

Negotiating Love and Gender Stereotypes among Youn People: Prevalence of “*Amor Ludens*” and Television Preferences Rooted in Hegemonic Masculinity

Maddalena Fedele
Ramon Llull University

Maria-Jose Masanet
Pompeu Fabra University

Rafael Ventura
Pompeu Fabra University

Abstract

This study was carried out in three Iberian-American countries, Colombia, Spain and Venezuela, to identify the stereotypes of love and gender professed among youth and compare them to those they prefer in television fiction series, i.e., those able to influence their identities and values. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the study involved a survey of 485 first-year university students, and a qualitative analysis of the media representations preferred by them. The results showed a preference for “*amor ludens*”, based on enjoyment and the present moment, and a gap between the cognitive and emotional spheres of some youth who consider themselves distant from stereotypical, heteronormative and patriarchal models, but who choose media representations that match these models and the traditional gender portrayals.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity; youth; love relationships; TV series; Ibero-America

Negociando Estereotipos Amorosos y de Género en la Juventud: Tendencia hacia el “*Amor Ludens*” y Preferencias Televisivas Ancladas a la Masculinidad Hegemónica

Maddalena Fedele
Ramon Llull University

Maria-Jose Masanet
Pompeu Fabra University

Rafael Ventura
Pompeu Fabra University

Resumen

Este estudio se llevó a cabo en tres países iberoamericanos, Colombia, España y Venezuela, para identificar los estereotipos de amor y género manifestados por los jóvenes y compararlos con aquellos que prefieren en las series de ficción televisiva, es decir, aquellos que pueden influir en sus identidades y valores. Desde una perspectiva interdisciplinaria, este estudio incluyó una encuesta a 485 estudiantes universitarios de primer curso y un análisis cualitativo de las representaciones mediáticas preferidas por los participantes. Los resultados mostraron una preferencia por el “*amor ludens*”, basado en el disfrute y el momento presente, y una brecha entre las esferas cognitiva y emocional de unos jóvenes que se consideran distantes de los modelos estereotípicos, heteronormativos y patriarcales, pero que eligen representaciones mediáticas que coinciden precisamente con estos modelos y con estereotipos tradicionales de género.

Palabras clave: masculinidad hegemónica; juventud; relaciones amorosas; series de ficción; Iberoamérica.

The importance of romantic relationships in our society has often been emphasized (Alberdi, 2004), especially during adolescence and young adulthood (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011; Erikson, 1980; Kimmel & Weiner, 1998). The following premises need to be acknowledged. First, love relationships are linked to cultural, social, generational, educational and other factors (Ackerman, 2000). Second, some cultural images in amorous discourses are more prominent than others in the social imaginary (Illouz, 1997). Third, the social imaginary, of course, is shaped and legitimated in part by media discourse. Based on those premises, it can be recognized that love is still associated with such myths as "the transformative power of love", "true love as fate" or the "soul mate", "total devotion" and "love as possession and exclusivity", among others. This conceptualization favors the perpetuation of roles and stereotypes regarding love and gender within romantic relationships, often translating into a "masculine" view of love concerned with sex and hormones, and a "feminine" one preoccupied with romance, caring and sentiment (Araña, Tortajada, & Willem, 2018; Lutz, 1996). These roles and stereotypes are heteronormative, patriarchal and even sexist, and often play an important part in excusing control-seeking, power-seeking and violent behaviors (Cantera, Estébanez, & Vázquez, 2009; de Miguel, 2015; Lindsey, 2015).

Masculinities Studies pay special attention to the existing male models and to the construction of masculine identities (Connell, 2012; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2004), showing that gendered socialization of hegemonic masculinity is mainly enacted through cultural elements. However, the hegemonic patterns and the most conflictive dimensions of masculine identity are still being idealized (Feasey, 2008; Guerrero-Pico, Establés, & Ventura, 2018; Hatfield, 2010). As for the Ibero-America context, according to Gutmann & Vigoya (2005), the studies of masculinities are often formulated using the term "machismo" and "macho". Indeed, "machismo" (male-chauvinism) is a common Spanish-speaking expression of sexism and male domination, which is based on the subordination of women, the systematic homophobia and the cult of virility (Fuller, 2012). Machismo is also related to gender violence and romantic love

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(Pérez & Fiol, 2013; Rubio et al., 2012). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that especially in the Ibero-America context the social constructions of love, sexual and gender identities are strictly connected to the concept of "machismo", that is, to patriarchal and heteronormative values and models.

Young people, who are in the identity-forming part of their lives, acquire values, models and social roles (including affective ones) not only through traditional socialization agents (family, community, school, institutions) but also from communications media (Arnett, Larson, & Offer, 1995; Boyd, 2014; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002).

Serialized fiction programs in particular (e.g. series, serials and sitcoms), which generally top the list of youth television preferences (von Feilitzen, 2004), offer young people several role models, which are often stereotyped, heteronormative and patriarchal, including those related to gender and love (Galán-Fajardo, 2007; Guarinos, 2009; Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008; Nogueira-Joyce, 2013; Scharrer, 2001; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Also, these media products prominently feature love relationships, and frequently present stereotyped representations based on the idealization of romantic love and on archetypal or stereotypical models (Galician & Merskin, 2017; Masanet, Medina-Bravo & Aran-Ramspott, 2016; Van Damme, 2010; Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2013). For example, teen series, those drama series targeted specifically at teenagers and representing teens' lives (Davis & Dickinson, 2004; Fedele, 2014; Ross & Stein, 2008), are representative of this matter. In fact, teen series frequently represent the lead couple - generally heterosexual (Kirsch & Murnen, 2015) - through the myth of redemptive love, in which a submissive, understanding woman saves the violent, "baddie" man from himself through the power of love (Masanet & Fedele, 2019), as in *Beauty and the Beast* (Balló & Pérez, 1995).

Furthermore, studies have proliferated in recent years showing the educational possibilities of communications media in the area of love relationships. They see teenagers and young people as active participants when interacting with audiovisual products, capable of making sense of contents presented in the media (e.g. Albury, 2013; Bragg, 2006; Kennett, Humphreys, & Schultz, 2012; Masanet & Buckingham, 2015; McKee, 2012).

Buckingham and Bragg (2004) indicate that teenagers and young people often consider communications media as a more useful resource than educational institutions or their parents in learning about sex and love relationships. In this sense, as Masanet & Buckingham (2015) sustain, media are more accessible, and often more entertaining while taking a less moralistic tack.

