

Myths of romantic love and gender-based violence in the fan forum of the Spanish Teen Series *Los Protegidos*

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Abstract

By analysing the fan forum of a popular Spanish teen series aimed at young people, *Los Protegidos* (2010-2012), this study explores how stereotypical myths and beliefs about romantic love are maintained. The article interprets comments made by Spanish fans of the series about the reactions and behaviours of the leading couple. We found that fan forum participants evaluate the couple's behaviour according to gender stereotypes. They justify the male character's aggressive behaviour towards the female character and blame her for her mistreatment. Based on the analysis results, we reflect on the perpetuation of myths that justify violence in romantic relationships.

Key words: romantic love, gender-based violence, series, audience, youth

Introduction

There are various studies that highlight the relationship that teenagers and emerging adults establish with what they consume in the media (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Simelio, Ortega and Medina, 2013). Cultural Studies research has developed an approach that considers teenagers and young adults as active consumers with a critical capacity in relation to the messages transmitted by multiple media (Albury, 2013; Bragg, 2006; Kennett, Humphreys and Schultz, 2012; McKee, 2012). From this perspective, it is understood that

teenagers and young adults add meaning to the sexual and romantic relationship content represented in the media. In fact, already back in the eighties, Buckingham (1987) stated that ‘to suggest that the programme merely imposes meaning on viewers is to oversimplify the process, and to accord it a degree of power which it does not possess’ (p. 202).

As Buckingham and Bragg (2004) point out, adolescents may come to consider the media a more useful source of information than schools or even their parents. This might be because the media are more accessible and entertaining and less moralistic (Masanet and Buckingham, 2015). In this context, television series and, more specifically, teen series, become one of the star products most consumed by Spanish teenagers and young people (Fedele, 2011; Medrano-Samaniego, Palacios and Aierbe-Barandiaran, 2007). Teen series provide young people with information on topics that interest them, such as love and sexual relationships, and at the same time play a role in the construction of their own identities. As García-Muñoz and Fedele (2011: 135) point out, teen series “recreate and offer the audience a symbolic transcription of reality that intervenes in some way in the construction process of the young people’s identities”. Different studies (Masanet and Buckingham, 2015; Simelio, Ortega and Medina, 2013) have found that, in fact, teenagers and young adults seek out series whose main characters are young people and which have storylines focused on love relationships, and that these storylines can become a significant educational source for issues that concern them, such as teenage pregnancies, loss of virginity and homosexuality. Davis (2004) looks at this issue, and has dedicated his work to studying how adolescent homosexuality is represented in various fictional series. He highlights that the portrayal of homosexual adolescent characters in fictional series helps fill educational gaps in school curricula and standardize the image of the teen homosexual. That these topics are represented in the series as open dilemmas leads to discussion, and therefore, learning (Albury, 2013; Masanet, 2015).

In fact, some series have raised more awareness in adolescents about different issues, such as the normalization of homosexual couples, than advertising campaigns or official information programmes (Montero, 2006).

Despite these revealing studies, parents and schools have shown concern about the representations of sexuality and romantic relationships, and therefore of gender roles, in the media and specifically in teen series. Yet these informal educational practices cannot be ignored because 'students already learn from the media, and they appreciate not only the information they can glean but also the media's appeal to them as knowledgeable and mature' (Bragg, 2006: 329). Thus, teen series have become an informal source of education about sexual/romantic relationships and gender roles with which teenagers and emerging adults feel comfortable and rate positively. Therefore, we agree with Barker and Andre (1996) when they state that soap operas can be used to clarify issues of gender and sexual identity.

This work falls within this area of study. We focus on a particular Spanish teen series and our main objective is to research the kinds of discourses young people establish on the romantic roles of heterosexual fictional characters. The aim is to determine whether the audience, focusing on the fan forum participants, judges the behaviour of the heterosexual characters differently according to their gender, and how they evaluate the character's attitudes and actions within the relationship that links them to the storyline. We focus on observing whether the fan forum comments adhere to (or deviate from) the application of gender stereotypes when they express judgements about a male or female character's behaviour within a relationship. The aim is to observe whether adolescents stick to the stereotypes and myths of romantic love presented by the series (Masanet, Medina-Bravo and Aran-Ramspott, 2016) or, on the contrary, they question them. This will also help us to determine the models of romantic love that the followers of the series could have internalized, providing information

for understanding the findings of previous studies (de Miguel, 2015) that alert us, as we shall see below, to the increase in gender violence in young heterosexual Spanish couples.

