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Maria-Jose Masanet^{a*} and Frederik Dhaenens^b

^aDepartment of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain;

^bDepartment of Communication Studies, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

Provide full correspondence details here including e-mail for the *corresponding author

Maria-Jose Masanet
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Department of Communication
C/ Roc Boronat, 138 | 08018
Barcelona, Spain
mjose.masanet@upf.edu

Provide short biographical notes on all contributors here if the journal requires them.

Representing Gender-Based Violence in Teen Series: Young People's Discourses on the Spanish Series *Física o Química*

Through the analysis of the fans' forum of a popular Spanish teen series, *Física o Química* (2008-2011), this study explores what meanings audiences give to the series' representation of gender violence, focussing on how they deal with the representation of male aggression towards women and how audiences reflect on gender stereotypes and unequal romantic and sexual adolescent relationships. This qualitative analysis has been carried out inductively, according to the principles of grounded theory. The analysis revealed that adolescents have internalized a series of stereotypes and myths of romantic love that can be very dangerous because they justify violence of men towards women. However, it is the actual representations in this series that lead viewers to question the myths, and thus, to talk about gender-based violence among adolescents, to reflect on it and the dangers of romantic idealization. This happens because the series takes the risk of presenting controversial and provocative representations that brings dilemmas out in the open, without trying to be moralizing with audiences, letting them discuss these representations among themselves in the fan forum.

Keywords: gender violence; gender stereotypes; romantic love; teen series; online forums

Introduction

A young person's sexuality emerges during adolescence and is usually accompanied by their first sexual and love relationships. As Medina (2006) states, adolescence is the beginning of new possibilities and responsibilities and among these is the discovery of sexuality, sexual attraction and romantic relationships, and indeed these aspects become key interests for adolescents (Havinghurst 1972; Kimmel and Weiner 1985). These changes and possibilities represent moments of confusion for adolescents, which they would be able to cope with better if they had support from peers and adults and sufficient and accessible information for understanding these moments.

Media have become key agents of socialization in the construction of adolescents' and young people's identities. In particular, media representations of sexuality and love have become informal education agents about these topics (Ward 2003). Steele and Brown (1995) state that adolescents use media in different ways, and their interest in media representations of sexuality increases as they grow into sexual maturity. Some studies highlight that adolescents and young people often consider media more useful sources of information than schools or parents for learning about sex and relationships (e.g., Buckingham and Bragg 2004; L'Engle, Brown, and Kenneavy 2006). This situation has been reinforced by parents' reticence to talk about sex with their children and by the limited ways schools are able to discuss sex (Hust, Brown, and Engle 2008). The fact that media are prime sources of information on sex and sexuality has alerted parents' associations and child welfare associations.

A prime example is the Spanish teen series *Física o Química*¹ (Physics or Chemistry, 2008-2011). Its representation of sex, gender violence and adolescent pregnancy sparked criticism from parents and education associations. The adolescent fans, however, did not share or care about the adults' reservations and criticisms. They applauded the series and followed it loyally. The series succeeded in being programmed in Spanish prime time and ran for seven seasons. In fact, Spanish newspaper *El País* defined *Física o Química* as “[t]he series that engages young people and frightens parents”². These polarized perspectives of *Física o Química* are neither new nor exclusive to this series.

¹ The website of the series can be retrieved at <http://atreseries.atresmedia.com/series/vuelve-fisica-o-quimica/> (14/07/2017)

² http://elpais.com/diario/2008/02/22/radiotv/1203634801_850215.html (14/07/2016)

The relationship between adolescents and media has traditionally been looked at from two oppositional discursive positions: alarmist or optimistic (Arnett, Larson, and Offer 1995; Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1999). Some agents, such as parents and caretakers, often take the alarmist point of view, while technology companies and some governments are optimistic. These polarized positions, however, fail to generate a productive debate on the role and representation of sexuality in media. In academia, cultivation theory, which states that repetitive, long-range, and consistent exposure of common patterns on television leads to the creation of a social reality (Gerbner 1998), has been repeatedly criticized for ascribing little agency to individuals when they consume television content; however, we reiterate this criticism since researchers continue to rely on this theory to highlight the threats television may pose (e.g. Collins et al. 2004). The field of cultural studies has challenged cultivation theory's perspectives on agency and developed a more nuanced approach. Cultural studies consider media as sources of multiple, layered meanings and regard adolescents and young people as active and critical consumers. This perspective is indebted to Hall's (1999) argument that communication is divided into four stages: production, circulation, use and reproduction. He believes the process is a complex structure in which each stage retains its distinctiveness, forms and conditions. In this sense, he suggests that audiences may be able to decode messages differently because the notion of 'stages' demands either a more thorough discussion or no discussion at all.

