

# Perception of Psychological Abuse in Spain

The Role of Sexism and Myths of Romantic Love

Percepción del Maltrato Psicológico en España: El Papel del Sexismo y los Mitos del Amor Romántico

Percepção do Abuso Psicológico na Espanha: O Papel do Sexismo e dos Mitos do Amor Romântico



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## Resumen

Objetivo: El objetivo de este estudio fue investigar cómo los mitos del amor romántico y el sexismo influyen en la reducción de la percepción de abuso psicológico contra la pareja. Método: Se llevó a cabo un diseño experimental 2x2x2, manipulando el tipo de abuso psicológico (control versus emocional), el mito del matrimonio (noviazgo versus matrimonio) y el mito del romanticismo (con versus sin contenido romántico). La muestra estuvo compuesta por 211 participantes de la población general de España, mayoritariamente mujeres (62,1%), con una edad media de 33,82 años (DE = 17,18). Los participantes fueron aleatorizados en las condiciones experimentales. El análisis de datos se realizó con IBM SPSS Statistics versión 23, empleando correlaciones de Pearson, ANOVA unidireccional, ANCOVA y cálculos de tamaño del efecto. Resultados: Los resultados respaldaron tres de las cinco hipótesis planteadas y ofrecieron apoyo parcial para una cuarta. Se encontró que los mitos del amor romántico tienen una relación débil con la reducción de la percepción de abuso psicológico, pero esta relación se fortalece en individuos con altos niveles de respaldo al sexismo. Conclusión: los mitos del amor romántico no reducen la percepción del abuso psicológico de manera aislada. Sin embargo, ejercen influencia desde una perspectiva externa, como la de un observador. En este contexto, las personas tienden a reconocer menos la violencia psicológica en historias con elementos románticos, especialmente si presentan altos niveles de respaldo al sexismo.

## Abstract

Objective: This study sought to investigate the extent to which the myths of romantic love and sexism impact the reduction of the perception of psychological abuse against a partner. Method: A 2x2x2 experimental study was conducted, in which the type of psychological abuse (control abuse versus emotional abuse), the myth of marriage (dating versus marriage), and the myth of romanticism (with romantic content versus without romantic content) were manipulated. Participants were randomized into experimental conditions, and the sample consisted of 211 participants from the general population of Spain, the majority of whom were women (62.1%) with a mean age of 33.82 years (SD = 17.18). IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 was implemented to perform data analysis. Pearson's correlation (r), One-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA), analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), and effect size calculations were used for all analyses. Results: The results contributed to the acceptance of three of the five hypotheses tested, and there was partial support for a fourth. Data indicated that romantic love myths have a weak relationship with reduced perceptions of psychological abuse, which was strengthened by high levels of endorsement of sexism. Conclusion: Endorsement of romantic love myths, by itself, does not reduce perceptions of psychological abuse, but they exert influence from an external perspective when individuals observe a story with romantic myths. Under this condition, there is less recognition of psychological abuse, especially among those with high endorsement of sexism.

## Resumo

Objetivo: Buscou investigar em que medida os mitos de amor romântico e o sexismo impactam na redução da percepção do abuso psicológico contra a parceira. Método: Para isso foi realizado um estudo experimental 2x2x2, no qual foram manipulados o tipo de abuso psicológico (abuso de controle versus abuso emocional), o mito do casamento (namoro versus casamento) e o mito do romantismo (com conteúdo romântico versus sem conteúdo romântico). Os participantes foram randomizados nas condições experimentais, e a amostra foi composta por 211 participantes da população geral da Espanha, a maioria mulheres (62,1%) com idade média de 33,82 anos (DP = 17,18). Para realizar as análises de dados, foi implementado o software IBM SPSS Statistics versão 23. Como análises foram adotados correlação de Pearson (r), análises de variância de uma via (ANOVA - One Way), análise de covariância (ANCOVA) e cálculos do tamanho do efeito para todas as análises. Resultados: Os resultados contribuíram para a aceitação de três das cinco hipóteses testadas e houve apoio parcial para uma quarta. Os dados indicaram que os mitos do amor romântico têm uma relação fraca com a redução da percepção do abuso psicológico, fortalecida por altos níveis de endosso ao sexismo. Conclusão: O endosso aos mitos do amor romântico, por si só, não reduz a percepção do abuso psicológico, mas exercem influência sob uma perspectiva externa, quando os indivíduos observam uma história contendo mitos românticos. Nessa condição, há menor reconhecimento de violência psicológica, especialmente entre aqueles com alto endosso ao sexismo.

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Romântico

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## Introduction

Among the various types of interpersonal violence, psychological abuse is the most aggressive that women report (FRA, 2014; Government of Spain, 2019). Murphy and Cascardi (1999) define psychological abuse as coercive or aversive acts intended to generate threats and/or emotional harm. According to Hammock et al. (2015), this form of violence can involve isolation, behavior restriction, humiliation, degradation, physical threats, threats to property, financial control, and emotional withdrawal. In addition to these forms, it can also involve degrading conduct in the sexual realm, secrets, and prolonged accusations that the victim is insane (Amor et al., 2022).

