

**Women's Risk Perception and Responses to Intimate Partner Sexual Coercion:
The Role of Type of Tactic, Previous Experience and Myths Acceptance**

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Abstract

Sexual coercion is among the subtlest forms of sexual violence in an intimate relationship and sometimes goes unnoticed by victims. The present study analysed factors that potentially mitigate women's negative perceptions of intimate partner sexual coercion (IPSC). A total of 427 women completed an online survey, in which they were shown vignettes illustrating a growing risk of sexual coercion according to the perpetrators' use of different coercive tactics. Participants replied to questions that reflected their risk perception, their perceptions of perpetrator behaviour, and the probability of their leaving the relationship. The survey also queried their previous IPSC experience, and their degree of acceptance of sexual aggression myths. According to the results, women exposed to positive (vs negative) verbal sexual coercion (VSC) condition decided to leave the abusive situation later (risk response), presented a longer time lag between the moment they recognised the risk and the moment they responded to it, perceived the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable and excusable, and were less likely to leave the relationship. Finally, greater myth acceptance and previous IPSC experience predicted a lower probability of leaving the relationship, due to delayed risk responses and to perceiving the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable and excusable. This was true regardless of the type of coercive tactic used by the perpetrator. The results highlight the need to consider the type of coercive tactic, previous experience, and myths acceptance as risk factors that may impede a woman to adequately perceive and respond to an intimate partner's sexual violence.

Keywords: sexual coercion, risk response, perceptions of perpetrator's behaviour, sexual aggression myths, victimisation.

Sexual coercion is among the subtlest manifestations of gender-based violence (Smith et al., 2017). It consists of unwanted sexual activity resulting from pressure, in absence of the perpetrator's use of physical force (Pugh & Becher, 2018), either through verbal pressure, manipulation, or blackmail (negative verbal coercion; Smith et al., 2018), or via seduction and sweet-talking (positive verbal coercion or coaxing; Camilleri et al., 2009).

Among the different types of sexual violence that occur within relationships, sexual coercion is more common than generally thought and tends to be normalised by victims, going unnoticed (Katz & Tirone, 2010; Salwen & O'Leary, 2013). In fact, according to Smith et al. (2017), three out of four women who reported one or more incidents of nonphysical sexual coercion at some point in their lifetime (a total of 13.5% of the sample) had experienced this sexual coercion by their current or former intimate partner.

Despite the multiple negative consequences that sexual coercion produces in victims (e.g., Brown et al., 2009), little is known about the relationship between sexual coercion experience and the perception of risky situations, especially when occurring within a couple's relationship. Therefore, the current study focused on analysing women's perceptions and responses to sexual coercion (risk perception, perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour, and probability of leaving the relationship), based on three important factors: the type of sexual coercion tactic used by the perpetrator, the women's previous IPSC experience, and their degree of acceptance of sexual aggression myths (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2016; Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020a, 2020b; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Hetzel-Riggin et al. 2021; Katz et al., 2007).

Factors Influencing Women's Perceptions and Responses to IPSC

Several factors can stop women from adequately perceiving and responding to situations of intimate partner sexual violence, such as: the type of coercive tactic used by the perpetrator; their previous experience of sexual coercion; and the extent to which they accept sexual aggression myths.

Type of coercive tactic

The perpetrator's sexual coercion tactic may influence how sexual violence situations are perceived. Usually, the harsher the sexual coercion tactic, the more negative the perception of sexual violence (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020a; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Katz et al., 2007). Specifically, the severity of the perpetrator's tactic conditions women's response to situations of sexual risk. Indeed, research indicates that the use of more severe strategies is related to women's faster responses to risk and earlier decisions to leave the sexual violence situation (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Yeater et al., 2011). For instance, Yeater et al., (2011) found that women's responses became increasingly effective as the risk of sexual assault became more violent in the described scenarios.

In the same vein, research has demonstrated that the perpetrator's tactic may also influence perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour (e.g., Brown et al., 2009; Edwards et al., 2012; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020). Generally, perpetrators are perceived more negatively when they use physical force tactics than when they use verbal tactics (Brown et al., 2009; Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020a; Katz et al., 2007). For example, based on written scenarios of sexual coercion, Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020) found that women perceived the perpetrator's behaviour as less acceptable and excusable when the coercion tactic was physical than when it was

verbal. The authors did not, however, find any differences in perceptions between positive and negative verbal coercion conditions.