This study is situated within cultural studies as it assumes that adolescents and emerging adults are able to actively make sense of media content in divergent ways. We are interested in how they make sense of media representations of gender-based

violence in teen series. Studying young people's discourses on gender violence in *Física o Química* gives us insights into the way they think about gender-based violence and adolescent romantic relationships as well as the role that the series plays in shaping adolescents' perspectives on these issues. We analysed the comments made in the *Física o Química* online fan forum that deal with issues or scenes related to gender-based violence between the adolescent characters in the series. We focus on the online forum because of its key role in the producers' strategy to interact with the series' audiences. The series stimulated viewer participation and interaction through its transmedia strategy. This included calls for teens to participate in creating the plots, to comment on them and give their opinion about the direction the plots were taking (Galán and Herrero 2011; García 2014). Further, the online fan forums were developed as spaces where fans could talk about the series' media representations while remaining anonymous, and thus they were free to express their opinions openly.

Teen series and the representation of sex and love relationships

Teen series are often drama series that explore the lives of teenage characters generally enrolled in high school. The series devote ample time to the teenagers' friendships and romantic relationships as well as their identity formation (Falcón and Díaz-Aguado 2014; García-Muñoz and Fedele 2011). The series also explore teenage rebellion, questioning of authority and coping with uncertainty (Falcón and Díaz-Aguado 2014). These themes, centred around love, sex and intimate relationships, are the topics that arouse most interest in adolescents (Masanet, 2015). Teen series tend to represent a romantic love that exalts different myths, such as the myth of 'predestined true love', 'the power of love' or 'love as possession' (Masanet, Medina-Bravo, and Aran-

Ramspott, 2016). Further, some scholars argue that most teen series maintain gender stereotypes (García-Muñoz and Fedele 2011; Masanet, Medina-Bravo, and Aran-Ramspott, 2016; Signorielli 2007), while other scholars have highlighted a few series that expose and challenge these stereotypes (Banks 2004; Feasey 2006; Osgerby 2004; Owen 1999). However, we argue that many of these series present ambiguous images. For instance, in most teen series, adolescent girls are represented as independent and autonomous, yet they are usually mainly interested in their physical appearance. They are generally thin and beautiful and show little concern for or interest in their academic training or future. Instead, most of their activities involve shopping and dating. In addition, the series often represent them as sex objects and they are depicted negatively when they openly express their sexual desires (Signorielli 2007; Van Damme 2010). On the contrary, some of the usual activities of the guys are related to drinking and smoking. They are athletic and attractive but their talents are what set them apart in these series. Further, boys are socially rewarded for their promiscuity, while girls are not (Signorielli 2007). With this, teen series represent active boys and passive girls when it comes to sex (Van Damme 2010; Van Damme and Van Bauwel 2010). Many of these stereotypes are also present in Spanish teen series. Female characters are good and kind while male characters are rebellious and this rebellion becomes the main reason why female characters show a sexual interest in male characters (Figueras-Maz, Tortajada, and Araña 2014). However, we also find other representations; for example, there is significant interest in teenage dilemmas such as anorexia, loss of virginity and sexual assault (Falcón and Díaz-Aguado 2014; Luzón et al. 2011; Masanet, Medina, and Ferrés, 2012; Simelio, Ortega, and Medina 2013). These dilemmas also occur in North-American television productions but they are not that common.

Adolescents and young people in Spain consume both North-American and Spanish teen series. North-American popular culture has been important for the creation of Spanish series but we need to carry out more academic analyses with non-American media products since adolescents consume both global and local content (Buckingham 2002) and the local productions may provide different representations of adolescence (Guarinos 2009).

Introducing *Física o Química*

Física o Química is a television series produced by *Ida y Vuelta* that was broadcast on Antena 3. The series focuses on the stories of a group of students and teachers from a high school. *Física o Química* was a huge audience success, reaching more than three million viewers with some of its episodes and was awarded various prizes, such as the Ondas 2009³. Its success also extended to other countries as it was broadcast in France, Portugal, Italy, the United States and Latin America, where it received applause and support from its adolescent audiences.