The literature suggests that psychological abuse consists of two dimensions: emotional and control (La Madrid, 2014; Paiva et al., 2020; Soto & Pérez, 2017). The former generally occurs within the context of the couple's private relationship and consists of victim manipulation and humiliation (La Madrid, 2014; Marshal, 1999). Control abuse entails more blatant behaviors that occur within the couple's relationship but also affect their surroundings, whether in the relationship with children, the victim's social circles (partner's isolation), or material goods (partner's financial control) (Soto & Pérez, 2017).



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Because this violence is frequent in romantic relationships, psychological abuse is sometimes not perceived as violence per se (Lansbach, 2024). When violence is not perceived as such, its consequences are minimized. The victim may not have a support network to turn to and may tend to remain in these relationships (Canto et al., 2020). However, if the aggressor does not perceive their behavior as violent and unjustifiable, they will tend to repeat it (Alsawalqa, 2023).

Studies focusing on the perception of psychological abuse mostly compare psychological abuse with physical violence and often reinforce the perception that the former is less harmful than the latter (Francis & Pearson, 2019; Hammock et al., 2015; Naughton, Donnell & Muldoon, 2020). In parallel, studies that just focus on understanding psychological abuse demonstrate that its perception is linked to the gender of the aggressor and sexism (Capezza et al., 2021), failing to investigate, for example, how the different manifestations of this violence (**control abuse and emotional abuse**) are perceived.

The perception of psychological abuse as violence has been explained through beliefs and ideologies (e.g., sexism, love myths), which serve to justify this aggression (Lelaurain et al., 2021; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023). For example, psychological abuse is sometimes conflated with romantic relationship expectations (Bonomi et al., 2013; Barnett et al., 2020). On the other hand, ambivalent sexism would justify unequal gender relations, diminishing the perception of abuse (Capezza et al., 2021).

Beliefs about love, which are deeply ingrained and widely accepted, create the myths of romantic love. These myths are cultural realities that can be interpreted from various perspectives. Typically, myths tell a sacred story, often with fantastical elements that do not reflect the complete reality. In essence, myths depict the dramatic appearances of the “sacred” in the world (Closs, 1962). They can support ideologies shaped by socio-historical processes and influence individual actions (Torres et al., 2023).

In summary, these myths include (Ferrer et al., 2010; Piñeiro et al., 2022; Yela, 2001): a) The soulmate myth, corresponding to the belief in the predestination of a partner; b) The pairing myth, related to the naturalization of the idea that we seek a partner; c) The jealousy myth as synonymous with “proving” love; d) The omnipotence myth, as love endures all and, because of it, everything can be overcome; e) The marriage/pairing and tradition myth centered on the idea that love leads to a union; f) The eternal passion and romanticism myth, based on fantastic and mystical beliefs about the power of love, and the understanding that the passion of the first months of a relationship can and should last throughout the relationship; g) The love-violence compatibility myth, which corresponds to the acceptance and tolerance of violent behaviors in the relationship.

Research on the relationship between romantic love myths and the perception of violence against women indicates that these beliefs minimize the perception of violent behaviors. This becomes evident, for example, when love myths are used to justify crimes committed by intimate partners, known as crimes of passion (Brunke, 2024). Additionally, love myths reproduce traditional gender schemas (Marcos et al., 2020), where the feminine is associated with submission and passivity, while the masculine is associated with strength, aggressiveness, and domination (Reyes et al., 2018). This view of gender roles reinforces the idea that, at times, aggressions committed by men are interpreted as a manifestation of affection (Hamel, 2020). Thus, studies in this theoretical field have supported the idea that love myths are a correlated and explanatory variable involved in the perception of interpersonal violence (Bonilla-Algovia & Rivas-Ribero, 2021; Lelaurain et al., 2021; Nava-Reyes et al., 2018).

However, the relationship established between love myths and the perception of psychological abuse is not very clear (Marcos et al., 2020; Lelaurain et al., 2021; Víllora et al., 2019). Some of these studies merely explore the relationship between adherence to love myths and the perception of psychological abuse, sometimes reaching conclusions based on weak statistical values (Marcos et al., 2020; Víllora et al., 2019). On the other hand, the relationship between love myths and the perception of psychological abuse can be established through other variables (Lelaurain et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, there is a theoretical gap regarding the comprehension of how the relationship between love myths and the perception of psychological abuse is articulated. Though studies demonstrate that the relationship between love myths and the perception of interpersonal violence depends on other variables (Lelaurain et al., 2021; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020), it is not clear how this relationship happens; moreover, low correlations among the variables are notorious, which can indicate a flaw in the manner studies are conducted. In this context, it is necessary to discuss how variables that establish a relationship between violence against women and ideals of gender roles impact the relation of love myths and the perception of violence, especially psychological abuse.

Ambivalent sexism against women has two dimensions: hostile and benevolent (Glick & Fisk, 1996). The first dimension is its more traditional and explicit form, i.e., the idea that inferiority of women justifies violence against them. This pathway has its roots in the patriarchal notion of male superiority over women (Bareket & Fisk, 2023). The second dimension, called benevolent, is the most subtle manifestation and revolves around the belief that women are weaker than men and must be cared for. This pathway sees women as docile and fragile (Hendl, 2017).

Several investigations argue that control and coercion, basic characteristics of psychological abuse in relationships (Keita, 2022), are rooted in ambivalent sexism (Keita, 2022; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Walby & Towers, 2018). Some studies have evidenced the relationship between adherence to sexism and the decreased perception of violence against women (Moya et al., 1999; Keita, 2022), revealing that these individuals tended to perceive less presence of psychological abuse.