Finally, **the persuasion coercive strategies used by the perpetrator generate emotional confusion, distortion of thoughts, and paralysis in women, which make it difficult to leave the relationship (Escudero et al., 2005). Thus,** the perpetrator's tactic plays a key role in the women's decision to leave a relationship in which sexual violence is taking place. In this way, the probability of women remaining in an abusive relationship is lower when they have experienced physical sexual coercion than when they have suffered verbal coercion (Edwards et al., 2012; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Katz et al., 2007). Based on written scenarios of verbal sexual coercion, Garrido-Macías and colleagues (2020a) found that women in the positive verbal coercion scenario were less likely to leave the relationship than women in the negative verbal coercion scenario. For their part, Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020) did not find any differences between the two verbal conditions.

Previous Experience of Sexual Coercion

One relatively unexplored factor relating to women's perceptions and responses to IPSC is previous experience of sexual violence victimisation. This latter factor can uniquely influence response to risk (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006). For instance, using sexual assault scenarios interspersed with sentences that increased sexual victimisation risk, Messman-Moore and Brown (2006) demonstrated that victims of sexual violence obtained similar risk recognition scores than nonvictims, but their responses to danger were delayed, i.e., they took more time in deciding to leave the situation described in the scenario. Similar results were found by Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, and Expósito (2020b), in their study on IPSC victims. Concretely, female university students watched a video showing

an increasing risk of sexual violence (ending with unwanted sex with the partner) and answered questions regarding risk recognition and risk response. No differences were found either between victims and nonvictims with respect to risk recognition, but sexual coercion victims took longer to hypothetically leave the situation than nonvictims.

Few studies have examined the potential impact of prior sexual victimisation experience on perceptions of perpetrator behaviour. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that victims of intimate partner violence would try to adjust their perceptions of their partner so as to avoid the decision to leave them (see Goodfriend & Arriaga, 2018). **This idea is based on cognitive consistency theories, according to which people align their beliefs to maintain consistency between their experiences and perceptions, trying to avoid the decision of whether or not to end the relationship (Arriaga & Capezza, 2011).** A small body of research has suggested that a victim's experience of intimate partner violence predicts a less negative perception of perpetrators. For example, women are more tolerant toward the perpetrator when the aggression occurs within their own relationship than in a stranger's relationship (Arriaga et al., 2016). In a recent study, women having experienced IPSC perceived the perpetrator's behaviour in a sexual coercion scenario as more acceptable than women without such experience (Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020).

Lastly, previous sexual coercion experiences may also affect the decision to leave the relationship, due to delayed risk responses and lower negative perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour. Deciding to leave an abusive relationship implies a greater degree of conscious reflection than deciding to leave a situation (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahé, et al., 2020). Indeed, according to several studies, many women decide not to leave the relationship after a sexual violence experience (e.g., Edwards et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2006). For instance, the scarce literature that does exist using

hypothetical written IPSC scenarios has shown that victims are less likely to leave the relationship than nonvictims (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2016; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020). These findings support the results of studies based on visual sexual coercion scenarios which found that prior IPSC experience predicted a lower probability of leaving the relationship (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, Krahé et al., 2020; Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b).

Sexual Aggression Myths

Finally, acceptance of sexual aggression myths is an individual factor that has been widely studied in perceivers of situations of sexual violence. Yet little is known regarding its effect on the victims' perceptions of such situations. Sexual aggression myths are defined as "descriptive or prescriptive beliefs about sexual aggression (i.e., about its scope, causes, context, and consequences) that serve to deny, downplay, or justify sexually aggressive behaviour that men commit against women" (p. 425; Gerger et al., 2007). Hence, sexual aggression myths serve as a general cognitive schema to interpret information in cases of sexual violence (Bohner et al., 2009). They can influence risk perception, perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour, and the probability of leaving the abusive relationship.