Despite its ratings success, the show did not escape controversy. The series' sexual and romantic relationships, numerous sex scenes and gender stereotypes raised more than a few eyebrows. The Federation of Education Workers, the Catholic Confederation of Parents of Students and the Spanish Confederation of Schools are some of the organizations and associations that called for the series to be taken off the air⁴. Several organizations, such as the Children's Ombudsman of Madrid, conducted

³ <http://www.formulatv.com/noticias/13038/fisica-o-quimica-fama-a-bailar-y-jorge-javier-vazquez-ganan-el-premio-ondas/> (14/07/2017)

⁴ <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/02/20/television/1203511736.html> (14/07/2017)

research into the series and concluded that it trivialized sexual relationships and alcohol consumption⁵. In Italy, the outcry from different Catholic groups over the series' "high sexual content" led to the series being discontinued⁶. This controversy prompted several scholars to research the series' representations of adolescence.

Falcón and Díaz-Aguado (2014), for instance, point out that the series represents key issues associated with social concerns, such as homophobia and teen suicide, but they also believe these topics are not presented from a learning and reflection perspective. In contrast, Luzón et al. (2011) emphasize the fresh air the series brings, as it represents conflicts around romantic relationships that can take place during adolescence. They argue that the series introduces sexuality as an issue to be addressed at school and offers a counterpoint to the general topics related to sexuality usually presented in teen series since it works with a wide range of subtopics. However, they also point out how the series introduces a promiscuous and irresponsible teenager who behaves violently towards his intimate partner.

The numerous sex scenes it has are surely the main reason why the series sparked a backlash from various educational and parental associations. However, the series presented plots around key issues in adolescence like sexuality, sexual attraction and love relationships (Havinghurst 1972; Kimmel and Weiner 1985). With its transmedia strategy the series had direct feedback from the audience for creating and

⁵ <http://www.que.es/television/en-pantalla/200906251417-defensor-del-menor-critica-fisica.html> (14/07/2017)

⁶ <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/04/04/television/1333527573.html> (14/07/2017)
<http://www.abc.es/20120404/tv-series/abci-fisica-quimica-italia-201204041103.html>
(14/07/2017)

developing the plots. They wanted to know what the fans expected from the series and how they would like the plots to develop, and therefore give the adolescents the stories they were interested in. As Ferrés (2014) points out, '[t]he screens, like mirrors, only have value when they are reflecting the person who interacts with them. They only have meaning and value for an interlocutor when [s]he can see him[er]self represented on them' (145). It may also be that this way of approaching audiences is one of the factors that justifies the high number of representations of sex and sexuality because adolescents are interested in these topics and look for information about them in media (Davis 2004).

Methodology

The main objective of this study was to analyse how young people make sense of the representation of gender-based violence in the series *Física o Química*, focussing on how the audience deal with the representation of male aggression towards women. In addition, we examined how audiences reflect on gender stereotypes and unequal romantic and/or sexual adolescent relationships.

Our study focuses on young people's discourses about representations of gender-based violence and more specifically the comments on the online fan forum of the series *Física o Química*. In particular, we focus on how people commented on the relationship between the adolescent characters Ruth and Gorka. Their relationship was characterized by recurring situations of gender-based violence, spread over three seasons. They also happen to be among the characters most liked by young fans (Masanet, 2015). Gorka and Ruth maintain a tempestuous romantic relationship characterized by psychological abuse from the boy towards the girl. Even though they break up on several occasions,

and engage in other relationships, they always end up back together. The boy's abuses towards the girl intensify throughout the series until she has serious health problems and the relationship breaks up definitively.

To analyse this, we consulted the *Fórmula TV* website (<http://www.formulatv.com>). This television portal receives the most visitors in Spain (source: Nielsen-OJD) and is also the largest television community in Spain. Every day *Fórmula TV* publishes diverse multimedia information for followers of different television programmes and has an extensive community in which its users can actively participate. At the time of our research (January-April 2013), the forum of the series *Física o Química* had over 180 pages of open discussion threads, which were written during the years the series was broadcast. The *Fórmula TV* forum uses a standard screen that enables registered participants to contribute to discussions and create new threads. Moderators seem to participate very little and the forum participants themselves suggest the discussion topics.

