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Articles

Forms of psychological abuse in heterosexual and homosexual romantic relationships

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Abstract

Background: Psychological abuse is a widespread form of Intimate Partner Violence and has harmful consequences for the wellbeing of the victim. Despite the theoretical and clinical relevance of this form of abuse, few studies have taken into consideration its multidimensional nature together with one of its defining essential characteristics, which is the systematic nature of abuse behaviors. The aim of this study was to analyze the prevalence of perpetrated and suffered psychological abuse in heterosexual and homosexual men and women, considering its multidimensional nature and repetitiveness, in the following terms: absent, occasional, and repeated abuse.

Methods: Our sample included 1026 participants (406 heterosexual men, 488 heterosexual women, 65 homosexual men, 67 homosexual women), aged 18–30 years ($M = 23.93$; $SD = 2.75$), involved in a romantic relationship. A series of chi-squared tests were performed to explore differences between the four groups.

Results: In line with previous studies, results showed that most of participants reported to have perpetrated (95%) and suffered (94%) at least one behavior of psychological abuse. However, considering the repetitiveness of the acts, the prevalence of repeated abuse is around 14%, with no significant differences among groups. However, significant differences emerged considering the different forms of psychological abuse and their repetitiveness.

Conclusion: Overall, these results highlight the forms of abuse most commonly perpetrated and suffered in relation to gender and sexual orientation. The distinction between less frequent and systematic cases of abuse provides important implications for clinicians dealing with couples and victims. These results are relevant for the implementation of possible supportive intervention policies.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Psychological Abuse

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a widespread phenomenon in romantic relationships and constitutes a serious problem for health and wellbeing, given that it implies a wide range of negative consequences at both personal and social levels (Gerino et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2014; Sugg, 2015). IPV can arise in various forms, such as physical, psychological, sexual, and financial violence, and in any type of relationship (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a), although there are very few studies that have taken into consideration same-sex relationships (Rollè et al., 2018). However, psychological abuse, also called emotional, verbal, or nonphysical abuse/aggression, has only recently been considered a separate and distinct form of abuse in romantic relationships (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a; DeHart et al., 2010).

Although there is not a universally accepted definition, there is a general consensus that psychological abuse is a multidimensional phenomenon implemented through a wide range of acts and behaviors, ranging from dominance, control, isolation, criticism, and physical threats, which entail a significant deterioration of the psychophysical wellbeing of the abused subject (Ali et al., 2016; Bonechi & Tani, 2011a). In this regard, a relevant contribution is offered by Murphy and Hoover (1999), who proposed a multidimensional model that includes four main dimensions to clarify the complexity of this phenomenon. The first dimension, *Restrictive Engulfment*, includes coercive acts or behaviors that isolate, limit, monitor, and control the partner's activities and social contacts, or manifestations of jealousy or possessiveness, which increase the partner's dependence and availability. The second dimension, *Denigration*, involves actions or verbal attacks, humiliation, insults, and criticism, which have a negative impact on the partner's self-esteem. The third dimension, *Hostile Withdrawal*, comprises behaviors intended to punish the partner or increase anxiety/insecurity about the relationship, such as cold and punitive avoidance during conflict, and denying emotional contact and availability. The fourth dimension, *Dominance/Intimidation*, includes behaviors aimed to create fear and submission through aggression, such as threats, property destruction, and verbal assaults.

Another fundamental characteristic of psychological abuse is the systematic nature of these acts, which deeply affects a person's self-esteem as well as his/her sense of security and identity (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a; Loring, 1994).

Unlike other forms of violence, the consequences of psychological abuse are not always directly observable, so much so that some authors refer to them with the term "invisible injuries" (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a). Despite this, there is consistent evidence that psychological abuse has

a wide range of harmful consequences for the psychological, physical, and relational wellbeing of the victim, which can sometimes be more serious and last longer than those caused by other more visible forms of violence (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a; Buller et al., 2014; Okafor et al., 2018). In addition, this form constitutes one of the most common and significant forms of IPV (Cornelius et al., 2010; Dokkedahl et al., 2019), common not only in clinical settings but also in the general population (Lawrence et al., 2009; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Simpson & Christensen, 2005). Unlike other forms of abuse in which the roles of victim and perpetrator are quite stable, distinct, and recognizable, psychological abuse has a bidirectional nature and is equally distributed among the partners (Edwards & Sylaska, 2013; Ponti et al., 2020; Tani et al., 2016). For all the above reasons, from a clinical point of view, it is important to know how this phenomenon occurs in romantic relationships.