Although media can promote harmful practices, they also have the potential to make available to young people ideas and representations of sexuality and love relationships that break with pre-established, hegemonic discourses and help to generate debate around ethical question that go beyond simplistic pronouncements about what is right or wrong (Masanet & Buckingham, 2015; Ventura, 2013). Similarly, several authors (Cohen, 2006; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Ter Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010; Ward & Friedman, 2006) indicate that teenagers and young people indeed tend to seek out television series with young protagonists dealing with relationships as couples, and that they can serve as an educational resource to this audience. In particular, as for boys, as Zeglin (2016) points out, media content as fiction and characters portrayals can contribute to the social construction of male identity and masculinity.

Given this, the special relationship between young people and the media can be used to understand teenagers' and young people's conception of love. This is especially true since, when young people talk about a program, they are talking indirectly about themselves, their preferences, their sensibilities, their ideology, their models of attraction and identification, their contradictions, and so on (Ferrés, Figueras-Maz, Masanet, & Hafner, 2017, p. 117). Thus, through young people's opinions of serialized fiction and the love and gender stereotypes portrayed in them on one hand, and the analysis of those portrayals, on the other, we can understand how the youth think about love, relationships and relationship models.

The principal objective of this study is to identify stereotypes and models related to gender and relationships that young people claim to hold, and to compare them with those that they consume in their preferred serialized fiction programs, i.e. those that have the potential unconsciously and

emotionally to influence their conceptualizations and values. This objective has been pursued with a focus in the period termed late adolescence or early youth (18-19 years old), throughout a convenience sample consisting of University students from three countries of the Ibero-American area: Colombia, Spain and Venezuela. An interdisciplinary perspective has been taken, combining the fields of Cultural Studies and Audience Studies (e.g.: Hall, 1999; McQuail, 1997), and contributions from the field of sociology (e.g.: Bauman, 2005; Giddens, 2008) and psychology (e.g.: Sternberg, 1989, 2000).

Analyzing Contemporary Love Relationships: Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love

The contemporary Western historical, social and economic context has produced a new paradigm of emotional relationships, one which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) define as the normal and everyday chaos of love. The authors refer to the emergence of new types of family, sexuality, lifestyle and more, in which feelings have come to occupy a prominent position. In this context of uncertainty and questioning, love becomes all the more essential for people: "romantic love, we are told by some, is the last repository of the authenticity and the warmth that have been robbed from us by an increasingly technocratic and legalistic age" (Illouz, 1997, p.1). Likewise, Esteban (2011), indicates that in contemporary Western society "Romantic thinking" has been established:

An articulated set of love-related symbols, concepts and theories permeating all social, even institutional spaces, which directly influences people's habits, structuring unequal gender, class and ethnic relations, and is a concrete, heterosexual way of understanding desire, identity and, indeed, the subject itself (Esteban, 2011, p. 23).

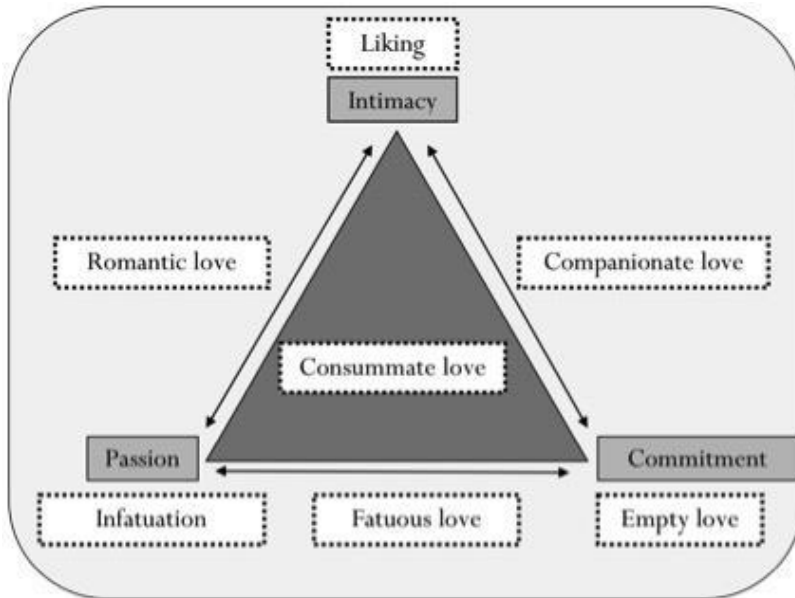


Figure 1. Sternberg's triangle of love (1989, 2000)

This model is based on three basic elements: intimacy, passion and commitment. "Intimacy" refers to feelings that occur in the relationship and foster closeness, bonding and emotional connection with the other. It encompasses traits such as trust, respect, sincerity, understanding and acceptance, which are characteristic of friendship and fundamental for intimacy. Building intimacy requires work on the part of the couple because it needs to be balanced with independence and personal autonomy. "Passion" can be understood as sexual attraction, although the author takes it further: "passion is, to a great extent, the expression of desires and needs, such as self-esteem, belonging, dominance, submission and sexual satisfaction" (Sternberg, 2000, p. 22). Passion is closely related to intimacy, although they may be manifested at different times. In some relationships, passion appears immediately while intimacy needs to be built from the ground up.

"Commitment" is the third component of Sternberg's triangle. He distinguishes between short- and long-term commitment: "the short-term aspect consists of the decision to love a certain person, while the long-term aspect constitutes the commitment to maintain love" (Sternberg, 2000, p. 24).

The combination of these three elements leads to seven different models for love relationships:

- Liking: based solely on intimacy;
- Infatuation: based solely on passion;
- Empty love: based solely on commitment;
- Fatuous love: combines passion and commitment, but excludes intimacy. "We occasionally associate this type of love with Hollywood marriages and other flash-in-the-pan relationships where a couple meets one day, swears eternal love and gets married right away" (Sternberg, 2000, p. 35);
- Romantic love: combines intimacy and passion. It is the love featured in classic literary works like Romeo and Juliet, which have ended up becoming an "institutionalized" model of desire (Sternberg, 2000);
- Companionate love: combines intimacy and commitment, but lacks passion, usually associated with physical attraction and sexual desire;
- Consummate love: emerges from the combination of all three elements and represents the most desirable model, but is difficult to maintain.

Sternberg himself has expanded and qualified his first proposal in "the duplex theory of love" (1998, 2006), where he points out that this theory captures two essential elements of the nature of love: first, its structure (a triangular subtheory), and second, its development (a subtheory of love as a story). The subtheory of love as a story is an attempt to specify how various kinds (triangles) of love develop. We consider each of the subtheories and the duplex theory as a whole (Sternberg, 2006, p.184).

Methods

As mentioned above, the principal objective of this study was to identify and analyze the models and stereotypes of love and gender that young people

claim to hold, in order to compare and contrast them with those they select, consume and interiorize from television fiction. Also, the study focused specifically on late adolescents (18-19 years-old), through a sample of 1st year University students from three Ibero-American countries: Colombia, Spain and Venezuela.