Regarding the impact of sexual aggression myths on risk perception, these myths are undeniably still embedded in our culture today and may affect risk perceptions due to current social realities (Hetzl-Riggin et al., 2021). Thus, the victims' risk perceptions in a given situation may differ due to factors such as their degree of acceptance of myths. This assumption was demonstrated by Loiselle and Fuqua (2007) who verified that women showing higher (vs lower) levels of rape myth acceptance presented longer response latencies when asked to indicate when a man had gone too far in an audiotaped date rape vignette. In line with the above, in a study based on scenarios

in which risk of sexual victimisation increased, Yeater et al. (2010) showed that the participant's greater myth acceptance predicted lower sensitivity to risk information. Recently, Hetzel-Riggin et al. (2021) found similar results using sexual assault vignettes and the evaluation of the participants' risk perception and rape myths acceptance. Specifically, women with higher levels of rape myth acceptance were more likely to leave the scenario later and showed delayed behavioural responses compared to women with lower levels of rape myth acceptance.

Research has also showed that sexual aggression myth acceptance is associated with how a perpetrator is perceived. Specifically, at the cognitive level, high acceptance of sexual aggression myths has been found to be related to less negative perceptions (e.g., Bohner et al., 2009; Klement et al., 2019). For example, after observing a date rape scenario, participants with higher levels of rape myths acceptance (vs participants with lower levels) attributed less responsibility and guilt to the perpetrator (Hammond et al., 2011; Klement et al., 2019), minimised the seriousness of the situation (Newcombe et al., 2008), and exonerated the perpetrator (Bohner et al., 2009).

Finally, to the best of our knowledge, no study has hitherto evaluated whether myth acceptance influences the probability of leaving the relationship. However, a positive association between sexual violence experiences and sexual aggression myth acceptance has been demonstrated (e.g., Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2020). Sexual coercion victims show more difficulties to perceive risk, they perceive the perpetrator's behaviour less negatively, and they are less likely to leave the relationship than nonvictims (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006). Therefore, acceptance of myths about sexual assault can be expected to have a similar impact: reducing women's ability to respond to the risk; to adequately

perceive the perpetrator's behaviour; and making it less likely, therefore, that the victim will leave the abusive relationship.

Current Research

Given the contrasting results found hitherto regarding women's perceptions of positive and negative VSC (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020a; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020), the present study analysed how the type of VSC tactic used by the perpetrator influences: IPSC risk perception; perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour; and the probability of leaving the relationship. Furthermore, previous research has analysed the relationship between myth acceptance and responses to sexual violence (e.g., Hetzel-Riggin et al., 2021; Klement et al., 2019). Yet little is known about myth acceptance and its effects on responses to IPSC, the specific focus of the current study. In fact, no previous studies have examined the victim's degree of myth acceptance and how this relates to her perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour and probability of leaving the abusive relationship. Thus, integrating findings from the literature summarised above, this work analyses the effects of previous IPSC experience and women's acceptance of sexual aggression myths on women's perceptions and responses to sexual coercion.

Based on the above, we expected to find the following: an absence of differences between positive VSC and negative VSC in risk recognition (*Hypothesis 1a*); that a positive VSC (vs a negative VSC) condition would lead, however, to a greater delay in risk response (*Hypothesis 1b*); and a greater delay in behavioural responses (*Hypothesis 1c*). Furthermore, we hypothesised that participants exposed to positive (vs negative) VSC would perceive the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable (*Hypothesis 2a*) and more excusable (*Hypothesis 2b*), and were less likely to leave their partner (*Hypothesis 3*). Moreover, it was expected that higher levels of myths acceptance and

IPSC experience would be associated with a greater delay in risk response as well as perceiving perpetrator behaviour as more excusable and acceptable and, hence, to a lower probability of leaving the relationship (*Hypothesis 4*). The final hypothesis was that this association would occur especially in cases of a subtler VSC tactic (positive VSC, *Hypothesis 5*).

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 427 heterosexual women from the Spanish general population and aged 18 to 38 years ($M = 24.09$, $SD = 4.49$). At the time of the study, all women were in a relationship of, with an average duration of 45.87 months ($SD = 44.16$). Furthermore, 40.98% of women reported having experienced some form of intimate partner sexual coercion over the last year, according to their responses to the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationships Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004).