1.2 Prevalence of Psychological Abuse

Despite the fact that there is a general consensus in literature to consider psychological abuse one of the most frequent forms of IPV, the estimation of its prevalence varies considerably between studies, due to the ways in which it is defined and measured, and within what time period (e.g., lifetime, past year, last six months) it is detected. Awareness that psychological abuse is a complex phenomenon constitutes a progressive achievement in literature. The first studies that attempted to investigate psychological abuse considered it to be a global construct, or focused on partial and different aspects of it.

For example, Lafontaine and Lussier (2005) found that 64.5% of women and 61.9% of men suffered from psychological abuse, while Muñoz-Rivas and colleagues found that psychological abuse, defined as verbal aggression, is used by more than 90% of partners in romantic relationships, with a significant gender difference, given that women that reported a greater prevalence of verbal aggression, both perpetrated and suffered, than men did (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007). Conversely, Hines and Saudino (2003) found that there are no gender differences regarding psychological abuse. Specifically, during the year preceding the survey, 82% of men and 86% of women perpetrated psychological aggressions against their partners, while 81% of males and 80% of females suffered it. A high prevalence of psychological abuse was also detected by Tani and colleagues (2016), who found that almost all participants declared that they had perpetrated (98.5%) and suffered (98%) some form of psychological abuse in their romantic relationships in the 6 months preceding the survey, without statistically significant differences according to gender.

Most of the studies carried out until now have focused on heterosexual couple relationships, while little research has considered psychological abuse within homosexual couples. These studies have highlighted that psychological abuse is also the most common form of IPV in homosexual relationships, with no statistically significant differences between men and women, referring to both perpetrated and suffered psychological abuse (Longares et al., 2018; Matte & Lafontaine, 2011).

Few studies have investigated this phenomenon within heterosexual and homosexual samples simultaneously (Mason et al., 2014). The *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (NISVS) reported that 63% of homosexual women and 47.5% of heterosexual women have suffered psychological abuse from an intimate partner at some point of their lives. For men, the percentages are 59.6% for homosexuals and 49.3% for heterosexuals. In both cases, statistically significant differences in prevalence emerged (Walters et al., 2013).

Despite the interest of these studies from a theoretical point of view, it is noteworthy that they considered psychological abuse as a predominantly unitary construct, or focused only on partial and different aspects of this phenomenon. In contrast, as we stated, we believe that psychological abuse is a multidimensional construct, and it should be studied as such. Moreover, moving from the consideration that one of the fundamental characteristics for the definition of psychological abuse is the systematic nature of the abuse behaviors, as discussed above, we believe that in order to correctly identify the prevalence of this phenomenon, it is necessary to detect it not only in terms of presence/absence, but also in terms of repetitiveness and seriousness of acts.

1.3 The current study

Starting with these considerations, the focus of this study was to look at the prevalence of psychological abuse within the romantic relationships, exploring how this phenomenon occurs in its different forms, based on repetitiveness over time of abuse behaviors. In particular, our aim was to explore the prevalence of psychological abuse, both perpetrated and suffered, in its different forms (Restrictive Engulfment, Denigration, Hostile Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation) in both heterosexual and homosexual men and women, considering the repetitiveness of absence, occasional, and repeated abuse.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedures

A sample of 1026 students of the University of Florence (Italy), aged 18 to 30 years ($M = 23.93$; $SD = 2.75$), divided into 4 groups (406 heterosexual men, 488 heterosexual women, 65

homosexual men, and 67 homosexual women), were recruited for the study. The inclusion criteria were to have a homo- or hetero-sexual orientation and to currently be involved in a romantic relationship for at least a year.

The data were collected through an online questionnaire via email, sent to the participants' university institution email box, which informed them about the purpose of the survey, that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without any negative consequences, and that no monetary reward was given for participation. The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical principles of research published by the Italian Psychological Association. Approval of the study was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Florence (n.35/7th November 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants through an online form with which the survey began. Only after signing the informed consent form could participants who met inclusion criteria access the questionnaire and anonymously complete the survey. In particular, the survey aimed to gather information on personal and demographic data and the tendency to perpetrate and suffer psychological abuse. Since the online survey had been constructed in such a way that it was not possible to send the answer without filling in all the required fields, the surveys returned did not present missing data.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

These measures included gender (male or female), sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, other), age, relationship length (months), status of relationship (cohabitants or non-cohabitants), birthplace, level of education, and socioeconomic status.