This qualitative analysis was carried out inductively, according to the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), to identify basic social processes as central points of the theory. A grounded theory approach stresses that categories can be interactively developed in parallel with the source material before they address any theory. This means that theory emerges from the data because we allow data to 'speak for themselves' instead of applying pre-existing categories or frameworks.

We included all comments that related to the teenage couple's gender-based violence and that appeared throughout the series' first three seasons. This allowed us to study and identify general trends in the comments. Comments on the different aspects of gender-based violence were compiled into a descriptive taxonomy that was developed and

refined recursively through re-reading and comparing different instances. The categories emerged inductively from the participants' comments. The coding scheme was divided based on the scenes or situations the series presented of the couple, and from that, the data were grouped into central categories – patterns of behaviour. The categories and data were produced and continuously examined until the end of the study. We detected a series of central categories (e.g. 'justifying boy's abuse') and from these categories some sub-categories emerged (e.g. 'romantic myths justify violence').

Given the amount of discussion threads focusing on this relationship and the need to observe the interactions between the forum participants, we decided to select discussion threads with over 10 responses. It was difficult to observe interaction among the participants in the discussion threads with few comments, so a minimum number of comments was established so that the interaction could be analysed. This process required reviewing all forum comments from the first three sessions as at times the title of the discussion thread did not correlate with the topic the participants discussed afterwards. In total 1,005 messages were analysed⁷, distributed among 44 discussion threads. We analysed comments posted by more than 100 participants.

The *Física o Química* forum appeared to be dominated by adolescents and young people, who are usually the ones who interact in these forums. The study focuses on a teen series, a format that tends to be at the top of the preferences of adolescents and young people and which has two key socializing functions for the young audience: a) comparison with the peer group, through the conversations generated from viewing the

⁷ In line with participant privacy protection protocols, forum usernames have been anonymized with a random code, the posting dates of the comments have been deleted and the comments have been translated into English.

series; and b) identification with the age group, possibly thanks to the situations and the characters presented (Fedele, 2011). Considering these characteristics we can assume that many of the forum participants are indeed embodying a general teenage identity. The anonymity of the forum allowed the participants more freedom to share their ideas and opinions. However, this made it impossible for the researchers to access identity-based data, such as the participants' gender or age. Nevertheless, the researchers were interested in the spontaneous reactions and the freedom the forum provided over the collection of personal data.

Analysis

The relationship between Gorka and Ruth revolves around psychological abuse and lasted three seasons. The boy's mistreatment of the girl intensified and caused the girl to develop a low self-esteem and a self-destructive attitude. The series presented an abusive teen relationship that seems to mirror Walker's (1979) theory of the cycle of abuse, which has three phases: the first is the accumulation of tension and is characterized by the easy irritability of the aggressor; in the second phase the explosion of physical and/or psychological and/or sexual violence takes place; and the third phase is the honeymoon when the couple make up, and which is considered a trap for many women. In this last stage the abuser shows remorse and affection and he even accepts help to change. However, the fact is that 'the change' does not come and the girl ends up immersed in the cycle of abuse.

With this, the series represented gender-based violence as a complex phenomenon. It was a violence that appeared little by little and was intensified throughout the series. Further, the representation of Gorka and Ruth's violent

relationship nudged audiences to start a debate about different myths of romantic love, such as ‘the predestined true love’, and the myth that ‘love changes people’. Since the representation of the violence was complex and ambiguous, audiences needed to try and figure out what these representations meant to them.

The meanings given to the relationship changed and modified as the relationship evolved, as we will see below.

The normalization of verbal violence by teens

Forum participants did not identify Gorka’s verbal and psychological abuse of Ruth until the violence became unsustainable. Although the series shows different scenes throughout the first season in which Gorka verbally mistreats Ruth, the first discussion thread in the fan forum on this relationship arrived when Gorka’s verbal abuse of Ruth intensified and the series shows the consequences of the constant verbal abuse the girl is suffering. At the end of the first season the fans started a new discussion thread in which they question Gorka’s treatment of Ruth. These messages arise from a scene in which Gorka, after cheating on Ruth with another girl, argues with Ruth and ends the relationship. Ruth, who wants to rekindle the relationship, performs a striptease in front of him, a friend of his and the girl with whom he was cheating on her. We can link this kind of degradation with the traditional gender roles that force a woman into serving her man, including by offering her body to her male partner (Van Damme 2010). The scene is violent. Gorka records the striptease with his phone while his friend feels uncomfortable and asks him to stop it. Before this scene, the discussion threads about the relationship between Gorka and Ruth were virtually non-existent as participants made very few comments. Since the verbal abuse is not discussed on the forum, we

postulate that it took the degradation of Ruth's body to actually start a discussion of Gorka's aggression.