The study was a between-subjects experiment in which the tactics used by the partner to obtain sex were manipulated through hypothetical scenarios. Women were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (positive VSC or negative VSC), and they responded to some dependent variables that assessed their perceptions of the scenario: their IPSC risk perception (risk recognition, risk response, and delayed behavioural response); their perceptions about the perpetrator (acceptable behaviour and excusable behaviour); and the probability of their leaving the relationship. Previous IPSC experience and sexual aggression myths were measured as predictor variables.

Procedure and Materials

The sample was recruited via a non-probabilistic **incidental sampling procedure in April 2021**. A research assistant **distributed announcements about the study on social networks (e.g., Facebook) requesting** women's collaboration online, inviting them to

participate in a study about decision-making within intimate relationships. The research assistant also provided information regarding the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, as well as the study's estimated duration (approximately 20 min). After giving their consent, participants completed all the measures via Qualtrics. This web host randomly assigned each participant to one of the two scenario conditions (positive VSC vs negative VSC) and instructed participants to imagine being the protagonist of the scenario. After reading it, women had to indicate when they would feel uncomfortable (risk recognition score), and when they would leave that scenario (risk response score). Subsequently, participants completed manipulation checks and rated whether the male partner's behaviour was acceptable and excusable, and the probability that they would leave the relationship. All women then completed predictor variables measures regarding their IPSC experiences in the last year and their acceptance of sexual aggression myths. Finally, they completed demographic measures and were debriefed. All measures and procedures were approved by the research ethics committee of the first author's university.

Measures

Manipulation: The type of VSC (positive vs negative) was manipulated according to two different scenarios created by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020). In both scenarios, the participant invites her male partner to her house after a night of laughs, talk and flirts together. The partner then makes sexual advances, the participant resists, and finally they have sex. Both scenarios described common features of sexually coercive tactics (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015; Black et al., 2011; Camilleri et al., 2009; Tamborra et al., 2014). In the *positive VSC condition*, the partner attempts to legitimise sex as reflecting love and closeness, verbally invoking relationship-oriented reasons to justify his sexual advances (e.g., “*your partner smiled, gently whispered that you were*

so very special to him, and affirmed strong feelings toward you..." or *"your partner expressed wanting to be intimate with you to demonstrate his feelings"*). However, in the *negative VSC condition*, the partner verbally invoked a self-oriented motive (e.g., *"your partner frowned and said to you that you were leading him on and he felt physically aroused toward you in that moment..."* or *"your partner replied that you owed it to him to meet his physical needs"*), reflecting a sense of entitlement.

Risk perception of IPSC. The two scenarios created by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020) were adapted to follow the Risk Perception Survey developed by Mesman-Moore and Brown (2006). The RPS is a written scenario depicting a heterosexual encounter with a series of statements that increase the risk of sexual assault. The participants' task is to identify when (in which statement) they start to feel uncomfortable (*risk recognition score*), and when they would leave the situation described in the scenario (*risk response score*). Furthermore, the *delayed behavioural response* captures the time lag between the moment participants first feel discomfort and when they would leave the scenario, calculating the difference between the risk recognition score and the risk response score. In contrast with Mesman-Moore and Brown's vignettes, those in the present study reflected a situation of sexual coercion (described in the previous section), but they were also broken into a series of chronological statements (17 sentences) that reflected an increasing risk of sexual coercion victimisation, including sexual comments, verbal persuasion, manipulation, and pressure. Participants had to imagine themselves interacting with the man in the scenario. Responses were scored according to the statement number signalled by participants and which corresponded to when they felt uncomfortable and when they would leave the situation. Higher numbers indicated later statements in the scenario (indicating a greater risk of sexual coercion).

Following the procedure applied by Messman-Moore and Brown (2006), to support the assumption that the risk of sexual coercion increased as the scenario progressed, some data was obtained via expert ratings. These experts assessed the level of risk at several points in both vignettes and identified risk factors within each statement. Two items also asked them (using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*): (a) whether the sexual coercion risk increased as activities in the vignette progressed; and (b), if the hypothetical situation was real, would the sexual coercion risk increase the longer the woman remained in the situation. Results indicated that experts strongly agreed that sexual coercion risk increased as statements in the vignette progressed in both the positive VSC condition ($M = 4.70$; $SD = 0.48$; $IVC = .70$; $k = .66$) and the negative VSC condition ($M = 4.90$; $SD = 0.32$; $IVC = .90$; $k = .89$), and the longer the participant remained in the situation (positive VSC, $M = 4.80$; $SD = 0.42$; $IVC = .80$; $k = .79$; negative VSC, $M = 5$; $SD = 0$; $IVC = 1$; $k = 1$).

