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"If It's Not a Slap or a Punch Then It's Not Violence": Portuguese University Student's Representations and Practices About Intimacies and Dating Violence

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Abstract: This study aimed to analyze characteristics, representations, and practices of intimacies and violence in Portuguese university students. Data collection involved 10 focus groups with a total of 35 university students aged 18–23. The findings reveal that students conceptualize healthy relationships based on respect, trust, and individuality, reflecting egalitarian ideals. However, participants acknowledge persistent gendered expectations and asymmetries. Contributing factors to dating violence (DV) include gender stereotyping, social media, substance use, and specific social settings. While social media can foster connection, it also enables control and online abuse. Substance use, although not a direct cause, may exacerbate pre-existing tensions. DV predominantly occurs in private settings, though emotional abuse also surfaces in public spaces like social gatherings. Participants condemned DV but noted the societal normalization of less visible forms of violence. They highlighted the role of peers as primary support networks for victims but also pointed to passive attitudes when abuse involves acquaintances. These insights underscore the need for targeted interventions addressing social norms and enhancing informal support networks in university settings. This study enriches the limited qualitative research on DV among Portuguese youth and emphasizes the importance of aligning prevention strategies with the nuanced realities of young people's relationships.

Keywords: dating violence; intimate partner violence; university students' values and social representations; social representations; interpersonal relationships

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1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV), defined as violence directed at a person due to their gender, gender identity, and/or gender expression, disproportionately affects individuals of a specific gender (European Commission; Cerejo 2014; Dias 2017). It is a phenomenon deeply rooted in social gender inequalities and encompasses various forms of violence, including violence against women, domestic violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), and other forms of abuse that manifest in both public and private spheres of social life. Women and girls are the primary victims of GBV, which is widely recognized as a violation of human rights and a significant public health issue (European Commission; World Health Organization (WHO) 2021). Specifically, IPV, as a manifestation of GBV, represents a global social problem that cuts across geographies, sociocultural contexts, sexual orientations, and

age groups. It is estimated that 27% of women aged between 15 and 49, worldwide, have been victims of some act of physical and/or sexual violence in an intimate relationship (Sardinha et al. 2022). In Europe, recent data published by the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) indicate that, in the EU-27, 31.8% of women have experienced psychological, physical, and/or sexual violence during their lifetime (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) et al. 2024). This manifestation of violence has serious effects on the physical and psychological health of the victims, in the short, medium, and long term (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000; Lisboa et al. 2006; Caridade 2011; García-Moreno and Riecher-Rössler 2013; Edwards 2018; Tarriño-Concejero 2022; Tarriño-Concejero et al. 2024). Besides health consequences, the experience of GBV and IPV entails impacts on socio-economic conditions of the victims but also has measurable negative outcomes on different public institutions and services (Lisboa et al. 2006; Barros et al. 2008; Teixeira et al. 2022; European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) 2021).

It is a phenomenon that begins to manifest itself early in the victims' intimate trajectories. International data indicate that 24% of women aged between 15 and 19, and 26% of women aged between 19 and 24 years old, in different global regions, have experienced IPV at least once in their lives since early adolescence (Sardinha et al. 2022). Recent European data also point to this type of scenario with approximately 36% of women, in the EU, aged 18–29 having experienced IPV (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) et al. 2024). These data are in line with different scientific evidence over the last decades that points to high prevalence rates of IPV in adolescence and youth, both in terms of victimization and perpetuation (Makepeace 1981; Straus 2004, 2008; Machado et al. 2010; Caridade 2023; Tarriño-Concejero 2022), this being a risk factor for the experience of IPV in adulthood. In fact, Portuguese studies on GBV and IPV, particularly in the marital phase, have pointed to the beginning of long trajectories of victimization in the dating phase (Lisboa et al. 2006; Cerejo 2014). Thus, IPV among young people, scientifically designated as dating violence (DV), has been consolidated as a specific theme of research internationally (Dardis et al. 2015; Caridade 2023; Tarriño-Concejero 2022; Neves and Correia 2024; Tarriño-Concejero et al. 2024).

Since the early 2000s, Portugal has not been left out of these advances with a considerable body of research in this area (Machado et al. 2010; Paiva and Figueiredo 2004; Caridade 2011; Neves et al. 2017, 2023). These scientific developments have also been accompanied by the country's legislative and penal arsenal. Although Portugal has had legislation that criminalizes abuse in intimate relationships since 1982, with the conversion of this crime into a public crime in 2000, it was in 2013 that legislative changes began to cover DV as a typology of IPV/domestic violence criminalized by law (Lisboa et al. 2020). This process has turned DV and prevention with adolescents and young people a priority in the fight against GBV and IPV, which has been reinforced in the country's most recent public policy instrument, the National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination (ENIND), in force since 2018.

Although, as previously mentioned, gender-based violence (GBV) is not exclusive to intimate relationships or the domestic sphere, the Portuguese legal framework classifies various types of violence under the broader term of domestic violence (DV). While it is true that not all intimate partner violence (IPV)—or, in this case, dating violence—constitutes manifestations of GBV, and not all domestic violence qualifies as IPV or GBV, national and international evidence highlights IPV as a specific form of GBV that disproportionately affects women from an early age and often occurs in private spaces.