2.2.2 Psychological abuse

The Italian version of the *Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse* (MMEA) (Bonechi & Tani, 2011b; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Murphy et al., 1999) was used to assess psychological abuse behaviors. MMEA is a self-report scale containing 28 items rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 0 (never) to 6 (more than 20 times) both for victimization and perpetration behaviors. Participants were asked to report the frequency with which forms of psychological abuse were implemented and suffered within a romantic relationship in the previous six months. In particular, MMEA measures a global score of psychological abuse and its four main dimensions, as discussed above, which have 7 items each: 1) *Restrictive Engulfment* (e.g., "Tried to stop you/your partner from seeing certain friends or family members", item n°3); 2) *Denigration* (e.g., "Called you/your partner a loser, failure, or similar term", item n°12); 3) *Hostile Withdrawal* (e.g.,

“Intentionally avoided you/your partner during a conflict or disagreement”, item n°21); 4) *Dominance/Intimidation* (e.g., “Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something in front of you/your partner”, item n°26), Scores for the four dimensions, both for perpetration and victimization reports, are obtained by summing the response categories. The total abuse score, both for victimization and perpetration, is obtained by summing all 28 items. Scores range from 0 to 42 for each subscale, and higher scores on the MMEA indicate higher levels of psychological abuse in the couple relationship. Starting from the total scores, we distinguished three levels of the phenomenon, using as cut-off a standard deviation above the mean on MMEA scores: 1) Absence, if the score was equal to 0; 2) Occasional, if the score was between 0 and a standard deviation above the average; 3) Repeated, if the score was greater than or equal to a standard deviation above the average. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha for perpetration and victimization reports were, respectively: .87 and .89 for the global score, .77 and .79 for *Restrictive Engulfment*, .75 and .76 for *Denigration*, .81 and .85 for *Hostile Withdrawal*, and .73 and .78 for *Dominance/Intimidation*.

2.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted for all participants. In order to compare the four groups on socio-demographical variables (age, duration of relationship, birthplace, relational status, educational level, and socioeconomic status), a series of χ^2 test or univariate analyses of variance were conducted, depending on the dichotomous or continuous nature of variables.

To explore differences in the prevalence of the different forms of psychological abuse, both perpetrated and suffered, among the four groups (heterosexual men, heterosexual women, homosexual men, and homosexual women), a series of chi-squared tests was performed. For all analyses the alpha level was set to $p = .05$.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive analysis

The socio-demographic characteristics of the four groups are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, no significant differences by groups emerged with respect to age, duration of relationship, birthplace, relationship status, educational level, and socioeconomic status.

The means and standard deviations of the total score of MMEA and its dimensions, separately by groups, are reported in table 2.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the four groups

		Total	Heterosexual men	Heterosexual women	Homosexual men	Homosexual women		
		M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	F (df)	<i>p</i>
	Age	23.93 (2.75)	24.3 (2.93)	23.80 (2.31)	24.37 (3.21)	23.91 (3.35)	1.14 (3)	.334
	Duration of relationship	35.20 (26.29)	37.51 (28.9)	34.19 (24.19)	31.03 (26.09)	32.55 (23.78)	2.07 (3)	.103
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>
Birthplace	Italy	992 (96.7)	389 (95.8)	473 (96.9)	64 (98.5)	66 (98.5)	2.39 (3)	.496
	Abroad	34 (3.3)	17 (4.2)	15 (3.1)	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)		
Relationship status	Non-cohabitant	977 (95.2)	380 (93.6)	468 (95.9)	63 (96.9)	66 (98.5)	4.860 (3)	.182
	Cohabitant	49 (4.8)	26 (6.4)	20 (4.1)	2 (3.1)	1 (1.5)		
Educational level	High school diploma	649 (63.3)	250 (61.6)	304 (62.3)	48 (73.8)	47 (70.1)	5.19 (3)	.158
	Bachelor's degree	377 (36.7)	156 (38.4)	184 (37.7)	17 (26.2)	20 (29.9)		
Socioeconomic status	Low	315 (30.7)	140 (34.5)	143 (29.3)	18 (27.7)	14 (20.9)	7.66 (6)	.264
	Medium	243 (23.7)	94 (23.2)	117 (24.0)	17 (26.2)	15 (22.4)		
	High	468 (45.6)	172 (42.4)	228 (46.7)	30 (46.2)	38 (56.7)		

