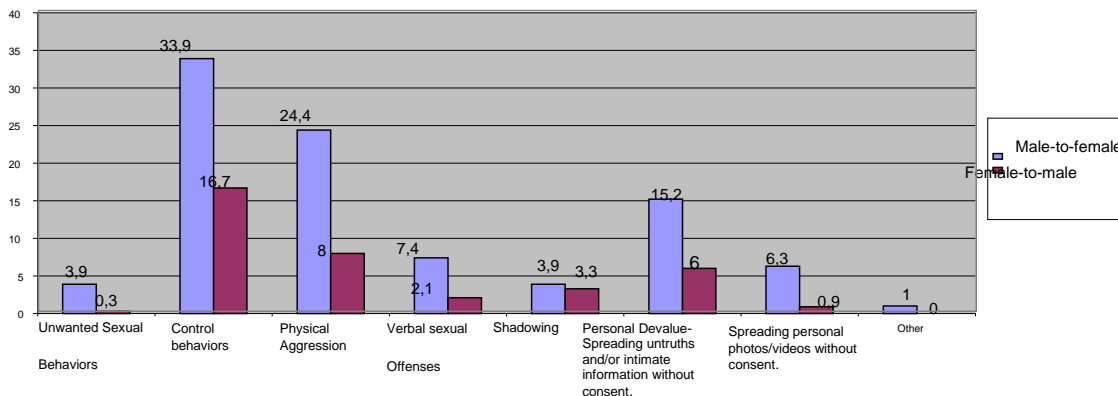
A total of 158 participants (47%) reported being female, ranging from 14 to 20 years old (M age = 17.1 years, SD = 1.68 years). The remaining 178 (53%) participants reported being male, ranging from 15 to 21 years old (M age = 17.1 years, SD = 2.23 years).

ii. Gender Comparison on Attitudes towards Control and Aggressive behaviors

Many adolescents reported that they were aware of TDV happening among peers and friends, confirming that intimate violence existed among very young people. 63.3% of girls and 34.8% of boys answered yes to the general question ‘Have you ever heard of any case of intimate violence or any behavior that you will label as violence, against girls among your friends and peers?’. The difference between frequencies of genders’ responses was statistically significant ($\chi^2=27.6$, $df=2$, $p\leq 0.000$). Both boys and girls showed statistically significantly higher frequencies of reporting TDV than girls. McNemar-Bowker test analysis confirmed that both genders’ frequency scores were significantly higher when reporting TDV against girls than against boys (Girls McNemar-Bowker value=51.30, $df=3$, $p=.000$; Boys McNemar-Bowker value=16.21, $df=3$, $p=.001$). Boys and girls were asked to choose from a list of the two most frequent TDV behaviors among peers (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Behavior among peers

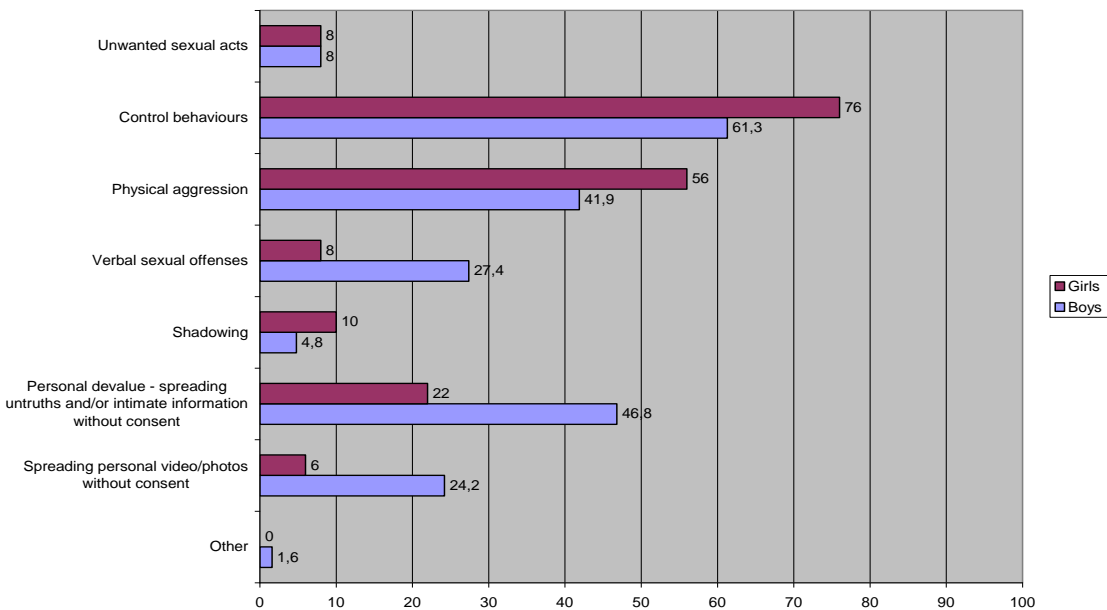


Note. Male-to-female and female-to-male’s TDV behaviors among peers. (Please note that n=336 and that questionnaire was forced to indicate only the two most frequent TDVs among all items).