Prolonged trajectories of IPV are frequently associated with interpersonal dynamics characterized by gender inequality between men and women, which are expressed within intimate relationships but not confined to them (Lisboa et al. 2006; Dias 2017; Cerejo 2017).

Domestic violence, in particular, is a form of interpersonal violence that occurs in intimate relationships. Although research indicates similar rates of victimization and perpetration among boys and girls (Straus 2008; Neves et al. 2023), dating violence can reflect gendered asymmetries, representations, and dynamics, as will be further discussed in the following section.

The Prevalence of IPV Among Young People in Portugal

It is estimated that 25.2% of women aged 18 to 29, living in Portugal, have experienced IPV (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) et al. 2024). These findings are close to the results of the most recent national survey on violence in Portugal—the Survey on Safety in Public and Private Spaces (ISEPP)—carried out in 2022, by the National Statistics Institute (Statistics Portugal), which has results that point out that 24% of women, in Portugal, aged between 18 and 24, have already been a victim of IPV (Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) 2024). Overall, in this age group, 24.3% of people (men and women) have suffered IPV in their lifetime, with the men who have reported suffering this type of violence the most (24.8% of men aged between 18 and 24) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) 2024). Although these figures point to the same prevalence among young men and women, when all age groups are considered, it was women who suffered IPV the most throughout their lives (Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE) 2024).

The most recent national studies on DV among school-age youngsters (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024), and among university students (Correia et al. 2023), show high rates of perpetuation and victimization of IPV, as well as its legitimization and normalization. The first study, carried out with a sample of 6152 young people aged between 11 and 25 years (M = 15 years), points out that 63% suffered from at least one indicator of victimization, with a higher prevalence of psychological violence acts such as controlling behavior (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024). In terms of legitimation, it is psychological violence acts (e.g., control, harassment, and insults during an argument), followed by subtle sexual acts (e.g., forcing/pressuring to kiss), the ones which the participants tend to normalize (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024). On the other hand, physical violence is the type of violence that is least legitimized by the youngsters in this study, although 9.7% of respondents do not regard these acts as violent. Finally, in this study, it was male respondents who most legitimized the different types of violence (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024).

Regarding the national study with university students, it was carried out on a sample of 4696 students, with an average age of 22.4 years, 53.7% of whom admitted to being a victim of intimate partner violence, while 34% admitted assaulting an intimate partner at least once. Although there are no significant percentual differences between men and women in terms of victimization (54.9% and 53.5%, respectively), in proportional terms it is men who commit the most violence and women who suffer violence the most (Correia et al. 2023). Also in this study, acts of psychological violence were the most frequently reported. This research adds that it is the participants with more conservative gender beliefs who practice and suffer more IPV, with male respondents expressing more traditional gender beliefs (Correia et al. 2023; Neves et al. 2023).

These results not only paint the most recent and alarming picture of the phenomenon in Portugal, highlighting the role of beliefs and representations in identifying and legitimizing IPV/DV among young people, but also denotes the role that socially shared representations play in perpetuating and experiencing these forms of violence. On the other hand, in relation to gender beliefs, which are also based on socially (re)produced representations, the aforementioned evidence is in line with the data from studies on perpetrators and victims of domestic violence, namely that the exercise of violence is legitimized through

assumptions and roles of exacerbated expressions of femininity and masculinity (Boira and Marcuello 2013; Cerejo 2014, 2017).

That said, it will be necessary to move beyond a mere quantification of the phenomenon, aiming to create a more in-depth vision of the social representations and perceptions that young university students have about intimate relationships and the abuses that may occur amid them. Violence as a social construction is rooted in the symbolic imaginaries of social actors and may or may not coincide with what normative instances conceptualize as a crime (Lisboa et al. 2021). Thus, crime and violence are not conceptually equivalent; the latter will be defined considering two levels: the socio-cultural context and the social actors. Studying social representations as forms of socially shared knowledge (Moscovi 2000; Berger and Luckmann 1991) will allow us to access a set of beliefs, norms, and values that guide human behavior in a social context and, therefore, the basis of social action (Giddens 1984). This constructivist and qualitative approach, based on the epistemological premise that does not separate action from social structures, allows us to understand how the latter are manifested in action. In this particular study, we analyzed how young people idealize and experience intimacy, how they perceive their social surroundings and what resources for action they have, whether in the form of beliefs and values or praxis, and, finally, how these are shaped by the socio-cultural environment in which they are involved, since social actors make sense of the world in which they live, giving meaning to their actions based on collective imaginaries (Amozurrutia and Servós 2011; Charmaz 2006).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach. We followed the indications of Creswell and Poth (2017) to ensure the depth of data collection and to capture the experiences of the participants. This approach focuses on describing and understanding the phenomenon under study from a collective perspective, based on the analysis of specific discourses and topics and their possible meanings (Charmaz 2006; Creswell and Poth 2017; Mertens 2014). In addition, this study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) (Tong et al. 2007), which encourages researchers to acknowledge and clarify their identity, credentials, profession, gender, experience, and training in order to minimize bias (see Appendix A).