Manipulation checks: Two questions used by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020) assessed whether the manipulation had the intended effect of invoking positive (vs negative) verbal coercion: “My partner’s intentions were positive” and “my partner believed that he is being caring or loving”. A third question assessed the extent to which women were immersed in the experimental task: “How realistic do you consider the scenario you just read to be?” All participants’ responses were based on a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*), higher scores reflecting a greater endorsement of each item.

Perceptions of the perpetrator’s behaviour: Two items previously used by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020) assessed the perceptions of the partner’s behaviour. The first asked participants whether the partner’s behaviour was acceptable (“my partner’s behaviour was acceptable”), and the second whether the partner’s behaviour

was excusable (“my partner’s behaviour was excusable”). Women responded using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*), higher scores indicating a greater endorsement of each item.

Probability of leaving the relationship: One item taken from Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura and Expósito (2020b) assessed the probability that participants would leave the relationship (“to what extent would you be willing to leave the relationship if the situation happened to you?”). Women answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*I would definitely not leave the relationship*) to 7 (*I would definitely leave the relationship*).

Previous IPSC experience. An abbreviated version of the Sexual Coercion in Intimate Relationship Scale (SCIRS; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004), used by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020), assessed sexually coercive experiences with an intimate partner. Women indicated how frequently they had experienced any of 19 specific acts of sexual coercion in the last year. The latter included: manipulations (e.g. “my partner hinted that if I loved him, I would have sex with him”); threats (e.g. “my partner hinted that he would have sex with another woman if I did not have sex with him”); and use of violence and physical force (e.g., “my partner threatened to use violence against me if I did not have sex with him”). Participants answered using a 6-point response scale: 0 (*has never occurred*), 1 (*has occurred once in the last year*), 2 (*has occurred twice in the last year*), 3 (*has occurred between three and five times in the last year*), 4 (*has occurred between six and 10 times in the last year*), and 5 (*has occurred more than 11 times in the last year*). All scores were added, higher numbers indicating greater sexual coercion victimisation by an intimate partner ($\alpha = .84$).

Sexual aggression myths: The Spanish validation of the Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression Scale (AMMSA; López-Megías et al., 2011) was used

to assess sexual aggression myths. Participants responded to 30 items (e.g., “Once a man and a woman have started ‘making out,’ a woman’s misgivings against sex will automatically disappear”, “If a woman invites a man to her home for a cup of coffee after a night out this means that she wants to have sex”) using a 7-point response scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). Responses were averaged in such a way that higher numbers indicated greater acceptance of sexual aggression myths ($\alpha = .91$).

Demographic Characteristics. Self-identified gender, relationship status, and current relationship duration were assessed via standard demographic questions.

Results

Manipulation Checks, Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Initial analyses examined whether the manipulation of the VSC tactic had the intended effect, by means of a between-subjects **MANCOVA** (using relationship duration and age as covariates). As expected, the results revealed a significant multivariate effect of condition, $Wilks' \lambda = .94$, $F(2, 422) = 14.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Specifically, the positive VSC condition was more likely to be judged as involving a partner whose intentions were positive, $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.45$, relative to the negative VSC condition, $M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.24$, $F(1, 423) = 24.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. The positive VSC condition was also more likely to be judged as involving a partner who believed he was being caring or loving, $M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.76$, relative to the negative VSC condition, $M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.54$, $F(1, 423) = 23.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. These effects remained significant when controlling for relationship duration and age.

Regarding ecological validity, an **ANCOVA** was conducted to examine the perceived realism of the described scenario (controlling for relationship duration and age). Participants reported that the portrayed interaction was quite realistic $M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.41$, and no differences were found between the conditions in terms of realism, F

(1, 423) = 1.10, $p = .295$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$ [positive VSC, $M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.40$; negative VSC, $M = 6.12$, $SD = 1.41$].