Percentages of answers were compared to highlight the differences in perception of TDV behaviors between males and females. Different types of violent behaviors against girls have a different salience depending on the gender of the observer (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Type of known TDV against girls



Note. Gender differences in the type of known TDV against girls among peers (n. 63 boys and n. 100 girls)

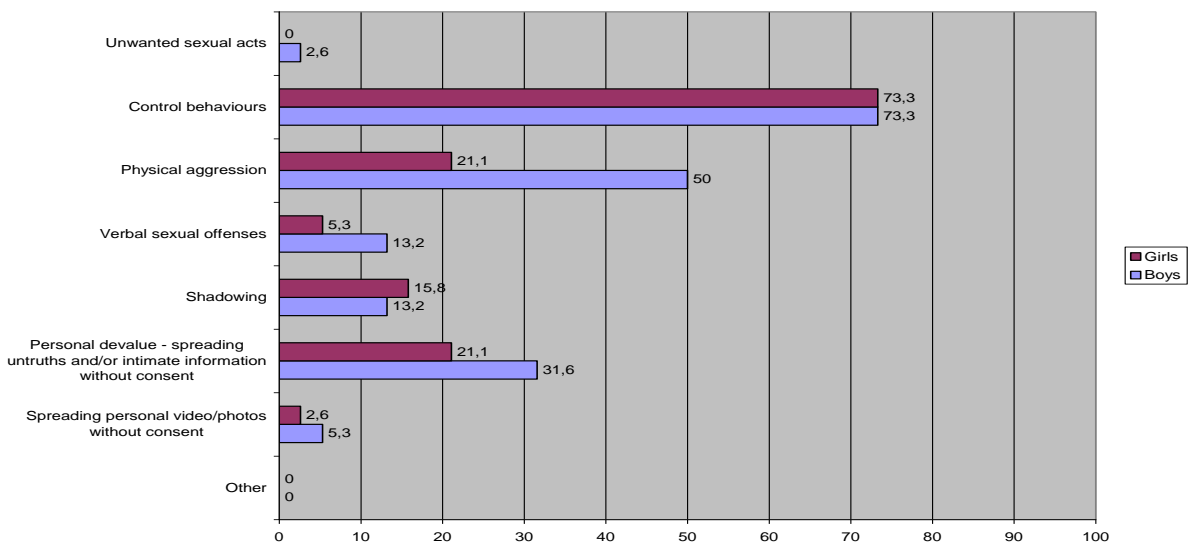
For girls, the two behaviors most frequently occurring among peers, with a significant margin of difference compared to the others, were “the control and limitation on her life’s freedom” (76% of answers) and “physical aggression” (56%). For most of the boys (61%), the control and limitation of her life’s freedom was also the most frequent form of violent behavior, followed by “devalue, spreading falsehoods or intimate details about her”, reported by 47% of boys (versus only 22% of girls). This is a set of behaviors that implies a public dimension: i.e., they involve others, who often act as amplifiers of violence. It is the case of insults and humiliations that are posted, for example, on social networks, visible to wide circles of friends with a multiplied and potentially devastating effect. “Sexual verbal offenses” and

“spreading personal video/photos without consent” were reported with an even more critical gap between males (27.4% and 24.2%) and females (8% and 6%) responses.

To the general question, “Have you ever heard of any case of intimate violence against boys?”, the difference between girls and boys was not significant. Although the percentage of girls who reported peer violence against boys was minimal, there is a significant gap between girls and boys in estimating TDV against girls (63.3% vs. 34.8%). Similar to the male-to-female TDV perception, the most reported behavior for female-to-male TDV was the ‘control and limitation on his life’s freedom’. Of 38 boys and 38 girls who said they knew male peers and friends who underwent TDV experiences, 73.3% of both boys and girls chose control behaviors as one of the two most frequent categories of TDV (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Type of known TDV against boys



Note. Gender differences in the type of known TDV against boys among peers (n. 38 boys and n. 38 girls)

There was an important difference in rates between girls and boys for two specific behaviors: boys reported “physical violence” against boys with a percentage more than double that of girls (50% vs. 21%). A gender bias was found in reporting “spreading falsehood, circulate intimate photos without consent” (32% boys vs. 21% girls).

iii. *Attitudes towards violence within intimate relationships*

For both boys and girls, TDV attitude mean scores were lower than the mid-point of the Likert scale, suggesting that, on average, there is a general refusal of TDV. However, comparing the scores on attitude towards TDV, adolescent boys showed a higher level of acceptance of interpersonal violence within an intimate relationship, regardless of the sex of the perpetrator, compared with adolescent girls. The results of PCA provided supportive evidence that both scales have a two factors structure: the first being “acceptance of control behaviors” and the second being “acceptance of aggressive behaviors”. As shown in Table 1, the control behaviors factor (A) groups behaviors meant to control and restrict the partner’s freedom. On the other hand, the aggressive behaviors factor (B) groups aggressive acting-out behaviors.

Table 1.

Attitudes towards control and aggressive behaviors

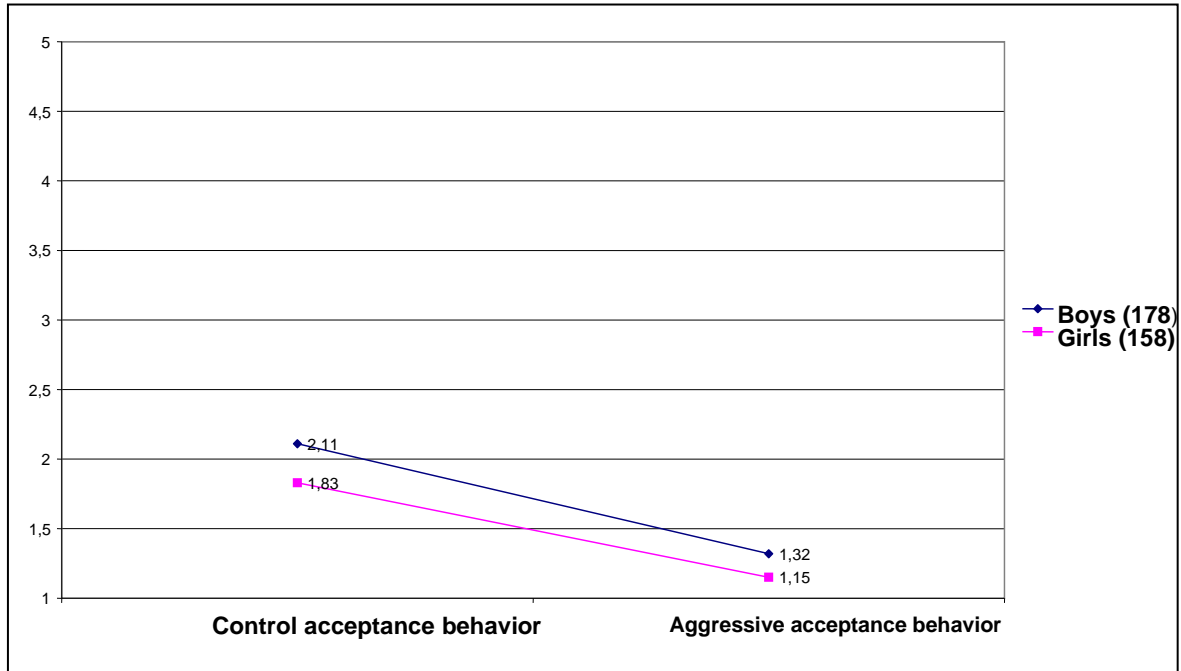
Attitudes about violence Items Is it ok for a boy/a girl to ...	Male-to-female Attitude Components		Female-to-male Attitude Components	
	A	B	A	B
c: ask his girlfriend/her boyfriend not to go dancing (party?) without him/her	.809		.780	
d: monitor her/him: always wanting to know where she/he is and together with whom	.790		.758	
b: not to dress in a particular way	.708		.657	
a: not to see her/his friends	.665		.625	
g: make very often scenes of jealousy	.610		.608	
e: humiliate him/her or make negative comments		.752		.771
f: call her/him insulting, vulgar names		.750		.819
h: throw and break objects		.715		.717
i: press her/him to have unwanted sexual contacts		.633		.432
j: slap the partner because of jealousy		.539		.600
% variance	26.79	25.09	25.05	25.66