2.2. Study Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in Lisbon, Portugal, specifically at the Nova School of Social Sciences and Humanities (NOVA FCSH) NOVA University Lisbon, and this study is part of the border project "Behaviors in dating relationships, mental health repercussions and resilience in young university students ofthe NOVA School of Social Sciences and Humanities. A total of 35 university students participated, 21 females (F), 13 males (M), and 1 non-binary person (NB), aged between 18 and 23 years at the time of this research phase (M = 20.60; SD = 1.612), 16% of which were employed and 74% were in a relationship with a partner. In terms of disciplinary areas, the majority were attending Social Science courses (such as Sociology or Geography) (n = 20), followed by Political Studies (International relations and Political science) (n = 11), Humanities (Philosophy or Language and Studies) (n = 3), and Communication Studies (n = 1). None of the participants invited to this study refused to participate in it.

2.3. Procedure

The request to participate in this phase of the research was made through key informants (two students of NOVA FCSH), and through the research team member's contacts

within a department of NOVA FCSH, the final sample was obtained using the snowball technique until the data were saturated. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) being between 18 and 24 years old; (b) being or having been in a dating relationship; (c) attending a course in NOVA FCSH at the time of the research; (d) residing in Portugal. Data collection was conducted from June 2022 to July 2023, with a total of 10 focus groups. The groups were conducted in person by a researcher from the team with experience in qualitative research and participatory methods, assisted by a second researcher, in a room provided by NOVA FCSH, where it was ensured that participants could express their opinions without interruption, confidentiality was guaranteed, and the groups were adequately audio recorded. Observations and field notes were made to verify the data.

A semi-structured script was developed for data collection that included the following main sections: perceptions and representations of intimate relationships; influence of various factors on dating relationships; perceptions of IPV and DV; social environment and dating violence; health effects of dating violence; training related to intervention for DV; knowledge of support resources for victims of IPV and DV (see Appendix B for a simplified version of the discussion script used in this research). This script was validated by two experts in dating violence, intimate partner violence, and gender-based violence, as well in qualitative research and methods, and then piloted in the first focus group, which helped us to reorganize the topics for the subsequent focus groups.

2.4. Data Management and Analysis

As mentioned above, the group interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, with the audibility and integrity of the data being checked after each interview. Participants' names were not mentioned during the recording in order to maintain confidentiality; all discourses were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by a member of the team, resulting in a total of approximately 18 h of transcription. During the analysis of the data, Tesch's eight steps, as described by Creswell and Poth (2017), were followed: reading all the verbatim transcripts to give meaning to the data, annotating the results, grouping all the topics with the same meaning, re-reading the transcripts and repeating the analysis, coding and abbreviating the topics, developing topics and subtopics from the transcripts, comparing the codes and topics by two researchers to avoid duplication, and starting the grouping of all the topics and subtopics. This whole process of data analysis was carried out in parallel by two researchers and checked by a third researcher and was carried out with the support of MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, version 2022.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Research Support Unit of the NOVA University Lisbon (Portugal), with study code 04/CE_NOVAFCSH/2022. The entire study complied with the Declaration of Helsinki on the ethical protection and regulation of research among human beings and met all the ethical aspects of a qualitative study.

The participation of the adolescents in the discussion groups was voluntary and without financial compensation. All participants received verbal and written information about the study. They signed an informed consent form that explained the purpose, method, and use of the results. The content of the recordings was treated with strict anonymity and confidentiality. The data were securely stored in a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive folder at the University of Seville.

In order to present the results of this study while protecting the identifying data of the participants, the following coding will be used: the gender of the participant (male = M; female = F; non-binary = NB), followed by the age of the participant (e.g., M, 20 years old).

3. Results

This study explores participants' experiences and perceptions of intimacy, their views on their social environments, and the resources available to them for action. Presented below are the most significant and relevant expressions shared by the participants.

3.1. Love in the Discourse of Young University Students

Throughout the focus groups, various questions were made about intimate relationships and the participants' perspectives on these, specifically about love interactions among their age group and sociability networks. One of these was how they would characterize their ideal intimate relationship:

> F, 19 years old: *(...) for me, an intimate relationship would be based on absolute respect for the other person, honesty, not only for the other person, but also for ourselves. (...) acknowledging that there are limits. You're not one person, you're two different people who (...) share an intimate relationship and manage to have separate lives.*

> M, 22 years old: *(...) the first thing I thought of was trust. (...) commitment on both sides (...) always finding a way that makes us both comfortable (...) that person is always a safe place (...).*

> F, 21 years old: *I think it's very much this idea of both a team and a safe haven, because I think that (...) in a dating relationship there has to be friendship... (...) we have our days, we have our moments, (...) we have to be willing to "give more one day, give less in the next one" (...).*

The speeches describe ideals not only based on companionship, security, trust, and commitment, but also freedom, negotiation, and individuality. They refer to models closer to pure relationships, than to traditional romantic love, which allow the pursuit of individual goals, characteristic of late and individualized modernity. In addition, when they asked about the differences between boys and girls in the level of commitment and performance in intimate relationships, the participants admitted the reproduction of some asymmetries and disproportionalities:

