Predictors of Attitudes Towards Dating Violence in Higher Education Students: The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Dating violence is an important problem among Portuguese young people, following international trends in this domain. The present study aims to understand how emotional intelligence can influence higher education students' attitudes towards dating violence, while exploring the mediating role of self-esteem in this relation, as well as gender differences. Participants were 555 higher education students, 62% female and 38% male, with ages between 18 and 25 years ($M = 20.76$, $SD = 1.87$). The main results show gender differences in the relations between the analyzed variables. In the female students, emotional intelligence is negatively related to attitudes towards dating violence due to the mediator role of self-esteem. In male students there is a direct and negative effect of emotional intelligence on attitudes towards dating violence. Emotional intelligence has more influence for male students and self-esteem for female students. Therefore, future interventions should focus on these variables for each gender in order to prevent the acceptance of dating violence and, consequently, dating violence.

Keywords: attitudes towards dating violence; higher education students; emotional intelligence; self-esteem; gender differences.

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Resumo

A violência no namoro é um problema relevante junto dos jovens portugueses, seguindo as tendências internacionais relativamente a este tema. O presente estudo tem como objetivo perceber de que forma é que a inteligência emocional pode influenciar as atitudes face à violência no namoro dos estudantes do ensino superior, enquanto explora o papel mediador da auto-estima na relação entre as variáveis em causa e ainda as diferenças de género associadas. Nesta investigação participaram 555 estudantes do ensino superior, 62% dos estudantes do sexo feminino 38% do sexo masculino, com idades compreendidas entre os 18 e os 25 anos (M = 20.76, SD = 1.87). Os principais resultados demonstraram que existem diferenças de género relativamente às variáveis em causa. Nos estudantes do sexo feminino a inteligência emocional encontra-se negativamente relacionada com as atitudes face à violência no namoro devido ao papel mediador da auto-estima, enquanto que nos estudantes do sexo masculino existe um efeito direto e negativo da inteligência emocional nas atitudes face à violência no namoro. A inteligência emocional é a variável que mais tem impacto sobre os estudantes masculinos, enquanto que a autoestima é a variável mais significativa nas estudantes femininas. Em virtude dos aspetos apresentados, intervenções futuras deveriam focar-se principalmente nestas variáveis de acordo com as diferenças de género obtidas, de forma a prevenir a aceitação da violência no namoro e, consequentemente, a violência no namoro.

Palavras-chave: atitudes face à violência no namoro; estudantes do ensino superior; inteligência emocional; auto-estima; diferenças de género.

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Introduction

The present cross-sectional study examines the influence of emotional intelligence on attitudes towards dating violence among higher education students exploring the mediating role of self-esteem, as well as gender differences in the relations between the studied variables. The literature in this domain presents some limitations, as most studies do not address these variables simultaneously (Bacıoğlu & Kocabıyık, 2020; Roberton et al., 2012) and do not focus on this topic in emerging adults (Dosil et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Ventura et al., 2013). Dating violence presents high prevalence levels among adolescents and young adults and it can be an important beginning point to prevent paths of violence, including domestic violence, especially when patriarchal norms are still so present in our society.

This research is composed of seven main topics, including: an introduction to the topic, which refers to the importance of this subjects in terms of general and principal results of the literature in this domains; a theoretical framework, that specifically refers to attitudes towards dating violence and its predictors such as emotional intelligence and self-esteem, the role of gender in such relations, and the innovative nature of the present study, the gaps in the literature, and the study's hypotheses; the method, which includes the description of participants, measures, and procedures, the results that make reference to the outcomes of the statistical analyses, especially the performed mediation analyses; the discussion, that aims to connect the obtained results in the explored literature, discuss the limitations of this study, present recommendations and future implications for future interventions; the conclusion that aims to summarize the principal results and take-home message; the references, and finally, the appendixes.

Predictors of Attitudes Towards Dating Violence in Higher Education Students: The Role of Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem

Dating violence has been a predominant and significant problem among the Portuguese juvenile population (Machado et al., 2010). According to *União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta* (UMAR, 2020) 58% of young people have already suffered from violence, with psychological violence being the most prevalent type of violence (Jezl et al., 1996; Muñoz et al., 2015; Murray & Kardatzke, 2007; UMAR, 2020). According to Paiva and Figueiredo (2004) 50.8% of university students suffered from psychological violence, 25.6% from sexual coercion and 3.8% from physical abuse. Men are described as the most acceptant of violence (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Saavedra, 2011; Ventura et al., 2013), though some studies describe women as the ones who most commit violence in dating relationships (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004; Machado et al., 2010;).

The perpetration of violence is associated to attitudes that influence how this phenomenon is accepted and practiced (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004), and seems to be negatively related to emotional intelligence (Fernández-González et al., 2018; García-Sancho et al., 2014). Additionally, self-esteem and gender seem to be important variables when it comes to understanding the relations between the variables (Dosil et al., 2020; Hornos & Núñez, 2019; Karlsson, 2015; Muñoz et al., 2015; Muslu et al., 2017; Yolcu & Akbay, 2020).