This general goal translates into the following specific objectives:

- To identify stereotypes about love and gender among youth;
- To identify their preferences regarding serialized television fiction;
- To analyze stereotypes about love and gender portrayed in their favorite programs;
- To compare stereotypes about love and gender among youth with those represented in their preferred programs;
- To analyze possible gender bias;
- To compare results for the three countries studied (Colombia, Venezuela and Spain).

In order to achieve these objectives, the study was carried out in two phases and combined quantitative and qualitative techniques.

The quantitative stage consisted of an analysis of the youth audience through a survey administered during the 2014-15 academic year to 485 young university students in three Iberian-American countries: Venezuela (n=209; 43.1%), Colombia (n=82; 16.9%) and Spain (n=194; 40%).

The questionnaire, which was administered in paper or online, depending on accessibility to each participating institution, to first-year Communication students, included open questions, closed questions and 5-point Likert scale items (where 5=Strongly agree and 1=Strongly disagree) about the following items:

- Sociodemographic data (always ensuring anonymity): sexe, age, sexual orientation, country;
- Stereotypes about love and gender, based on Sternberg's (1989, 2000) triangular theory of love. In order to do this we created statements based on the three elements of the Sternberg proposal: intimacy (ex: trust, respect, sincerity, complicity), commitment (long-term commitment) and passion

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(sexual satisfaction). The majority of these statements were taken from the authors' own reflections;

- Preferences regarding television fiction products (programs, characters, plots) (Fedele, 2011; Masanet, 2016). In particular, participants were asked to mention their favourite programs and characters in two open questions, whose answers were codified *a posteriori*. Furthermore, two lists of plot types and characters' adjectives (Fedele, 2011) were proposed to the participants in order to be valued on a 1 to 10 scale. The adjectives used to describe the psychological traits were also used in the qualitative phase of this study.

The database was weighted by participant country, and descriptive and bivariate analysis was carried out with SPSS (significance $p < 0.05$). The final weighted sample was 62,1% (n=301) female and 37,9% (n=184) male, with a mean age of 19,45 (median=19; mode=18).

The qualitative phase comprised an analysis of media representations regarding the serialized fiction characters preferred by those surveyed. Qualitative analysis was performed on the 7 characters mentioned by more than 5% of the sample for the following variables: physical characteristics, social characteristics, psychological characteristics and types of love relationships (García-Muñoz & Fedele, 2011; Masanet, Medina-Bravo & Aran-Ramspott, 2016). As for physical characteristics, the variable used to analyze the characters were: sex, age, race, physical build and dress. As for social characteristics, we analyzed the social class, the family type, and the leisure activities carried out by the character. As for psychological traits, we used the following list of adjectives we had applied in previous studies (Fedele, 2011; Masanet, 2015), and to describe the psychological attributes of the characters in the questionnaire: Affectionate, Ambitious, Attentive, Attractive, Authoritarian, Conflictive, Fun, Generous, Hard-working, Helpful, Honest, Idealistic, Impulsive, Immature, Independent, Insecure, Intelligent, Kind, Manipulative, Mature, Rebellious, Responsible, Romantic, Seductive, Selfish, Self-assured, Sensitive, Tender, Tolerant, Understanding, Violent. Finally, as for love relationships, we analyze the sexual orientation of the character, their love and sexual relationship in the series, and the

possible narrative scheme behind them. Three coders analyzed the characters by classifying them for all variables. To ensure coding reliability, the coding criteria were agreed on in meetings prior and simultaneous to the analysis.

Results

Stereotypes of Love and Gender among Youth

Regarding youth stereotypes about love, the results reveal that participants consider intimacy as the most important aspect of a love relationship, since items connected with intimacy were the most highly valued, including "trust, respect, sincerity, complicity" and "enjoying spending time together" (Figure 2).

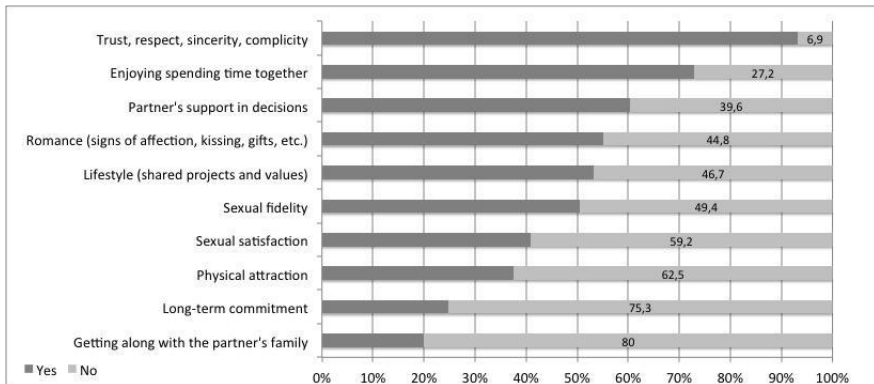


Figure 2. Youth assessment of factors from Sternberg's triangle (%) (Source: own data)

Aspects related to passion came in second place, including sexual satisfaction and physical attraction, while aspects related to long-term commitment came in last, chosen by less than one fourth of the sample. Thus, it was shown that the young people in the sample prioritized the components

that together form Sternberg's (2000) romantic love. Commitment, a key element for consummate love, comes in third place.

Bivariate analysis shows gender-related differences (Figure 3): more males than females chose aspects related to passion, such as "sexual satisfaction" ($p=0.001$), chosen by 50.8% ($n=93$) of males versus 34.8% ($n=104$) of females; and "physical attraction" ($p<0.001$), chosen by 49.7% ($n=91$) of males versus 30% ($n=90$) of females. In contrast, more females than males selected intimacy-related aspects such as "trust, respect..." ($p=0.002$), selected by 96% ($n=288$) of females versus 88.5% ($n=162$) of males; and "partner's support in decisions" ($p=0.002$), selected by 65.7% ($n=197$) of females versus 51.4% ($n=94$) of males.