As previous studies with young people have demonstrated (Meras 2003), Spanish adolescents do not consider the control of time, money or friendships, or blackmail, threats or even insults as acts of aggression. Abuse is associated with physical aggression and that is presumably why the participants did not discuss the verbal abuse. They see it as a normal part of the relationship. Only after the striptease scene did participants start to talk about the couple. However, only a small part of the forum criticizes Gorka's attitude:

«Gorka is a scumbag. The typical cocky high-handed pain in the ass...»

(participant_FoQ_003)

They insult the male character but do not explain why. They do not refer to the verbal and psychological violence of the boy towards the girl. Therefore, no debate takes place among the forum participants on the motives, attitudes and actions of the characters. On the contrary, a few of the participants who insulted Gorka justify his behaviour by arguing that, deep down, he is a good boy and stress that he only acts this way because he had a difficult childhood. They believe that audiences have to be patient as they are convinced that Gorka will change his behaviour out of love for Ruth:

«I'll wait a little longer, right now he is like this but I think that deep down he loves her and he is going to demonstrate it sooner or later. He cannot be that bad, he must have had bad stuff happen to him at home» (participant_FoQ_051)

Meras (2003) states that teens may normalize violence because they think it can be resolved by talking because there is a love story behind it and this can recompose love. But they do not see that the boy's actions have psychological implications. The series represents a girl that has been verbally abused and, as a consequence, has lost her

self-esteem and autonomy and is willing to do anything to get back the boy's love. If this is not understood as violence, it is difficult to do something to end it. And this is, in a way, what was happening in the forum. They do not understand Ruth, her vulnerability and helplessness and, for this reason, they do not understand her actions and suffering. As a result, they criticize and blame Ruth for her situation, making the victim guilty of her situation:

«I think Ruth is silly, what was she doing there naked??? And in front of Cabano and the other girl? Really, this girl is crazy» (participant_FoQ_014)

Further, they do not want any girl to "humble herself" that way for a boy, further articulating the victim as the one who should be thought of as guilty or responsible for the situation and abuse. In addition, the way the forum participants verbalized their contempt for the situation presented in the series denotes that they feel they are immune to this kind of situation and therefore that they will not have a relationship of gender-based violence:

«I don't understand how a person can denigrate herself in that way... and besides for that disgusting guy. God, I would hit him.... he is so disgusting. I don't know if there are girls like her, but I wish they wouldn't humble themselves like that for these guys»
(participant_FoQ_062)

Although the boy's attitude and behaviour did not arouse debate in the forum, participants discussed this scene and focused on the 'representation of reality' of the series. A group of participants did not understand why Ruth did a striptease to demonstrate her love for Gorka. This caused some participants to criticize her actions, or rather, criticize the authenticity of the representation. They stress that these situations do not occur in real life:

«I don't agree. In real life, do you really take off your clothes in front of a guy that doesn't give a shit about you, in front of his friends, just to show him how much you love

him? What do you wanna prove? That you've got nice boobs? That you are an easy lay?

What is it about???... » (participant_FoQ_026)

On the other hand, there are some participants that acknowledged that these situations happen in the everyday-lives of people and underscore that the series should represent these moments:

«All of those scenes are part of the script, and they are very good. You have to think it is a series about teenagers and all this is part of life» (participant_FoQ_083)

As can be seen, forum participants are analysing media representations and looking for connections with their own realities. For Masanet and Buckingham (2015), a text that is perceived by the audience as realistic will probably be taken more seriously as a source of information and learning. However, realism is a complex issue, since texts that are clearly tagged as fantasy can have a large educational potential. Ang (1985) distinguishes between 'emotional realism' and 'empirical realism'. A text may lack empirical realism – viewers may find it implausible or artificial in comparison with reality – but possess an emotional realism that allows viewers to relate it to their own daily concerns and dilemmas. Complexity is linked to the different dimensions of realism. Participants argue about whether this scene could take place in real life or not and that is a key issue for them because they are looking at the connections with their own reality, they are analysing the scene and looking for examples from their own experiences that could be similar. Therefore, being able to relate the representations in the series to their own experiences is important for forum participants. In this way, the series can become a source of information for understanding the world around them because they are not only speaking about the series' representations but also about their peers' attitudes and behaviours in love and sexual relationships.