Gender differences in the internalization of romantic myths and justifications of violence in the Spanish adolescent population

Reports of gender-based violence among adolescents and young people in Spain have increased in recent years. According to a recent survey (de Miguel, 2015), the age group with the highest percentage of women who experience gender-based violence in their relationship (21%) corresponds precisely to that of women younger than 25 years old. This makes it essential to reflect on what may be the underlying reasons for these data when the social perception is that of a highly egalitarian society in terms of gender issues. However, authors such as Osborne (2009) make a more critical reading of this apparent equality by defending the hypothesis that, faced with the transformations in the relationships between men and women, some men (also young men) resort to violence precisely to maintain their traditional social status within the couple, confirming what Valcárcel (2013) calls the 'mirage of equality'.

One of the legitimating mechanisms of violence in young Spanish couples remains the mythology surrounding love, understood as 'the set of socially shared beliefs about the supposed true nature of love' (Yela, 2003: 264). The findings of different studies (Cantera, Estébanez and Vázquez, 2009; de Miguel, 2015; Díaz-Aguado, 2013) demonstrate the weight that this mythology (the one true love, jealousy as a requirement of love, love can overcome all obstacles, and especially, the myth that 'who fights each other, desires each other', that is, the compatibility of feelings of romantic love and aggressive behaviours, among others) continues to have for Spanish adolescents, and its role as justification for behaviours of

power, control, and physical violence. If girls confuse controlling behaviour and jealousy for evidence of love from their partner, it is evident that they are more unprotected and will not look for strategies to change the situation. And when they are aware, the myths that love can overcome everything and that he will change serve as reinforcements to stay in the relationship and not question what is really happening (Yela, 2000).

Whether because adolescent boys have more embedded cognitive schemas that justify the use of violence than girls (Calvete, 2008), especially if the boy belongs to a lower social class (Garaigordobil, Aliri and Martínez-Valderrey, 2013), or due to different socialization in the gender roles within the couple relationship (Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, Carrera and Vallejo-Medina, 2013b), the reality is that boys and girls continue to socialize within the same socio-cultural standards of romantic love, despite the fact that certain gender differences can be observed within this conceptualization. The ideal love for both boys and girls is related to altruism, obsessiveness, friendship and romanticism. However, we need to refine this general idea: girls have a more idealized vision of love, while boys are more accepting of the myth of the link between love and mistreatment, making them more prone to hostile sexism. In the words of the authors: 'So the boys, who agree with love without emotion, with no further expectations, at the same time, are those who consider that violence can be understood as acts of love' (Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, Carrera, and Vallejo-Medina, 2013a: 217). This is consistent with other studies with Spanish teenagers (such as Arenas, 2013; Díaz-Aguado, Martínez, and Martín, 2013; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, and González, 2007). The study by García (2010) with young Spanish and British female bloggers shows a variant of the different roles adopted in a couple relationship and the internal contradictions. The study demonstrates how adolescents 'self-subordinate' in their romantic relationships with their

boyfriends and radically change their discourse – to then vindicate their independence – when they break off the relationship.

According to Allen (2007), Connell (2005) and Lomas (2003), the hegemonic model of masculinity ends up being inter-linked with the romantic ideology; thus, the social prototype of what is expected from a man in a love relationship is based on a social model of masculinity characterized by dominance, toughness and emotional insensitivity. Within this cultural expectation of male dominance, the woman is surrounded by messages that idealize her surrender and submissiveness to love.