Note. Component structure revealing two factors (a=control vs. b=aggression): variance explained by each factor in male-to-female and female-to-male attitude.

Both girls and boys have a significantly greater acceptance of control behaviors, when compared with acceptance of aggressive behaviors (girls: $t(157) = 12.92, p = .000$; boys: $t(177) = 14.75; p = .000$) (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Attitudes towards control and aggressive behaviors

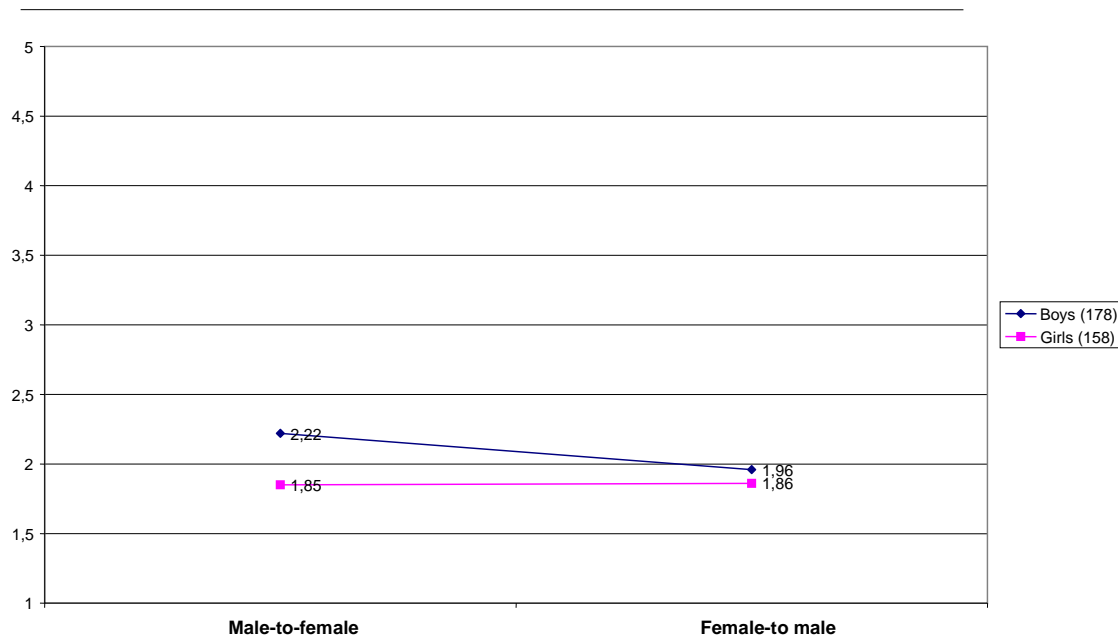


Note. Girls' and boys' scores in the two attitude factors: acceptance of control and acceptance of aggressive behaviors.

For girls and boys, the acceptance of control behaviors score was below the mid-point of the Likert scale, showing an overall rejection of control behaviors within intimate teen relationships. However, comparing means on this factor, boys accepted control behaviors more than girls: gender-based scores' differences were statistically significant $t(334) = 1.13, p < 0.05$. Moreover, boys showed a higher acceptance of male-to-female control behaviors, when compared to female-to-male control behaviors as if there were a sort of intra-gender solidarity (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Acceptance of Control behaviors