Attitudes Towards Dating Violence

Attitudes towards dating violence refer to the way each person accepts, tolerates and perceives global consequences about dating violence (Foshee, et al., 1998) and predict over time, the behavioral perpetration of dating violence (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Sears et al., 2007). Therefore, the tolerance of violence and the manifestation of sexist attitudes are the visible issues that society must fight for to protect victims (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020). Acceptance of violence varies according to the type of aggression committed, as some types of violence are more permissible than others. For example, sexual and physical abuse are identified as the least acceptable forms of violence, while emotional abuse is typically the most acceptable (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020). Boys' tolerance to dating violence is more related to psychological aggression and girls' tolerance to dating violence is more associated to physical violence (Josephson

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& Proulx, 2008). According to the literature, female and male adolescents tend to accept more easily female-to-male violence than male-to-female violence. (O´Keefe, 1997). The experience of suffering violence is a crucial factor for acceptance of violence, since individuals seem to be more acceptive of the type of violence of which they have been victims of (Sears, et al., 2007).

However, the previous literature has not yet gathered consensus regarding the position of adolescents and young adults about violence acceptance. While Saavedra (2011) showed that adolescents are not supportive of any type of violence such as physical, psychological or sexual violence in their relationships, Ventura et al. (2013) suggested that a higher proportion of adolescents favor violent attitudes in intimate relationships. In this population, tolerance of dating violence increases physical violence (Josephson & Proulx, 2008).

Adolescents who think it is tolerable to be violent towards their partner under certain situations (Fernández-González et al., 2018) or believe that the husband should have a more dominant posture (Lichter & McCloskey, 2004) tend to be more likely to execute and support dating violence. Although knowledge about relationships and violence has a stronger influence on attitudes towards dating violence in boys, it is in girls that this relation has a significant direct effect (Josephson & Proulx, 2008). Adolescents with difficulties in internalizing social prohibitions more frequently present intimidating behaviors and attitudes (Feiring et al., 2002). Traditional attitudes related to family roles and dating relationships are positive linked to dating violence, in the two possible forms, execution and victimization; those who present traditional attitudes tend to fantasize about their romantic relationship accordingly, which can create difficulties in interrupting aggression path (Lichter & McCloskey, 2004).Training the way young people manage their anger skills is crucial to change attitudes and normative beliefs (Fernández-González et al., 2018), and therefore reduce the likelihood of violent behaviors in dating relationships.

The literature has also shown controversial results when it comes to gender differences in the perpetration of violence. Several studies have demonstrated that female individuals are the ones who are more violent in relationships (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Machado et al., 2010; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Sears at al., 2007; Swahn, et al., 2008), but other studies show that boys are more associated to the acts of perpetration in violence (e.g., Dosil et al., 2020; Karlsson, 2015). Higher levels of perpetration can be related to a form of self-defense (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; O'Keeffe, 1997) for female adolescents and to the fact that boys give more importance to maintaining relationships, which can lead to acceptance of suffering from violence

(Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020). In a sample of higher education students, female students presented higher levels of violence perpetration, namely of psychological and physical violence, compared to male students. Yet, these young women also reported higher levels of victimization from emotional, physical, and sexual violence (Muñoz et al., 2015).

Boys are more frequently socialized to perform dominative roles and traditional patriarchal models than girls. When girls accept submission patterns for themselves and boys' domination patterns, a formula of thinking and behaving will be created. Essentially, these ingredients will define how both genders should accept and act in society regarding violence. This type of pattern allows individuals to defend and normalize violent behavior in relationships (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020), and may explain why gender is an important predictor of dating violence (Bacıoğlu & Kocabıyık, 2020; Machado et al., 2010). Research suggests that, in general, boys and men seem to be more supportive of violence than girls (Bacıoğlu & Kocabıyık, 2020; Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Karlsson, 2015; Saavedra, 2011; Ventura et al., 2013; Yilmaz & Taplak, 2020). The male gender is less susceptible to present affective and emotionally charged behaviors and more prone to physical strength and verbal conflict, in order to appear strong and in control (Ventura et al., 2013). Accordingly, aggression is thought to be useful when there is a justified reason, which may support the initiation and acceptance of violence (Foshee et al., 2001).

Research suggests that sexist attitudes frame traditional gender roles regarding the acceptance of violence in intimate relationships. Hostile sexism has been found to be higher in male adolescents, and benevolent sexism seems to be higher in female adolescents (Fernandes et al., 2020). In higher education institutions, men also show higher levels of hostile sexism, while there are no gender differences in benevolent sexism (Ferreira, 2004). Regarding the influence of emotional intelligence, higher levels of emotional intelligence seem to be associated with lower levels of sexist attitudes in both genders (Hornos & Núñez, 2019).