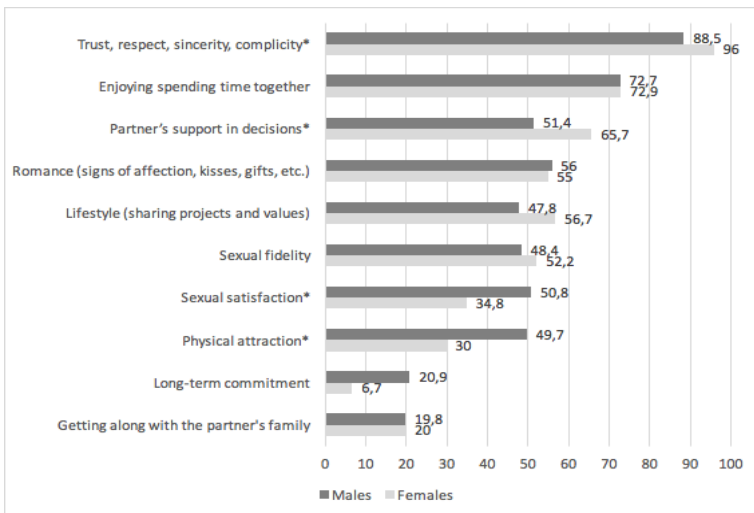


Figure 3. Gender differences in youth assessment of factors from Sternberg's triangle (%). Source. Own data

Differences were also detected between the three countries (Figure 4). Spanish participants in particular favored intimacy-related items such as "trust, respect..." ($p=0.003$; Spanish: 96.9%, $n=157$; Venezuelan: 94.4%,

n=152; Colombian: 87.7%, n=142) and "enjoying spending time together" (p=0.001; Spanish: 80.1% n=129; Colombian: 75.8%, n=122; Venezuelan: 62.7%, n=101); while they were the group that placed least value on "getting along well with your partner's family" (p<0.001; Spanish: 8.7%, n=14; Colombian: 17.3%, n=28; Venezuelan: 34.4% n=55).

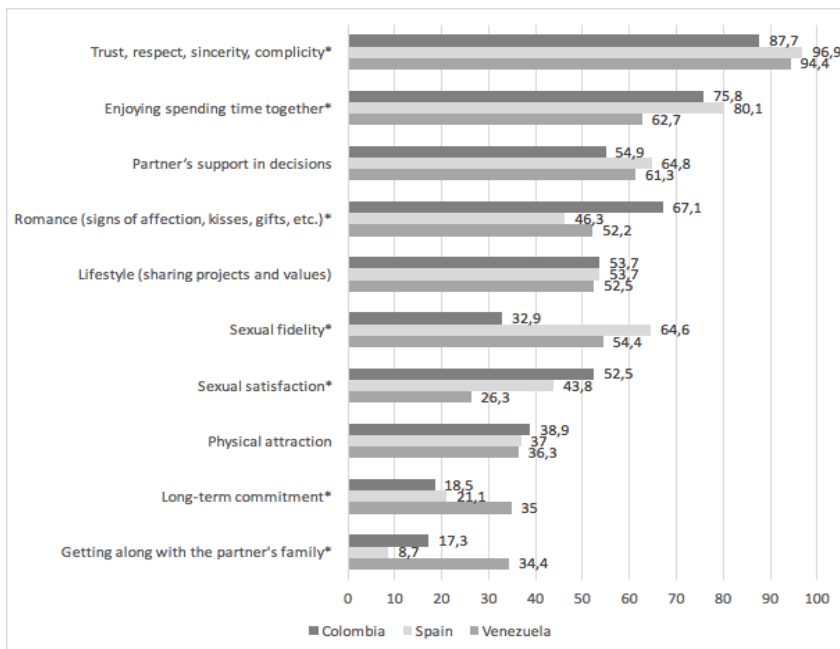


Figure 4. Differences among countries in youth assessment of factors from Sternberg's triangle (%). Source. Own data

Colombian participants, on the other hand, selected passion-related items more than the other national groups, for example "sexual satisfaction" (p<0.001; Colombian: 52.5%, n=85; Spanish: 43.8% n=71; Venezuelan: 26.3%, n=42), and "romance" (p=0.001; Colombian: 67.1% n=108;

Venezuelan: 52.2%, n=84; Spanish: 46.3%, n=75). They selected commitment-related items less frequently than the rest of the sample, including "sexual fidelity" ($p < 0.001$; Colombian: 32.9%, n=53; Venezuelan: 54.4% n=87; Spanish: 64.6%, n=104) and "long-term commitment" ($p = 0.001$; Colombian: 18.5%, n=30; Spanish: 21.1%, n=34; Venezuelan: 35% n=56).

Lastly, Venezuelan participants tended to favor commitment-related items compared to the rest of the sample, both in the case of "long-term commitment" ($p = 0.001$; Venezuelan: 35% n=56; Spanish: 21.1%, n=34; Colombian: 18.5%, n=30) and "getting along with the partner's family" ($p < 0.001$; Venezuelan: 34.4%, n=55; Colombian: 17.3%, n=28; Spanish: 8.7%, n=14).

These data were also corroborated by the degree of (dis)agreement expressed by participants regarding three items corresponding to the three corners of the triangle of love, on a 5-point Likert scale (where 5=Strongly agree and 1=Strongly disagree): intimacy ("A relationship can never work without trust and respect"; $x = 4.71$), passion ("Sex is the key element in consolidating a relationship"; $x = 2.96$) and commitment ("One never knows if a relationship is going to work", $x = 3.76$). Once again, some sex-based differences were found: males rated the passion-related item higher compared to females ($p < 0.001$; $x_{\text{male}} = 3.2$, $x_{\text{female}} = 2.82$), and females did so with the intimacy-related item ($x_{\text{female}} = 4.82$, $x_{\text{male}} = 4.52$).

Lastly, as shown in Table 1, participants were asked about their degree of (dis)agreement with items related to various stereotypes (and anti-stereotypes) regarding gender and romantic love, based on the results of previous studies and which stress the importance of romantic love for youth (Aran-Ramspott, Medina-Bravo, Rodrigo-Alsina, & Munté-Ramos, 2014; de Miguel, 2015).

Table 1

Youth ratings of stereotypes about gender and love

Stereotypes (s) and anti-stereotypes (as) of gender	x	Romantic love ideal	x
Having sex is good both for women and for men (AS)	4.57	Maintaining romance is basic in any love relationship	4.13
In a relationship, women tend to be more demanding than men (S)	3.34	I would like to meet the love of my life	4.09
The more feminine a woman, the more attractive she is (S)	3	If your partner does not make you feel special, it is no use continuing the relationship	3.64
Emotionally, men are more independent than women (S)	2.83	I believe in the transformative power of love	3.34
In general, men and women are looking for the same thing in a relationship (AS)	2.66	If you aren't jealous, you aren't in love	2.08
"Bad boys" are more attractive (S)	2.65	Love involves suffering and self-denial	2.05
Men want sex and women want romance (S)	2.33	If you fall in love once, you cannot fall in love again	1.63

Source. Own data

Participants agreed (4 on a Likert scale) or strongly agreed (5) both with anti-stereotype-related statements like "Having sex is good both for women and men" ($x=4.57$), and with statements related to the myth of romantic love such as "Maintaining romance is basic in any love relationship" ($x=4.13$) and "I would like to meet the love of my life" ($x=4.09$). Also, they disagreed (2) or strongly disagreed (1) with statements obviously related to the ideal of romantic love such as "If you aren't jealous, you aren't in love" ($x=2.08$) and "Love involves suffering and self-denial" ($x=2.05$), as well as those statements explicitly related to gender stereotypes, like "Men want sex and women want romance" ($x=2.33$). Furthermore, contradictions were observed: while participants rated the search for absolute or definitive love very highly (the myth of the soul mate), they strongly disagreed with statements representing this myth, such as "If you fall in love once, you cannot fall in love again" ($x=1.63$).