The representations of love relationships in Spanish teen series and how young people interact with them

The situation outlined in the previous section has opened the doors to research focused on representations of romantic and sexual relationships (and the related gender representations) in teen series as well as how teenagers and young adults interact with these messages. There is concern about the representations of adolescent love and sexual relationships in teen series, which can be seen in an increase in the research centred on them. In the Spanish context, there are several studies that highlight the perpetuation of gender differences in teen series through the representation of romantic relationships that appeal to idealized love and romantic myths. Masanet, Medina-Bravo and Aran-Ramspott (2016) examine how romantic relationships are represented in the teen series *El Barco* and *Los Protegidos* and conclude that myths of romantic love, like “the power of love”, “the predestined true love” or “love as possession”, persevere in modern stories aimed at young people. They highlight the fact that these romantic myths are about gender differences, as they present a submissive cultural model of femininity and a dominant cultural representation of masculinity. Likewise, Luzón et al.

(2009) found that Spanish teen series give particular importance to the representation of impossible loves between adolescents and the myth of sacrifice within the relationship. The findings of other similar studies, such as that by Medina et al. (2005) on the Spanish teen series *Los Serrano*, alert us to how the myths of romantic love (the one true love or the transforming power of love) are systematically associated with female adolescent characters, while male adolescent characters are educated to be sexually powerful and jealous. Of course, there are also Spanish studies that emphasize the role played by teen series in giving visibility to alternative love models and sexual diversity, like that of García (2013), which points out the importance that different Spanish teen series, like *Al Salir de Clase* or *Física o Química*, have had in raising awareness about teenage homosexuality. These are important studies, but they are in the minority. In the Spanish context there are many more studies that emphasize the persistence of representations of stereotyped love relationships that justify and exalt the myths of romantic love. Considering that these myths are one of the causes of gender violence in teenage couples in Spain, as discussed above, it is interesting and necessary to see how teenagers and young people interact with these representations, what they make of them and how they interpret them.

There are fewer studies that examine audience interpretation in the Spanish context, but they do exist. Capdevila, Crescenzi, and Araüna (2013) analysed the teen series *Sin tetas no hay paraíso* and concluded that the series presents highly stereotypical female characters. They found that there is a certain relationship between representations in the series and the interpretations made by the adolescent fans, despite the fact that they attempt to distance themselves from the series' proposals. Masanet (2015) also analysed the discourses of adolescents about the relationships presented in teen series and concluded that only those series that break with the stereotypical representations that idealize romantic love and present

open dilemmas to teens, like *Física o Química*, are able to get teenagers to reflect on love and the myths that surround it. These series therefore become information sources for the construction of the teenagers' own identity. However, when the series are based on the perpetuation of the romantic mythology, most adolescent viewers accept and justify this mythology, as it is more difficult to uphold a critical attitude towards it.

As we have seen, young people attempt to shy away from the most traditional representations in the series but in most cases they still hold them as reference points in their daily lives. It is therefore important to study audiences to better understand the relationship young people have with love representations in series because, although some series present alternative representations, the old models are still very much alive. As Click, Holladay, Lee, and Kristiansen (2015) point out, more studies into audience discourses around TV series are necessary to determine how the gender identities of these audiences are affected by media representations. This article works with the audiences in order to examine whether they adhere to gender stereotypes when they interpret the love relationships shown in the series *Los Protegidos*. In this study we analyse the comments made on a fan forum. Such forums are 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2004), meeting points for those who share similar cultural affiliations or tastes. These forums make it possible to explore new spaces where teenagers and young adults can discuss the media representations of romantic relationships. Fan forums are new information sources within traditional audience studies, which centre on focus groups and interviews. By analysing fan forums, the researcher has access to spontaneous comments that are not conditioned by the adult gaze and that correspond to the specific scenes of interest of the series. They are little discussion spaces where the audiences themselves interpret or engage with the programmes.

Introducing "Los Protegidos"