However, studies conducted up to date have not analyzed how the endorsement of sexism and the exposure to stories with love myths can invisibilize the psychological abuse against a partner. Furthermore, concerning love myths, most studies tend to focus on the perception of young people and adolescents or the academic population (Cortes et al., 2021; Ramírez, 2022; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020; Cabra, 2023).

Given the preceding and acknowledging the theoretical gap in understanding the perception of different forms of psychological abuse and the relationship between variables (**love myths, sexism, and perception of psychological abuse**), this study aims to address the following questions: Which form of psychological abuse (**emotional and control**) are easier to perceive? And to what extent are romantic love myths and ambivalent sexism related to the perception of psychological abuse? Thus, the following five hypotheses were developed to explain the perception of psychological abuse as violence. Two of these complement other hypotheses.

**H1:** Control psychological abuse will be perceived more intensely compared to emotional abuse, because the former is easier to identify as violence per se, as it exceeds the private sphere of the couple (Marshal, 1999; Paiva et al., 2020).

**H2:** Romantic love myths will not establish a strong relationship with the perception of psychological abuse. Thus, we expect low correlations between these variables, as romantic love myths require the influence of other variables to reduce the perception of psychological abuse (Cava et al., 2023; Marcos et al., 2020).

**H2A:** Manipulations of marriage/pairing and romanticism myths will not significantly affect the perception of psychological abuse (Lukšík & Guillaume, 2022; Piñeiro et al., 2022). In other words, the type of relationship established by the couple and narratives with romantic content will not reduce the perception of psychological abuse.

**H3:** A high adherence to ambivalent sexism will moderate the perception of psychological abuse, decreasing the perception of abuse (Cinquegrana, Marini & Galdi, 2022).

**H3A:** In this scenario, love myths when combined with the moderating impact of sexism begin to influence the reduced perception of psychological abuse. In summary, love myths depend on the moderating effect of sexism to reduce the perception of psychological abuse (Lelaurain et al., 2021).

To verify these hypotheses, an experimental study was structured, where the following were manipulated: type of psychological abuse and myths of romantic love. In order to verify the effect of these manipulations on the participants' perception of psychological abuse, and response to the estimated hypotheses, multivariate analysis was adopted. The entire methodological process adopted in this article will be presented in detail below.

## Method

### Participants

The size of the sample was established using the GPower 3.1.9 software (Faul et al., 2007), which suggested a sample of approximately 211 participants to provide an 80% chance of detecting a main effect and an interaction effect ( $p = 0.05$ ). Thus, the sample consisted of 211 individuals of the general population of Spain, who were randomly allocated in the experimental conditions of the study. As an inclusion criterion, individuals over 18 years old and who had access to the questionnaire available online were considered; therefore, the younger population, under 18 years old, was disregarded. Moreover, participants who did not fill the entire form were also disregarded from the analyses.

The sample had a mean age of 33.82 years old ( $SD = 17.18$ ), ranging from 18 to 32 years old. Most were females (62.1%), followed by males (34.1%), non-binary individuals (2.8%) and 0.9% who did not identify with any of the study's gender categories. Regarding the marital status, 41.2% reported being single; 32.2% married or living with a partner; 14.2% in a casual relationship; 3.8% divorced; 3.3% engaged; 1.9% in another type of relationship, and 0.5% widowed. Concerning the financial income, 60.2% reported earning the national average; 17.1% below the average; 14.7% above the average, and 6.2% very below the average.

### Design

This is an experimental study with a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  design (Type of abuse: emotional or control  $\times$  Type of relationship: dating or marriage

$\times$  Romantic content: with romantic content or without romantic content), which was randomized among participants.

## Instruments

The questionnaire comprised five sections. The first consisted of the experimental scenario presenting a brief story of a heterosexual couple, which included manipulating variables: a) the marriage myth (**married vs. dating**); b) the type of abuse (**control abuse vs. emotional abuse**); and c) the myth of romanticism (**with romantic content vs. without romantic content**), resulting in seven experimental conditions. A control situation was also used, describing a friendship relationship without manipulating variables. Below is an example of one of the scenarios used, representing the manipulation of dating, control abuse, and romantic content:

*“María and Guillermo are dating and engaged. They both claim to have fallen in love at first sight. However, since the beginning of the relationship, he forbids her from going out with her friends even in his company. Guillermo also has access to María’s phone, checking who she exchanges messages with, without her consent.”*

In conditions where emotional abuse was manipulated, after characterizing the couple, it was stated: *“Since the beginning of their marriage/dating, Guillermo gets strongly irritated with her every time María expresses opinions different from his. Guillermo ends the argument by stating that she overreacts during discussions, and for this reason, he disappears from home for several days without giving any news.”* In scenarios where romantic content was not manipulated, the story ended after the description of the abuse.

After reading the text, participants were asked to answer seven questions measuring the perception of psychological abuse in the scenarios (e.g., to what extent do you believe Guillermo's behaviors towards María are harmful to their relationship?). Participants responded to the questions using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all good) to 7 (very good). The items were grouped into one factor (*Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$* ).