The legitimatization of gender-based violence 'in the name of love'

During the second season of the series, when the abuse is intensified, what we interpret as the second phase of the cycle (i.e. the phase of aggression), the forum participants criticize Gorka and they want Ruth to leave the relationship. When they break up, most of the forum participants criticize Gorka's attitude and want him to suffer:

«Gorka has always behaved like a bastard... But he can't treat people like crap and want to have friends too. He deserves to be alone because he has humiliated Ruth a lot. You don't realize what you have until it's gone, it's the same as always»

(participant_FoQ_071)

The participants had detected the abuse and rejected it. But when the series represented the boy's repentance and suffering, what we understand as the third phase of the cycle (i.e. the honeymoon phase), the forum discussions took another direction. At this point, we would like to highlight how forum participants usually justify Gorka's attitude of abuse towards Ruth and her 'patience' with the abuse, referring to myths of romantic love such as 'love changes people', 'the predestined true love' and 'love conquers all'. A large part of the forum participants expect Ruth's love to change Gorka. Participants vindicate the right to fall in love, but appeal to stereotypes of romantic relationships that carry gender differences. They relate romantic love to certain myths and gender stereotypes that position girls in a situation of inequality compared to boys and which are generally represented in most teen series (Masanet, Medina-Bravo, and Aran-Ramspott, 2016). These appeals to myths of romantic love usually appear when Gorka tries to get Ruth back after an aggressive act, when Gorka shows his sensitive side or takes actions to start up his relationship with Ruth again. These moments are used by participants to defend the notion of 'the power of love', and the inability to decide who we love. We can see the idealization of love and the romantic

myths represented in their comments. The idea of the 'force of destiny' also comes out.

Reason cannot do anything to stop it:

«Unfortunately we can't avoid who we fall in love with even when we know that this person isn't good for us. When you fall in love with someone, you don't know why. If someone can tell me the reasons why they have fallen in love with a certain person it is because they aren't really in love. Ruth knows the other Gorka. The Gorka that is there and that someday will come out» (participant_FoQ_067)

They know the mechanisms of teen series in which these myths occupy an important position. For this reason, most of the forum participants expect Ruth to bring out Gorka's sensitive, positive side and that they will end up together. This is why the participants say that they need to wait a little bit in order to watch his personal transformation in the series. And while they are waiting for the change, they look for ways to justify Gorka's attitude, like 'he must be going through bad times at home'. Moreover, the participants continue making the girl responsible for the abuse she is experiencing. First, they blamed her for letting him degrade her in that way and, second, they blamed her for not being able to change the boy:

«I would prefer Ruth to stay with the other boy so Gorka can have a chance to date a better girl (a girl who makes him settle down a bit xD)» (participant_FoQ_068)

As Meras (2003) points out, in the abusive relationship, the girl tries to meet the requirements of the role of a traditional woman and, by doing this, she believes she can change or educate the boy, she feels responsible for the problems and the functioning of the relationship and she thinks she will never find another guy to love her. The girl starts to think that the boy's jealousy indicates that he is looking out for her and that he loves her. Such an affirmation of love as well as a confession that he cannot hide his behaviour from her will put an end to her attempts to understand his accusations and

reproaches and, instead, she will start to look for excuses for the abuse she is going through. We can see all these mechanisms represented in the series and, curiously, also in the comments of some forum participants.

«I like Gorka too. I think he is very sorry for everything he has done to Ruth during the series, and all he wants is to get his girl back!» (participant_FoQ_066)

They take on the female character's subject position and they comply with what is traditionally expected from a woman: they justify the boy's jealousy in the name of love, they appeal to the boy's sensitive side to justify his abuse and they cling to his promises of love. The audiences thus become the abused girl.

According to Yela (2003), one of the legitimating mechanisms of gender violence is the mythology surrounding love, understanding this mythology as 'the set of socially shared beliefs about the alleged nature of love'. This mythology encompasses the different myths of romantic love that have been discussed in the present article. In fact, there are several studies in the Spanish context that highlight the weight these myths continue to have in adolescence and how they serve as justifications for power and violent behaviour (e.g., Cantera, Estébanez, and Vázquez 2009; de Miguel 2015; Ruiz 2016). Because most of the forum participants defend Gorka when he shows his sensitive side and appeal to romantic myths, we assume participants are in a way legitimating gender violence in 'the name of love'.