> F, 19 years old: *(...) I think that girls and women have this characteristic of being the ones who work more emotionally and who have a greater expectation regarding the relationship, especially when we are younger, maybe in a more adult phase not so much and men/boys, being more carefree, (...) [they] do not have so much of a long-term perspective.*

> F, 21 years old: *(...) there is always the princess or woman, or whatever, (...) regardless of what it is, there is always her husband and she always has her family (...). Barbies and all those things that we have always seen since we were little and we have a certain idealization of our prince charming and a perfect and beautiful life. Boys, I believe that because of the way they are also educated since young, (...) have to be tough and [this thing of] the man does not cry, the man does not this and the man does not that...*

A certain ambivalence between ideals and practices perceived in the youngster's social environment is evident. Although, at the individual level, they idealize egalitarian models, they admit the (re)production of asymmetries and gendered models in terms of expectations and performance in the context of heterosexual intimate relationships. It remains to be understood that other factors, from the point of view of the participants, influence and structure the relationships of intimacy in their age group.

3.2. Factors That Influence Intimate Relationships

The young people interviewed were presented with different contexts and factors that could influence intimate relationships in their age group, namely social networks, the

consumption of substances such as alcohol and/or drugs, and whether certain spaces were more conducive to conflicts in couples.

Regarding social networks, the speeches mention positive aspects of the use of social networks in relationships, such as the possibility of keeping in touch with their love partner, even when physical distance does not allow it in the offline context. On the other hand, this type of communication and information technologies (ICT) are seen as detrimental to the well-being of a relationship in the sense that they transmit artificial versions of relationships between acquaintances and/or strangers that can undermine the self-esteem of a loving relationship. On another note, as far as DV is concerned, most of the speeches led the discussion to the potential of social networks as instruments for exercising control, humiliation, and blackmail over an intimate partner, as well as platforms for perpetuating image-based sexual violence (IBSA). Here are some of the interviewed views on this:

> F, 22 years old: *(...) within social networks, it is easier to do it, for example, blackmail, because there are situations. for example, a boy or a girl can also happen to have their partner's nudes on their cellphone and say "You can't do this, otherwise I'll post this somewhere".*
>
> M, 22 years old: *(...) [Social networks] are a much easier space to make these abuses. It is easier to practice certain acts that are considered abuse, for example, stalking on social networks.*
>
> NB, 21 years old: *(. . .) I think that the feeling that comes out of it the most is the feeling of jealousy, and I think that it's a platform that's very prone to creating this feeling, in the sense that people can see "oh, but you've been liking those photos?". Of course it's not healthy, but I think that's mostly the impact that social media can have on a relationship between two people. And it can be frowned upon by one person or the other.*
>
> F, 19 years old: *(...) Social networks are an abstract place where most violence tends to happen. Something that scares me a lot is among pre-teens, up to 14. For example, at my school, the amount of violence that happened online, people were always asking for nudes... basically creating child pornography and threatening to share it. This is an extremely traumatizing type of violence (...).*

On the other hand, the interviewees' narratives show that the use of substances such as these increases the risk of perpetuating acts of physical abuse against an intimate partner:

> F, 20 years old: *I think that alcohol (...) stimulates a lot. If a person has a violent tendency, alcohol will stimulate and the person may, or may not, be able to control it...*
>
> M, 22 years old: *Those are not motivators of violence or risky behaviors in a relationship by themselves. (...) "Oh it was because I was drunk when I did that". That kind of excuse doesn't sit very well with me.*
>
> M, 22 years old: *Yes, alcohol or drugs alone do nothing (...). The trend is already there (...) it is never an excuse for absolutely anything!*

Young people attribute DV and IPV episodes to internal and external factors to the individual, as we will see later, rather than to substance use. Although they admit that excessive consumption can lead to tensions within the couple serving as a trigger for violence, most of them reject it as an absolute justification for the perpetuation of abuse, finding answers in dynamics and tensions already present in these relationships.

Then, when asked about the most common spaces in the management of intimate conflicts and the perpetuation of IPV, the young people were divided between private spaces and spaces where sociability relationships take place (e.g., conviviality spaces, night out spaces, etc.). But the private sphere is transversally considered the privileged location for the perpetuation of this type of abuse.

F, 19 years old: *(...) I would say that it occurs mainly in private and even on social networks, conversations between them. Then parties, discos, where the consumption of substances can aggravate the situation.*

M, 22 years old: *(...) Traditionally, we associate it with private spaces, for example, at home. But I think that it can happen anywhere where one person has dominance and power over the other (...).*

M, 22 years old: *Physical violence has more presence in the private space, but emotional violence can always happen at a party.*

In sum, the interviewees' views are in line with the representation of IPV as a phenomenon of the private sphere; however, as it will be seen below, these youngsters admit that certain types of acts may occur in the public sphere, where everyone can watch, due to the power imbalance between the partners—in other words, in pre-existing interpersonal dynamics.

3.3. Representations About IPV

Regarding IPV, young people conceptualize it as an opposition to the idealized bases, already mentioned, of a romantic relationship, namely freedom, trust, commitment, and preservation of individual spaces and trajectories.