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Predictors of Attitudes Towards Dating Violence: Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence has been defined in many different ways through the years. The relations between emotion and cognition are at the base of emotional intelligence (Mayer et al., 2011). According to the ability model or the four branch model, emotional intelligence is defined as ''(…) the degree of attention that individuals devote to their feelings, the clarity of their experience of these feelings, and their beliefs about terminating negative mood states or prolonging positive ones" (Salovey et al., 1995, p. 127). The first ability relates to the perception of emotions, referring to the capacity to identify emotions in faces, pictures, voices, cultural objects and in ourselves. This concept is considered the fundamental mechanism which allows the process of emotional intelligence to happen. The next branch is the use of emotions and refers to the ability to control emotions to help in cognitive activities, for example, thinking and problem solving. The aim is to adapt the emotion according to the necessity of the task. The third branch, understanding emotions, is described as the capacity to recognize emotional language and to realize how emotions change over time. The last ability, managing emotions, is defined as the capacity to control emotions in ourselves and in others (Mayer et al., 2004; Salovey & Grewal, 2005).

Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to achieve well-being (Mayer & Salovey, 1993), are less likely to be involved in problematic behaviors and to present self-destructive and negative behaviors, such as interpersonal violence (Mayer, 2004; Mayer et al., 2004). The literature has shown that the way we regulate emotions is crucial for behavioral outcomes and, therefore, maladaptive forms of emotion regulation can enhance violent behavior (Roberton et al., 2012), which in return is related to the frustration resulting from difficulties in emotional perception and expression (Sanchez-Ruiz & Baaklini, 2018). Individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less engaged in all types of aggression and it seems that emotional abilities are negatively associated to aggression (García-Sancho et al., 2014). Positive self-perceptions of emotional intelligence are linked to self-esteem and positive adjustment (Petrides & Furnham, 2000). Moreover, lower levels of emotional intelligence are associated with dysregulated coping strategies and a tendency to experience stressful situations instead of solving the problem (García-Sancho et al., 2014). Over time, boys are socialized to restrict the expression of their emotions, while girls are expected to have more facility to express such emotions (Polce-Lynch et al., 2000). In addition, higher levels of emotional abilities in girls are linked to a tendency to solve

problems with an active and positive approach (Stolarski et al., 2011). Previous studies found that women tend to be more socially skilled than men (Petrides & Furnham, 2000) and men self-perceived emotional intelligence values are lower than women, indicating that they see themselves as less confident in their abilities to perceive, understand and regulate their emotions (Fischer, et al., 2018).

Regarding dating violence, emotional intelligence reduces the perpetuation of acts of violence in dating relationships (Fernández-González et al., 2018). Clarity and repair dimensions of emotional intelligence are negatively associated with the practice of this type of violence, and gender seems to be a decisive factor in this relation. For girls, dating violence perpetration is associated with lower levels of emotional attention, while boys with lower levels of capacity to regulate emotional states are more prone to perpetrate dating violence (Fernández-González et al., 2018).

Self-esteem

Prior studies have shown contradictions when it comes to understanding how self-esteem predicts violent behavior. Some studies have shown that low levels of self-esteem predict violence in dating relationships in adolescents (Dosil et al., 2020, Machado, et al., 2010; Lewis, et al., 2002). This fact may be related to controlling attitudes towards partners in intimate relationships (Dosil et al., 2020), or to the lack of confidence and jealousy, which can be associated with difficulties in solving conflicts and establishing boundaries, and therefore contributing to the continuation of aggressive behavior (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Lewis et al., 2002). However, other studies have shown that people with higher levels of self-esteem tend to be more confident and to participate more frequently in violent behaviors than individuals with lower levels of self-esteem (Muslu et al., 2017).

Regarding victimization of dating violence, individuals who experienced abusive behavior show lower levels of self-esteem (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Clements et al., 2005; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Lewis et al., 2002; Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997). Accordingly, emotional abuse is considered the type of violence with the most significant impact on self-esteem (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994).

Acceptance of dating violence has been found to be negatively associated with perceived relationship self-efficacy and self-esteem (Yolcu & Akbay, 2020) and self-esteem was identified as a significant mediator in the relationship between perceived emotional intelligence and life satisfaction (Rey et al., 2001). In adolescents, higher levels of emotional clarity and repair are associated with higher levels of global self-esteem: individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence present higher levels of positive mood states and self-esteem (Rey et al., 2011; Schutte et al., 2002). Research

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has identified gender differences in self-esteem, as boys tend to present higher levels of self-esteem when compared to girls (Gomez-Baiy et al., 2016; Moksnes & Espnes, 2020). In addition, self-esteem is positively related to perceived emotional intelligence in adolescents, and gender has a moderator role in this relation, specifically in boys. Higher levels of emotional clarity and repair will result in higher levels of self-esteem, while, in girls higher levels of perceived emotional attention can compromise self-esteem (Gomez-Baiy et al., 2016).