Next, participants responded to two other instruments, all presented with a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree):

Romantic Myths Scale (**EMRO – Evaluación de los Mitos Románticos**): developed by Piñeiro et al. (2022), it aims to measure romantic love myths. It is composed by 33 items grouped into four factors that represent the following myths: Possession (e.g., when one is in love, it is common to say or feel “you're mine” or “I'm yours”). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.81$ , Abnegation (e.g., if one truly loves their partner, they will not mind changing their habits, interests or personality to please them). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.83$ , Romanticism (e.g., love can conquer anything). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$ , and Tradition (e.g., it is not possible to be truly in love with two people at the same time). Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$ . In addition to the adequacy of internal consistency indexes of the factors, this instrument also showed good indicators of adequacy of the five-factor model ( $p < .000$ ;  $\chi^2/gf = 2.544$ ,  $CFI = .89$ ,  $SRMR = .052$ , and  $RMSEA = .059$ ).

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (**Glick & Fiske, 1997**): adapted for the Spanish context by Expósito et al. (1998). This instrument contains 22 items that measure two dimensions: Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism. This study used it unifactorially (*Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$* ), since this structure has been verified in other studies (Arnoso et al., 2017; Novo et al., 2016). The one-dimensionality of this scale is something



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that has been debated since its development, in which, although the bifactorial structure presented better adjustment indicators ( $GFI=0.83$ ;  $AGFI=0.80$ ,  $\chi^2= 106.61$ ), it did not show strong differences when compared to the unifactorial model ( $GFI=0.80$ ;  $AGFI=0.76$ ,  $\chi^2=460.47$ ).

## Procedures

Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire on the SurveyMonkey platform, which allowed the randomization of participants in the experimental conditions, ensuring their randomization. The  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experimental study design resulted in eight distinct experimental conditions, in which the distribution of participants varied from **33** (in the condition with manipulation of psychological emotional abuse, marriage myth and romantic content) to **20** participants (in the condition with control abuse, marriage myth and absence of romantic content). In total, **199** participants were allocated to the experimental conditions, and the control group was composed by **12** participants.

Contact with participants was established through the snowball strategy (Coleman, 1958), with the collaboration of undergraduate students from a Spanish university. This technique is based on the questionnaire's chain-sharing, in which each participants forwards it to new individuals, ensuring a broad and diffuse distribution. The average completion time of the questionnaire was approximately **30** minutes.

## Data analysis

For hypothesis testing, IBM SPSS Statistics version **23** was utilized. To assess hypothesis 2, Pearson's correlation coefficient (**r**) was employed to illustrate the relationship between variables. For hypotheses 1, 2a, and 3a, three one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine differences in participants' mean perceptions of abuse across experimental scenarios, according to the manipulated variables. Additionally, bootstrapping procedures (**1000** resamples; **95% BCa CI**) were carried out to enhance result reliability, correct for deviations from normality in the sample distribution and differences in group sizes, and provide a **95%** confidence interval for the mean difference (Haukoos & Lewis, 2005). Furthermore, to test hypothesis 3 and further support hypothesis 3a, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed that examined differences in the moderating effect of sexism and participants' mean perceptions across experimental manipulations. In addition to hypothesis testing analyses, descriptive statistics were conducted to characterize the sample.

Effect size calculations were also made for all analyses (Cohen, 1988). Pearson's **r<sup>2</sup>** was adopted for correction analyses, and Hedge's G effect size was adopted to verify the difference in means, taking into account the lack of equal sampling distribution between the experimental conditions. Furthermore, partial eta-squared ( **$\eta^2$** ) (Keppel, 1991; Lakens, 2013) was used for univariate analyses.

## Ethical considerations

The study adhered to the national and international ethical standards, including those defined by the American Psychological Association (2017) and the The World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki (2018). All participants signed the Informed Consent Form, in which they authorized the use of data for scientific purposes; in this same document, participants were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. They were informed that their

participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any moment, without any consequences, according to the ethical guidelines.

## Results

After randomizing participants into experimental conditions, participants were allocated to experimental conditions as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Distribution of participants in experimental conditions.

Experimental manipulation	N	M	SD
Type of abuse	1,35	0,58	
Control Abuse	86		
Emotional Abuse	113		
Marriage myth	1,14	0,60	
Married	99		
Dating	100		
Myth of romanticism	1,44	0,60	
With Romanticism	105		
No Romanticism	94		
Control condition	12		

Note. N= Total number; M= Mean; SD= Standard deviation.

## Differences in means for experimental conditions

To test hypotheses 1, 2a, and 3a, three one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine differences in participants' mean perceptions of abuse across experimental scenarios, according to the manipulated variables (**type of abuse, marriage myth, and romanticism myth**), where a Bonferroni post-hoc test was also requested to verify mean differences between conditions.

The analyses revealed statistical differences between the manipulations and the control condition: manipulation of the type of abuse [ $F(2,210)=122.260$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta^2=.35$ ], marriage myth [ $F(2,210)=122.695$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta^2=.35$ ], and romanticism myth [ $F(2,210)=119.562$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta^2=.34$ ]. These results are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Differences in average abuse perception between experimental manipulations.