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of the total score of MMEA and its dimensions, separately by groups

		Heterosexual men		Heterosexual women		Homosexual men		Homosexual women	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Perpetration	Total abuse	21.04	16.58	23.27	15.31	20.12	17.86	23.25	20.12
	Restrictive Engulfment	3.47	4.55	6.96	6.26	6.20	7.17	6.34	6.58
	Denigration	2.30	4.21	2.16	3.31	1.91	4.20	1.54	4.28
	Hostile Withdrawal	10.71	8.28	10.15	7.58	8.43	7.63	11.51	9.50
	Dominance/Intimidation	4.57	4.98	4.01	3.70	3.58	4.65	3.87	4.94
Victimization	Total abuse	24.56	20.48	24.18	17.53	22.28	21.89	23.51	20.03
	Restrictive Engulfment	6.39	7.16	6.04	6.46	6.55	7.32	6.78	7.51
	Denigration	2.64	4.74	2.22	3.88	2.65	5.31	1.49	3.85
	Hostile Withdrawal	11.31	9.20	11.68	8.75	9.55	9.54	11.70	9.27
	Dominance/Intimidation	4.22	5.49	4.25	4.52	3.52	4.83	3.54	5.09

The prevalence of repetitiveness of the different forms of perpetrated psychological abuse in the four groups is reported in table 3. More than 95% of all participants reported at last one act of abuse in the previous six months in their romantic relationships. However, considering the

repetitiveness of acts, the prevalence of repeated abuse perpetrated behaviors hovered around 14%. Occasional psychological abuse is the one most present for the different forms of abuse in romantic relationships, except for denigration, which results to be more absent. In particular, hostile withdrawal is the prevalent form of psychological abuse perpetrated in all groups. No significant differences emerged among groups on the prevalence of the repetitiveness of perpetrated psychological abuse ($\chi^2(6) = 10.32, p = .112$). However, significant differences emerged considering its different forms. Specifically, regarding behaviors of restrictive engulfment, heterosexual females reported to act to a greater extent in occasional and repeated ways, while this form of perpetrated abuse is prevalently absent in heterosexual males ($\chi^2(6) = 143.38, p = .000$). Moreover, heterosexual females reported to act on behaviors of hostile withdrawal prevalently in a more occasional way than other groups ($\chi^2(6) = 14.37, p = .026$). Regarding behaviors of dominance/intimidation, heterosexual females reported to perpetrate them occasionally more frequently, while heterosexual males perpetrated them more frequently in a repeated way ($\chi^2(6) = 16.80, p = .010$). On the contrary, no significant differences among groups emerged on the prevalence of denigration ($\chi^2(6) = 11.17, p = .083$).

Table 3. Prevalence of perpetrated psychological abuse in the four groups

		Total (N = 1026)	Heterosexual men (n = 406)	Heterosexual women (n = 488)	Homosexual men (n = 65)	Homosexual women (n = 67)	
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Perpetration	Total	Absence	48 (4.7)	24 (5.9)	16 (3.3)	3 (4.6)	5 (7.5)
		Occasional	829 (80.8)	332 (81.8)	396 (81.1)	54 (83.1)	47 (70.1)
		Repeated	149 (14.5)	50 (12.3)	76 (15.6)	8 (12.3)	15 (22.4)
	Restrictive Engulfment	Absence	247 (24.1)	170 (41.9)	45 (9.2)	20 (30.8)	12 (17.9)
		Occasional	630 (61.4)	207 (51)	348 (71.3)	31 (47.7)	44 (65.7)
		Repeated	149 (14.1)	29 (7.1)	95 (19.5)	14 (21.5)	11 (16.4)
	Denigration	Absence	547 (53.3)	221 (54.4)	241 (49.4)	41 (63.1)	44 (65.7)
		Occasional	338 (32.9)	125 (30.8)	179 (36.7)	17 (26.2)	17 (25.4)
		Repeated	141 (13.7)	60 (14.8)	68 (13.9)	7 (10.8)	6 (9)
	Hostile Withdrawal	Absence	108 (10.5)	51 (12.6)	39 (8)	10 (15.4)	8 (11.9)
		Occasional	754 (73.5)	283 (69.7)	381 (78.1)	47 (72.3)	43 (64.2)
		Repeated	164 (16)	72 (17.7)	68 (13.9)	8 (12.3)	16 (23.9)
Dominance/I ntimidation	Absence	206 (20.1)	95 (23.4)	78 (16)	16 (24.6)	17 (25.4)	
	Occasional	684 (66.7)	246 (60.6)	354 (72.5)	41 (63.1)	43 (64.2)	
	Repeated	138 (13.3)	65 (16)	56 (11.5)	8 (12.3)	7 (10.4)	