The Present Study

Dating violence has been a prevalent problem in the Portuguese juvenile population (Paiva & Figueiredo, 2004; UMAR, 2020). Although some research has been conducted in this field, the literature has shown some inconsistencies in findings regarding the relations between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence, as well as the role that gender plays in this relation, and therefore it is crucial to further investigate existing patterns for this social problem. Prior studies suggest that emotional intelligence is a relevant variable when it comes to violence, showing that the capacity to be emotionally intelligent is negatively correlated with aggressive behaviors (Fernández-González et al., 2018; García-Sancho et al., 2014; Mayer, 2004;). Additionally, the acceptance of violence is influenced by traditional beliefs about gender roles and violence (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004). Gender differences have also been described in the literature regarding attitudes towards violence (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Yilmaz & Taplak, 2020; Ventura et al., 2013) and emotional intelligence (Fernández-González et al., 2018). Finally, self-esteem is a variable that can influence the relation between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence (Dosil et al., 2020; Muslu et al., 2017).

Most studies in this domain have been predominantly focused on adolescents (Dosil et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Ventura et al., 2013), lacking a focus on other development periods, such as emerging adulthood. In addition, the literature lacks a more comprehensive perspective about the influence of emotional intelligence on attitudes towards violence, since many of the previous studies have focused only on one of its dimensions (i.e., emotional regulation) (Bacıoğlu & Kocabıyık, 2020; Roberton et al., 2012). Many studies approach the topic of violence or aggression in general, but not the attitudes associated with violence, and in the specific context of dating violence (García-Sancho et al., 2014; Sanchez-Ruiz & Baaklini, 2018). Furthermore, the study of the relations between emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and

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attitudes towards dating violence, along with the role of gender in these associations, is lacking in the literature in this domain.
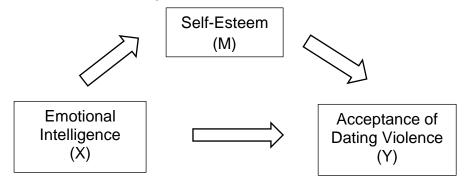
The purpose of this study is to understand how emotional intelligence can be associated to attitudes towards dating violence, particularly exploring the mediating role of self-esteem, and gender differences in higher education students. We expect that lower levels of emotional intelligence translate into more positive attitudes towards dating violence and that self-esteem plays a mediating role in this relation. Moreover, we also expect that gender influences the relation between these variables, since gender has been described as an important variable for emotional intelligence, attitudes towards dating violence and self-esteem outcomes (Fernandes et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Gomez-Baiy et al., 2016; Hornos & Núñez, 2019). The findings of this study will potentially help to raise awareness about the importance of emotions and attitudes towards violence, which can be helpful in interventions to prevent and remediate violent behaviors in dating relationships. In this line of thinking, we expect that:

H1: Self-reported levels of emotional intelligence are negatively associated with acceptance of dating violence.

H2: Self-esteem has a mediating role in the relationship between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence: higher levels of emotional intelligence are related to higher levels of self-esteem, which in turn are related to less acceptance of dating violence.

H3: Men and women differ in the patterns of relations between emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and acceptance of dating violence.

Figure 1.

Model of Mediation for Higher Education Female and Male Students

Note. Model for the mediating role of self-esteem in higher education female and male students, regarding the relations between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence (acceptance of dating violence).

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Method

Participants

Initially, this sample was composed of 616 participants. After applying the exclusion criteria, we excluded participants that had more than 25 years (41 participants), were married (5 participants) or divorced (1 participant), who did not inform about their gender (1 participant) and who presented social desirability values with 2 standard deviation points above the average in the Social Desirability Scale (13 participants). The final sample of participants was composed of 555 higher education students, 211 (38%) men and 344 (62%) women, with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years (M = 20.76, SD = 1.87). All the higher education students were single, and the majority declared to be heterosexual (93%). A subtotal of 312 (56.2%) of the participants were enrolled in a public higher education institution, and the majority studied at a university (73.5%), while fewer attended a polytechnic institution (25.9%). Science and Technology courses were the most prevalent in this sample (34.1%), and the highest percentage of students was observed for students in the third year (30.8%). Most students were not in a dating relationship (54.4%) and never had been in one during their studies in higher education institutions (61.6%). For those who were in a dating relationship (45.6%), the average length of this relation was of 21 months. Of this sample, 492 (88.6 %) of the students were never a victim of dating violence; however, 45 (8.1%) students had already been in this position. The majority had never been an aggressor of dating violence (92.8%), yet 19 students (3.4%) admitted being in this position.

Measures

Emotional Intelligence. Emotional intelligence was assessed by the Portuguese version (Queirós et al., 2005) of the Trait Meta Mood Scale (TMMS-24; Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004). This instrument aims to assess perceived emotional intelligence with 24 items that are distributed into three dimensions: emotional attention (e.g., "I pay a lot of attention to my feelings"), clarity of feelings (e.g., "I am usually very conscious of what I feel") and repair of emotional states (e.g., "I usually spend time thinking about my emotions") with 8 items each. Respondents answered the items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Totally disagree", 5 = "Totally agree"). Both Spanish (Attention: α = .90; Clarity: α = .90; Repair: α = .86) and Portuguese (Attention: α = .80; Clarity: α = .79; Repair: α = .85) versions showed good levels of internal consistency. The present study

also demonstrated good levels of internal consistency globally (α = .90) and in all the subscales (Attention: α = .84; Clarity: α = .86; Repair: α = .81).