	Experimental conditions	$\Delta M$	Bootstrap Estimates (95%CI BCa)			Effect Size (Hedge's G)
			SE	LLCI	ULCI	
Control condition	Emotional Abuse	-4.32*	.37	-4.94	-3.52	4.24
	Control Abuse	-4.32*	.37	-5.15	-3.81	4.43
Emotional Abuse	Control Abuse	.22	.13	-.03	.54	.22

Experimental conditions	$\Delta M$	Bootstrap Estimates (95%CI BCa)			Effect Size (Hedge's G)	
		SE	LLCI	ULCI		
Control condition	Dating	-4.53*	.35	-5.15	-3.76	5.18
	Married	-4.30*	.35	-4.91	-3.53	4.14
Control condition	Dating	.23	.13	-.02	.48	.24
	No romanticism	-4.42*	.37	-5.06	-3.60	4.85
No romanticism	With romanticism	-4.21*	.37	-5.03	-3.61	4.32
	With romanticism	.01	.13	-.24	.27	.01

Note.  $\Delta M$  = mean difference; SE = standard error; LLCI = lower level for 95% confidence interval; ULCI = upper Level for 95% confidence interval; \* $p < 0.05$ .

## Correlations between total abuse perception in scenarios, perception of emotional and control abuse, ambivalent sexism, and romantic love myths

To test hypothesis 2, a Pearson correlation analysis revealed that the overall perception of abuse in the experimental scenarios was negatively correlated with the study variables. Specifically, the perception of abuse in the experimental scenarios established a low negative correlation with the factors of romantic love myths: Tradition ( $r^2=2.9\%$ ), Self-sacrifice ( $r^2=2.0\%$ ), and Possession ( $r^2=3.2\%$ ). The data are illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
Pearson correlations between study variables and perception of psychological abuse

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perception of psychological abuse	5.91	1.40					
2. Romanticism Myth	3.47	1.04	-.08				
3. Tradition Myth	3.65	1.08	-.17*	.69*			
4. Self-sacrifice Myth	2.98	1.19	-.14*	.68*	.70*		
5. Possession Myth	2.70	1.11	-.18*	.56*	.62*	.69*	
6. Sexism	2.47	1.06	-.22*	.56*	.57*	.63*	.78*

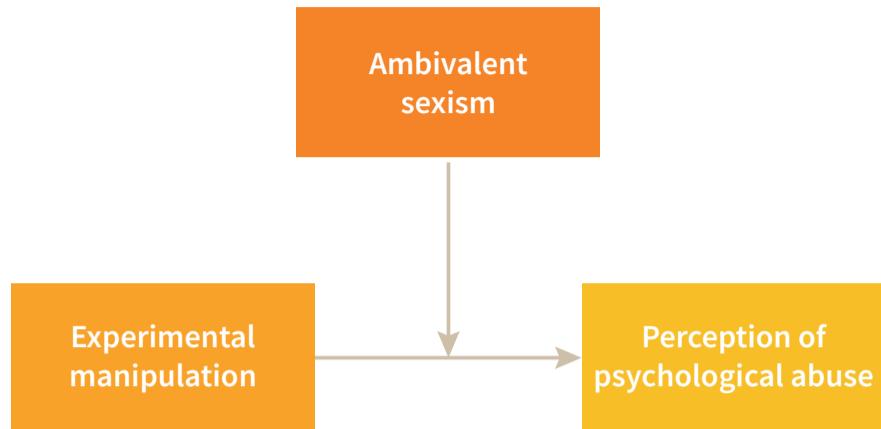
Note. M= Mean; SD= Standard deviation; \* $p < 0.05$ .

## Explanatory model for the perception of psychological abuse

Finally, to test hypotheses 3 and 3a, three factorial ANCOVAs were conducted. A simple moderation model was tested, with experimental

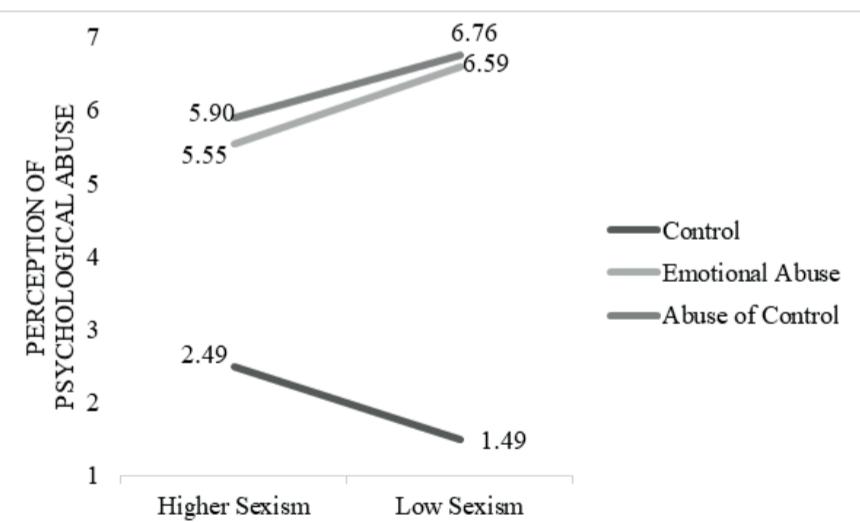
manipulations as predictors of the perception of abuse in scenarios and sexism as the moderator (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
Explanatory model