Table 4 reports the prevalence of the repetitiveness of the different forms of suffered psychological abuse in the four groups. In general, nearly 95% of all participants reported to have suffered at last one in past six months in their romantic relationships. However, regarding repetitiveness, the prevalence of repeated abuse suffered is around 14% for perpetrated psychological abuse. Similarly, participants reported a greater prevalence of occasional suffered psychological abuse for restrictive engulfment, hostile withdrawal, and dominance/intimidation, while suffered denigration resulted to be the form of abuse prevalently absent.

Regarding suffered psychological abuse, hostile withdrawal is the prevalent form suffered in all groups. No significant differences emerged among groups on the prevalence of the repetitiveness of suffered psychological abuse ($\chi^2(6) = 2.67, p = .849$). However, significant differences emerged considering its different forms. Specifically, heterosexual females reported to suffer a greater prevalence of restrictive engulfment ($\chi^2(6) = 15.57, p = .016$) and of dominance/intimidation ($\chi^2(6) = 12.91, p = .045$) in occasional ways. On the contrary, no significant differences among groups emerged on the prevalence of suffered denigration ($\chi^2(6) = 10.99, p = .088$), and hostile withdrawal ($\chi^2(6) = 6.32, p = .388$).

Table 4. Prevalence of suffered psychological abuse in the four groups

		Total (N = 1026)	Heterosexual men (n = 406)	Heterosexual women (n = 488)	Homosexual men (n = 65)	Homosexual women (n = 67)	
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Victimization	Total	Absence	53 (5.2)	24 (5.9)	21 (4.3)	3 (4.6)	5 (7.5)
		Occasional	828 (80.7)	324 (79.8)	401 (82.2)	52 (80)	51 (76.1)
		Repeated	145 (14.1)	58 (14.3)	66 (13.5)	10 (15.4)	11 (16.4)
	Restrictive Engulfment	Absence	241 (23.5)	111 (27.3)	97 (19.9)	18 (27.7)	15 (22.4)
		Occasional	643 (62.7)	253 (57.9)	334 (68.4)	34 (52.3)	40 (59.7)
		Repeated	141 (13.8)	60 (14.8)	57 (11.7)	13 (20)	12 (17.9)
	Denigration	Absence	551 (53.7)	211 (52)	255 (52.3)	37 (56.9)	48 (71.6)
		Occasional	353 (34.4)	140 (34.5)	177 (36.3)	21 (32.3)	15 (22.4)
		Repeated	122 (11.9)	55 (13.5)	56 (11.5)	7 (10.8)	4 (6)
	Hostile Withdrawal	Absence	120 (11.7)	51 (12.6)	48 (9.8)	10 (15.4)	11 (16.4)
		Occasional	739 (72)	294 (72.4)	357 (73.2)	46 (70.8)	42 (62.7)
		Repeated	167 (16.3)	61 (15)	83 (17)	9 (13.8)	14 (20.9)
Dominance/ Intimidation	Absence	231 (22.5)	103 (25.4)	88 (18)	19 (29.2)	21 (31.3)	
	Occasional	689 (67.2)	262 (64.5)	349 (71.5)	40 (61.5)	38 (56.7)	
	Repeated	106 (10.3)	41 (10.1)	51 (10.5)	6 (9.2)	8 (11.9)	

4. Discussion

The main aim of the present study was to explore the prevalence of psychological abuse in romantic relationships. In particular, our aim was to analyze, in samples of heterosexual and homosexual individuals, the prevalence and possible differences in different forms of psychological abuse, both perpetrated and suffered, taking into consideration the nature, occasional or repeated, with which they were expressed. Literature has consistently highlighted that psychological abuse is one of the most common forms of IPV in romantic relationships (Cornelius et al., 2010; Dokkedahl et al., 2019). However, little is known about its prevalence and its different manifestations in couples of the opposite and same sexes, especially in the specific Italian context. Therefore, it seems relevant to contribute to the visibility of this phenomenon, which has very serious consequences for the health and wellbeing of individuals, to correctly identify its real prevalence in different types of romantic relationships and, considering its multidimensional nature, explore how the different forms occur.

