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Victimization and Perpetration of Online Dating Violence and Emotional Dependence by Gender among University Students in Ecuador

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Abstract: The present study investigates the roles of online dating violence and emotional dependence within the context of interpersonal relationships. The primary objective of this research is to analyze the perpetration and victimization of online dating violence and emotional dependence among men and women. Utilizing a quantitative approach with a descriptive and explanatory focus, this research employed a non-experimental cross-sectional design. A sample comprising 3202 university students completed the Dating Online Abuse Scale (DOAS) and the Emotional Dependence Questionnaire (EDQ). Statistical analyses, including Student's *t*-test, Pearson's correlation coefficient, and simple linear regressions, were conducted. Significant gender differences ($p < 0.01$) emerged concerning both victimization and perpetration of online dating violence. Furthermore, a noteworthy association ($p < 0.01$) was observed between online dating violence and emotional dependence, with the latter serving as a predictive factor for online dating violence across genders.

Keywords: violence; dating; mental health; victimization; gender



Citation: Castillo-González, Mayra, and Emilio Terán Andrade. 2024. Victimization and Perpetration of Online Dating Violence and Emotional Dependence by Gender among University Students in Ecuador. *Social Sciences* 13: 406. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13080406>

Academic Editor: Robert L. Peralta

Received: 28 June 2024

Revised: 1 August 2024

Accepted: 1 August 2024

Published: 4 August 2024



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1. Introduction

Dating violence represents a significant concern impacting both the psychological and physical well-being of individuals, and is recognized as a critical public health issue (Tarriño-Concejero et al. 2023). The World Health Organization defines violence as actions that may lead to physical, psychological, or sexual harm to either partner within a relationship. Dating violence specifically pertains to intimate partner violence, distinguished by its unique characteristics (Organización Mundial de la Salud 2002).

That is, this type of violence can occur at different stages of life and in diverse contexts, focusing on romantic relationships between adolescents and young adults (Rojas-Alonso and Rojas-solis 2021). This may make victims particularly vulnerable and less able to identify or respond to abuse. In conjunction, this type of violence can manifest itself both physically (offline) and virtually (online) (Vílora et al. 2019).

Online Dating Violence (ODV) specifically refers to aggressive or abusive behaviors occurring through technological platforms and social networks during the courtship phase (Borrajó et al. 2015). These behaviors include control, intimidation, harassment, and unauthorized dissemination of private information, among others, which significantly impact the mental health of young individuals (Borrajó and Gamez-Guadix 2016; Jaen-Cortés et al. 2017; Peña-Cárdenas et al. 2018).

ODV is a complex phenomenon requiring thorough analysis to understand its underlying causes and manifestations. Emotional Dependence (ED) emerges as a critical variable influencing online violence (Hossain et al. 2020). Emotionally dependent individuals may exhibit aggressive and controlling behaviors in digital environments, driven by a compulsive need to monitor and exert control over their partners or significant others (De Los Reyes et al. 2021).

1.1. Prevalence of ODV

ODV extends beyond national borders, constituting a global phenomenon amplified by the proliferation of social networks and digital platforms. Data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) underscores its widespread impact, with over 400,000 reported cases of ODV in 2019 alone (INEGI 2022). For example, Zweig et al. (2013) found that approximately 50% of high school and college students in the United States have experienced or perpetrated cyber-violence¹ within dating relationships. Rodríguez-Domínguez et al. (2017) also documented significant prevalence rates of online violence among young individuals. Online violence represents a significant issue, exacerbated by the user-friendly nature and unregulated aspects of social media platforms. Platforms such as Twitter enable discussions about sexual violence to occur with minimal censorship and often anonymously (Sowersby et al. 2022). This environment contributes to the perpetuation of violent attitudes and the normalization of problematic sexual behaviors.

In Latin America, a notable increase in incidents of online dating abuse has been observed. Research conducted in Mexico revealed that 62% of surveyed women reported experiencing dating violence through social networks (Javier-Juárez et al. 2022). In Ecuador, a report by Plan Internacional highlighted that 60% of girls and young women faced online harassment or violence. The most prevalent forms of violence included: (a) threats of sexual violence, (b) offensive language, and (c) sexual harassment. The attacks are most frequent on Facebook, where 39% of the respondents reported experiencing harassment and/or violence, but they also occur on other platforms such as Instagram (23%), WhatsApp (14%), Snapchat (10%), and Twitter (6%) (Plan Internacional por la niñez en Ecuador, Informe 2019).