The first ANCOVA examined the effect of manipulation of abuse types as predictors of the perception of psychological abuse. According to the results, sexism had a moderating effect in this relationship [ $R^2=.65$ ;  $F(2.205)=4.567$ ,  $p=.011$ ]. Additionally, a significant interaction was found for higher levels of sexism [ $F(2.205)=19.090$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta^2=.15$ ], indicating significant differences in the average perception of control abuse and emotional abuse manipulations ( $p=.034$ ), as well as between experimental manipulations and the control condition ( $p<.001$ ). According to these data, participants perceived control abuse more than emotional abuse. However, no significant differences were found in the average perception of psychological abuse for lower levels of sexism ( $p=.304$ ) in relation to experimental manipulations. Nevertheless, differences were observed between experimental manipulations and the control condition [ $F(2.205)=144.324$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta^2=.58$ ]. These results are illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
Comparison between the average perception of psychological abuse and the impact of sexism in predicting different types of abuse



The second ANCOVA examined the manipulation of the romanticism myth as predictors for perceiving psychological abuse and found a moderating effect of sexism [ $R^2=.34$ ;  $F(2.205)=4.158$ ,  $p=.017$ ]. The results also indicated a significant interaction for higher levels of sexism [ $F(2.205)=16.371$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\eta^2=.15$ ]. However, no significant differences were found in the average perception of abuse for romantic and non-romantic content of the stories ( $p=.959$ ). Thus, participants did not display different perceptions of abuse based on the content of the stories. The same pattern was observed for lower levels of sexism. That is, the content of the stories did not significantly change the average perception of abuse ( $p=.779$ ); however, there was a difference between experimental manipulations and the control condition

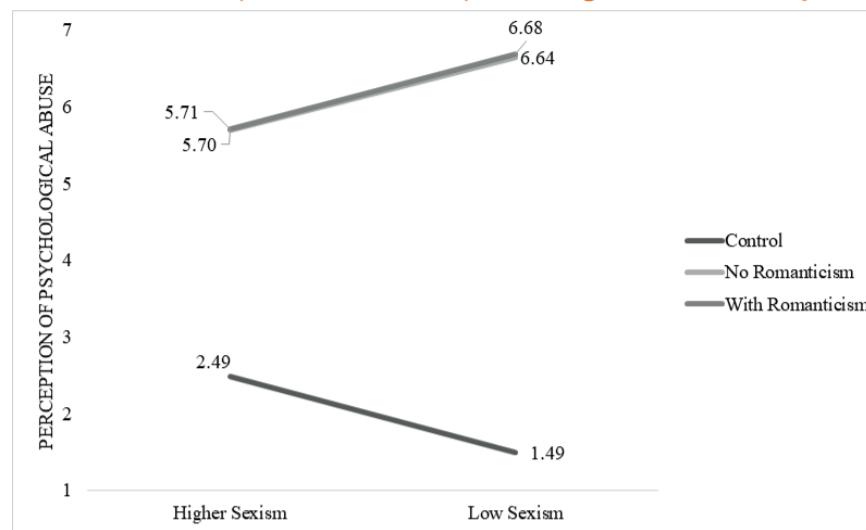
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[ $F(2,205)=140.037, p<.001; \eta^2=.58$ ]. These results are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Comparison between the average perception of psychological abuse and the impact of sexism in predicting romanticism myths



The third ANCOVA examined the manipulation of the marriage myth as predictors for perceiving psychological abuse and found a moderation effect of sexism [ $R^2=.64; F(2,205)=4.980, p=.008$ ]. The results also indicated a significant interaction for higher levels of sexism [ $F(2,205)=18.462, p<.001; \eta^2=.14$ ]. The average perception of abuse was different for dating and marriage relationships ( $p=.059$ ), as well as for the control condition ( $p<.001$ ). According to these results, participants

perceived more psychological abuse in dating relationships compared to married relationships. However, no significant differences were found in the average perception of abuse for lower levels of sexism ( $p=.954$ ) for experimental manipulations. Nevertheless, a difference was observed between experimental manipulations and the control condition [ $F(2,205)=142.322, p<.001; \eta^2=.58$ ]. These results are illustrated in Figure 4. Additionally, all average differences, confidence intervals, and effect sizes of the results are illustrated in Table 4.

Figure 4

Comparison between the average perception of psychological abuse and the impact of sexism in predicting marriage myth

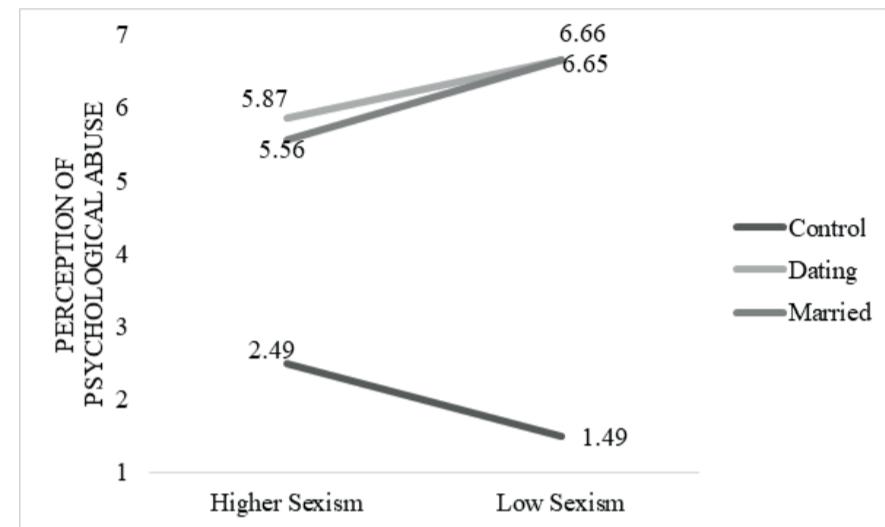


Table 4

Differences in the mean level of perception of psychological abuse with the moderating effect of sexism levels.