Overall, most participants in our study reported to have perpetrated and suffered a behavior of psychological abuse within their romantic relationship. Over 95% of the participants reported that they had perpetrated at least one act of psychological abuse against their partners. Similarly, over 94% of participants reported having suffered one or more psychological abuse by the partner. These data appear to be in line with what has emerged from previous studies, which have shown similar high percentages in both heterosexual (Ponti et al., 2020; Tani et al., 2016) and homosexual samples (Craft et al., 2008; Pepper & Sand, 2015; Turell, 2000). This highlights that psychological abuse is an extremely common and widespread form of IPV. Among the various forms of psychological abuse, the one most frequently perpetrated and suffered is hostile withdrawal. In other words, independent from sexual orientation and gender, partners tend to act and suffer a greater percentage of behaviors that reflect forms of avoidance during situations of interpersonal conflicts that tend to increase feelings of anxiety and insecurity about their relationship. On the contrary, the least reported form of psychological abuse for all groups was denigration. This result seems to highlight that the tendency to humiliate, insult, and criticize the partner is less implemented than other abusive behaviors, which are finalized to the control of one's partner.

If we consider that a fundamental characteristic for defining psychological abuse is the repetitiveness and systematicity of abusive acts over time, the percentage of participants who declared to have perpetrated and suffered systematically and in a repeated way psychological abuse in their romantic relationship drops considerably, hovering around 14%. Therefore, the results show that, although psychological abuse is highly frequent in romantic relationships, it is usually implemented occasionally, and only a small percentage of individuals, albeit alarming,

have continuous and repetitive behaviors of psychological abuse. In other words, although behaviors of psychological abuse are common in couple relationships, our study shows that, in reality, couple relationships characterized by repeated forms of IPV are much less frequent than what is reported in the literature. In our opinion, this is a relevant outcome because, from an epidemiological, clinical, and social point of view, it is necessary to identify the correct prevalence of a phenomenon, especially when it has so relevant an impact on the individual's wellbeing.

Our results show that there are no statistically significant differences in prevalence of psychological romantic abuse according to gender or sexual orientation. From this point of view, our results appear to be not-in-line with previous studies that investigated psychological abuse in heterosexual and homosexual samples simultaneously, which, in contrast, found significant differences. It still must be considered, however, that these studies did not simultaneously analyze males and females of both sexual orientations, but rather compared heterosexuals with homosexuals, or heterosexual women with homosexual ones and heterosexual men with homosexual ones, separately (Messinger, 2011; Walters et al., 2013). Moreover, if we consider the multidimensional nature of construct, our results highlight that men and women, both heterosexual and homosexual, differ in the specific ways in which psychological abuse occurs within the couple relationship. Regarding perpetration, heterosexual females reported to perpetrate significantly more in forms of occasional and repeated abuse, behaviors of restrictive engulfment, hostile withdrawal, and dominance/intimidation, than any of the other participants. On the contrary, heterosexual males tend to act in a repeated way in forms of dominance/intimidation behaviors, while they tend not to act in behaviors of restrictive engulfment. Concerning victimization, heterosexual females reported to suffer, in an occasional way, behaviors of restrictive engulfment and dominance/intimidation more than heterosexual men or homosexuals of both sexes.