Table 2.

Gender differences in youth ratings of stereotypes about gender and love

Stereotypes (s) and anti-stereotypes (as) of gender	\bar{x}_{males}	\bar{x}_{females}	Romantic love ideal	\bar{x}_{males}	\bar{x}_{females}
Having sex is good both for women and for men (AS)*	4.72	4.48	Maintaining romance is basic in any love relationship*	4.03	4.19
In a relationship, women tend to be more demanding than men (S)	3.39	3.30	I would like to meet the love of my life*	3.86	4.23
The more feminine a woman, the more attractive she is (S)*	3.21	2.87	If your partner does not make you feel special, it is no use continuing the relationship	3.53	3.71

Table 2 (Continued)

Gender differences in youth ratings of stereotypes about gender and love

Stereotypes (s) and anti-stereotypes (as) of gender	\bar{X}_{males}	\bar{X}_{females}	Romantic love ideal	\bar{X}_{males}	\bar{X}_{females}
Emotionally, men are more independent than women (S)	2.91	2.79	I believe in the transformative power of love	3.27	3.40
In general, men and women are looking for the same thing in a relationship (AS)	2.68	2.65	If you aren't jealous, you aren't in love	2.12	2.06
"Bad boys" are more attractive (S)*	2.38	2.81	Love involves suffering and self-denial	2.17	1.98
Men want sex and women want romance (S)*	2.14	2.44	If you fall in love once, you cannot fall in love again	1.65	1.62

Source. Own data

Once again, there are significant differences between sexes (Table 2), since male participants tended to agree less with aspects connected with the ideal of romantic love, such as "I would like to meet the love of my life" ($p < 0.001$; $x_{\text{male}} = 3.86$, $x_{\text{female}} = 4.23$), and disagree more with certain items related to gender stereotypes, such as "Men want sex and women want romance" ($p < 0.001$; $x_{\text{male}} = 2.14$, $x_{\text{female}} = 2.44$) or " 'Bad boys' are more attractive" ($p < 0.001$; $x_{\text{male}} = 2.38$, $x_{\text{female}} = 2.81$), a fact which furthermore

shows a certain tendency to internalize stereotyped differences established by heteropatriarchy.

Male participants, on the other hand, agreed more than females with items related both to physical and sexual items like "Having sex is good both for women and for men" ($p < 0.001$; $x_{\text{male}} = 4.72$, $x_{\text{female}} = 4.48$), and to classic patriarchal stereotypes like "The more feminine a woman, the more attractive she is" ($p = 0.005$; $x_{\text{male}} = 3.21$, $x_{\text{female}} = 2.87$).

Table 3.

Differences among countries in youth ratings of stereotypes about gender and love

Stereotypes (s) and anti-stereotypes (as) of gender	XCols	XSpa	XVen	Romantic love ideal	XCols	XSpa	XVen
Having sex is good both for women and for men (AS)*	4.61	4.71	4.39	Maintaining romance is basic in any love relationship*	3.99	3.95	4.45
In a relationship, women tend to be more demanding than men (S)*	3.16	3.17	3.69	I would like to meet the love of my life*	3.82	4.09	4.37
The more feminine a woman, the more attractive she is (S)*	2.85	2.47	3.66	If your partner does not make you feel special, it is no use continuing the relationship*	3.61	3.41	3.90
Emotionally, men are more independent than women (S)*	2.87	2.61	3.02	I believe in the transformative power of love*	3.57	3.09	3.37

Table 3 (Continued)

Differences among countries in youth ratings of stereotypes about gender and love

Stereotypes (s) and anti-stereotypes (as) of gender	xCols	xSpa	xVen	Romantic love ideal	xCols	xSpa	xVen
In general, men and women are looking for the same thing in a relationship (AS)	2.79	2.74	2.44	If you aren't jealous, you aren't in love*	2.01	1.86	2.37
"Bad boys" are more attractive (S)	2.61	2.60	2.75	Love involves suffering and self-denial*	1.94	2.20	2.02
Men want sex and women want romance (S)*	2.33	2.13	2.51	If you fall in love once, you cannot fall in love again*	1.80	1.48	1.61

Source. Own data

Lastly, regarding differences between countries (Table 3), it should first be noted that Spanish participants tended to agree more closely than participants in the other two countries on sexual aspects, i.e. "Having sex is good both for women and for men" ($p=0.004$; $x_{Spain}=4.71$; $x_{Colombia}=4.61$; $x_{Venezuela}=4.39$).

In general, Venezuelan participants tended to agree more with ideas concerning romantic love, such as "Maintaining romance is basic in any love relationship" ($p<0.001$; $x_{Venezuela}=4.45$; $x_{Colombia}=3.99$; $x_{Spain}=3.95$), "I would like to meet the love of my life" ($p<0.001$; $x_{Venezuela}=4.37$;

xSpain=4.09; xColombia=3.82), "If your partner does not make you feel special, it is no use continuing the relationship" ($p < 0.001$; xVenezuela=3.9; xColombia=3.61; xSpain=3.41) and "If you aren't jealous, you aren't in love" ($p < 0.001$; xVenezuela=2.37; xColombia=2.01; xSpain=1.86), with the Spanish participants taking the furthest distance from this ideal.

Also, Venezuelan participants tended to agree more with traditional gender stereotypes like "In a relationship, women tend to be more demanding than men" ($p < 0.001$; xVenezuela=3.69; xSpain=3.17; xColombia=3.16), "The more feminine a woman, the more attractive she is" ($p < 0.001$; xVenezuela=3.66; xColombia=2.85; xSpain=2.47), "Emotionally, men are more independent than women" ($p = 0.005$; xVenezuela=3.02; xColombia=2.87; xSpain=2.61) and "Men want sex and women want romance" ($p = 0.002$; xVenezuela=2.51; xColombia=2.33; xSpain=2.13), with Spaniards again taking the furthest distance from this ideal.

Youth preferences in serialized fiction

Surveyed participants indicated more than 150 different serialized fiction programs as their favorites. All programs mentioned by more than 10% of the sample were from the U.S. The five most frequently mentioned programs in the three open questions were *The Simpsons* (20.4%, $n=87$), *The Big Bang Theory* (16.5%, $n=71$), *Friends* (16.1%, $n=69$), *Game of Thrones* (14.9%, $n=64$) and *Breaking Bad* (13.5%, $n=59$).