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all dependent variables are shown in Table 1. The three risk perception measures correlated with each other, but risk recognition did not correlate with any of the other variables. Risk response correlated positively with the perception of the perpetrator's behaviour as excusable, previous IPSC experience, and sexual aggression myths acceptance, and correlated negatively with the probability of leaving the relationship. For its part, perpetrator behaviour perceptions correlated positively with previous IPSC experience and sexual aggression myths acceptance, and negatively with the probability of leaving the relationship. Finally, previous IPSC experience was positively associated with sexual aggression myths acceptance.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Influence of the Partner's Coercive Tactics on Perceptions

To examine the influence of the partner's coercive tactics on perceptions, a between-subjects **MANCOVA** was first conducted. It allowed to analyse the hypothesised relationship (*Hypothesis 1*) between the type of sexual coercion tactic (positive VSC vs negative VSC; independent variable) and IPSC risk perception (risk recognition, risk response, and delayed behavioural response; dependent variables) (see Table 2). Age and relationship duration were introduced as covariates¹. The results indicated a significant multivariate effect of the type of tactic on IPSC risk perception, $Wilks' \lambda = .97$, $F(2, 422) = 7.23$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Consistent with *Hypothesis 1a*, no differences were found between positive and negative VSC regarding the moment in which women first felt uncomfortable (risk recognition), $F(1, 423) = 0.19$, $p = .660$, η_p^2

¹ Covariates had a non-significant multivariate effect on risk perception ($Wilks' \lambda_{relationship\ duration} = .99$, $F(2, 422) = 2.92$, $p = .060$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; $Wilks' \lambda_{age} = 1$, $F(2, 422) = 0.07$, $p = .935$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$).

= .00. However, women differed with respect to the moment in which they would leave the situation (risk response), $F(1, 423) = 8.34, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .02$, so that positive VSC condition participants decided to leave the scenario when the sexual violence situation was more advanced than negative VSC condition participants, **supporting Hypothesis 1b** (see Table 2). Finally, according to *Hypothesis 1c*, the type of tactic had a significant effect on the time lag between risk recognition and risk response (delayed behavioural response), $F(1, 423) = 14.08, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$, being greater in the positive VSC condition than in the negative VSC condition (see Table 2).

Secondly, to evaluate the effect of the type of tactic on perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour (*Hypothesis 2*), another between-subjects **MANCOVA** was conducted, with the type of tactic (positive VSC vs negative VSC) as independent variable and perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour as acceptable and excusable as dependent variables. Again, both age and relationship duration were introduced as covariates². Regarding *Hypothesis 2*, results indicated a significant multivariate effect of the type of tactic on the perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour, $Wilks' \lambda = .97, F(2, 421) = 5.55, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .03$, with differences between positive and negative VSC on both perceptions of acceptable behaviour, $F(1, 422) = 8.23, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .02$, and excusable behaviour, $F(1, 422) = 9.92, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Specifically, as shown in Table 2, women in the positive VSC condition (vs women in the negative VSC condition) perceived the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable (*Hypothesis 2a*) and excusable (*Hypothesis 2b*).

Finally, a between-subjects **ANCOVA** analysed the relationship between the type of tactic and the probability of leaving the relationship (*Hypothesis 3*). Again,

² Covariates had a non-significant multivariate effect on perceptions of perpetrator's behaviour ($Wilks' \lambda_{relationship\ duration} = .99, F(2, 421) = 2.01, p = .135, \eta_p^2 = .01$; $Wilks' \lambda_{age} = .99, F(2, 421) = 1.39, p = .249, \eta_p^2 = .01$).

relationship duration and age were introduced as covariates.³ Results revealed an influence of the type of tactic on the probability of leaving, $F(1, 423) = 4.16, p = .042, \eta_p^2 = .01$, so that women in the positive VSC condition reflected lower probability of leaving the relationship than women in the negative VSC condition (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Indirect Effect of Sexual aggression myths and Previous IPSC experience on the Probability of Leaving the Relationship based on Response to Risk and Perceptions of the Perpetrator's Behaviour