Despite this, it is important to highlight that there are a few participants that discuss this situation and criticize the boy's behaviour towards the girl:

«Apparently 90% of the guys are the same, while they are with you they are not great and when they lose you they suck up to you because they don't want to see you happy with another guy. Godddd, it sounds to me... disgusting guys... people very rarely

change... can change 1 week, or 1 month as much but, from my experience, I don't think the guy is going to change» (participant_FoQ_071)

Similarly, a few participants question the uncritical reiteration of love myths by many forum participants:

«People who like Gorka... You should go out with a guy like him, you would see how you would eat your words» (participant_FoQ_016)

They challenge those who defend Gorka to experience similar situations by, again, making a complex relationship between fiction and reality, turning the representations of the series into personal experiences.

When the honeymoon is over, the criticism of gender-based violence appears

After these references to romantic myths, we could wonder whether most participants would start expressing discourses about the gender-based violence represented in the series and challenge the dynamics that have typified most discussions on the forum to this point. Do participants talk about the abuse without justifying it by reiterating the romantic mythology, without trying to look for excuses for Gorka's attitude? We found that the comments posted by the forum participants also followed the cycle of abuse. The series, however, omitted the boy's repentance in the third season of the series. At this point there is no justification for the boy's attitude and a large part of the participants stopped supporting the couple and started acknowledging that Gorka is "abusive".

When the honeymoon stage disappears and the consequences of the abusive relationship are more visible (e.g., Ruth forces herself to throw up because Gorka makes comments about her weight) we note a remarkable change in the tone of the comments.

A large part of the participants does not want the couple to rekindle the relationship and starts to comment on all the previous abusive situations that the couple have gone through, situations that they had not commented on before:

«I have always liked the couple but the problem is that he is an asshole. I loved it in the last season when he lost her and he finally understood what Ruth meant for him and he did everything possible to get her back. But now I don't like him, he treats her very badly and he doesn't value her» (participant_FoQ_055)

The series appeals to a gender specific stereotype of romantic love as other teen series normally do (Figueras-Maz, Tortajada, and Araña 2014; García-Muñoz and Fedele 2011), but, in this case, the way the series treats the stereotypes – deconstructing some of them – promotes debates about them in the forum. Consequently, teenagers end up debating and questioning their stereotyped conceptions:

«Obviously, now he is again the bad boy he was before, but at least this series is realistic and doesn't take us for a ride saying that people change just like that» (participant_FoQ_005)

Even though *Física o Química* uses the same stereotypes used in other teen series, it represents them differently because it breaks some of them down and offers new portrayals to viewers. *Física o Química* in this specific representation of a romantic relationship takes some stereotypes, like romantic stereotypes, to the limit, presenting situations that are really uncomfortable for viewers. When the indifferent attitude of the rebellious boy towards his partner turns into an attitude of constant contempt and ends up being psychological abuse, what the series is representing is that romantic stereotypes based on internalized gender roles can end up being very impoverishing and dangerous. The series represented a romantic relationship that shows

us that love does not change people, that no girl should be responsible for the boy's attitude, that opposites do not necessarily have to attract.

The forum shows that most participants at first accept these stereotypical constructions and even appeal to the actual stereotypes to defend them; only some participants discuss them and try to get away from them. However, when situations occur that take the characters to the brink, situations that are extremely abusive, the participants discuss them and question them.

Nonetheless, a group of participants – much smaller than at the beginning of the series – continued to defend the male character, referring to his previous repentance and, again, to different romantic myths. These justifications led those who had identified gender violence and did not believe that repentance or love can justify it to react.

«I think he's the perfect example of an abusive guy who ends up crushing you. That does not justify anything... and he does not deserve to be with any girl. Because Ruth was not self-destructive at the beginning of the series... it was Gorka's fault...»