F, 22 years old: *In a relationship there has to be intimacy, cooperation and respect (...) two people who are separated and together make a relationship (...) when there comes a point when someone tries to take away that individuality...*

M, 23 years old: *It's the opposite of dating and loving somebody, causing pain to someone is not love.*

F, 20 years: *For me, it's a relationship in which there isn't respect... a relationship in which the victim has to measure, based on fear, the steps they take (...). The victim feels that there is control behind them, where respect and freedom are limited.*

Censorship of IPV is widespread among the young people interviewed; nevertheless, they believe that society still prioritizes and highlights certain forms of IPV, depending on their intensity and severity. On the other hand, they admit that there is a logic of normalization based on the binomials of physical/psychological and visible/invisible, which leads to the later acts occurring more frequently.

M, 22 years old: *I think the most common type of violence might be those small acts... (...) That example of a person feeling obliged to do something because of someone else, because that person exerts coercion... I know people who are brought up in that mentality of "If it's not a slap or a punch then it's not violence".*

M, 22 years old: *It's that physical acts are easier to see, the psychological ones are harder to know... if you see someone slap someone else, most people will say "that's violence, period". (...) But taking into account what the media highlights, for example, I think sexual violence is extremely highlighted. Or, when it's really cases of extreme violence that lead to murder, for example, "Woman was killed by her husband".*

NB, 21 years old: *Identifying physical violence is much easier and more obvious, because it's observable (...). Regarding psychological violence, it has a lot to do with situations in which people cross the line, such as jealousy, manipulation, situations where a person doesn't threat their partner as equal and start taking advantage, controlling them and conditioning their actions and thoughts.*

Although DV is conceptualized by young people as acts that limit the victim's freedom and autonomy, there is still a prevailing idea that psychological violence is devalued as such, since in society physical acts still tend to be more prominent.

3.4. IPV Among Young People in a University Context—Representations, Experiences, and Logics of Informal Intervention

With the discourses illustrating socially constructed conceptualizations and beliefs of IPV, it was necessary to understand how the participants perceived the occurrence and prevalence of IPV, namely DV, among their age group and in the university social environment, more specifically detailed as follows:

> F, 21 years old: *(...) I think that dating violence between students is much more frequent than we imagine. We can say that we are the part of the population that is more informed and that is why we must break a taboo against this. But I think they are also the first to close their eyes (...) we have heard of situations [of DV/IPV] that are known within the campus.*

> M, 21 years old: *In a university setting it is much more common, due to a maturity that is not as defined as it is, for example, in a relationship between people who are married. No, it's not the same. And also, because there is a bit of a limitation in terms of resources... because during college people are still in their 20's, lives are not yet established and hormones are still on the surface, leaps and bounds...*

With the participants declaring knowledge about various cases of DV/IPV, it was needed to obtain further understanding about their reactions to known cases. Friendships were the most used and important support networks for survivors and even for breaking away from the abusive relationship:

> F, 21 years old: *(...) colleagues are the first people to know because... In general, we all have friends from high school or acquaintances that suffered violence(...).*

However, it is still common such situations to remain silent when they come to the attention of classmates, i.e., when those involved do not have a direct friendship relationship with those who know about the cases:

> F, 22 years old: *Many times people see it, they don't say anything, neither to the police nor to the person who is being aggressive (...). When I was in high school, there was a couple, I never watched it, but my friends said "Oh, I saw him slapping him in the middle of the hallway, I saw him doing I don't know what". Nobody did anything. There was a phase when everyone knew and did nothing...*

On the other hand, the young people reported personal situations with friends, so it was also important for us to understand whether they reacted to these situations by intervening, or whether they followed the model of not intervening that is perceived when the situations involve acquaintances.

> F, 21 years old: *I had a friend who called me every day crying, because her boyfriend (...) blackmailed her, manipulated her, questioned everything she did, everything she said... (...) I tried to intervene, I saw this as something violent that had to be stopped and I said [to her friend] "I think the best thing you have to do is come back home buy the ticket.", in the morning as everything was fine I asked "have you bought the ticket to come home?" and she said "no, everything is ok now." On the same day, or after a few days, she called me crying again, in panic. I got to the point of saying "Okay, if you don't leave, I'll call your parents."*

> F, 21 years old: *My friend suffered threats of having intimate photos exposed, not only her, but also her parents, because she didn't respond to her ex-boyfriend, she didn't want to go back to the relationship... The ex-boyfriend was excessively jealous, demanded things from her, very manipulative, when there was a problem, he blamed her and made her feel bad*

The cases presented reinforce the important role of sociability nets in the intervention of DV cases and, therefore, the importance of training these audiences on how to intervene in these situations. The young people interviewed are sensitive and ready to help when situations are with close friends. However, the maintenance of an abusive relationship harms the victims' bonds with different support networks (friends, family...), causing a certain demotivation to friends' ability to act and intervene in these situations:

> F, 22 years old: *I intervened a few times. (...) It's something that has been going on for a long time, they complain that they do this and this (...). I always said, "you need something, tell me.", or "I think you should try to end the relationship" (...). I was always the first to get between them, like if she was angry or that, I got in the middle and sometimes they got upset with me, it got to a point where I was the bitch friend.*

These discourses show that the young people interviewed tend to be active, although to different degrees, when the situations are with friends, but the reports show fruitless interventions, especially when they become more active. Whether due to the maintenance of the cycle of abuse, so common to these situations, or due to the perception that they cannot do anything given the intimacy and complexity of the cases, when interventions are unsuccessful, there is a lack of motivation to continue intervening in these situations.