To examine *Hypothesis 4*, six mediation analyses were run using PROCESS (Model 4; Hayes, 2018; [Igartua & Hayes, 2021](#)), testing **through linear models using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions** whether sexual aggression myths acceptance (X_1) and previous IPSC experience (X_2) predicted probability of leaving the relationship (Y) via risk response (M_1) and perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour (i.e., acceptable behaviour [M_2] and excusable behaviour [M_3]). Relationship duration and age were included as covariates. As shown in Figure 1 (Panel A), sexual aggression myths and previous IPSC experience were related to delayed risk response, which also decreased the probability of leaving the relationship. Results indicated that the indirect effect of sexual aggression myths ($b = -0.04, SE = .02, 95\% CI [-0.10, -0.01]$) and previous IPSC experience ($b = -0.01, SE = .01, 95\% CI [-0.02, -0.01]$) on the probability of leaving the relationship was driven by delayed risk response. This finding suggests, in accordance with *Hypothesis 4*, that higher levels of myths acceptance and previous IPSC experience lead to a later response to risk, which, consequently, decreases the probability of leaving the relationship.

³ Relationship duration and age showed a non-significant effect on the probability of leaving the relationship when they were introduced as covariates, $F_{relationship\ duration}(1, 423) = 2.88, p = .090, \eta_p^2 = .01$; $F_{age}(1, 423) = 1.07, p = .302, \eta_p^2 = .00$.

Conversely, Figure 1 (Panel B) reveals a significant association between sexual aggression myths and perceptions of perpetrator's behaviour as acceptable, but the association between previous IPSC experience and acceptable behaviour perception was not significant. For its part, acceptable behaviour perception was related to the probability of leaving the relationship. Therefore, results showed that sexual coercion myths acceptance ($b = -0.08$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI $[-0.17, -0.02]$) but no previous IPSC experience ($b = -0.01$, $SE = .00$, 95% CI $[-0.01, 0.00]$) was indirectly linked to the probability of leaving the relationship via its effect on acceptable behaviour perception. Specifically, greater myths acceptance was associated with perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable, which, in turn, was associated with a lower probability of leaving the relationship. This pattern, however, was not found in the case of previous IPSC experience, partially supporting *Hypothesis 4*.

Furthermore, Figure 1 (Panel C) indicates that sexual aggression myths and previous IPSC experience were also related to perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour as more excusable, which decreased the probability of leaving the relationship. Concretely, results revealed that the indirect effect of sexual aggression myths acceptance ($b = -0.12$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI $[-0.21, -0.05]$) and previous IPSC experience ($b = -0.02$, $SE = .01$, 95% CI $[-0.03, -0.01]$) on the probability of leaving the relationship was driven by perceptions of more excusable behaviour. Therefore, in accordance with *Hypothesis 4*, higher levels of myths acceptance and higher previous IPSC experience led to perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour as more excusable, which resulted in decreasing the probability of leaving the relationship.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Finally, six moderated mediation analyses were run to examine *Hypothesis 5*, that is, whether the type of tactic (W) moderated the indirect effect of sexual aggression

myths acceptance (X_1) and previous IPSC experience (X_2) on the probability of leaving the relationship (Y), based on risk response (M_1) and perpetrator behaviour perceptions (M_2 and M_3) using PROCESS (Model 7; Hayes, 2018). Results did not yield a moderating type of tactic effect in any of the mediation models. Specifically, the interaction between sexual aggression myths and type of tactic on risk response ($b = -0.49$, $SE = .34$, 95% CI $[-1.16, 0.18]$), acceptable behaviour ($b = -0.28$, $SE = .19$, 95% CI $[-0.64, 0.09]$), and excusable behaviour ($b = -0.19$, $SE = .13$, 95% CI $[-0.44, 0.05]$) were not significant. Similarly, the interaction effects of previous IPSC experience and type of tactic on risk response ($b = 0.05$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.12]$), acceptable behaviour ($b = -0.03$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI $[-0.07, 0.00]$), and excusable behaviour ($b = -0.02$, $SE = .03$, 95% CI $[-0.07, 0.03]$) were not significant either. These results did not support *Hypothesis 5*, and suggest that sexual aggression myths and previous IPSC experience decrease the probability of leaving the relationship via delayed risk response and perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable and more excusable, regardless of the perpetrator's type of verbal sexual coercion tactic.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to assess women's perceptions and responses regarding a scenario involving sexual coercion by a hypothetical intimate partner. Different factors that could potentially affect their interpretations were examined: (a) the type of coercive tactic used by the perpetrator; (b) previous IPSC experience; and (c), their acceptance of sexual aggression myths.