Los Protegidos is a Spanish teen series produced by Boomerang TV and broadcast on the Spanish television network Antena 3. It was first shown in prime time in 2010. The series ended in 2012 after a total of three seasons and 41 episodes. It was an audience success in Spain, reaching over 3,000,000 viewers in different episodes (data from *Fórmula TV*). The series belongs to the fantasy and drama genres. The story revolves around a group of children and teenagers with supernatural powers who must learn to live as a family and hide their secrets from the rest of the world. One of the main storylines of the series is the romantic relationship between the two main teenage characters: Sandra and Culebra. This is also the young audience's favourite relationship in the series (Masanet, 2015) and it is the focus of our analysis. This romantic relationship is characterized by being an impossible love because Sandra's power (physical contact generates electricity) prevents her from touching anyone. Previous studies have reflected that this romantic couple symbolizes a forbidden love relationship: they "represent the modern day Romeo and Juliet who live in the society of individualism and, due to external factors, cannot be together" (Masanet, Medina-Bravo and Aran-Ramspott, 2016: 27). Consequently, throughout the series the main aim of these two characters is to try to control their powers so they can be together or to forget each other so they can stop suffering – they try to do this by having relationships with other characters. In the last chapter of the series Sandra manages to control her powers and begin a romantic relationship with Culebra. Thus, the series perpetuates myths of romantic love like "predestined true love" and "the power of love" (Masanet, Medina-Bravo and Aran-Ramspott, 2016), because Sandra's love is represented as being something superior that manages to overcome all obstacles, including her supernatural powers. All the relationships

presented in the series are heterosexual, and therefore the LGBTI+ collective is not represented.

Following the classification developed by Jenner (2011), *Los Protegidos* can be included in the teen series category and, more specifically, it can be considered a ‘supernatural teen series’. As a teen series, it is aimed at an adolescent audience, runs for 40-60 minutes, focuses most of the plot on the teenage characters, especially on the relationships between them – friendship and love – and takes place in family environments or schools (García-Muñoz and Fedele, 2011). As a supernatural teen series, it also uses different narrative tools that place a lot of emphasis on allegories and metaphors, through teenage characters who have supernatural powers.

The transmedia strategy of *Los Protegidos* makes it particularly interesting. Its first chapter was recorded in 3D, and web-exclusive content, videogames, novels and official diaries were created, among other contents (García, 2014; Mayor, 2014). Therefore, the user's experience of the series became interactive. The fans also expanded this experience by creating fanfic, fanvids and fanpics, and it was a very active fan community. According to García (2014), series like *Los Protegidos* take the audience beyond the television broadcast and therefore obtain greater commitment from its public. These transmedia strategies are generally developed for contents aimed at young people, who are more open to interacting with series.

The transmedia strategy of *Los Protegidos* is not exclusive to this series but rather a general tactic of Antena 3, the Spanish television network that opts most for transmediality (Mayor, 2014; Lacalle, 2011). Antena 3 is also characterized by its strong commitment to national series, and it is the reference network for Spanish fiction (García, 2014). This makes it attractive for young people.

Methodology

Objectives

Our initial question looks at what discourses teenagers/emerging adults place on the romantic roles of fictional characters. Our aim is to look at whether fans of the series judge reactions and behaviours differently according to the gender of the character in the romantic storyline. By establishing these differences in values, a second objective concentrates on analysing the nature of these differences.

Sample and method

Our study focuses on the internet forum of the series *Los Protegidos* and more specifically on the comments about the romantic relationship between Sandra and Culebra, which makes up a large part of the series' storyline.

We therefore decided to work with the fan forum of the *Fórmula TV* website (<http://www.formulatv.com>). This television portal receives the most visitors in Spain (source: Nielsen-OJD) and it is also the largest Spanish television community. Every day *Fórmula TV* publishes a large range of multimedia information for followers of different television programmes and has an extensive community in which its users can post comments about the news, take part in forums, discuss videos, as well as other options. The website contains a fan forum for the series broadcast on Spanish television. These forums have intense daily activity, in which fans comment on the daily shows and the news surrounding the series. Fans can also share different user-generated content in relation to the series. At the time of our research (January-April 2013), the forum of the series *Los Protegidos* within the *Fórmula TV* website had over 160 pages of open discussion threads that were written during the years

the series was broadcast. Most of the forum posts contained numerous comments on different aspects of the series. We chose this forum for three reasons: a) it was a very active forum among fans; b) it maintained the anonymity of its participants – a key aspect for the research, given that it was focused on love relationships and the anonymity made it easier for users to discuss sensitive subjects; and c) it was an unofficial forum of the series that offered the users more freedom, since it moved away from the interventions of the series itself. In fact, *Fórmula TV* forums use a standard screen that enables registered participants to contribute to discussions and create new threads freely. No participation is observed by the moderators and it is the participants themselves who suggest discussion topics, and thus the types of discussion.