Participants rated more highly plots based on mystery/suspense ($x=7.78$), love ($x=7.03$) and action/adventure ($x=7.02$), while they "rejected" plots based on violence ($x=4.62$) and physical appearance ($x=4.56$) (see [Table 4](#) and [Table 5](#)).

Table 4

Youth ratings of plots

	Mystery/ Suspense	Love	Action- Advent- ure	Social issues	Friend -ship	Adoles -cence
Mean	7.78	7.03	7.02	6.67	6.59	5.77
Median	8	8	7	7	7	6
Mode	10	10	10	8	8	5
S.D.	2.385	2.515	2.49	2.756	2.183	2.736

Source. Own data

Table 5

Youth ratings of plots

	Sex	Sexual diversity	Family issues	Discri minati on	Drugs- Alcohol	Violence	Physical appearan ce
Mean	5.61	5.46	5.45	5.24	5.23	4.62	4.56
Median	6	5	6	5	5.98	5	5
Mode	5	5	5	5	7	5	5
S.D.	2.73	2.86	2.57	2.89	2.8	2.91	2.77

Source. Own data

Bivariate analysis revealed sex differences: males rated higher plots related to action/adventure ($p < 0.001$), violence ($p < 0.001$), sex ($p < 0.001$) and drugs/alcohol ($p < 0.001$), while female participants rated higher than did male participants plots related to love ($p < 0.001$), friendship ($p = 0.001$), adolescence ($p = 0.001$) and family issues ($p = 0.005$). These preferences are in line with dominant gender stereotypes, as previous studies have shown (Fedele, 2011).

Furthermore, bivariate analysis by country showed that Spanish participants rate more highly plots based on sensitive or controversial topics like sex ($p < 0.001$: $x_{\text{Spain}} = 6.09$; $x_{\text{Colombia}} = 5.88$; $x_{\text{Venezuela}} = 4.84$), sexual diversity ($p < 0.001$: $x_{\text{Spain}} = 5.87$; $x_{\text{Colombia}} = 5.7$; $x_{\text{Venezuela}} = 4.78$), drugs/alcohol ($p < 0.001$: $x_{\text{Spain}} = 5.65$; $x_{\text{Colombia}} = 5.9$; $x_{\text{Venezuela}} = 4.54$) and violence ($p < 0.001$: $x_{\text{Spain}} = 5.2$; $x_{\text{Colombia}} = 4.62$; $x_{\text{Venezuela}} = 4.03$), while it was Venezuelans who rated most highly plots dealing with love ($p < 0.001$: $x_{\text{Venezuela}} = 7.53$; $x_{\text{Spain}} = 6.83$; $x_{\text{Colombia}} = 6.76$) and Colombians, those dealing with social issues (politics, culture, health, environment, education, etc.) ($p < 0.001$: $x_{\text{Colombia}} = 7.45$; $x_{\text{Spain}} = 6.31$; $x_{\text{Venezuela}} = 6.22$).

The adjectives attributed to the characters most appreciated by participants (on a scale of 0 to 10) were intelligent ($x = 8.73$), fun ($x = 8.69$) and self-assured ($x = 8.3$), while the lowest-rated ones were authoritarian ($x = 5.25$), manipulative ($x = 4.63$) and violent ($x = 4.05$). Participants also highly value other traits such as independent ($x = 7.78$), mature ($x = 7.58$), honest ($x = 7.25$), seductive ($x = 7.24$), attractive ($x = 7.22$) and rebellious ($x = 6.9$).

In the open-ended items, participants listed more than 200 characters among their favorites, although this variety does not translate into gender equality: choices for favorite character were mostly male, from 78.4% ($n = 301$) for first choice to 69.9% ($n = 233$) for third-favorite.

Indeed, the only seven characters indicated by more than 5% of the sample were white, heterosexual males from U.S. programs from various genres (sitcoms, drama series and animated series) (Table 6).

Table 6

Characters preferred by the sample

Character	Frequency	Percentage
Sheldon Cooper - <i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	61	16.8
Homer - <i>The Simpsons</i>	59	16.3
Walter White - <i>Breaking Bad</i>	36	9.6
House - <i>House</i>	31	8.8
Barney Stinson - <i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	23	6.4
Tyrrion Lannister - <i>Game Of Thrones</i>	23	6
Damon Salvatore - <i>Vampire Diaries</i>	21	5.5

Source. Own data

Gender bias also manifests itself in these preferences: more female than male participants listed female characters ($p < 0.001$), sometimes by score differences in multiples of ten. For their first choice, only 10.9% ($n=17$) of male participants mentioned a female character, while for third-favorite 38.9% ($n=77$) of female participants did so. On the other hand, no difference was found between the three countries.

Furthermore, male participants rated more highly "negative" characters ("baddies") with traits like authoritarian ($p=0.018$), impulsive ($p=0.01$), violent ($p < 0.001$), ambitious ($p < 0.001$) and manipulative ($p < 0.001$). In contrast, female participants rated more highly the "positive" traits of characters, with adjectives such as kind ($p=0.002$), honest ($p=0.003$), affectionate ($p < 0.001$), mature ($p < 0.001$), self-assured ($p=0.007$), helpful ($p=0.003$), sensitive ($p < 0.001$), attentive ($p=0.003$), romantic ($p < 0.001$), understanding ($p=0.002$), generous ($p=0.001$), tender ($p < 0.001$).

One exception to this tendency was that female participants rated seductive ($p < 0.001$) and attractive ($p < 0.001$) characters more highly than did males. Lastly, significant differences were observed in ratings for

affectionate (xmale=5.70, xfemale=7.04), romantic (xmale=5.70, xfemale=7.57), manipulative (xmale=4.72, xfemale=4.48) and violent (xmale=5.55, xfemale=4.09) characters.

Analysis of media representations

Results of the qualitative analysis are summarized in Table 7, which describes variables related to the physical, social and psychological characteristics of the characters preferred by the sample, as well as their love relationships, analyzed across seasons of the series.

Table 7

Qualitative analysis of preferred characters

Character	Physical Characteristics	Social Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Love Relationships
Sheldon Cooper – <i>The Big Bang Theory</i>	Build: Slim Dress: Casual	Social class: Upper-middle Family: Flat mate/partner Hobbies: Comics, Series, Role plays, Social relations	Attributes: Intelligent, Fun, Self-assured, Honest, Ambitious, Authoritarian, Manipulative	He loathes emotional relationships; has a "relationship agreement" with his partner Amy; hates physical contact and is self-centered in the relationship, which follows the myth of redemptive love.
Homer – <i>The Simpsons</i>	Build: Heavy-set Dress: Casual	Social class: Lower middle Family: Traditional Hobbies: Drinking, Family relations	Attributes: Fun, Rebellious, Impulsive, Affectionate, Authoritarian, Manipulative, Violent	He is married to Marge, with whom he has a typical patriarchal relationship (almost mother-son), centered around his carelessness and self-centeredness. Marge forgives all his mistakes when he apologizes and becomes tender (a certain degree of influence from the myth of redemptive love is to be felt).