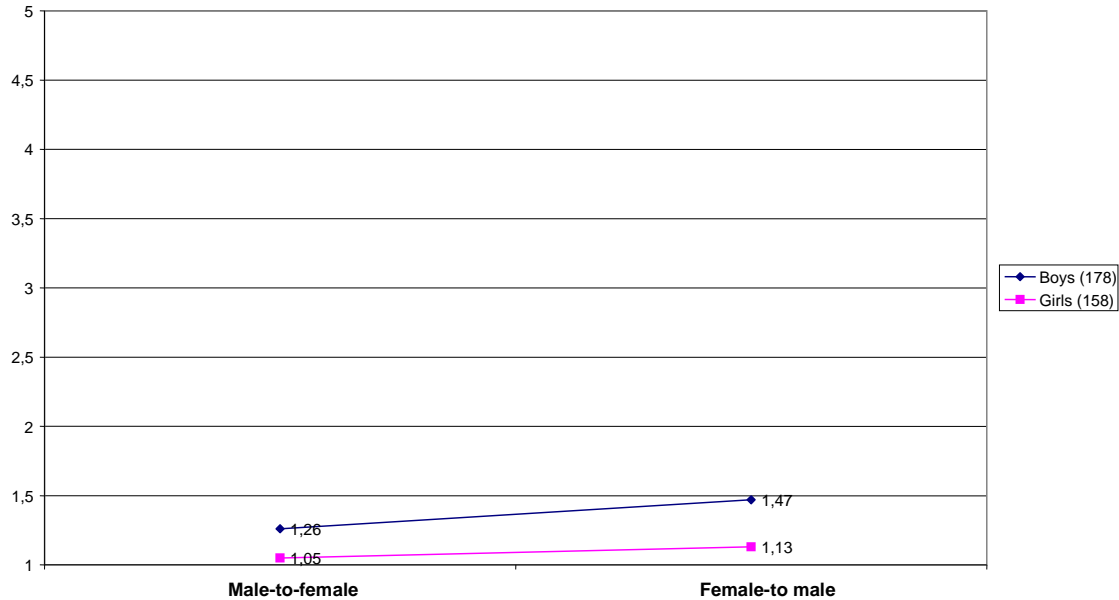


Note. Comparison of boys' and girls' acceptance of control behaviors scores (Likert scale: 1= totally disagree to 5=totally agree on the y-axis)

As shown in Figure 6, the study revealed that boys and girls showed a significantly higher acceptance of aggressive behavior in the case of the female perpetrator (Girls paired t-test: $n=158$, acceptance of male-to-female aggressive behavior mean=1.05, acceptance of female-to-male aggressive behavior mean=1.13, $t=-2.77$, $df=157$, $p=0.006$. Boys paired t-test: $n=178$, acceptance of male-to-female mean=1.26, acceptance of female-to-male mean=1.47 $t=-5.69$, $df=177$, $p=0.000$).

Figure 6

Attitudes towards aggressive behaviors



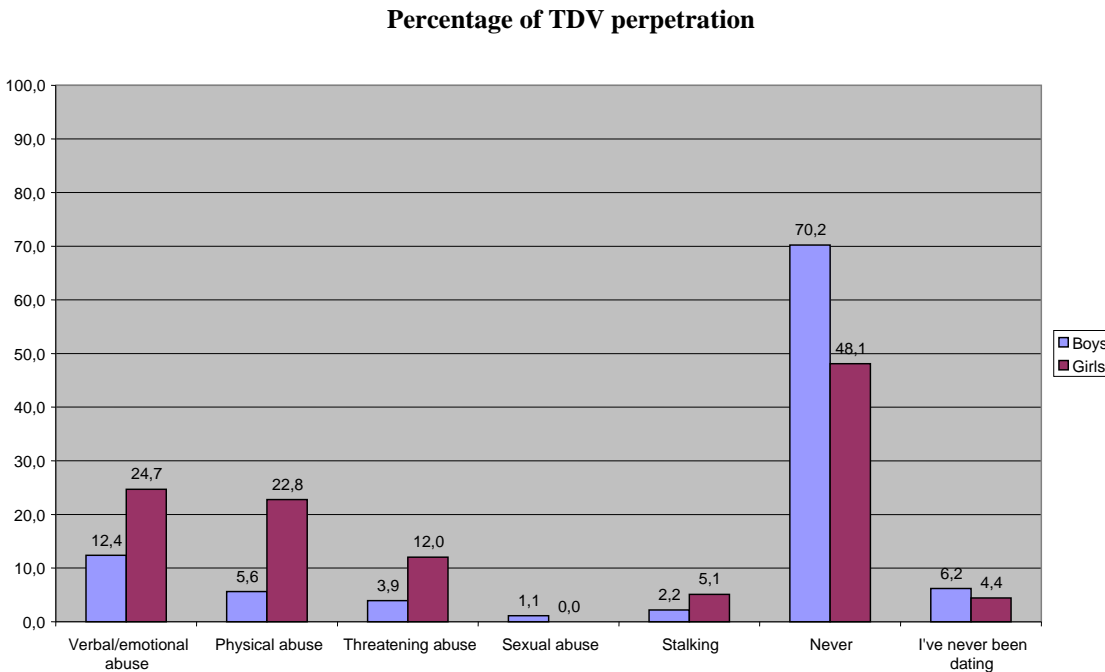
Note. Comparison Of boys' and girls' scores on The B Factor attitudes: Acceptance of aggressive behaviors

i. TDV perpetration, victimization, and attributions

This study explored perpetration and victimization that occurred at least once in one's lifetime dating experience: unfortunately investigating only the types of TDV behaviors, not their frequency. Girls reported themselves as being perpetrators of TDV significantly higher than boys: 47.5% of girls versus 23.6 % of boys said they acted out some form of TDV in their lifetime intimate relationships. ($\chi^2=17.04$, $df=1$; $p=.000$, calculated on the percentage difference of non-perpetrators, boys=70.2% and girls=48.1%. 6.2% of boys and 4.4% of girls said they had never been in a dating relationship). Moreover, girls reported perpetration of all kinds of TDV behaviors with higher percentages than boys, except for sexual abuse (Figure 7).