The *Los Protegidos* forum appeared to be predominated by young people, who are usually the ones that interact in these kinds of fan forums. In this context, the anonymity of the forum allowed the participants to enjoy more freedom to share their ideas and their judgments about the representations in the series and even talk about their own experiences of love. However, this made it impossible for the researchers to access other data, such as the gender, age or region of origin of the participants. Nevertheless, the researchers prized the spontaneity and freedom of discussion that the forum provided over the collection of personal data. Moreover, our objective was not to analyse whether the fan who wrote the comment was a boy or a girl, but rather the internalized romantic myths expressed and how these imply models of male dominance and female submissiveness, independently of the gender of the forum participant.

The purpose of studying the forums is to make a qualitative analysis. The aim is to understand the statements in their spontaneous individuality ‘delving into the panoply of unique opinions that coexist within it’ (Masanet and Buckingham, 2015). This is a descriptive analysis of the key trends seen in the forum. The analysis was carried out inductively according to the

principles of the grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The analysis was made according to a descriptive taxonomy that was developed and perfected gradually through re-reading and comparing different instances. From a broad initial categorization of the themes in the forum, the key and most general trends within the data were identified and different analysis categories were created that were modified throughout the research process.

All comments that were relevant to our objective and that appeared throughout the series' three seasons were selected for the study. These comments do not arise from explicit disruptive scenes for either character in any specific episode but more from their general behaviour throughout the series' three seasons. This therefore enables us to study the general trend of the comments in the forums. Given the amount of posts (or discussion threads) focused on this romantic relationship and the need to observe interaction between the forum participants, we selected posts with over 10 responses. This required reviewing all forum comments because at times the title of the post did not correspond to the topic participants then discussed afterwards. In total 2,679 messages were analysed, distributed among 115 posts.

The researchers followed the appropriate privacy protection protocols. Given that the forum was accessed after the series ended, user participation was virtually non-existent and researchers did not interact with fans. However, privacy protection protocols were adopted to ensure that the identity of the forum participants – in this virtual case – was not harmed. Therefore, the forum usernames have been anonymized with a random code, the comment posting dates have been deleted and the comments have been translated into English so they cannot be located with online searches.

Results

The romantic relationship between Sandra and Culebra is marked by its impossibility, as the female character is unable to touch anyone, as explained above (except for other teenagers who have powers that offset hers). This means that Sandra and Culebra attempt relationships with other people to try to forget each other. These relationships with other people instigate a large amount of comments in the forum. When Culebra has relationships with other girls, Sandra accepts them as she believes the fault is hers. Since she is the one who cannot touch him, she therefore takes on the burden of the failure of the relationship. However, when Sandra has relationships with other characters in the series, Culebra does not accept it in the same way; he gets angry and verbally abuses Sandra. It is at this point of the storyline that we collected contributions from forum participants for analysis.

What happens in the fan forum when the girl has a relationship with another boy?

When Sandra has relationships with other teenage boys, the series presents Culebra as a jealous man who verbally abuses Sandra. Here, the forum is split into two trends: a) a minority who criticize Culebra's attitude, and b) a majority that justifies it.

The minority sector that criticizes Culebra's attitude justifies their position by indicating that he has been with other girls too and that Sandra did not get angry with him. They point out that Culebra's attitude is that of a male chauvinist and unfair; however, it is interesting to note that these criticisms do not affect the character's popularity:

[Season 1. Sandra and Leo (first boy who intervenes in the relationship). They kiss each other and Culebra becomes angry with Sandra]

«I really like Culebra but I don't like it when he's like that with Sandra when he's been getting off loads of times with Claudia and Sandra didn't say anything. And now he's like that just coz of one kiss. Don't get it» (participant_LP_127)

«I think it's a bit of a "male chauvinist" attitude in the sense that he can but she can't?? WTF! Why? But anyway, we're going to see tit for tat for a long time I think!» (participant_LP_024)

Furthermore, one part of the sector clearly indicates that Sandra is not doing anything wrong by going out with other boys:

[Season 2. Sandra and Ángel (second boy who intervenes in the relationship). Culebra becomes angry with Sandra]

«It's as if Sandra is doing something wrong and she's not.