Level of Sexism	Experimental manipulation	$\Delta M$	SE	P	LLCI	ULCI	95% Confidence Interval	Effect size (Hedeg's G)
Type of abuse								
Higher Sexism	Control condition	Emotional Abuse	-3,05	0,56	<.001	-4,15	-1,95	15,98
		Control Abuse	-3,40	0,56	<.001	-4,50	-2,36	15,93
	Emotional abuse	Control Abuse	-.34	.16	.03	-.67	-.02	3,06
Low Sexism	Control condition	Emotional Abuse	-5,09	.31	<.001	-5,71	-4,48	37,57
		Control Abuse	-5,27	.31	<.001	-5,90	-4,64	33,73
	Emotional abuse	Control Abuse	-.17	.17	.30	-.51	.16	1,43
Myth of romanticism								
Higher Sexism	Control condition	No Romanticism	-3,20	.56	<.001	-4,32	-2,08	15,20
		With Romanticism	-3,21	.56	<.001	-4,33	-2,09	14,95
Low Sexism	No Romanticism	With Romanticism	-.008	.16	.96	-.33	.31	.07
	Control condition	No Romanticism	-5,14	.32	<.001	-5,77	-4,51	34,47
		With Romanticism	-5,25	.32	<.001	-5,82	-4,56	35,33
	No Romanticism	With Romanticism	-.048	.17	.78	-.38	.28	0,25
Marriage myth								
Higher Sexism	Control condition	Dating	-3,38	.56	<.001	-4,51	-2,27	16,26
		Married	-3,07	.56	<.001	-4,17	-1,96	15,09
Low Sexism	Dating	Married	.31	.16	.06	-.01	.63	2,70
	Control condition	Dating	-5,17	.31	<.001	-5,89	-4,55	37,27
		Married	-5,16	.32	<.001	-5,82	-4,53	35,30
	Dating	Married	.01	.17	.95	-.32	.34	.08

Note.  $\Delta M$  = mean difference; SE = standard error; p = p-value; LLCI = lower level for 95% confidence interval; ULCI = upper Level for 95% confidence interval.

# Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the factors influencing the perception of psychological abuse, starting from romantic love myths and ambivalent sexism, to understand this phenomenon. For this purpose, five hypotheses were developed, of which three were corroborated (**H2**, **H2A**, and **H3**), one was partially confirmed (**H3A**), and one was rejected (**H1**). Overall, we found that romantic myths alone do not decrease the perception of psychological abuse; however, when accompanied by sexism moderation, this relationship changes, becoming significant.

The first hypothesis postulated that control abuse would be more noticed compared to emotional abuse. Although the average perception of psychological abuse was higher in the control abuse manipulation, this difference was not significant, leading to the rejection of this hypothesis. Research reveals that control abuse is the most perpetrated form of abuse in abusive relationships, with digital control (**partner's social media and the like**) being more socially accepted and valued in a romantic relationship, sometimes even being seen as harmless (**Bouffard et al., 2022; Nardi-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020**). In other words, control abuse becomes less "**flagrant**" as it becomes more normalized, which is why it does not stand out from emotional abuse.

Hypothesis 2 was corroborated. As expected, the relationship between adherence to romantic love myths was weakly correlated with the decrease in perception of psychological abuse. Although the results showed negatively significant correlations between these variables, they were very weak, corroborating previous studies (**Borrajo et al., 2015; Marcos et al., 2020; Nardi-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Sánchez Hernández et al., 2020**). A possible explanation for this result may be related to the age of the participants in this study, who had an average age of over 33 years. Previous studies have found that adherence to romantic myths is strongly related to the age of the subjects, with younger individuals showing greater support for these myths (**Bollina-Algovia & Rivero, 2021; Marcos et al., 2020**).

Hypothesis 3, which expected that a higher endorsement of ambivalent sexism would negatively moderate the perception of psychological abuse, was corroborated in all experimental manipulations. The literature points out that ambivalent sexism is a variable strongly related to the perception of violence against women and a predictor in the perception of interpersonal violence (**Marcos et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022**). Despite controversies in previous studies regarding the moderation of this variable in the perception of psychological abuse (**Badenes-Sastre et al., 2023; Capezza et al., 2021; Keita, 2022**), our findings corroborate that ambivalent sexism is indeed a variable that directly reduces the perception of psychological abuse. The relevance of ambivalent sexism in the relationship between the manipulated variables (**type of abuse and romantic myths**) becomes even more evident when we delve into the results of this analysis.

For example, the results illustrate that when ambivalent sexism moderates the manipulation conditions of the psychological abuse type, participants on average showed a higher perception of control abuse than emotional abuse (**Martín-Fernández et al., 2018; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2020**). These findings corroborate previous studies, which also found that the perception of abusive and controlling behaviors only stands out when accompanied by the effect of sexism.