It is crucial to understand that the prevalence of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) varies based on cultural and regional factors. Cuadrado-Gordillo and Martín-Mora-Parra (2022) underscore the significance of cultural factors in shaping the perception and prevalence of gender-based violence within adolescent relationships in Ecuador, noting that sexism is more pronounced in this context compared to countries such as Spain. These sociocultural patterns contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that young Ecuadorians are making efforts to challenge and deconstruct machismo, reflecting a growing recognition and rejection of the cultural values that underpin violence, despite its ongoing prevalence (Boira et al. 2017).

Furthermore, Lilley et al. (2023) indicate that gender myths have a profound impact on the perception and handling of sexual violence in intimate relationships. These myths foster erroneous beliefs and stereotypes that diminish the seriousness of sexual violence and assign undue blame to victims, thereby influencing both public opinion and the responses of justice professionals. These authors argue that to address the problem of violence in intimate relationships, it is essential to use both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. The combination of both approaches provides a more complete and more robust picture of the problem.

Such biases and stereotypes are likely to manifest in the Ecuadorian context, affecting the perception and management of online violence within intimate relationships. It is crucial to understand that the prevalence of OGBV varies based on cultural and regional factors. Social norms, attitudes toward violence, access to technology, and policies regarding prevention and education differ significantly across various cultural and geographical contexts. These differences can influence both the prevalence and manifestation of such violence.

1.2. Victimization and Perpetration of ODV and Gender

Victimization in ODV refers to the experience of being subjected to acts of digital violence by an intimate partner. These acts can include harassment, intimidation, surveillance, dissemination of private information without consent, and other forms of emotional and psychological abuse (Borrajó et al. 2015). Victims may suffer significant mental and physical health consequences due to these abuses (Redondo Pacheco et al. 2022). Conversely, perpetration in ODV involves acts of violence that an individual commit against their partner

through digital media, encompassing the same behaviors mentioned above (Gámez-Guadix et al. 2018).

Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018) found that perpetration and victimization can be bidirectional, meaning that an individual can be both a victim and a perpetrator of cyberviolence within a dating relationship. This finding has been corroborated by other research (González Ortega et al. 2020; Pérez-Ruiz et al. 2020; Zamora-Damián et al. 2019), which also identifies ODV as a non-unidirectional phenomenon. de la Villa Moral and Prieto (2021) note that both men and women can be victims and perpetrators of violence in intimate partner relationships, with perpetration and victimization often being interrelated.

For instance, Burke et al. (2011), Sourander et al. (2010), and Zweig et al. (2013) found higher rates of cybervictimization among women. Marcos Santiago and Isidro de Pedro (2019) highlight that control and jealousy are predominant factors in gender-based dating violence, primarily affecting women. However, other studies (Gabarda et al. 2021; Javier-Juárez et al. 2022; Piquer Barrachina et al. 2017; Rodríguez-Domínguez et al. 2017) indicate that men can also frequently be victims of cyberviolence, and in some cases, even more so than women.

De Los Reyes et al. (2022) reported that 51.9% of college students claimed to have experienced cyberviolence, and 56.6% admitted to committing cyberviolence. In terms of gender, men scored higher than women in both cyberviolence and cybervictimization, suggesting that men were not only more frequently victimized, but also more likely to perpetrate acts of cyberviolence. Despite the existing research, it remains complex to conclusively determine whether women or men are more often victims or perpetrators of online violence.

1.3. Emotional Dependence (ED), Victimization and Perpetration of ODV and Gender

The relationship between ED and ODV victimization as well as perpetration is complex and multifaceted. Studies (Gabarda et al. 2021; De Los Reyes et al. 2022; Peña-Cárdenas et al. 2018) have shown that ED contributes to the maintenance of violent online dating relationships by increasing tolerance to abuse and making it more difficult to end the relationship. Additionally, this dependence can influence the perpetration of violence through behaviors such as excessive control, jealousy, emotional manipulation, and threats (Alvarado Toribio and Plasencia León 2019). Individuals with ED tend to normalize both the pleasurable and painful aspects of relationships, making them more likely to accept abusive behaviors from their partners (Castillo-Gonzales et al. 2024). This tendency is exacerbated in adolescence and youth by the valuing of unconditional surrender to the other, leading to greater ED and, consequently, greater victimization (Pradas Cañete and Perles Novas 2012). Simultaneously, individuals with high dependence may resort to violent behaviors to maintain control over their partner and avoid abandonment, leading to greater perpetration of ODV (Marcos et al. 2020).