I mean it's as if a lot of people have forgotten that in the last season Culebra dumped Sandra because he fancied Claudia. And Sandra had to put up with them both giggling, snogging and stuff» (participant_LP_048)

We saw that a minority of forum participants respond to what according to Kjeldgaard & Storgaard (2010) is the complex dialogue that the audience establishes between traditional models and more up-to-date models about romantic relationships. That is why they criticize Culebra's behaviour when he gets angry because the storyline suggests that Sandra can have other relationships. This justification (minority) is supported in an equality argument, given that Culebra has had relationships with other girls in previous episodes.

However, most participants defend Culebra's attitude and we detected three different justifying reasons: a) Culebra is jealous, so he cannot help treating Sandra badly (romantic jealousy as justification for violence); b) Culebra is more impulsive than Sandra and this is why he gets angry (men's innate difficulty to control their impulses as a justification of the action) and c) Culebra feels frustrated because he loves her so much and therefore cannot avoid treating her badly (male frustration as a justification of violence). Thus, a common thread for the three arguments is that deep down Sandra is made responsible or blameworthy for Culebra's behaviour and emotional reactions. Some examples collected from the forum:

a. Justifying jealousy:

[Season 2. Sandra & Ángel. Culebra is angry about the relationship between Sandra and
Ángel]

«I get the way Culebra behaves coz of jealousy coz he sees someone else touching and kissing Sandra, who's the love of his life» (participant_LP_017)

«And the jealousy thing... that's normal, that happens to everyone... what he sometimes messes up is behaving properly, but that's something that he'll learn later on.

I mean I think it's been really hard for him coz he's made an effort, a really big effort, even though that's the way he is, but even so, he's trying to sort it out and quite often he does» (participant_LP_099)

b. Impulsive tendency:

[Season 2. Sandra & Ángel. Culebra is angry about the relationship between Sandra and
Ángel]

«I think that Culebra has this need for self-protection (...) it's something that just comes out like that, from inside, but that doesn't mean that he hurts people... that's just what it looks like from the outside. In fact, Culebra says himself that this is something he's not used to, how to deal with relationships... but that doesn't mean that he doesn't care about Sandra» (participant_LP_063)

c. Justifying frustration:

[Season 1. Sandra & Leo. Culebra is angry about the relationship between Sandra and Leo]

«I think he's really pissed off that he wasn't the first one to kiss Sandra, he wasn't able to be the first one, after going after her for so long. Sandra meanwhile understands that she can't give Culebra the things Claudia can give him, basically physical contact, and maybe this is why she's more accepting and controls her jealousy more» (participant_LP_047)

[Season 3. Culebra. Culebra is angry about the relationship between Sandra and Ángel]
«Culebra is tired and hurt, he feels helpless coz he can't forget Sandra and he has to see her everyday» (participant_LP_088)

And even though we find participations that do not agree with Culebra's behaviour, this does not mean we do not find arguments for a justification based on Culebra's "excess" of love:

[Season 2. Sandra & Ángel. Culebra is angry about the relationship between Sandra and Ángel]
«I really love Culebra's character and I know it's bad what Culebra's doing with Sandra but the poor guy must feel frustrated by loving a girl soooo much and he can't even touch her» (participant_LP_063)

Comparable to the blame apportioned to the female character, we also find opinions that justify Culebra's abuse as they feel that Sandra is not making enough effort to find a solution for overcoming her powers:

[Season 2. Sandra & Ángel. Sandra starts a relationship with Ángel. She thinks she will never be able to control her powers]
«I reckon Sandra isn't making as much effort as she could... If I were her I'd be trying every day to try to be with the person I love ...But she's all indecisive and not trying every day... The thing is in the end we're too simple, we blame the person we see who's behaving badly, the person that can be seen to be doing wrong. But we don't look around enough to FIND OUT why he's behaving badly» (participant_LP_118)

These comments show that Culebra's impulsiveness, jealousy and frustration are justified from the normalization of an ideology that sustains that the woman is the force maintaining the romantic relationship and therefore any conflict is potentially her responsibility. What is still a representation of a social model of aggressive and dominant masculinity (Connell,