4. Discussion

The ideals of these young people about intimacy privilege relationships of trust, commitment, negotiation, individuality, freedom, and definition of personal limits, marked by individual satisfaction as a key for relationship success, and therefore associated with models of pure and egalitarian relationships between males and females (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Other studies with young university students indicate that this group presents love models closer to the described style of pure relationship, based on companionship and preservation of the individual dimension rejecting possessive love (Rodríguez-Santero et al. 2017). In fact, in general, Portuguese youngsters are more prone to informal models of intimacy, with a certain devaluation of more traditional and institutionalized models of romantic relationships (Torres et al. 2018).

However, the discourses highlight a certain ambivalence between idealization and practice, regarding gender relationship expectations. The interviewees, although they are apologists for egalitarian and democratic models, admit that between boys and girls there are differences in terms of performance and expectations. The masculine continues to be associated with a relationship that is more focused on the physical and sexual aspects, while the feminine is responsible for maintaining the affective dynamics and feelings, like other national studies with young people in this age group report (Machado Pais 2012; Vieira 2012; Mendes et al. 2013; Neves and Torres 2018). On the other hand, these discourses demonstrate how the appanage of the masculine associated with action and reason, while the feminine with emotion (Cerejo 2018) prevails in the social representations of these young people and in the social dynamics in which they are inserted. Connell also conceptualized intimate sphere as a dimension of social life where the hierarchies between masculinity and femininity are produce leading to the solidification of the gender order (Connell 1987) and male domination (Bourdieu 2001). As these performances are the stage for negotiation and consolidation of gender identities at the level of love and between peers, they are, therefore, essential elements in the gender performances of young university students.

In the context of relationships, the participants identified the use of the internet and social networks as factors that currently influence relationships at different levels. Young adults start using social media very early in life, which carries different risks to their safety, subjective well-being, and in their different relationships (Dardis et al. 2015; Vives-Cases

et al. 2021a, 2021b; Tarriño-Concejero et al. 2023; Oydemir and Dikmen 2024). If, on the one hand, the virtual world constructed by social networks places new pressures and demands on intimate relationships (Vaterlaus et al. 2018), despite also bringing new opportunities and facilities, these are also configured as a privileged space for the exercise of different forms of interpersonal violence (Mosley and Lancaster 2019).

These forms of online violence are an extension of IPV in an offline context and demonstrate some of the specificities of DV compared to IPV in the marital phase, for example (Caridade et al. 2020; Monteiro et al. 2022). In other words, in abusive relationships, social networks serve as a complement to the abuse already practiced in a face-to-face context, even if they lead to specific acts specific to this context. As with national studies with adolescents and young people (Correia et al. 2023; União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024), the qualitative data from this study show that the participants are aware of various cases of psychological and sexual abuse using social media. In particular, regarding IBSV, the interviewees' speeches indicate that this specific type of violence is quite common in their age group and in the different social and school contexts they have been part of throughout their lives. On the other hand, this type of violence disproportionately affects young girls compared to their male counterparts, and despite other research pointing to this scenario, as well as the existence of specialized institutions to support victims of this phenomenon, there is still a legislative arsenal to be built in Portugal aimed specifically at this type of crime (Faustino et al. 2022).

As for substance use, most young people deny that this is a justification for the use of IPV, although they admit that it can be a stimulant in this sense. However, it is important to point out that these views point to a greater intolerability towards substance abuse, which is a positive indicator and is in line with other studies (Caridade 2011).

Another interesting fact in the speeches presented is that in the participants' perception, the types of violence vary according to space, with a perception that more intense acts with immediate consequences, such as those of a physical nature, are kept for the private sphere and the more subtle ones in the public sphere. These narratives also show that regardless of the presence of third parties or not, young people can attack an intimate partner in multiple ways. This representation typifies a different model of perpetrator of spousal violence, who assaults only in the private sphere (Boira Sarto 2010; Cerejo 2017). It also indicates that it is socially normalized to carry out subtle psychological abuse in front of friends, colleagues, and/or acquaintances (e.g., humiliation and insults).

In terms of representations and beliefs about IPV, the interviewees generally conceptualize it as the antithesis of love, recognizing that there is a certain normalization of certain acts of abuse in their social environment, especially of a psychological nature, under the logic of showing affection (Caridade 2011; Cerejo 2014; Wood 2001). They also believe that it is the more intense forms of violence, such as physical and sexual, that are more prominent and more quickly perceived in the surrounding social environment. This evidence is allied to data from the most recent national studies on DV, in which young participants tend to normalize indicators of psychological abuse compared to physical abuse, with subtle violence being the most legitimized, these representations being rooted in more conservative relational and gender values (Correia et al. 2023; Neves et al. 2023; União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024).

Finally, the opinions of the participants are divided into those who see IPV among young people at university as quite common, due to the pressures that university life puts on young people, challenging and testing their personal relationships, as well as the question of it being a transitional phase where maturity, the definition of personal limits and respect for others are being solidified, and those who argue that young people are increasingly more interventionist and intolerant of this form of abuse.