Figure 7

TDV perpetration



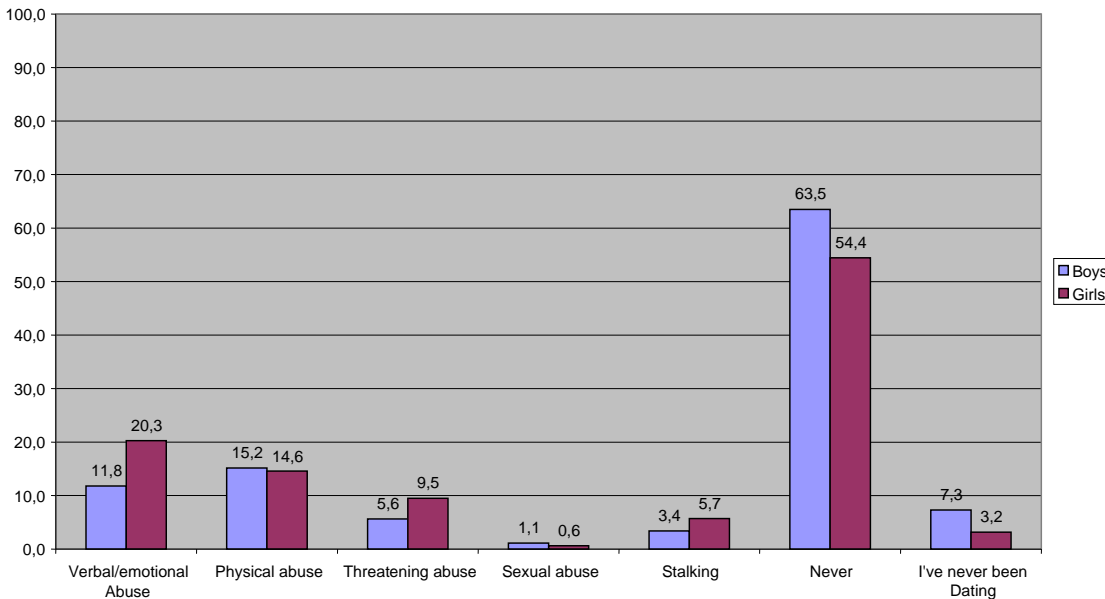
Note. Types of TDV Perpetration: comparison between boys and girls

As for the level of victimization among students who had dated, 42.4 % of girls (n. 67) and 29.2% of boys (n. 52), reported that they had suffered TDV from their partner. A significant higher rate of girls' victimization emerged from our data ($\chi^2= 2.81$, $df=1$, $p=.05$ calculated on the percentage difference of no-victims, boys=63.5% and girls=54.4%).

For girls, verbal/emotional abuse was the most frequently reported victimization experience (20.3% of the female sample), followed by physical abuse (14.6%) and threatening abuse (9.5%). Stalking was reported by 5.7% of girls. Boys reported more frequently physical abuse (15.2%), followed by verbal/emotional abuse (11.8%), and threatening abuse (5.6%). Out of 336 adolescents, one girl and two boys denounced to have suffered sexual abuse by their partner (Figure 8).

Figure 8

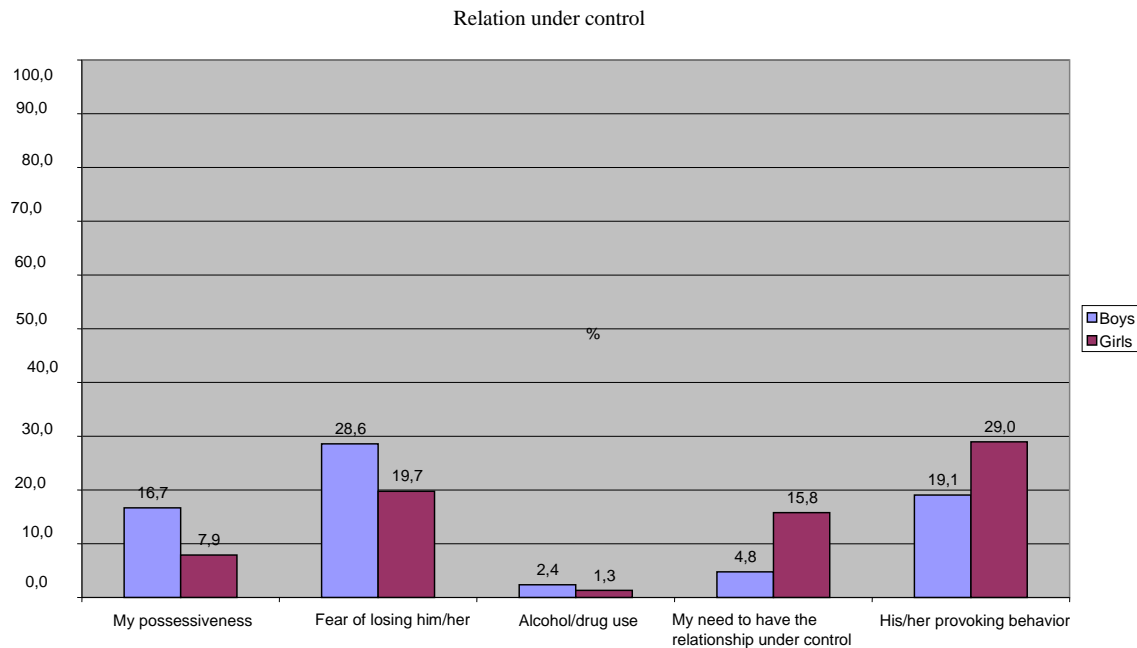
Percentage of TDV victimization



Regarding the girls' motives for TDV perpetration, 29% of girls answered that their TDV perpetration had been a reaction to their "boyfriend's provoking behavior". Others chose internal attributions: 19.74% identified the reason for violence as the fear of losing him; 15.79% in the need to have the relationship under control; 7.89% in their possessiveness. Some did not respond to the question (13%), while a very little percentage of girls attributed TDV to alcohol and/or drug use (1.3%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9:

Causal attributions



Note. Boys and girls perpetrators’ answers to the question: ‘Why did it happen?’

Boys recognized their “fear of losing her” as the most important reason (28.6%) to act violent against a girl. About 19% of male perpetrators said their violent behavior was a reaction to their girlfriends’ provoking behavior, while 4.8 % reported that it was because they “need to have the relation under control”. A reverse pattern is observed when comparing boys’ and girls’ responses. The boys' most frequent reason for TDV is the “fear of losing her”, the second reason being the “partner’s provoking behavior”. For the girls, the order was the opposite.