Little research has explored the relationship between ED and ODV by analyzing gender. For instance, de la Villa Moral and Prieto (2021) found that men with ED were more frequent perpetrators of online violence in their dating relationships. Similarly, De Los Reyes et al. (2022) identified that emotionally dependent men exhibited higher scores in victimization and perpetration in their online dating relationships. Marcos et al. (2020) showed that men tended to report higher ED, belief in romantic love myths, and sexism compared to women, and found a positive correlation between ED and ODV perpetration in men. Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez (2022) observed significant differences between men and women regarding ED, cyberviolence, and cybercontrol, with men exhibiting intense ED scoring higher on these variables.

On the other hand, Bell et al. (2022) identified that ED and the perpetration of aggression in intimate relationships may be interrelated in both men and women, although the mechanisms and intensity of these relationships may vary. Men who are emotionally dependent on their partners, combined with high emotional reactivity, may have an increased risk of aggression. For women, ED, particularly fear of abandonment, may contribute to physical aggression in female-to-female dating relationships.

As shown, ED plays a crucial role in the victimization and perpetration of ODV in both men and women, acting as a factor that promotes the persistence of abusive relationships. However, the differences observed in studies ([Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022](#); [de la Villa Moral and Prieto 2021](#); [De Los Reyes et al. 2022](#)) regarding ED, ODV victimization and perpetration, and gender are complex and sometimes contradictory. Given this diversity of findings, it is essential to continue investigating the relationship between ED, victimization, and ODV perpetration across different cultures and contexts ([De Los Reyes et al. 2021](#)). This approach will provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how these factors interact and vary by sociocultural setting. Research in diverse contexts can help identify specific patterns of violence in intimate partner relationships.

In the context of Ecuador, cultural norms and traditional gender roles play a significant role in the manifestation of violence ([Cevallos Ortega and Mena Manzanillas 2023](#)). These roles and norms contribute to the acceptance, justification, and victim-blaming in situations of gender violence ([Capelo-Gálvez and Córdova-requera 2022](#)). Despite formal advances in Ecuadorian legislation, the implementation of concrete actions is hindered by the lack of a comprehensive approach and adequate resources to combat gender-based violence in the country ([Pacheco Lupercio and Palomeque Arias 2023](#)). Research on this topic would enable a richer and more nuanced understanding of these phenomena, which is crucial for the development of public policies and intervention programs that effectively address the needs of affected individuals in various contexts within Ecuador.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to analyze the perpetration and victimization of online dating violence and emotional dependence among men and women.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

This research adopts a quantitative approach, emphasizing numerical examination and statistical analysis of the collected data. It is both descriptive and explanatory in scope, describing the study variables at a specific point in time and applying statistical analyses to determine how emotional dependence influences the perpetration and victimization of online violence according to gender. Additionally, this research utilizes a non-experimental cross-sectional design, and is classified as field research, as psychological tests will be administered to the study participants.

2.2. Participants

The study population consisted of 60,000 university students from three public universities in Ecuador. The final sample comprised 3202 individuals, selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. This indicates that the participants comprised those who responded to the initial survey. To participate in this research, participants provided informed consent and completed the questionnaires virtually and anonymously. The purpose of the study, the nature of the questions to be posed, and the potential risks and benefits of participation were clearly communicated to the participants. The use of reagents did not pose any physical or psychological harm to the students; thus, their participation was entirely voluntary and was conducted with respect for confidentiality and adherence to ethical research standards. Necessary permissions were secured from the relevant institutional authorities.

Regarding the characteristics of the sample, 35.7% of the participants were male, and 64.3% were female. The age range of the participants was 16 to 48 years ($M = 21.50$, $SD = 2.82$). Participants were required to have been in a dating relationship for at least one month without the relationship being formalized (i.e., common law union or marriage). Additionally, participants needed to use the Internet, cell phones, and virtual platforms to communicate with their partners.

Additionally, the sample included students from three public universities, resulting in a predominance of participants from middle socioeconomic backgrounds (84.8%), followed by 15.2% from lower socioeconomic levels and only 2% from higher socioeconomic levels. Geographically, 70% of the participants were from urban areas, while 30% were from rural

areas, indicating a higher representation from urban settings. Most ethnically identified as mestizos (88.7%), consistent with national demographics. In contrast, 8.4% identified as Indigenous, 8% as Afro-Ecuadorians and Montubios, and 1.3% as White, reflecting the country's cultural and racial diversity.