Attitudes Towards Dating Violence. Attitudes towards dating violence were assessed using a translation to Portuguese of the original version of the Acceptance of Couple Violence Scale (Foshee et al., 1992). This is a self-report instrument composed by three subscales, with a total of 11 items: Male acceptance of violence against women (e.g., "A girl who makes her boyfriend jealous on purpose deserves to be hit"), Female acceptance of violence against males (e.g., "A girl angry enough to hit her boyfriend must love him very much") and the Acceptance of general dating violence (e.g., "Violence between dating partners is a personal matter, and people should not interfere"). Participants rated the items using a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = "Strongly disagree", 4 = "Strongly agree"). This version has adequate levels of internal consistency in all factors (Male acceptance of violence against women – α = .74; Female acceptance of violence against males – α = .71; Acceptance of general dating violence – α = .73) (Foshee et al., 1992). The Brazilian version in Portuguese also showed satisfactory levels of internal consistency in the first and third factor (α=.61; α=.67, respectively) and good levels of internal consistency in the second subscale (α=.80) (Pimentel et al., 2017). The present study also found good levels of internal consistency globally (α = .96) and in all factors (Male acceptance of violence against women – α = .92; Female acceptance of violence against males – α = .86; Acceptance of general dating violence – α = .94).

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was assessed with the Portuguese version (Pechorro et al., 2011) of The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). This instrument is constituted by 10 items (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I take a positive attitude toward myself") and evaluates self-esteem in adolescents and adults. Participants rated the items using a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = "Strongly disagree", 4 = "Strongly agree". This scale shows good levels of internal consistency in both versions (Original version: α = .77 to .88; Portuguese version: α = .81). In the present study, the scale also presents good levels of internal consistency (α = .87).

Social Desirability. Social desirability was assessed with the Portuguese version (Pechorro et al., 2012) of the short version of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Ballard, 1992). This is a unidimensional scale composed by 13 items (e.g., "I sometimes feel resentful when I don´t get my way"; "I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake") with a dichotomic set of response (true/false). Both the original (α = .70) and the Portuguese (α = .60) versions showed adequate levels of internal consistency. In the present study, satisfactory levels of internal consistency (α = .71) were also found.

Procedures

Data were collected in higher educational institutions, both polytechnic and universities, in 2019. The participants completed the questionnaires in person, in paper and pen. They were informed about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their participation and the possibility of withdrawing at any time. Anonymity and confidentially were guaranteed and informed consent was collected. All procedures in this study complied with the Portuguese Psychologists' Code of Ethics (Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2016).

Data Analysis

Data were explored by descriptive and correlational analyses using the IBM-SPSS Statistics 27 program. Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the distribution of scores, followed by a set of t-tests and chi-square tests to explore the differences and associations between the studied variables, respectively. The main statistical procedures concerned the mediation model of self-esteem in the relation between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence. Two simple mediations were performed for each gender, male and female participants, using model 4 of the macro-PROCESS for SPSS created by Hayes (2013). Analyses were conducted using a confidence interval of 5000 bootstraps.

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Results

Descriptive and Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents the minimum and maximum values, means, standard deviations and skewness and kurtosis values of the studied variables. The results show low variability in all the variables and as expected, attitudes towards dating violence dimensions present abnormal values of skewness and kurtosis, indicating they do not follow the normal distribution.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Studied Variables

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Emotional Intelligence	2.08	4.79	3.55	.47	-.18	.25
Emotional Attention	1.25	5.00	3.51	.60	-.29	.26
Emotional Clarity	1.75	5.00	3.54	.58	-.17	.13
Emotional Repair	1.75	5.00	3.60	.55	-.29	.18
Self-esteem	1.60	4.00	3.12	.51	-.31	-.42
Acceptance of dating violence	1.00	3.91	1.15	.41	3.51	13.28
Male-on-female Violence	1.00	4.00	1.16	.47	3.66	13.81
Female-on-male Violence	1.00	4.00	1.12	.37	4.44	25.07
General Violence	1.00	4.00	1.17	.46	3.45	12.44

When comparing female and male students, the t-tests showed that there are statistically significant differences between men and women in relation to Emotional Intelligence $t(406) = -2.06$, p = .04), and Acceptance of Dating Violence, $t(310) = 3.64$, p < .001) (see table 2). There are no differences between participants in a dating relationship and participants not in a dating relationship regarding the studied variables (table 1 in the appendices). Women present higher levels of emotional intelligence ($M = 3.59$, $SD = .44$) and men present higher levels of violence acceptance ($M = 1.24$, $SD = .52$) (see table 2). Additionally, the status relationship does not influence the studied variables.