Attributions to victimization

Partner jealousy was the most frequent reason for victimization, chosen by 42.3% of boys. Secondly, 17.3% of boys thought the partner had reacted to their provoking behavior. For 9.6% of boys, their girlfriend’s TDV was aimed at imposing her personal views. A significant percentage of victims did not answer the question (23.1%). Like boys, most girl victims attributed TDV victimization to the extreme partner’s jealousy (26.9%). In particular, 17.9% blamed themselves for having provoked the partner, while

7.4% attributed TDV behavior to the partner’s intention to impose his personal view. An overall of 13.4% did not answer.

i. *Relationship between suffered abuse and displayed abuse*

In the correlation study between forms of perpetration and forms of victimization, data show that the two constructs were frequently interconnected. Therefore, those perpetrating were likely to enact different types of TDV behaviors, and those who were victimized were likely to have been victimized in different ways (Table 2). Moreover, most categories of victimization were significantly correlated with most categories of perpetration. The correlation between being a victim and perpetrating TDV is supported in the linear regression both for girls ($R^2 = .215$, $Beta = .463$, $t = 6.48$, $p = .000$) and boys ($R^2 = .389$, $Beta = .624$, $t = 10.58$, $p = .000$). Multiple regression analysis showed that being abused explained 29% of the variance in physical aggression perpetration for girls and 13% of the variance for boys.

Table 2.

Bivariate Correlations for Perpetration and Victimization Measures

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Physical abuser	--	.223**	.329**	.311**	.033	.336**
2. Verbal/emotional abuser		--	.206**	.312**	.494**	.233**
3. Threatening abuser			--	.065	.126*	.385**
4. Physically abused				--	.281**	.279**
5. Verbally/emotionally abused					--	.266**
6. Threatening abused						--

Note * $p < .05$ ** $p < 0.01$ Total N. = 336 (158 girls and 178 boys).

Of those who were victimized, a high percentage had reported having perpetrated as well: specifically, of the 53 girls who reported to have been victimized by their partner, 43 reported perpetrations. Male data show similar results: of 39 victims, 21 reported perpetrations. Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was found between being a victim (as independent variable) and acting as a perpetrator (as dependent variable): linear regression results confirm it both for girls ($R^2 = .215$, $Beta = .463$, $t = 6.48$, $p = .000$) and boys ($R^2 = .389$, $Beta = .624$, $t = 10.58$, $p = .000$). Multiple regression analysis showed that being abused explained 29% of the variance in physical aggression perpetration for girls and 13% of the variance for boys. Physical, verbal/emotional, and threatening abuses were all significant predictors of girls' perpetration. For boys, being physically abused was the only statistically significant predictor of physical aggression, threatening abuse was nearly significant while being verbally/emotionally abused was not statistically significant.

The factor of being abused (three categories of TDV victimization were entered as an antecedent of perpetrating verbal/emotional TDV) explains 19.4% of the variance for girls and 40.3% of the variance for boys. More in detail, for both boys and girls, perpetrating verbal/emotional aggression was predicted by being verbally/emotionally abused. There is a reverse pattern for boys and girls on the other two predictors: physical abuse victimization was a statistically significant predictor of boys' verbal/emotional perpetration but not for girls'; threatening abuse victimization was a statistically significant predictor of girls' verbal/emotional perpetration but not for boys.

Discussion

Scientific literature has investigated several aspects of TDV, which are essential in understanding how violence develops within young people's intimate relationships. Attitudes toward violence are a significant antecedent of TDV; acceptance of violence is one of the key factors in explaining the perpetration of violent behavior in intimate relationships (Temple et al, 2013; Shorey et al. 2017). This study conceptualized attitudes towards TDV through the acceptance or 'refusal' of control and aggressive behaviors.

a. Gender differences on Attitudes towards control and aggressive behaviors

According to Leen et al.'s (2013) review of European, UK, and US studies, the attitude towards dating violence is identified as one of the dynamic risk factors for TDV perpetration. Accepting dating violence

predicted physical, psychological, and sexual categories of dating violence perpetration in boys, physical and psychological in girls (Sears et al., 2007). Moreover, the acceptance levels of TDV behaviors can work as indicators of the level of awareness in adolescents. They reveal whether, and to what extent, teenagers can identify and deny risky behaviors that lead to negative reciprocity and escalation of abuse (Karlsson et al., 2018).

The results of this study revealed that adolescent boys and girls had a significantly greater acceptance of control behaviors if compared with acceptance of aggressive behaviors. Evidence exists that controlling behaviors are significantly associated with the use of physical aggression (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008 and Cohen et al., 2018). The fact that in our study boys were more accepting of male-to-female control behaviors, when compared to female-to-male control behaviors (Figure 5), shows that there was also a sort of intra-gender solidarity. Some of the attitudes can lead adolescents to overlook violent behaviors in romantic relationships (Carrascosa et al., 2019).

Both boys and girls showed a significantly higher acceptance of aggressive behavior in the case of the female perpetrator (Figure 6). Some studies have found more social acceptance of women's physical aggression toward partners than men's (Harris & Cook, 1994; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). Two main reasons have been identified: first, female aggressiveness is perceived as less dangerous than males (Anuja et al., 2010); second, female violence is less socially sanctioned than that of men (Bates et al., 2014). The results of the current study suggest that this higher acceptance of female aggressiveness is also true for young people.

b. Gender differences on peer influence towards TDV perpetration and Victimization

The results reveal specific social humus where adolescents experience their first and early intimate relationships, within which there is a high diffusion of risk behaviors. Many adolescents reported that they know TDV is happening among peers and friends. Peer influence has been identified as another predictive key factor of TDV (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004). In other words, directly assisting or being reported that a peer has committed TDV as a perpetrator (Barter et al., 2009; McDonell et al., 2010; Sears et al., 2007) or has suffered TDV as a victim (Parker et al., 2017) plays a sort of normative role that makes TDV more 'normal' for the teens. As an example, information on how widespread TDV is among friends and peers has been found more strongly related to TDV perpetration when compared with witnessing inter-parental violence (Choi & Temple, 2016), as they are "dynamic risk factors. On the contrary, parental influences are a

historical factor and cannot be modified through intervention (Leen et al., 2013). It is to be noted that literature has reported that all TDV behaviors against girls occur much more often than TDV against boys. Adolescence is the period in women's life when they are mostly exposed to the risk of suffering violence within intimate relationships (Johnson et al., 2015).