2.3. Instruments

The *Online Abuse in Dating Relationships Scale* (OADRS), developed by [Borrajo et al. \(2015\)](#), was used. This tool is a multidimensional instrument developed to evaluate various forms of abuse within the context of dating relationships through digital media. It assesses victimization and perpetration of online dating violence through two subscales comprising ten items each: (a) direct aggressions, which include behaviors such as insults and threats, and (b) monitoring/controlling behaviors, which include actions such as checking the time the partner logged off a social network. The scale contains 20 pairs of parallel items to report both victimization and perpetration of each form of abuse. For example, it asks, "Have you been threatened via social networks?" and "Have you threatened your partner via social networks?", utilizing a six-point Likert scale (ranging from never to always). In terms of reliability and validity, the author demonstrated high coefficients of internal consistency, typically assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Additionally, confirmatory factorial consistency (CFC) analyses were conducted to validate the multidimensional structure of the scale. These analyses ensured that the various dimensions of online abuse were accurately represented and measured. In this study, the reliability of the victimization subscale was high (Cronbach's alpha = 0.93), as was the reliability of the perpetration subscale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.93).

The *Emotional Dependence Questionnaire* (EDQ), developed and validated by [Lemos and Londoño \(2006\)](#) for the Latino population, was used. It is a multidimensional instrument designed to assess different aspects of ED in interpersonal relationships. It contains 23 Likert-type items with 6 response options (1 = "completely untrue of me" to 6 = "describes me perfectly"). This questionnaire assesses Emotional Dependence (ED) both as an overall construct and through six subscales: (a) fear of loneliness (e.g., "Do I feel helpless when I am alone?"), (b) separation anxiety (e.g., "When I argue with my partner, do I worry that he/she will stop loving me?"), (c) affectionate expression from partner (e.g., "Do I constantly need expressions of affection from my partner?"), (d) modification of plans (e.g., "If I have plans and my partner shows up, do I change them just to be with him/her?"), (e) attention seeking (e.g., "Do I go out of my way to be the center of attention in my partner's life?"), and (f) borderline expression (e.g., "Have I threatened to hurt myself so that my partner won't leave me?"). The authors demonstrated that the reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.927 for the entire scale, indicating a high level of internal consistency. Concerning validity, factor analysis revealed six factors accounting for 64.7% of the total variance, suggesting that the questionnaire effectively measures the construct of ED. In this study, the instrument exhibited good overall reliability ($\alpha = 0.93$) and reliability within the six subscales: separation anxiety ($\alpha = 0.94$), affectionate expression ($\alpha = 0.858$), modification of plans ($\alpha = 0.852$), fear of loneliness ($\alpha = 0.859$), borderline expression ($\alpha = 0.895$), and attention seeking ($\alpha = 0.851$). To determine the presence of emotional dependence, Lemos and Londoño suggest using the sum of the mean and standard deviation (80.42, i.e., 81 for the total score) as the cutoff point. Individuals scoring between the mean and this value would be considered at risk, while those scoring below the mean would not exhibit ED behaviors.

2.4. Statistical Procedure

SPSS (IBM) version 25 software was used to analyze the collected data. Initially, the primary descriptive statistics were obtained, including the reliability of the scales and subscales through Cronbach's Alpha, and normality indices with a Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, as well as the mean and standard deviation. To identify differences between WNV

and gender, Student's *t*-test was employed. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationships between the variables. Finally, Simple Linear Regression was conducted to examine how ED predicts ODV in both men and women.

3. Results

Statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were found between men and women regarding victimization and perpetration of direct aggression and monitoring/controlling behaviors in the context of online dating. Women experienced more direct aggression, such as threats, insults, dissemination of intimate information, and aggression through digital media. Similarly, they were more likely to be victims of monitoring or controlling behaviors, such as feeling controlled on social networks regarding their correspondents, friends, and whereabouts. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were also found in relation to the perpetration of both direct aggression and monitoring, with men being more likely to perpetrate these behaviors. Additionally, it was found that women had higher scores in relation to emotional dependence, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of victimization and perpetration of online dating violence and emotional dependence by gender.