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Table 2

Analyses of Differences Between Men and Women

	Men		Women		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Emotional Intelligence	3.50	.50	3.59	.44	-2.06	406	.04
Self-Esteem	3.15	.48	3.10	.52	1.25	553	.21
Acceptance of dating violence	1.24	.52	1.10	.32	3.64	310	<.001

Chi-square tests showed that there is an association between gender and the victimization of dating violence, χ^2 (2) = 10.26, p =.006 (table 2 in the appendices), there is no association between gender and the practice of aggression in dating violence, χ^2 (2) = 5.73, p >.05 (table 3 in the appendices), and that there is an association between being (or not being) in a stable relationship and being a victim of dating violence, χ^2 (4) = 30.95, p <.001 (table 4 in the appendices). Women are more likely to be a victim of dating violence than men and being in a stable relationship is related to a higher likelihood to not suffer from dating violence.

Relations between Emotional Intelligence, Self-Esteem, and Attitudes Towards Dating Violence

Table 3 presents the correlations between emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and acceptance of dating violence, for male and female participants in the study. In women, emotional intelligence presents a moderate and positive correlation with self-esteem (r = .31, p <.001) and a weak negative correlation with acceptance of violence (r = -.11, p = .043), and self-esteem is negatively correlated to acceptance of dating violence (r = -.17, p <.001). For men, emotional intelligence is moderately related to self-esteem (r = .24, p <.001), but negatively and weakly correlated to acceptance of dating violence (r = -.18, p = .011).

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Table 3

Correlations between Emotional Intelligence, Self-esteem, and Acceptance of Dating Violence for Men and Women

	1	2	3
1. Emotional intelligence	-	.31***	-.11*
2. Self-esteem	.24***	-	-.17***
3. Acceptance of dating violence	-.18*	-.10	-

Note. N=555; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. Women – above diagonal; Men – bellow diagonal

The mediation analyses aimed to explore whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence in female and male higher education students. For female students (see table 4), emotional intelligence is a statistically significant predictor of self-esteem (β = .36, *SE* = .06, *p* = .000) and explains 9.7% of its variance. Additionally, self-esteem is a statistically significant predictor of acceptance of dating violence, β = -.09, *SE* = .04, *p* = .007, explaining 3.3% of the variance of attitudes towards dating violence. However, the direct effect shows that emotional intelligence is not a statistically significant predictor of acceptance of dating violence, β = -.05, *SE*= .04, *p* = .267. The total effect model shows that, for women, emotional intelligence only predicts acceptance of dating violence because of the involvement of self-esteem, β = -.08, *SE*= .04, *p* = .043, resulting in a full mediation effect, *F* (1,342) = 4.139, *p* = .043. Emotional intelligence presented a significant indirect effect on acceptance of dating violence via self-esteem, *z* = -.03, *SE* =.01, 95% CI [-.07, -.01])

For male students (see table 5), emotional intelligence is a statistically significant predictor of self-esteem, β = .23, *SE* = .06, *p* =.01, and it explains 5.5% of the variance of self-esteem. However, self-esteem is not a statistically significant predictor of acceptance of dating violence, β = -.07, *SE* = .08, *p* = .373. The direct effect shows that emotional intelligence is a statistically significant predictor of acceptance of dating violence, β = -.17, *SE* = .07, *p* = .023, contributing to 3.4% of the levels of its variance. The total effect model shows that emotional intelligence is a predictor of acceptance of dating violence, but self-esteem does not influence the levels of such attitudes towards dating violence, β = -.18, *SE* = .07, *p* =.011, and therefore there is no mediation effect, *F* (1,209) = 6.598, *p* =. 011. Testing of indirect effects aimed to determine whether self-esteem mediated the relationship between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards

dating violence. Emotional intelligence does not have a significant indirect effect on acceptance of dating violence via self-esteem, *z* = -.015, SE = .02, 95% CI [-.07, .03]).

Table 4

Mediation Analysis for Female Higher Education Students (N=344)

Regression	*β*	SE	LLCI	ULCI	*t*	*p*
Total effect of Emotional Intelligence (X) on Acceptance of Dating Violence (Y)	-.08**	.04	-.16	-.003	-2.03	.043
Emotional Intelligence (X) to Self-esteem (M)	.36***	.06	.25	.48	6.06	<.001
Self-esteem (M) to Acceptance of Dating Violence (Y)	-.09**	.04	-.16	-.03	-2.7	.007
Direct effect of Emotional Intelligence (X) on Acceptance of Dating Violence (Y)	-.05	.04	-.12	.04	-1.11	.267

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient. SE= standard error. LLCI= lower CI limit. ULCI= upper CI limit. **p* < .01, ***p* < .001.

Table 5

Mediation Analysis for Male Higher Education Students (N=211)

Regression	*β*	SE	LLCI	ULCI	*t*	*p*
Total effect of Emotional Intelligence (X) on Acceptance of Dating Violence (Y)	-.18*	.07	-.32	-.04	-2.57	.011
Emotional Intelligence (X) to Self-esteem (M)	.23***	.06	.1	.36	3.5	<.001
Self-esteem (M) to Acceptance of Dating Violence (Y)	-.07	.08	-.21	.08	-.89	.373
Direct effect of Emotional Intelligence (X) on Acceptance of Dating Violence (Y)	-.17*	.07	-.31	.02	-2.29	.023

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient. SE= standard error. LLCI= lower CI limit. ULCI= upper CI limit. **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