Gender difference in TDV perception among peers was explored. The question was whether they perceive the same patterns of behaviors taking place among peers, or if, on the contrary, there is any difference in the way the two genders look at them. Both boys and girls showed statistically significantly higher frequencies of reporting TDV than girls (Figure 3). When compared to boys, however, girls reported significantly higher scores of responses regarding their knowledge about cases of violence against girls among their peers (Figure 2). A couple of hypotheses are feasible to explain such difference. The first and easiest hypothesis concerns with how much boys as perpetrators and girls as victims respectively tell friends about their intimate relationships. It might be easier for a girl victim than for a boy perpetrator to tell friends about their TDV experience. However, if we assume it is likely for a boy to tell friends about perpetrating TDV, girls often have older boyfriends that are likely not to be in their classmates' circles of friends (thus not among the boys of our sample). In this case, the difference might indicate the increasing age trend of TDV incidences. Indeed, Johnson et al. (2015) found that the probability of intimate partner violence increases during adolescence and reaches its peak in the early twenties.

Another explanation might be that a boy chooses to be silent about male violence as a sign of shame, because of the increased perception of social blame associated with violence against women. As McCarry (2010) argues in her work, many adolescents hold a traditional model of gender roles that describe men as being more aggressive and violent than women, and, at the same time, consider this expected and more acceptable. Becoming aware of male violence is uneasy for boys; it requires extrapolating violence out of a hidden legitimate model of masculinity. From this perspective, recognizing male violence also implies challenging a part of male social identity (Associazione Nondasola, 2014). Alternatively, it can be a simple sign of same-gender solidarity. Further research is needed to explore this gender difference in the perception of TDV.

To highlight the differences in attitudes of TDV behaviors between the male and female groups, percentages of answers by gender were compared. Different types of violent behaviors against girls have a different salience, depending on the gender of the observer. The results showed that males perpetrated

sexual verbal offenses and spread personal video/photos much more than females, which leads to the hypothesis that such behaviors might be often acted on only among boys. It is to be noted that at the time of the research, spreading personal video/photos without consent was not considered a crime in Italy as in the current legislation, on revenge porn, since July 2019.

c. Gender differences towards Peer influence, perpetration and victimization

When asked about knowing about intimate violence against boys, the difference between girls and boys was not found to be significant. However, it is interesting to associate the slightly higher percentage of girls who denounce peer violence against boys with the significant gap between girls and boys in estimating TDV against girls; girls' reports were almost double those of boys. A certain violence denial seems to affect male adolescents as if boys were more 'blind' in seeing violence. The 'blindness' towards violence could also be associated with social desirability bias of certain violent behaviors, such as stigmatization of male violence towards women, leading to lower rates self-reported perpetration (Wincentak et al., 2017). It could also be associated with normalization of certain violent behaviors, and/or ignorance of the same, where certain behaviors are considered normal. This implies that future research should explore deeper the perceptions of adolescents on TDV, with a focus on different socio-demographic factors such as background.

Concerning perpetration, the research unveils an interesting discrepancy: on one hand, girls reported perpetration rates more highly than boys. On the other hand, girls' victimization had a higher rate than boys' (Figure 7) and both genders report a higher perception of all peer TDV behaviors against girls. This data discrepancy may be the result of a divergence in reporting. We may assume that self-reporting perpetration might be easier for girls than for boys, due to the lack of social sanctions associated with female violence (Bates et al., 2014). Alternatively, this discrepancy may arise from girls' higher awareness of the violent aspects of some relational dynamics. It might be more difficult for boys to be aware of violent dynamics played in intimate relationships, as aggressiveness is part of normative masculinity. In the Northern Italian town where the research was conducted, local authorities have invested plenty of resources to fight gender violence and set up prevention programs in the last twenty years. Among their most salient results, it is noteworthy to mention the network of stakeholders at the Panel against Violence. It is a municipal institution where representatives of the police, the court of justice, the hospital (with its emergency rooms), the youth centers, the parents' associations, and the schools can seat and discuss how

to address gender and domestic violence. The educational courses on TDV in schools are among their programs. In this respect, the social positioning of boys and girls as revealed in such courses is different (Figure 9). Aggressiveness is considered part of normative masculinity; therefore, if a boy behaves aggressively, it is somehow seen as normal. That is why boys might not recognize aggressive attitudes as violence.

On the other hand, aggressiveness is thought of as ‘not natural’ for girls and therefore females are noticed more when they show aggressive behaviors; they also have more chance to become aware of the violence they perpetrate. Moreover, social sanctions on violence against women make it difficult for a male to admit perpetration, while the lack of social sanctions on violence against men makes it easier for girls to report perpetration.

d. Gender differences in Causal Attributions

When it comes to why they committed violence, there is a sort of reversal pattern if we compare boys’ and girls’ responses. Boys’ most frequent answer to why they perpetrated TDV against their partner was the ‘fear of losing her’; the second reason was the ‘partner’s provoking behavior’. On the other hand, the most frequent answer for girls was the ‘partner’s provoking behavior’, the second reason for their perpetration being the “fear of losing him.” We might consider aggregating the two options, “my possessiveness” and “fear of losing her/him”, as corresponding to the “jealousy” item in the motivations for victimization. In this case, it would be interesting to notice that 45.3% of boys reported that they perpetrated because of jealousy versus 27.6% of girls. This shows that an important percentage of TDV is motivated by a “proprietary mindset,” which is much more frequent in boys. Such results support the “gender violence paradigm”, which states that “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women”, such that women are forced into a subordinate position, being treated as a man’s propriety (Council of Europe, 2014). This implies that there still exists a need to educate teenage boys on issues against gender-based violence and the objectification of women in intimate relationships.