2005; Lomas, 2003) is accompanied by a glorification of the romantic ideology (Allen, 2007), so the viewer ends up interpreting Culebra's abusive behaviour as an example of true love, thus leaving the real victim exposed (Cantera, Estébanez and Vázquez, 2009; Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, Carrera and Vallejo-Medina, 2013a; Díaz-Aguado, 2013). Here we see that the gender stereotypes presented in the series – dominant masculinity and submissive femininity (Aran-Ramspott, Medina-Bravo, Rodrigo-Alsina and Munté, 2014) – are reinforced by the way the audience interprets the series. The audience does not break away from or criticize these representations; instead it reinforces them through its comments.

A particularly concerning result is the discourse in which the victim (Sandra's character) is blamed directly or indirectly for the treatment she receives from Culebra's character. This indirect blame appears when she is criticized for letting herself be abused by Culebra. The focus of the comments (the criticism) remains on her (receiving the abuse) and not on him (who is doing it), so in fact the myth remains that the person ultimately responsible for how a romantic relationship is progressing is the woman. Thus, we detected a justified acceptance of the disrespectful attitudes of the male character. This acceptance is also accompanied by the presumption that the female character – guided by the unconditionality of her love – should understand the disdain received and (re)formulate it as a sign of love, thus inferring another dangerous myth for women: love hurts (de Miguel, 2015; Díaz-Aguado, 2013).

Meanwhile, when they discuss Sandra's attitude to Culebra's verbal abuse, most forums accept that she should not be angry with him because she is in love with Culebra and "love conquers all". This means they again justify the verbal abuse by the boy to the girl in the name of love:

[Season 2. Sandra & Ángel. Sandra does not become angry about the abuse she receives from Culebra because of her relationship with Ángel]

«Sandra is madly in love with Culebra. She can't fall out of love with him in just one day, even if he does say such horrible things» (participant_LP_085)

«yeah, I think that even though they've argued, Sandra's still in love with him» (participant_LP_064)

Furthermore, as Sandra's relationship with another boy prospers, the comments that severely criticize her attitude become more intense.

[Season 2. Sandra & Ángel. The relationship progresses]

«maybe Culebra deserves it, but he only deserves a little bit of what he's getting... Sandra's going too far» (participant_LP_037)

We see that when the audience is confronted with the conflicts in Sandra and Culebra's relationship, most opinions respond to the internalized idea of power and submission, that is, relationship inequality. For a love that implies total commitment (that of the woman to the man) the traditionally established relationships of domination-submission are justified. Thus we see the capacity of gender roles to endure as legitimate forms of justifying abusive behaviour in the relationship. The audience attitude found here correlates with the results of previous studies, such as those by Capdevila, Crescenzi and Araüna (2013), that indicate how young people end up justifying gender differences represented in fictional series despite attempting to distance themselves from them.

What happens in the fan forum when the boy has a relationship with another girl?

Meanwhile, the series presents a different situation when Culebra has relationships with other girls. In these cases, Sandra does not reprimand Culebra because, as mentioned earlier, she assumes that it is her power that makes her relationship with Culebra impossible and, therefore, that she's partly to blame for them not being together. This means she resignedly

accepts that Culebra is with other girls. When this happens, we see two trends in the forums:
a) those that criticize Culebra's behaviour and b) those that defend it.

Participants who criticize it are angry with the character and show their increasing dislike of him. It is worth noting, however, that we have to wait until the third season for this "discomfort" towards the character to appear. During the third season Sandra dedicates all her efforts to finding a cure for her power to be able to be with Culebra, but he, feeling frustrated at not being able to be with Sandra, starts a relationship with another girl, Michelle. This gives rise to a change in attitude in one part of the forum participants:

[Season 3. Culebra & Michelle. They start a relationship]

«I don't like Culebra any more coz Sandra is going through the same and she doesn't go off with the first one that comes along. She's doing all she can and all he does is get off with Michelle and throw it back in her face about her powers so like I said I'm starting to really not like him» (participant_LP_059)

Meanwhile, the unconditional supporters of Culebra argue that Sandra has also been with other boys while Culebra was suffering and that now it's her turn to suffer:

[Season 3. Culebra & Michelle. During their relationship]