Table 7 (Continued)

Qualitative analysis of preferred characters

Character	Physical Characteristics	Social Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Love Relationships
Walter White - <i>Breaking Bad</i>	<p>Build: Average</p> <p>Dress: Casual</p>	<p>Social class: Middle</p> <p>Family: Traditional</p> <p>Hobbies: Family relations</p>	<p>Attributes: Intelligent, Self-assured, Independent, Rebellious, Affectionate, Ambitious, Authoritarian, Manipulative, Violent</p>	<p>Married to Skyler, whom he considers to be the love of his life, alongside his children (with whom he is affectionate, the reason for which he starts to produce methamphetamine s.) But he also lies to, manipulates and even threatens Skyler throughout the series. When she leaves him, he attempts to redeem himself by doing everything he can to get his money to Skyler and his children.</p>

Table 7 (Continued)

Qualitative analysis of preferred characters

Character	Physical Characteristics	Social Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Love Relationships
House - <i>House</i>	Build: Average (Limps) Dress: Casual	Social class: Upper-middle Family: Lives alone Hobbies: Art, Culture, Drugs	Attributes: Intelligent, Fun, Self-assured, Independent, Honest, Rebellious, Generous, Impulsive, Ambitious, Authoritarian, Manipulative, Violent	Solitary and ill-tempered, misanthropic and narcissistic, House makes fun of, treats badly, lies to and manipulates everybody, even Lisa Cuddy, his boss, friend and (for a time) girlfriend. Although the relationship with Lisa redeems him temporarily, his relationships are doomed by his self-centeredness and lack of emotional communication.

Table 7 (Continued)

Qualitative analysis of preferred characters

Character	Physical Characteristics	Social Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Love Relationships
Barney Stinson - <i>How I Met Your Mother</i>	<p>Build: Average</p> <p>Dress: Formal - Elegant (suit)</p>	<p>Social class: Upper-class</p> <p>Family: Lives alone</p> <p>Hobbies: Hooking up/having fun (drinking, partying)/Social relations</p>	<p>Attributes: Intelligent, Fun, Self-assured, Seductive, Attractive, Rebellious, Generous, Impulsive, Ambitious, Authoritarian, Manipulative</p>	<p>An inveterate womanizer, sexist, narcissistic, self-centred, liar and manipulator of women, whom he sees as sexual objects, terrified of short- and long-term commitment, falls in love with his best friend Robyn, whom he marries and for whom he decides to change. When change is impossible, they divorce and he returns to his previous life, only truly and unselfishly loving his daughter. Although the redemptive love with his partner fails, the love in Barney's father-daughter relationship works. He is also generous with his friends.</p>

Table 7 (Continued)

Qualitative analysis of preferred characters

Character	Physical Characteristics	Social Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Love Relationships
Tyrion Lannister - <i>Game Of Thrones</i>	Build: Normal (dwarfism) Dress: Formal	Social class: Upper-class Family: Dysfunctional Hobbies: Drinking/Sex	Attributes: Intelligent, Fun, Self-assured, Independent, Mature, Honest, Rebellious, Romantic, Understanding, Tolerant, Sensitive, Impulsive, Attentive, Manipulative	A lover of sexual pleasure, he mostly has relations with prostitutes (due to his physical and social condition), until he falls in love with Shae. To protect her, he keeps their relationship secret, but ends up killing her when she betrays him. He treats the women he loves protectively and with respect: Shae, his teenage bride, Sansa, with whom he decides not to have sexual relations due to her young age (and because he is in love with Shae); his queen Daenerys, with whom he shares a deep friendship.

Table 7 (Continued)
Qualitative analysis of preferred characters

Character	Physical Characteristics	Social Characteristics	Psychological Characteristics	Love Relationships
Damon Salvatore - <i>Vampire Diaries</i>	<p>Build: Average</p> <p>Dress: Casual/Trendy</p>	<p>Social class: Upper-middle</p> <p>Family: Other types/Dysfunctional</p> <p>Hobbies: Having fun (Drinking, Killing), Social Relations</p>	<p>Attributes: Intelligent, Fun, Self-assured, Independent, Seductive, Attractive, Rebellious, Romantic, Affectionate, Sensitive, Impulsive, Ambitious, Authoritarian, Manipulative, Violent</p>	<p>Rebellious, manipulative, a "bad boy" and self-centered with women, until he falls in love with his brother's girlfriend, Elena, for whom he attempts to change, and with whom he maintains a typical relationship based on the myth of redemptive love (he is romantic, affectionate and sensitive only with her). He often makes mistakes, becomes violent, even kills his friends, but she eventually forgives him and "saves" him, literally (turning him human).</p>

Source. Own data

The most frequently chosen favorite characters are, except for Homer, all intelligent, fun, and self-assured (the three most highly-rated characteristics by the university students of our sample), but at the same time, most are manipulative, authoritarian and violent (the lowest-rated traits).

Most have some sort of addiction, belong to upper or upper-middle classes or possess some sort of power (except for Homer), and belong to dysfunctional homes or families, or non-traditional family situations (only Homer and Walter have a traditional family situation). Only two of them, Barney and Damon, also fit the archetype of the attractive womanizer; the rest are not very (or not at all) attractive (and two of them, Tyrion and House possess physical handicaps).

As for psychological characteristics and relationships, they are all heteronormative, patriarchal characters, narcissistic and/or self-centered with their partners (Tyrion being the only exception to the latter). As it is shown in [Table 7](#), all the characters analyzed are well rounded ones, with complex personalities, since they combine different psychological traits, which are sometimes in contrast with each other. For example, Sheldon is both honest and manipulative, since he is always sincere about his opinions and feelings, but he also tends to manipulate others using his intelligence. On the other hand, Homer is both affectionate and violent, since he loves his family and especially his wife very much, but, at the same time he is irascible and often physically violent, for instance with his son Bart.

Regarding love relationships portrayed in the series, they are all heteronormative and nearly exclusively depict relationship models characterized by gender differences. For instance, Barney Stinson is a compulsive womanizer, treats women as objects and shows very little skill in terms of feelings. Likewise, Homer Simpson demonstrates many instances of sexism towards his partner and the family model they represent. None, except Tyron, is truly capable of being completely open and sincere with his partner, or of working on the facet of relationship that Sternberg (2000) calls "intimacy".

Most match the archetype of the rebel or "bad boy" who always shows a sensitive, affectionate or tender side with the person he loves. Thus, they can

be considered "rebels who are good deep down inside", and so exemplify the erotic attraction of the "baddie" discussed by Figueras-Maz, Tortajada & Araña (2014), an erotic attraction always associated with men, and which can foster violent attitudes within a relationship. Furthermore, other attributes such as, for example, sensitivity and romance are scarce among the characters chosen, and always associated with their loving partner.