Throughout the 10 discussion groups, the different participants reported different experiences of IPV, their own, and those of friends, colleagues and acquaintances. In the case of violence suffered by others, the interviewees reinforced the importance of informal support networks in managing cases of IPV. Friends tend to prefer these to more formal networks, either because they do not know about the resources or because they are afraid, ashamed or even lack confidence in exposing the situation. However, although the interviewees admit to helping and intervening in these situations, many of the actions fail due to the maintenance of the cycles so typical in these cases, which discourages young people from constantly acting on the situation in question. However, some interviewees point to the potential of more subtle intervention methods in these situations.

The data indicate the importance of reaffirming a commitment to informal models of reporting and intervention (Neves et al. 2017; Klein 2012, 2018). This is particularly relevant in specialized training on how to intervene when close friends are entangled in situations of abuse. Additionally, it is crucial to address strategies for intervening in cases involving acquaintances, as the findings suggest that young people are less likely to intervene in such situations, corroborating evidence from other national studies (Mendes et al. 2013).

The representation of the interviewees about IPV, at the general level and at the university level, reinforces this argument, since most of the youngsters admitted to knowing several cases of IPV. However, their discourses and practices continue to be focused on the intervention with the victims and not with the aggressors, which will apply to reinforce in prevention campaigns and training for intervention, being in line with national and international studies that show high levels of perpetuation of IPV, regardless of gender, in young people (Straus 2004, 2008; Machado et al. 2010; Neves et al. 2023; União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024).

Still, in prevention and intervention, the young people left some suggestions for lines of action in relation to DV guided by horizontal rather than vertical logics, which reinforces the privileged character of informal interventions and networks. It is true that universities must be agents of change in the fight against social inequalities and discrimination at different levels (Torres et al. 2024; Ribeiro et al. 2023); however, this process will be innocuous if students continue to follow institutionally established guidelines and without their full participation. For this reason, young students must also be seen as agents and co-producers of these changes aimed at equality, anti-discrimination and the fight against different public and private violence, in order to increase the effectiveness of the programs already in force in Portugal (Neves et al. 2017; Neves and Correia 2024), ensuring more inclusive and horizontal processes, betting on inter-university networks made up of different HEI and student groups.

5. Conclusions

This study sheds light on the nuanced perceptions and experiences of dating violence (DV) among Portuguese university students, uncovering both the egalitarian ideals they espouse and the persistent gendered asymmetries and social influences that shape their relationships. Participants described healthy relationships as those grounded in mutual respect, trust, and individuality, yet they recognized the pervasive influence of societal norms, peer behaviors, and digital environments on their experiences of dating and intimacy.

The findings highlight the dual role of social media as both a connector and a space where control and emotional abuse can occur. Similarly, while substance use does not directly cause DV, it can amplify pre-existing conflicts, underscoring the complex interplay between environmental and individual factors. Participants' identification of peers as key sources of support for victims also suggests the potential of peer-led initiatives to combat DV. However, the recognition of passive attitudes among bystanders, especially

when the perpetrator is known, signals the need for programs that foster active bystander intervention.

However, despite the richness of the questions raised and the reinforcement of evidence from other Portuguese research (Mendes et al. 2013; Neves et al. 2023; União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) 2024), this study describes a circumscribed social space and raises a series of new questions that should be explored in greater depth using other types of information-gathering tools, such as individual interviews and life stories, which will allow to access a set of data on victimization trajectories, intimacy dynamics, personal network constraints, among other type of in-depth information.

Future developments should focus on expanding the scope of this research to include diverse university contexts across Portugal, capturing regional variations in cultural and social norms. Also, the development of qualitative longitudinal studies, that help to shed more light on current annual diagnostics (Neves et al. 2017; Correia et al. 2023), could deepen our understanding of how perceptions and behaviors evolve over time, particularly as students' transition from university to adult relationships. Additionally, exploring the intersectionality of factors such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background could provide a more comprehensive picture of DV dynamics in diverse youth populations.

Prevention efforts should integrate findings from this study to design interventions that are context-specific and culturally sensitive. This includes leveraging social media platforms to disseminate positive relationship norms, developing peer-education programs to empower students as allies and active bystanders, and fostering institutional commitments to creating safer campus environments. Although this work is being carried out in Portugal (Cruz et al. 2024; Ribeiro et al. 2023; Torres et al. 2024), it is focused on academic professions and the organizational culture of institutions, which implies strengthening these programs and linking them to university programs for prevention and intervention in dating violence, such as the Uni+ Programme, based in the north of Portugal (Neves et al. 2017; Neves and Correia 2024). In a scenario where research and university teaching are increasingly internationalized (Ribeiro et al. 2023), it is important to build synergies between different educational institutions in different countries, in order to build up prevention and intervention models institutionalized in inter-university task forces, both at national and international level.