«I don't think either should be criticized more than the other. Sandra was with Victor and now it's Culebra's turn, but at least it's not being drawn out through the whole season, like what happened in the second one with the other couple» (participant_LP_085)

«Sandra was with Angel in the whole of the 2nd season and Culebra had a really HARD TIME, now it's Sandra's turn... Although I'd like them to get back together again once and for all :)» (participant_LP_100)

Likewise, they justify that Culebra's relationship with the other girl only occurred because he was depressed and tired, because he feels helpless at not being able to touch Sandra. This

means they justify Culebra going with other girls, a justification, remember, that did not occur when Sandra's character went with other boys:

[Season 3. Culebra & Michelle. During their relationship]

«Culebra is tired and hurt, he feels powerless because he hasn't got over Sandra and has to see her every day (remember it was Sandra who told him they could only be friends) so if he wants to shag Michelle you can understand it, if I remember right it's called spite shag or consolation prize...» (participant_LP_088)

This comment shows how Culebra's perspective (that is, the boy's) prevails over the others and the girl ends up being "a consolation prize"; an object.

These comments show us that, while initially Sandra's character is condemned by most forum participants when she has relationships with other boys, it is not until the third season that Culebra's character receives the same criticism. This points to an audience with a different assessment scale when they judge the same behaviour according to the gender of the character. This repercussion of the romantic ideology is a widely used resource in fictional series (Luzón et al., 2009) and, as we can see, it is broadly internalized by the audience.

Conclusion

Does the audience of the series judge the characters' behaviour differently according to their gender? Our answer is a qualified yes. Our analysis of the forums demonstrated the perpetuation of beliefs about romantic love that bind the woman to submission and blame and the man to aggression and domination. This is in accordance with the results found by Allen (2007) on the relationship between the social model of dominant male (Connell, 2005) and the expectations of young heterosexual people about the behaviour expected from them in romantic relationships. The fans invoke romantic love myths such as "love will change him"

or “love conquers all” to justify the boy’s verbal abuse of the girl and the girl’s resignation to the situation. It can also be seen that the fans concede more sexual freedom to the boy than to the girl as she receives much more criticism for having other experiences. Only a minority of fans steer away from this general trend but their criticism is not extensive enough and they cannot compete with the general school of thought that engages with gender differences within the relationship to evaluate and cast judgement on the main characters’ behaviour.

At this point it is important to ask ourselves why this situation occurs. It must be remembered that romanticism is a cultural construction that attributes different gender roles according to whether the subject is a girl or a boy. As indicated at the beginning of the paper, studies such as those by Calvete (2008) Cantera, Estébanez and Vázquez (2009) or Garaigordobil, Aliri, and Martínez-Valderrey (2013) alert us to the perpetuation of beliefs and expectations in which it is assumed that the woman in love maintains a passive, obedient position, taking the blame when there are conflicts, while the man’s love is still understood as a love that can be shown through violence and contempt. An extreme contemporary review of these beliefs can be seen in the reality check shown by domestic violence figures. It seems that ambivalences and past-rooted convictions have not been repressed in adolescents. In recent years young people in Spain have been undergoing shifts in traditional relationship models, yet these new models coexist with the set of myths and stereotypes linked to romantic love (de Miguel, 2015; Díaz-Aguado, 2013). These myths and conventions are reflected in their discussions about love, as we saw in the fan forum of the series. We must remember that the power of stereotypes lies in the fact that they quickly and uncritically connect with assimilated beliefs that may even be subconscious.

Thus the stereotypical romantic love representations made by the series (Masanet, Medina-Bravo and Aran-Ramspott, 2016) are embedded within the audience’s internalized beliefs – as

indicated above – and this makes it harder to analyse critically the stereotypical gender roles afforded to the main characters examined.

To conclude, and as indicated by Albury (2013), it may be the representation of open dilemmas that best provokes discussion among the audience and, therefore, critical thought. We have come to a similar conclusion in previous research (Masanet and Buckingham, 2015) when we indicated that fictional series could be important educational sources when they question stereotypes. The key point for generating thought is to present storylines that generate perplexities that contrast with the set of stereotypes that are deeply-rooted in a large part of the audience.

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