Online Abuse		Men		Women		t-Test	
		M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Victimization	Aggression	27.71	15.2	29.22	16.3	2.89	0.001
	Control	26.49	14.4	27.44	15.4	2.21	0.001
	Global	54.21	29.2	56.66	31.3	2.89	0.001
Perpetration	Aggression	17.41	10.1	16.40	9.1	1.8	0.001
	Control	17.89	10.2	16.86	9.3	5.03	0.001
	Global	35.38	19.6	33.35	17.8	2.21	0.001
Emotional Dependency		87.17	33.19	89.13	33.80	2.86	0.001

As shown in the correlation matrix (Table 2), victimization in ODV has a moderate significant correlation with ED and its subscales. Similarly, the relationship between perpetration and ED also shows a significant, although low, correlation.

Table 2. Relationship between ODV and Emotional Dependence.

D.E	Victimization	Perpetration
Separation anxiety	0.477 **	0.232 **
Modification of plans	0.427 **	0.245 **
Affective Expression	0.479 **	0.224 **
Attention Seeking	0.171 **	0.187 **
Expression limit	0.528 **	0.150 **
Fear of loneliness	0.501 **	0.210 **
Global	0.510 **	0.220 **

Note: ** $p < 0.001$.

The degree of influence that ED has on ODV as a predictor variable was determined through Simple Linear Regression analysis. It is shown that overall ED predicts ODV victimization in females with 17% of the changes in variance ($F = 85.7$ $p < 0.001$) and in males with 7% ($F = 60.7$ $p < 0.001$). ED is a stronger predictor of victimization in women compared to men, both in general terms and across specific dimensions. Furthermore, while all variables show significant correlations, certain dimensions of separation dependence exhibit a more pronounced correlation with the female gender. Notably, separation anxiety and modifications to plans demonstrate a higher correlation with victimization among women than among men. Nevertheless, the effect size is small, indicating that, despite the

statistical significance of the relationship, the overall impact of emotional dependence on victimization is relatively limited, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Linear regression emotional dependence and victimization in men and women.

Models		R2	R2 c	F	β	B	T
Global emotional dependence and V	Women	0.17	0.17	85.7	0.15	0.36	0.19
	Men	0.07	0.07	60.7	1.5	0.30	3.5
Separation anxiety and V	Women	0.08	0.08	63.7	−1.6	0.31	3.7
	Men	0.05	0.05	50.2	1.1	0.20	3.1
Modification of plans and V	Women	0.15	0.15	57.7	0.93	0.34	1.3
	Men	0.06	0.06	47.4	3.6	0.28	5.5
Affective expression and V	Women	0.07	0.07	56.3	3.7	0.27	5.8
	Men	0.06	0.06	53.3	1.2	0.27	2.8
Attention seeking and V	Women	0.05	0.05	49.4	1.6	0.30	2.3
	Men	0.04	0.04	38.9	1.1	0.18	1.1
Expression limit and V	Women	0.16	0.16	65.3	0.96	0.37	1.8
	Men	0.5	0.5	43.2	3.9	0.21	5.4
Fear of loneliness and V	Women	0.15	0.15	62.1	0.93	0.32	1.7
	Men	0.6	0.6	44.1	4.3	0.25	5.9

Note: R2 = coefficient of determination. R2 c = corrected coefficient; F = ANOVA; β = unstandardized beta coefficient; B = standardized beta coefficient; T = *t* test.

Finally, it is shown in Table 4 how global ED predicts the perpetration of ODV with 13% of the variance changes in men ($F = 75.7$ $p < 0.001$) and in women with 9% ($F = 70.7$ $p < 0.001$), identifying a slightly higher prediction of ED on the perpetration of violence in men. Consistent with the findings presented in this table above, various dimensions of ED are associated with perpetration among men. However, the intensity and the explained variance of these associations vary between genders. Effect sizes range from small to moderate, with most models indicating a higher coefficient of determination (R^2) for males compared to females.

Table 4. Linear regression of emotional dependence and perpetration in men and women.

Models		R2	R2 c	F	β	B	T
Global emotional dependence and P	Women	0.09	0.09	70.7	2.5	0.30	3.5
	Men	0.13	0.13	75.7	0.15	0.36	0.19
Separation anxiety and P	Women	0.07	0.07	60.2	1.5	0.25	2.5
	Men	0.08	0.08	63.7	1.6	0.27	2.7
Modification of plans and P	Women	0.06	0.06	47.4	1.3	0.24	4.1
	Men	0.07	0.07	57.7	1.4	0.34	1.3
Affective expression and P	Women	0.07	0.07	56.3	3.7	0.27	5.8
	Men	0.08	0.08	62.5	1.5	0.26	2.6
Attention seeking and P	Women	0.06	0.06	48.9	4.1	0.26	6.4
	Men	0.09	0.08	49.4	1.6	0.30	2.3
Expression limit and P	Women	0.07	0.07	47.4	3.9	0.27	6.3
	Men	0.11	0.11	65.5	0.85	0.34	1.2
Fear of loneliness and P	Women	0.6	0.6	44.1	4.3	0.25	5.9
	Men	0.09	0.08	49.4	1.6	0.30	2.3

Note: R2 = coefficient of determination. R2 c = corrected coefficient; F = ANOVA; β = unstandardized beta coefficient; B = standardized beta coefficient; T = *t* test.