In sum, this research underscores the need for a holistic and participatory approach to DV prevention and intervention, one that aligns with the lived realities of young people while challenging the societal structures that perpetuate violence in intimate relationships.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

DV Dating violence
GBV Gender-based violence
HEI Higher education institutions
IBSA Image based sexual violence
ICT Information and communication technologies
IPV Intimate partner violence

Appendix A. COREQ Checklist: Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ): 32-Item Checklist

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page #
Domain 1: Research team and reflexivity		
Personal Characteristics		
1. Interviewer/facilitator	Which author/s conducted the interview or focus group?	Pg 5
2. Credentials	What were the researcher's credentials, e.g., PhD and MD?	5
3. Occupation	What was their occupation at the time of the study?	5
4. Gender	Was the researcher male or female?	5
5. Experience and training	What experience or training did the researcher have?	5
Relationship with participants		
6. Relationship established	Was a relationship established prior to study commencement?	4–5
7. Participant knowledge of the interviewer	What did the participants know about the researcher, e.g., personal goals, reasons for conducting the research?	4–5
8. Interviewer characteristics	What characteristics were reported about the interviewer/facilitator, e.g., bias, assumptions, reasons, and interests in the research topic?	4–5

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page #
Domain 2: study design		
Theoretical framework		
9. Methodological orientation and Theory	What methodological orientation was stated to underpin the study, e.g., grounded theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, phenomenology, content analysis?	4
Participant selection		
10. Sampling	How were participants selected, e.g., purposive, convenience, consecutive, snowball?	4–5
11. Method of approach	How were participants approached, e.g., face-to-face, telephone, mail, and email?	5
12. Sample size	How many participants were in the study?	4
13. Non-participation Setting	How many people refused to participate or dropped out? Reasons?	4
14. Setting of data collection	Where was the data collected, e.g., home, clinic, and workplace?	4–5
15. Presence of nonparticipants	Was anyone else present besides the participants and researchers?	N/A
16. Description of sample	What are the important characteristics of the sample, e.g., demographic data and date?	4
Data collection		
17. Interview guide	Were questions, prompts, and guides provided by the authors? Was it pilot tested?	Appendix B
18. Repeat interviews	Were repeat interviews carried out? If yes, how many?	N/A
19. Audio/visual recording	Did the research use audio or visual recording to collect the data?	5
20. Field notes	Were field notes made during and/or after the interview or focus group?	5
21. Duration	What was the duration of the interviews or focus group?	5
22. Data saturation	Was data saturation discussed?	5
23. Transcripts returned	Were transcripts returned to participants for comment and/or correction?	N/A

Item No	Guide Questions/Description	Reported on Page #
Domain 3: analysis and findings		
Data analysis		
24. Number of data coders	How many data coders coded the data?	5
25. Description of the coding tree	Did the authors provide a description of the coding tree?	5
26. Derivation of themes	Were themes identified in advance or derived from the data?	5
27. Software	What software, if applicable, was used to manage the data?	5
28. Participant checking	Did participants provide feedback on the findings?	N/A
Reporting		
29. Quotations presented	Were participant quotations presented to illustrate the themes/findings? Was each quotation identified, e.g., participant number ?	6–10
30. Data and findings consistent	Was there consistency between the data presented and the findings?	6–10
31. Clarity of major themes	Were major themes clearly presented in the findings?	6–10
32. Clarity of minor themes	Is there a description of diverse cases or a discussion of minor themes?	6–10

Appendix B. Discussion Script

Intimate Relationships

What would an ideal romantic relationship look like for you?

Is there anyone you consider a role model for a romantic relationship?

Do you think boys and girls have different expectations regarding love? What do you see as the major differences?

Dating Relationships and Violence—Factors

Social Media and Internet

The use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok is widespread. How do you think social media influences dating relationships?

Alcohol/Drugs

Alcohol and drug use is common among young university students. In your opinion, how does it influence tense situations in a dating relationship?

Have you ever witnessed a situation like that? How did you respond?

Places

In terms of locations, where do you think dating violence occurs most frequently?

Representations of Non-Heteronormative Intimacies and Violence

As you know, intimate relationships exist beyond the heteronormative spectrum (e.g., same-sex relationships, non-monogamous relationships, polyamorous relationships). Do you believe intimate

partner violence can occur in these types of relationships? I would like to hear your views on this topic.

Perceptions of Dating Violence

How would you define dating violence? What makes a relationship abusive?

What kinds of behaviors or acts are most common in these situations?

Social Environment and Dating Violence

Let's talk a bit about your social environment (e.g., friendships, acquaintances, fellow students). Do you think dating violence is common among young university students?

Do you know of any cases of dating violence among your classmates?

How about among your friends?

Impact on Health

In your opinion, what kind of consequences does an abusive relationship have on the victim's life and health?

Training Related to the Prevention of Dating Violence

Have you ever received training on the prevention of dating violence? If yes, where?

Knowledge About Resources for Getting Out of a Violent Relationship

If you have witnessed an unhealthy relationship involving acquaintances, friends, or colleagues, how did you act? Did you intervene?

Do you know of any networks (e.g., institutions, NGOs, organizations) in civil society that support victims of intimate partner violence?

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions' Action on Dating Violence

What actions could your college or university take to promote healthier intimate relationships among students?

What measures could be implemented to prevent and address dating violence between students?

How could a group of students contribute to these efforts?

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