(participant_FoQ_057)

The debate between the two groups, as mentioned above, again, is transferred to personal experience through references to reality or the explanation of the participants' own experiences:

«I don't understand it either. I see how girls in my university are crazy about guys that humiliate them and put them aside. And after that the girls are even more crazy for them...» (participant_FoQ_064)

As we have seen, the stereotypes and abuses are not always questioned; a representation of the abuse in conjunction was necessary in this case. Therefore, the series that, in some way, break the barriers of stereotypes have to set up more complex

situations, limit-reaching situations that become dilemmas. Only in these situations did we notice participants challenging some of the myths of romantic love, such as questioning the myth that love will change a person. This does not mean, however, that this representation of gender violence has broken all the stereotypes adolescents have internalized. It is true that the series engages its viewers in questioning them but it does not make them completely disappear. In fact, some participants continue to appeal to the idealization of love to justify Ruth having an abusive relationship.

Conclusions

It is undeniable that media have acquired an important role as agents for socialization for teenagers in the areas of love and sexual relationships (Buckingham and Bragg 2004). Teen series occupy a special position in this sense, as they are one of young people's favourite media products (García-Muñoz and Fedele 2011). As we have observed, some teen series, such as *Física o Química*, present risky representations that alert parents, teachers and different associations. These organizations worry about the love representations of these series and, in some cases, even attempt to prohibit them. It is at this point that we need to ask ourselves how adolescents interpret these representations, how they understand and make sense of them. Our analysis showed that adolescents have internalized a series of stereotypes and myths of romantic love that can be very dangerous because they justify violence of men towards women, as indicated by previous studies carried out in Spain (Ruiz 2016). They use them to justify the violent relationship represented in this series. But it is this representation that leads viewers to question the myths and talk about gender violence among adolescents, to reflect on it and also on the dangers of romantic idealization. This happens because the series

presents a risky representation, a representation based on the cycle of abuse, where violence always returns. The series raises the dilemmas openly, without trying to be moralizing with the adolescents, letting them discuss these representations themselves.

Based on the above, we could say that portrayals that present dilemmas and that break away from stereotypes seem to instigate discussions about romantic relationships, which is consistent with reflections by Masanet and Buckingham (2015). As we have seen, when the series presented situations that did not adhere to the teenagers' expectations, adolescent audiences used forums to make sense of the portrayals. Therefore, this article also demonstrates the importance of forums. These are anonymous areas where viewers can express their concerns or observations about the series' portrayals. Through the debates, participants are reconstructing their own conceptions about romantic relationships and gender violence by negotiating the opinions of their forum colleagues. In the forums, participants speak freely about their conceptions and own experiences. Anonymity enables them to discuss topics that undoubtedly in other contexts would make them uncomfortable – at school or talking with parents (Hust, Brown, and Engle 2008). We see, therefore, how the media can become a useful source of “learning” about romantic and sexual relationships, as indicated previously by other authors in their studies (Albury 2013; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Masanet and Buckingham, 2015; Mckee 2012).

Naturally, this learning depends on how the teen series portrays these romantic relationships in the future. When a series takes risks and breaks away from stereotypes, it also brings the teenagers' conceptions into question. Curiously, the representations that worried parents and teachers are those that caused adolescents to question myths and stereotypes. Gender violence among adolescents is a reality in Spain that increases

every year (Ruiz 2016) and it is necessary for adolescents to be aware of this and discuss it. To stop showing or discussing it in the media is, however, not the way to eradicate it.

The value of this article is twofold. First, it gives us insights into the way adolescents and emerging-adults in Spain think about and discuss gender-based violence and adolescent romantic relationships. The article articulates how they understand gender-based violence and the motives or actions that lead them to justify or criticize it. These topics are explored through the analysis of adolescents' comments about a popular teen series posted in a fan forum. Second, our work also has educational value. We demonstrate that a teen series has the potential to explore and work on preventing gender-based violence. The analysis reveals that many teenagers discuss the representations in the series and, in some cases, relate them to their own lives. At this point, it is important to highlight that the series can be a source of information for understanding the world around them because teenagers are not only speaking about the series' representations but also about their peers' attitudes and behaviours in love and sexual relationships. When people make comments about the gender-based violence represented in a teen series or justify it, for example, they are not only talking about the series, they are also sharing information about themselves, about the way they understand violence and relationships. We should take advantage of this critical interplay provided by the representations in teen series to work on these critical issues in schools. This research shows that adolescents want to talk about romantic and sexual relationships, and about gender-based violence. Perhaps it is time to introduce series like *Física o Química* into formal educational environments to be able to work on issues of gender-based violence with adolescents and young people.

This work was supported by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain under Grant BES-2011-045450.

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