The most frequent answer of girls to why they perpetrated TDV was the reaction to their partner’s provoking behavior. This finding may be connected Luthra and Gidycz (2006) studies about female subjects being susceptible to reciprocating their partners’ violent acts. Further research needs to be conducted to sustain such a hypothesis. It is also necessary to examine what the adolescents deem to be provoking

behavior as it may vary across cultures and backgrounds. Finally, a significant percentage of victims did not answer the question regarding the cause of TDV (23.1% of boys and 13.4% of girls). This might stand for their impossibility to understand their partner's violence because in most cases it happens unexpectedly and may be difficult to internalize. These results accepted the hypothesis that there is a significant gender difference in the causal attributions of TDV, with girls justifying their partner's violence because of their behavior and boys who thinking that it is the girl's responsibility when she displays violence.

e. Relationship between suffered abuse and displayed TDV behaviors

As the hypothesis proposed, there was a significant relationship between suffered abuse and displayed TDV behaviors. From the correlations among perpetration and victimization data, we can observe that perpetration and victimization categories are frequently interconnected. Of those who have been victimized, a high percentage have reported having perpetrated as well. In fact, in our sample, of 53 girls who reported to have been victimized by their partner, 43 reported perpetrations within their intimate relationships. The same pattern was revealed in the male groups. The results showed a statistically significant relationship between being a perpetrator (as a dependent variable) and a victim (as an independent variable), thus upholding the hypothesis. Similar to prior studies, often TDV becomes an antecedent: adolescents who were victims of TDV tend to be perpetrators as well, exposing themselves to risky escalating dynamics (Foshee et al., 2004; O'Keefe, 2005; Whitaker et al., 2007; McNaughton et al., 2018).

Physical, verbal/emotional, and threatening abuse were all significant predictors of girls' perpetration. For boys, being physically abused was the only statistically significant predictor of physical aggression, threatening abuse was nearly significant while being verbal/emotional abused was not statistically significant. The factor of having been abused as an antecedent of perpetrating verbal/emotional TDV explains 19.4% of the variance for girls and 40.3% of the variance for boys.' In other words, perpetrating verbal/emotional aggression was predicted by having been verbally/emotionally abused for both boys and girls. There is a reverse pattern for boys and girls on the other two predictors: physical abuse victimization was a statistically significant predictor of boys' verbal/emotional perpetration but not for girls'; threatening abuse victimization was a statistically significant predictor of girls' verbal/emotional perpetration but not for boys.

In brief, the findings in the study suggest that TDV is predominantly a form of violence perpetrated against women. Firstly, control behaviors were especially accepted when directed to control female partners. Secondly, male participants reported a significantly greater level of acceptance of interpersonal TDV, suggesting that male adolescents may perceive violence as a normalized component in their relationships. On the other hand, female aggression was generally more accepted; being seen as a response to the partner's behavior.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to highlight the limitations of this study. To begin with, TDV is a sensitive issue and working with minors, it was difficult to negotiate with families and schools about disclosing such data that was felt too intrusive and discriminating among peers. There could be some limitations related to underreporting due to issues such as stigmatization of violence, social desirability bias, and the varying perceptions of violent behaviors. Some violent acts may not be perceived as violence due to normalization within the communities, and girls are more attentive to acts of interpersonal violence than boys, which could lead to higher reporting rates (Wincentak et al., 2017). This study did not assess for such moderating factors.

Additionally, the participants of the study were chosen from the schools that had joined the educational program for the prevention of gender violence, thus the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population of the city. This limitation is the same as in other studies recently conducted on mental health stigma: representative socio-demographic data did not include other predictors, such as economic status of the family, pre-existence of abusive relations in the family of origin, the mental health status of parents (El Rakhawy et al., 2021).

Another limitation is the cultural homogeneity of the sample, due to the limited access to 'grammar schools' (the high schools that prepare for university access) for students with a multicultural background. Both these limitations could be addressed by expanding the sample to other high schools, within the same city, including vocational schools with students of the same age as in this study.

Another relevant limitation is that the questionnaire could have drawn from previous scales existing in literature, to make our results more comparable to those of other geographies. Within a model of action research, instead, the questionnaire was 'built' by the team that had conducted the workshops by importing the variables that resulted from a year-long program to prevent gender violence. Furthermore, the questionnaire was not tested on any other population for its validity or reliability.

Recommendations

The current study highlights several aspects that deserve attention when planning prevention programs in schools against gender violence. The following recommendations may be implied from the findings of the study:

- Prevention programs need to challenge the culture of violent masculinity, which has been defined as a means to perpetuate a social system based on the inequality of genders. Educational programs should challenge the presumed natural aggressiveness of boys and the lack of sanctions against female aggressiveness.
- Introducing of conflict resolution techniques in schools may add to the strength of preventive programs.
- Prevention should be directed to adolescent interaction's qualities and competencies. In other words, it is crucial to develop programs that address both adolescents' use of warning sign behaviors and their responses to them in their early intimate relationships.
- The importance of well-defined personal boundaries for healthy relationships must be stressed in prevention programs; the partner's freedom to choose how to dress, whom to see, etc. should not be questioned. Adolescents need to become aware that any form of physical or emotional constraint becomes abusive when it is aimed at enhancing the power and control of one partner over the other. Adolescents must identify the control as a specific feature of abuse, and not mistaken as a sign of love. Further studies are needed to investigate the relationship between gender and intimate relations in adolescence: a broader multicultural sample might also work to highlight the stereotypes and pre-assumptions connected to the way boys and girls understand and engage with a partner at such young age.

Conclusion

Research on teen dating violence is crucial as it plays a key role in the prediction and tendencies in adult relationships, and it is a critical step toward developing prevention programs. The results on TDV in Italian secondary schools highlight the need for effective and evidence-based prevention programs that should be added to the preexisting curriculum. The programs should promote safe relationships among teens and provide teachers and educators with useful information on adolescence dynamics. Future research should explore deeper the perceptions and attitudes of adolescents on TDV with diverse samples of participants.

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