Emotional abuse represents a form of violence that substantially impacts the victim's individual sphere, affecting their feelings and emotions. Thus, its characterization is intrinsically linked to the victim's report (**Askari, 2020**). On the other hand, control abuse constitutes violence that extends beyond the individual, affecting other people involved in the couple's routine, such as children, friends, and family members (**Fanslow et al., 2021**). Therefore, its detection does not necessarily depend on the victim's report. In this context, sexism emerges as a variable that undermines the victim's account (**Glick & Fiske, 1996; Le Brun et al., 2023; Tutkal, 2023**). For this reason, those who strongly adhere to sexism tend to perceive control abuse more than emotional abuse.

Regarding romantic myths, this variable only reduced the perception of psychological abuse when accompanied by the moderation of ambivalent sexism, corroborating the acceptance of hypothesis 2a and partially confirming hypothesis 3a. Hypothesis 2a postulated that manipulations of romantic love myths would not reduce the perception of psychological abuse, and our results confirmed this expectation. The results of the ANOVA suggest that neither the manipulation of the marriage myth nor the romanticism myth reduced the perception of psychological abuse.

Although Lelaurain et al. (**2018**) corroborate that in situations where the couple involved in domestic violence is described as passionate or in a long-term relationship, these romantic aspects tend to justify violence and consequently reduce the perception of its severity. Years later, the same author, along with other collaborators (**2021**), found that this relationship between romantic myths and the perception of the severity of interpersonal violence only exists in the presence of the moderating effect of ambivalent sexism and myths of domestic violence.

The impact of the manipulation of the marriage myth was only observed when moderated by ambivalent sexism, partially confirming our hypothesis 3a. In contrast, in the study by Lelaurain et al. (**2021**), the authors showed that the moderation by both sexism and myths of domestic violence influenced the perception of the severity of domestic violence. In our study, we specifically addressed psychological abuse and found that people with high adherence to ambivalent sexism perceived less psychological abuse when the couple's relationship was described as married (**marriage myth**), compared to the control condition and the manipulation of a dating relationship. The manipulation of romanticism (**the content of the stories**) did not reduce the perception of psychological abuse, even when accompanied by the moderation of ambivalent sexism. Thus, contextualizing that romantic myths may legitimize stereotypes of gender inequality (**Cuadrado-Gordillo & Martín-Mora-Parra, 2022**), a central characteristic of ambivalent sexism, what actually occurs is a combined effect between these variables, since both express an endorsement of gender inequality. In other words, adherence to ambivalent sexism leads to internalization of romantic myths, consequently reducing the perception of psychological abuse.

Furthermore, an explanation for why the romanticism myth did not reduce the perception of psychological abuse may have occurred due to how this myth was characterized. This myth was only represented in the stories describing the couple as being in love (**Piñeiro et al., 2022**). However, romanticism also involves other factors, such as the fanciful belief that this feeling of passion persists throughout the entire relationship, and this aspect was not illustrated in the adopted manipulation. Therefore, we believe that the manipulation of this type of abuse lacked more complex information, which may explain why it did not affect the perception of psychological abuse.



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It is also necessary to indicate the limitations of this work. First, as previously mentioned, the manipulations of the study can have been compromised and described disproportionately. The characterization of love myths (**romanticism and union/marriage**) in the stories was considerably low, which can have influenced readers' perception about the stories and the relationships presented. Moreover, experimental vignettes can not fully illustrate a real situation of psychological abuse among couples. Future studies can manipulate real stories of psychological spousal abuse to enhance realism in narratives based, for instance, on newspaper articles. It would be interesting to explore other variables, to verify if they influence the perception of psychological abuse, such as cultural and individual characteristics, including personality, educational level, and previous relationship experiences of participants. Another limitation of this research is its heteronormative nature, from which people's perception about a traditional couple was investigated; it is interesting that future studies investigate people's perception regarding psychological abuse in homosexual couples, since homophobia can be another variable correlated to the love myths, in which sexism serves as a moderator in this type of relationship.

Another aspect to be highlighted concerns the viewer's perspective. Our study investigated how people perceive the psychological abuse in a story in which they are not involved; this perspective is positive in the sense that it proposes to analyze how people judge romantic and psychologically violent situations. However, it has its limitations, since it does not involve the individual directly in the experimental scenarios; therefore, it is not possible to analyze to what extent subjects judge such situations (**psychological abuse and love myths**) in their own lives. We propose that future studies investigate how subjects analyze these situations in their private lives, and how love myths and sexism can explain the maintenance and permanence of psychologically abusive relationships.

The theoretical implications of this work highlight that sexism is not simply a belief system about gender roles and power hierarchy between men and women. Instead, sexism is an ideological system that endorses and reproduces this hierarchy, which facilitates the perpetuation of violence against women and, consequently, its non perception as actual violence (**Rollero et al., 2021**). It is also necessary to mention that, in our research, the strong relation between sexism and romantic love myths was evident; despite being considered distinct phenomena, our results suggest that love myths can be another dimension of sexism, as they serve to maintain traditional gender roles that place women in an inferior position in relation to men, making violence against them justifiable, especially concerning psychological abuse (**Rivero & Algovia, 2021**). For this reason, specific interventions aimed at combating sexism and love myths are necessary, since lower levels of sexism endorsement are associated not only with reduced involvement in abusive relationships, but also with lower endorsement of the interpretation of such violence (**Villacres, 2024; Agadullina et al., 2022**).

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## Perception of Psychological Abuse in Spain

### The role of sexism and myths of romantic love

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