4. Discussion

ODV represents a problem for both men and women, although it manifests differently between the genders. Both can experience and exert violence in these settings (De Los Reyes et al. 2022). Additionally, online violence in intimate partner relationships may be associated with emotional dependence, suggesting that it is a complex phenomenon influenced by this

variable (Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022; De Los Reyes et al. 2021; Estévez et al. 2018).

4.1. Victimization and Perpetration of ODV and Gender

The research reveals that ODV affects both men and women, although a slight difference is evident, with women scoring higher in victimization and men in perpetration. These findings are consistent with previous studies reporting higher rates of cybervictimization among women (Burke et al. 2011; Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022; Sourander et al. 2010; Zweig et al. 2013). Marcos Santiago and Isidro de Pedro (2019) highlight that online control and jealousy are predominant factors in gender-based violence during dating, mostly affecting women, who tend to normalize these behaviors, making them more vulnerable to cyberviolence. Additional research (Asensi Pérez and Díez Jorro 2016; Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022; Marcos et al. 2020) confirms that men are more likely to perpetrate VON. Donoso-Vázquez et al. (2018) also found that men tend to commit more acts of cyberviolence, possibly due to the internalization of social models based on inequality and heteronormativity.

The normalization of controlling and jealous behaviors can lead to men exercising more cybercontrol and women misperceiving these acts as displays of concern or love, rather than forms of violence. This perception can aggravate situations, leading to excessive cyberbullying and other types of harassment, such as sextortion or non-consensual sexting (Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022). Additionally, these results in Ecuador may be due to the internalization of social models based on inequality and heteronormativity, which contributes to the failure of both women and men to recognize these behaviors as violent.

This indicates that gender, ethnicity, culture, power, and other factors play a crucial role in shaping the perception of intimate partner violence, both offline and online. For instance, Ostermann and Watson (2024) found that male participants exhibited a greater acceptance of intimate partner violence compared to female participants, attributing this disparity to social expectations and a desire for power. Similarly, Conroy et al. (2023) discovered that the dynamics of perpetration are influenced not only by gender, but also by attitudes toward various forms of abuse and demographic characteristics. Their research indicated that minority groups were more likely to engage in such violence.

Culture significantly impacts attitudes toward violence online, as traditional cultural beliefs and gender roles can increase tolerance for violent behavior (Bringas-Molleda et al. 2017; Ulloa et al. 2004). Specifically, Cuadrado-Gordillo and Martín-Mora-Parra (2022) highlighted that Ecuador, with its more conservative social and cultural characteristics concerning gender roles and sexist attitudes, displays higher levels of hostile and benevolent sexism compared to Spain. This cultural backdrop is reflected in the higher levels of victimization reported by Ecuadorian adolescents, which aligns with the findings of this study. The lower perception of the severity of violent behaviors among Ecuadorian adolescents may contribute to a higher tolerance for and frequency of victimization. In summary, understanding the cultural context is essential for explaining why Ecuadorian adolescents may experience and report elevated levels of violence in their intimate relationships.

4.2. ED and Gender

Another result of this research is that ED is more frequent in women. Although with a slight difference with respect to men. Several studies (Castillo-Gonzales et al. 2024; de la Villa Moral et al. 2017; Aiquipa 2015; Momeñe et al. 2017; Ponce-Díaz et al. 2019; Lemos Hoyos et al. 2012) have shown this prevalence in women. In addition, a systematic literature review by Gonzalez-Bueso et al. (2018) identified that women presented higher ED than men in different regions. This review found that women tend to be more emotionally dependent than men due to several social and psychological factors. One factor is gender socialization, which teaches women to prioritize interpersonal relationships and to be more emotionally dependent. In addition, ED in women is supported by a maladaptive

and idealized view of the couple relationship, which leads to tolerance of inappropriate behaviors and minimization of jealousy, which are related to controlling behaviors. It has also been observed that women with emotional dependence tend to present anxious attachment, which makes them more vulnerable to domestic violence (Estévez et al. 2018). In addition, women tend to be socialized to be more ED and to prioritize interpersonal relationships, which can lead to greater dependence (Momeñe et al. 2017).