Overall, these results can be explained by taking into consideration the construct of romantic jealousy, a common feeling in couple relationships that is closely linked to the implementation of psychological abuse (Ghinassi & Tani, 2020; Ponti et al., 2020). Specifically, recent studies have shown that heterosexual women report significantly higher levels of romantic jealousy than heterosexual men (Ponti et al. 2020; Tani & Ponti, 2016; Valentova et al., 2020). Furthermore, Barelds and Dijkstra (2006) have highlighted that heterosexual men manifest less jealousy than heterosexual women and homosexuals of both sexes. Similarly, another study highlighted that women, regardless of sexual orientation, exhibit higher levels of jealousy than men and, at the same time, that heterosexuals report higher levels of jealousy than homosexuals (Barelds et al., 2017). These differences in the experience of jealousy could particularly explain the results

relating to restrictive engulfment. In fact, the central core of these dimensions of psychological abuse is the feeling of jealousy, since it includes acts intended to limit, isolate, and control the partner's contacts and social activities, to increase his/her availability and dependence. Therefore, it is not surprising that heterosexual women, inclined to feel high levels of romantic jealousy, reported that they perpetrate restrictive engulfment behaviors to a greater extent in occasional and repeated ways, while heterosexual men, less inclined to experience feelings of romantic jealousy, indicated a general absence of this specific form of psychological abuse. In light of these considerations, future research should investigate the role played by romantic jealousy as a risk factor for psychological abuse, taking into account its multidimensional nature.

Heterosexual men report to more frequently perpetrate repeated behaviors of psychological abuse, characterized by dominance and intimidation, including threat to harm, throw, or damage objects, and verbal assaults. This result is in line with research on gender differences in psychological abuse, underlining that men tend to implement more direct and serious behaviors in order to gain and maintain control and power over the partner (Bonechi & Tani, 2011a; Próspero, 2008).

Regarding abuse suffered, heterosexual women reported that they occasionally suffer restrictive engulfment and dominance/intimidation behaviors of psychological abuse more than other groups. While suffered dominance/intimidation behaviors reflect what is reported by heterosexual men who have declared greater use of such behaviors, the greater restrictive engulfment suffered is an unexpected result. Given the exploratory nature of this study, further studies are necessary to better clarify these results. However, one possible explanation is that heterosexual men may underestimate or not consciously recognize their restrictive engulfment behaviors in light of the stereotypes and social roles of our specific western culture, which suggest the appropriate behaviors individuals should adopt in certain circumstances (Eckes & Trautner, 2000; Naples et al., 2016). In fact, the social roles of western cultural context do not allow men to freely express their feelings as women do, especially within intimate relationships (Cross & Campbell, 2011; Fischer et al., 2004; Grossman & Wood, 1993). Therefore, this aspect may not legitimize in men the conscious implementation of behaviors that reflect their feelings, as in the case of restrictive engulfment, which reflects feelings of jealousy. Further studies are needed to more profoundly explore the role played by gender stereotypes and social roles in psychological abuse.

5. Limitations and conclusion

Despite the undeniable interest of these results, this study presents some limitations. The first limitation regards the convenience sample that was used, which was made up solely of university students. Another limitation regards the sampling of homosexuals, who are considered a

difficult to reach or hidden population (Paz-Bailey et al., 2013). To try to overcome this problem, the present study used online sampling. However, this type of sampling does not provide a random selection of participants, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to the whole homosexual population (Johnston et al., 2013; Pereira & Costa, 2016). Second, only heterosexual and homosexual subjects were considered in the present study, not taking into account bisexual or other sexual orientations. It would be useful to explore psychological abuse by also taking these sexual orientations into consideration. Third, in this study, we only used self-report measures. Despite the limitations of a self-report questionnaire, the perception of individuals of their close relationships and feelings represents an important source of information not to be overlooked (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000). Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate psychological abuse by considering both members of the couple, to get a more complete picture of the phenomenon. Moreover, no measures of romantic relationship quality or couple satisfaction were used in the present study. Finally, no social desirability measures were considered, even though the online questionnaire makes this problem less disabling. This could be a problem, especially for a delicate phenomenon, such as psychological abuse, where participants may have difficulty admitting its presence in their romantic relationship.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the description of how the phenomenon of psychological abuse occurs in its multidimensional nature in same- and opposite-sex romantic relationships, and provides its prevalence, considering its characteristics of repetitiveness. The distinction between occasional and repeated psychological abuse offers a clarification between less frequent or more isolated cases and more ongoing cases that occur systematically over a period of time, which can have more negative consequences for the members of the couple (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Overall, this study represents an invaluable first step for raising awareness of the real prevalence of psychological abuse in the specific Italian context, providing important implications for clinicians dealing with couples and victims of abuse.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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