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Discussion

Dating violence is an important and predominant social problem, specifically among the juvenile population (Machado et al., 2010; Paiva & Figueiredo, 2004; UMAR, 2020). Although prior research has found some evidence on attitudes towards dating violence (O´Keefe, 1997; Josephson & Proulx, 2008), emotional intelligence (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Fischer, et al., 2018) and self-esteem (Gomez-Baiy et al., 2016; Yolcu & Akbay, 2020), the majority of studies focuses on adolescents and does not evaluate the mutual influence of these variables altogether, nor the impact of gender on the relations between these variables. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to understand how emotional intelligence can influence attitudes towards dating violence in emerging adults, while also exploring the mediating role of self-esteem and the influence of gender in these relationships. The main results showed gender differences in variables predicting attitudes towards dating violence. More specifically, while female participants' acceptance of dating violence was predicted by emotional intelligence via the mediating role of self-esteem, for male participants acceptance of dating violence was directly predicted by emotional intelligence, with no mediating role of self-esteem.

The mediation analyses evidenced gender differences in both hypotheses H1 and H2. The present study explored the hypothesis that self-reported levels of emotional intelligence were negatively associated to acceptance of dating violence (H1). Overall, such hypothesis was only confirmed for male participants. The male participants showed lower levels of emotional intelligence than women, which is confirmed by the literature since men's self-perceived emotional intelligence values are generally lower than women's, indicating that they see themselves as less confident of their abilities to perceive, understand and regulate their emotions (Fischer et al., 2018). Moreover, male students presented higher levels of acceptance of violence, which is in accordance with the literature (Bacıoğlu & Kocabıyık, 2020; Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020; Fernández-González et al., 2018; Karlsson, 2015; Saavedra, 2011; Ventura et al., 2013; Yilmaz & Taplak, 2020) as they are typically more socialized to perform dominative roles on traditional patriarchal models (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020) and are more likely to act with violence when they think an aggressive response can be applied for a justified reason (Foshee et al., 2001).

The mediating role of self-esteem in the relationship between emotional intelligence and acceptance of dating violence (H2), assuming that higher levels of emotional intelligence are related to higher levels of self-esteem which in turn are related to less acceptance of dating violence, was also explored in the present study. Overall, results supported this hypothesis and showed considerable gender differences,

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empirically supporting H3. For female students' emotional intelligence influenced attitudes towards dating violence, through the mediating role of self-esteem. Previous studies had shown that emotional intelligence has a positive effect on self-esteem, since individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are more likely to achieve well-being (Mayer & Salovey, 1993) and that self-esteem plays a negative effect on attitudes towards dating violence (Yolcu & Akbay, 2020). Even though literature has not deeply explored the relationship between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence, sexist attitudes have been negatively associated with emotional intelligence (Hornos & Núñez, 2019). For male students, self-esteem was not identified as a mediator in the relationship between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence, due to the absence of a significant relationship between self-esteem and attitudes towards dating violence. Although previous research has shown that self-esteem is higher in men (Gomez-Baiy et al., 2016; Moksnes & Espnes, 2020), for these participants self-esteem plays no mediating role, as emotional intelligence is directly associated with attitudes towards dating violence.

Preliminary analyses of the present study revealed that women present higher levels of emotional intelligence, which can be corroborated by literature showing they are more likely to express their emotions (Polce-Lynch et al., 2000) and are more prepared to resolve their problems in a positive and active way (Stolarski et al., 2011). Concerning self-esteem, this study did not find any gender differences, but according to literature, men exhibit higher levels of self-esteem (Gomez-Baiy et al., 2016; Moksnes & Espnes, 2020). This sample indicated that women are more likely to be a victim of dating violence, which is in line with previous investigations (Dosil et al.,2020; Muñoz et al., 2015) and may be associated with traditional gender roles that dictate how violence is accepted (Fernández-Antelo et al., 2020). The present study's results also demonstrate that there are no gender differences in the practice of dating aggression, which goes against the findings of prior research, since the majority found that women are the ones that most practice this type of violence (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Fernández-Fuertes & Fuertes, 2010; Machado et al., 2010; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Sears at al., 2007; Swahn, et al., 2008), which can be related to a form of self-defense (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; O´Keefe, 1997). According to the results of the current study, there are no associations between dating relationship status and emotional intelligence, self-esteem and attitudes towards dating violence.