4.3. Victimization and Perpetration of ODV, ED and Gender

ED has been identified as a factor correlating with ODV. Individuals with high ED tend to use social networks and mobile devices to feel closer to their romantic partners and to exert more control over them (Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022). The results of this research indicate that ED correlates with ODV. In women, ED influences victimization to a greater extent, while in men, it is more associated with the perpetration of such violence.

These results bear some similarity to the study conducted by Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez (2022), which found that ED is significantly related to the victimization and perpetration of online violence in young couples. Their research highlighted that ED is a relevant factor in the manifestations of jealousy and cyberviolence, especially in young men. Similarly, de la Villa and Prieto found that men are more frequent perpetrators of online violence in their dating relationships. However, De Los Reyes et al. (2022) showed that boys not only scored higher on cyberviolence perpetration, but also on cybervictimization, suggesting that they are more likely to be both perpetrators and victims.

Although this research shows that ED is a predictor for ODV in both men and women, it is not clear that women with higher ED scores are more likely to be victims of VON. Authors such as Aiquipa (2015), Ponce-Díaz et al. (2019), and Estévez et al. (2018) have already shown that women with ED are more frequently victims of dating violence, although these studies focus on offline violence. Online violence presents different dynamics, which could explain the observed differences in the influence of ED and its factors on victimization. Thus, this study shows that ED in women has a greater influence on their victimization.

Additionally, this research found that all ED factors predict victimization in ODV among women, although some factors do so to a greater extent. For example, plan modification is characterized by behaviors that reflect a partner-centered life, to the point of abandoning and modifying one's plans, which evidences a lack of autonomy and a constant search for attention (Lemos and Londoño 2006). Fear of loneliness is another relevant aspect of ED that influences victimization in ODV among women. Individuals with ED may tolerate abusive behaviors to avoid loneliness, which perpetuates toxic relationships and increases the intensity of ODV. This fear may lead to ignoring danger signs or justifying abusive behavior (Aiquipa 2015). Borderline expression, which includes extreme behaviors and aggressive reactions, is one of the most potent predictors of ODV in women. Individuals with ED may resort to these expressions to manipulate or withhold their partner, escalating conflicts within the relationship (Lemos and Londoño 2006).

This borderline expression also predicted the perpetration of ODV in men to a greater extent. When a man feels threatened, such as when he is about to be abandoned, he may use strategies such as borderline expression, which indicates an underdevelopment of his autonomy (Lemos Hoyos et al. 2012). Borderline expression could be interpreted as a critical factor that may predict an increase in violence; the presence of jealousy and the manifestation of control, especially in intense levels of ED, indicate a significant relationship with violence (Granda Cabal and de la Villa Moral Jiménez 2022). However, although ED may play a role in how people manage conflicts and express needs in relationships, it is important to consider that aggression in relationships may be multifaceted and influenced by individual, relational, and social factors (De Los Reyes et al. 2022).

Simultaneously, ED within intimate relationships in Ecuador is profoundly influenced by gender roles and cultural factors. Traditional gender norms and sexist attitudes can legitimize controlling and abusive behaviors (Boira et al. 2017), thereby contributing to the

prevalence of ED. In Ecuador, where patriarchal structures are deeply entrenched, cultural expectations may pressure individuals to tolerate abuse and control as part of their relational role (Cuadrado-Gordillo and Martín-Mora-Parra 2022). These power dynamics are exacerbated by limited educational opportunities and ethnic disparities, which perpetuate gender stereotypes and violence (Goicolea et al. 2015).

Consequently, ED may reflect the internalization of such cultural norms, with women in particular feeling that their self-worth and security are contingent upon maintaining the relationship despite experiencing abuse. Moreover, social control and surveillance within relationships can intensify ED and dating violence, with men often acting as primary perpetrators by using social media and online technologies as means of control and monitoring. However, ED can affect individuals of any gender, leading to scenarios in Online Dating Violence (ODV) where individuals may occupy both victim and perpetrator roles. This highlights that dependency is not confined to one gender and plays a significant role in the power and control dynamics of online romantic relationships.