Lastly, in most of the love relationships experienced by these characters, various myths of romantic love are promoted and exploited, including "redemptive love" (Damon and Elena, Sheldon and Amy), "the soul mate" (Damon and Elena, Homer and Marge) and "the transformative power of love" (Barney and Robyn, House and Cuddy), and the idea of jealousy as an indicator of love is promoted.

Discussion and Conclusions

The data reveal that the ideal love relationship among young people belongs to Sternberg's (2000) conceptualization of romantic love and fosters the myths that it comprises. Young people value items based on intimacy and passion above those based on commitment. As Medina et al. (2007) has already stated, this state of affairs should be connected with the dissolution of older love and family structures mainly based on commitment, which has led to an emphasis on feelings within relationships, and thus intimacy, the aspect most highly valued by youth. Sharing and enjoying time together, emotional complicity and supporting one's partner have become some of the most important items for the young people in the sample. Bauman's concept of "liquid love" (2005) matches this way of understanding love perfectly: leaving commitment in third place, it leads to relationships that are more fragile and difficult to maintain, because they are based on more unstable elements. It could be said that young people, and boys in particular, live their relationships in the present moment and give great importance to enjoying experiences shared with their partner, forming a sort of "amor ludens" - a "here and now" love that can be difficult to maintain if the costs of the relationship increase and the benefits associated with mutual enjoyment (and

often passion) are lost from sight (Bauman, 2005). "Amor ludens" is a contribution that emerges from the results of the present study, where it has been observed that "commitment" has become a secondary component of the relationships and not a key element, as Sternberg (1989, 2000) would understand it. As it has been observed in this study, the young people in the sample emphasize statements related to the "enjoyment of time" and "fun" with their partner. We have found some indicators of this "amor ludens" but obviously it should be explored in detail in future qualitative studies.

The most notable differences in the Iberian-American setting studied here can be summed up as follows: Spanish youth depart more from the ideal of romantic love and identify more with "amor ludens"; Colombians tend to move towards infatuation; Venezuelans, of the three, value commitment and identify with romantic love the most.

Furthermore, gender differences are observed in youth understandings of love. Males emphasized items dealing with passion and the physical and sexual and, thus, to values corresponding to heteronormative and patriarchal stereotypes. On the other hand, females attributed more importance than did males to items related to intimacy and the romantic ideal and, thus, to feelings. In this way, it is demonstrated that the romantic ideal and the myths associated with it do not permeate both sexes equally, since males tend to associate romantic relationships less with emotions and with these myths. This could lead to a situation in which women are more willing to be subordinate and passive in relationships (de Miguel, 2015) or even to a somewhat slave-like relationship model (Illouz, 1997), being men more active and dominant. It can be observed that traditional gender stereotypes in love relationships, including those related to the "machismo", are still active in the youngest generations in the Iberian-American setting. Additionally, these stereotypes are constructed within an environment of heteronormativity, which legitimates differences between men and women and dissociates itself from any form of love that could exist outside the normative bounds of heterosexuality (Guerrero-Pico, Establés & Ventura, 2017; Ventura, 2016).

This is also reflected in their preferences in serialized fiction. While males prefer those based on violence, sex or drugs and alcohol, females prefer plots based on personal relationships - love or friendship. Again, stereotypes are observed that associate males with violence and action, and females with more intimate, labile and emotional aspects.

Furthermore, the youth in the sample reported a preference for characters that embody positive attributes such as intelligence, fun and self-assuredness, while the characters they like least are authoritarian, manipulative and violent. Again, gender differences were observed: male participants' rate attributes such as authoritarianism and violence higher, while females participants do so with friendliness and affection. These are worrisome data, because they show that males understand these traits as highly positive and thus models to follow. Furthermore, when these data are related to the preferred series characters, it is observed that although young people claim to prefer non-stereotypical, more gender-equal characters, a majority chooses men that embody gender stereotypes and heteronormative and patriarchal values. Paradoxically, youth are cognitively capable of rejecting stereotyped beliefs when rating traits of characters in the abstract, without associating them with any specific character, but emotionally they prefer and defend fictional characters that embody these self-same beliefs. In other words, there is a gap between cognition and emotion. As previously observed ([Ferrés et al., 2017](#)), understanding and critical thinking, associated with cognition, are essential yet not sufficient without an emotional component to, here, confront stereotypes and gender differences, and to attempt to depart from them.

Some young people, who claim to look for positive attributes in their preferred models, but later follow gender stereotypes and choose violent, sexist and authoritarian characters, demonstrate a dissociation between what they understand, intellectually, to be right, and what attracts them emotionally and constitutes itself as an unconscious model. If egalitarian societies seek to transform the structures that produce gender inequality, then it is necessary to work on new communicative strategies to help youth reject - not merely cognitively but also emotionally - characters that embody

heteronormative and patriarchal values and gender differences, in order to ensure that youth do not unconsciously adopt them as models of reference.

Also, regarding love relationships, there is an apparent disconnect between the cognitive and emotional spheres. Youth prove to agree with items related to the romantic ideal, although they rate more highly items far removed from stereotypes and defend equality in relationships. Paradoxically, they preferred characters exemplify love relationships that do not challenge the romantic myths, reproduce heteronormative models and, in most cases, are far removed from egalitarian models.

In fact, these data not only make possible studies that delve into the way youth incorporate media representations of love in their daily lives. They also make possible the development of applied research focused on raising awareness in adolescents and youth of gender and heteronormative stereotypes, sexist behavior and different kinds of gender-based violence that can sometimes coexist with the romantic ideal (e.g. [Connolly & McIsaac, 2011](#); [de Miguel, 2015](#); [Kirsch & Murnen, 2015](#); [Lutz, 1996](#); [Van Damme, 2010](#); [Van Damme & Van Bauwel, 2013](#)). Youth consume and talk with each other about fiction series, which suggests their potential to become useful educational and transformational tools to help promote equality-based models and impact youth attitudes in their current and future love relationships. Series' potential to influence youth could help facilitate conversations aimed at challenging gender stereotypes and helping them build healthier, more equalitarian love relationships.

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Maddalena Fedele is postdoctoral researcher at Blanquerna Universitat Ramon Llull in the Faculty of Communication and International Relations, Spain.

Maria-Jose Masanet is lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University, Spain.

Rafael Ventura is lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Communication at Pompeu Fabra University, Spain.

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to Maddalena Fedele, Facultat de Comunicació i Relacions Internacionals Blanquerna-URL, Plaça Joan Coromines, 08001 Barcelona, Spain, email: maddalena.fedele@gmail.com