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Strengths, limitations and recommendations for future research

To the best of our knowledge, the present study is one of the few that seeks to understand more deeply how emotional intelligence and self-esteem work together to predict attitudes towards dating violence in emerging male and female adults in higher education. Therefore, the present study has a number of strengths, which should be considered. First, at a theoretical level, it explores the factors related to attitudes towards dating violence in Portuguese emerging adults. More specifically, the results of this study not only indicated how emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and attitudes towards dating violence are associated, but also add to the literature that the pattern of relations between these variables are different across genders. Therefore, the present study highlighted the role of several theoretically important constructs intervening in attitudes towards dating violence. Second, the theoretical contributions of the present study translate into practical implications. More particularly, the present study's findings suggest that more effective interventions aimed to promote awareness in emerging adults regarding dating relationships and dating violence should be differently designed according to participants' gender. For female students, these interventions could focus primarily on the promotion of self-esteem while for male students they can focus on strategies to promote emotional intelligence. Such interventions are particularly important due to the attitude-behavior connection. Assuming that attitudes of acceptance of dating violence are related with violent behavior in intimate relationships, interventions aiming to promote anti-violent attitudes in emerging adults may prevent future paths of violence from happening, not only during emerging adults' paths in higher education, but also in their future relations, as dating relationships in higher education often last in time, throughout adulthood. Therefore, psychoeducational awareness programs should be created through the counselor support office of each higher education institution to capacitate young people with tools to prevent and understand how and when to act when faced with violence in dating relationships.

Notwithstanding, this study also presents some limitations. First, its cross-sectional design does not allow to examine changes in attitudes towards dating violence over time nor to explore mechanisms of causality between the variables. Second, as in all studies using self-reported measures, response bias cannot be excluded, especially when considering such a sensitive and socially condemned topic as dating violence. Although a social desirability scale was included in the study design for sample screening, the absence of socially desirable answers cannot be guaranteed. Finally, while assessing the attitudes towards dating violence, the present study missed to explore a more

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behavioral component of dating violence, which could be achieved by the inclusion of self-reported experiential measures.

Based on the study findings, future studies could explore the relation between emotional intelligence, self-esteem and attitudes towards dating violence in participants of different sexual orientations and gender identities. Also, as the present study focused only on a general measure of attitudes towards dating violence, future studies could explore associations between emotional intelligence and self-esteem and more specific dimension of the attitudes towards dating violence. In such exploration, more complex and complete instruments assessing attitudes towards dating violence could be considered, namely those distinguishing between behaviors performed by the self (perpetration) and targeted by the partner (victimization) (i.e., Conflict Adolescents Dating Relationship Inventory [CADRI]; Wolfe et al., 2001).

Moreover, a series of variables could be included in future investigations in this domain and population, focusing, for example, on the influence of patriarchal norms in educational trajectories and the development of attitudes towards dating violence, the influence of sexist attitudes in female and male students on attitudes towards dating violence, and the influence of family norms in attitudes towards gender roles and dating violence. Violence exposure can also be an important variable to understand how attitudes towards violence are created and internalized.

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Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand how emotional intelligence can influence attitudes towards dating violence, exploring the mediating role of self-esteem and gender differences in the relations between the studied variables. The lack of evidence in literature relatively to attitudes towards dating violence in young adults, especially those in higher education institutions and the analyses of all the variables referred in this study individually and together was the principal purpose of this study. The main results showed that, for female students, self-esteem plays a decisive role in the relationship between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards dating violence, but for male students, emotional intelligence has only a direct effect on attitudes towards dating violence.

This study allowed to explore the concepts of emotional intelligence, self-esteem and attitudes towards dating violence, their relations and gender differences. Furthermore, it was possible to understand how dating violence is a real issue in this specific Portuguese population and that it is important to develop strategies to combat this problem.

Future interventions should focus primarily on psychoeducational programs to prevent dating violence and to create more meaningful and healthy dating relationships. According to the results, these programs should focus on improving female students' self-esteem and male students' emotional intelligence.

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Appendices

Table 1

Analyses of Differences Between Subjects in a Dating Relationship and Not Dating

	With dating relationhip		Without dating relationhip		*t*	df	*p*
	M	*DP*	*M*	*DP*			
Emotional Intelligence	3.58	.46	3.53	.47	1.26	553	.21
Self-esteem	3.09	.48	3.14	.53	-1.09	548	.28
Violence Acceptance	1.11	.37	1.18	.44	-1.87	552	.07

Table 2

Analyses of Associations between Men and Women and Being or not a Victim of Dating Violence

Victim of Dating Violence	Men N (%)	Women N (%)	$\chi^2(2)$
Yes	7 (3.4%)	38 (11.1%)	10.26**
No	195 (94.2%)	297 (86.8%)	
Doesn´t know/doesn´t answer	5 (2.4%)	7 (2 %)	

*Note. **p < .01*

Table 3

Analyses of Associations between Men and Women and the Perpetration of Dating Violence

Aggressor of dating violence	Men N (%)	Women N (%)	$\chi^2(2)$
Yes	6 (2.9%)	13 (3.8%)	5.73
No	190 (91.8%)	325 (325%)	
Doesn´t know/doesn´t answer	11 (5.3%)	6 (1.7%)	

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Table 4

Analyses of Associations between Being a Victim and Being in a Stable Relationship

Stability in a relationship	Victim of Dating violence N (%)	Non-victim of dating violence N (%)	Doesn´t know/doesn´t answer N (%)	$\chi^2(4)$
Stable	21 (95.5%)	210 (94.2%)	2 (40%)	30.95***
Not stable	1 (4.5%)	5 (2.2%)	1 (20%)	
Doesn´t know/doesn´t answer	0	8 (3.6%)	2 (40%)	

Note. ****p* < .01