4.4. Limitations

This research has some limitations. One of these is the social desirability of the responses, which could have led participants to respond favorably rather than accurately and honestly. This is especially relevant in studies on relationship violence, where participants may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed to report violent or abusive behavior. In addition, the use of a non-probability sample may lead to results that are not generalizable to the broader population. The cross-sectional nature of the study also limits the ability to make causal inferences, highlighting the need for longitudinal studies to analyze the variables in depth. Moreover, the quantitative approach does not allow for a detailed analysis of individual experiences or the contextualization of participants' behaviors. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, can provide a richer and more detailed understanding of individual experiences and contextual dynamics in dating violence. Therefore, a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods allows for data triangulation and offers a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Finally, women are overrepresented in the study, and any generalizations involving gender and sexual orientation should be made with caution.

Despite its limitations, this research offers significant theoretical contributions, particularly in the relatively underexplored area of ODV. This study provides valuable insights into how ODV manifests in Ecuador, an area that has received limited attention in the literature. Furthermore, this research underscores the relationship between perpetration and victimization in the context of ED, suggesting that these variables are interconnected and warrant further investigation, especially concerning gender differences.

The findings of this study could inform the development of educational programs within schools and universities, addressing both in-person and online forms of violence. Such programs could be instrumental in tackling these issues within intimate relationships. Mental health professionals may also benefit from these insights, as they can enhance their ability to identify and treat the combined effects of ED and ODV, enabling more comprehensive evaluations and personalized treatment plans.

Additionally, the results have implications for public health policies, highlighting the need for specialized resources and services for victims and perpetrators of ODV, as well as individuals exhibiting high levels of ED. This research may thus contribute to the advancement of targeted interventions and support systems aimed at mitigating the impact of these forms of violence.

5. Conclusions

This study reveals significant gender differences in the perpetration and victimization of WNV, with victimization being more common in women and perpetration being more common in men. This reflects the perpetuation of social models based on inequality and heteronormativity in Ecuador, where men are expected to exercise control and power

in relationships and women are seen as subordinate. Likewise, violence can transcend from being physical to manifesting itself online. ODV is a contemporary form of violence in intimate partner relationships, facilitated by digital technologies and social networks (Rojas-Alonso and Rojas-solis 2021).

ED is a determinant variable in ODV. This dependence is based on a maladaptive and idealized view of the couple relationship, and is linked to mechanisms of control and surveillance, which aggravates inappropriate behaviors in virtual environments (de la Villa Moral and Prieto 2021). ED predicts victimization in women and perpetration in men. This may be because women accept certain aggressive behaviors as part of the relationship, while men tend to score higher on controlling behaviors, suggesting an internalization and possible acceptance of these behaviors as ways to maintain power in the relationship.

Additionally, ED factors such as plan modification, fear of loneliness, and borderline expression are more predictive of online violence in women due to a maladaptive view of relationships that tolerates inappropriate behaviors. These controlling behaviors are exacerbated in virtual environments, especially among young women. In men, the borderline expression of ED predicts perpetration, as they tend to score higher on controlling behaviors and cyberviolence, internalizing and accepting these behaviors as ways of maintaining power in the relationship, thereby perpetuating an asymmetry of power in the digital environment.

Given the scarcity of intervention models for online dating violence in Ecuador (Molina Sisson and Zambrano Quiroz 2023), it is essential to develop comprehensive interventions that address online violence in both genders, considering the cultural and social particularities of the Ecuadorian context. Focusing on variables such as ED is crucial, as it involves an excessive need for affection and approval from a partner, leading to submissive behaviors and tolerance of abuse. Addressing ED in interventions can help tackle the psychological roots that perpetuate online dating violence, empowering individuals to set healthy boundaries and recognize abusive behaviors, which is essential for preventing and stopping violence in both offline and online dating relationships.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.C.-G.; methodology, M.C.-G.; software, M.C.-G.; validation, M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; formal analysis, M.C.-G.; investigation, M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; resources, M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; data curation, M.C.-G.; writing—original draft preparation, M.C.-G.; writing—review and editing, M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; visualization, M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; supervision, M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; project administration M.C.-G. and E.T.A.; funding acquisition, M.C.-G. and E.T.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ministerio de Salud Pública, Gobierno del Ecuador (protocol code: MSP-034-01-01), for studies involving humans.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: We thank the Universidad Nacional de Chimborazo for the support provided throughout the process of this research, as well as for the corresponding permits and the facility provided for its execution.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Cyber-violence refers to any form of aggression or abuse that occurs through technological media and social networks (González Ortega et al. 2020).

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