The first aim of this study was to analyse the influence of the perpetrator's type of tactic (positive VSC vs negative VSC) on women's risk perception, their perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour, and the probability of their leaving the relationship. To do this, the RPS (Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006) was adapted to examine women's

risk recognition, risk response, and delayed behavioural response in a hypothetical written scenario that reflected an increasing risk of sexual coercion. As expected, in accordance with *Hypothesis 1a*, the results did not show differences between positive and negative VSC regarding the delay it took for women to feel uncomfortable (risk recognition). Although no previous studies have analysed how the type of tactic influences risk recognition, this finding is consistent with past research that found an absence of differences regarding the moment in which women recognised the risk of sexual violence as a situation's circumstances varied (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006). For its part, the results obtained for risk response **supported** *Hypothesis 1b* by demonstrating that women in the positive VSC scenario responded later to risk than women in the negative VSC scenario, deciding to leave the scenario when the situation of sexual coercion was more advanced. In addition, in line with the above and in agreement with *Hypothesis 1c*, women in the positive VSC condition (vs negative VSC condition) had higher delayed behaviour, spending more time between the moment they recognised the risk and decided to leave the abusive situation. These findings support previous studies showing that women may have less negative reactions to sexual coercion when the abusive partner uses softer coercion tactics (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020a). Therefore, the results of this study are consistent with the findings in the literature regarding risk perception and demonstrates that the perpetrator's use of less severe strategies (in this study, positive VSC vs negative VSC) is associated with women's delayed decisions to leave the situation of sexual violence as well as delayed behavioural responses (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006; Yeater et al., 2011).

Regarding perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour, results indicated, consistent with *Hypothesis 2*, that women in the positive VSC scenario perceived the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable (*Hypothesis 2a*) and excusable (*Hypothesis 2b*) than women in the negative VSC scenario. This is consistent with the existing literature that has found that the use of softer sexual coercion tactics (verbal vs physical) is associated with less negative perceptions of the perpetrator (e.g., Brown et al., 2009; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Katz et al., 2007). However, while this study found less negative perpetrator perceptions in positive (vs negative) VSC tactics, the only previous study to have analysed how the types of verbal coercion tactics influence perpetrator perceptions found no differences between the positive and negative variants (Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020). One possible explanation is the different procedure used in the scenarios. In the study by Garrido-Macías and Arriaga (2020), the participants had to read the entire scenario and then respond to the measures of perception of the aggressor's behaviour. In the present study, the fact that women had to decide at what point in the scenario they would leave the situation may have highlighted the positive or negative type of verbal coercion, making the participants more aware of the differences between both and thus obtaining the expected results of *Hypothesis 2*.

Focusing on the probability of leaving the relationship, results indicated that women in the positive VSC condition would be less likely to leave the relationship after the situation compared to women in the negative VSC condition. This finding supports *Hypothesis 3* and previous research that has shown that the probability of remaining in the relationship is greater in the case of women having experienced softer sexual coercion (Edwards et al., 2012; Katz et al., 2007) and when the perpetrator uses positive verbal coercion tactics (Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020a).

The second main objective of this study was to analyse the role of previous IPSC experience and myths acceptance on risk perception, perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour, and the probability of leaving the relationship. Results **partially supported Hypothesis 4** by reflecting that both variables (previous IPSC experience and sexual aggression myths) captured a motivation to continue the relationship based on risk response and perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour. Specifically, previous IPSC experiences and higher sexual aggression myths acceptance led women to delay their decision to leave the situation (later risk response) and to perceive the perpetrator's behaviour as more acceptable (only significant for sexual aggression myths acceptance) and more excusable, and, hence, to a lower probability of leaving the relationship. These results agree with past research that has demonstrated that both, previous experience of sexual violence and myths acceptance predict later risk response (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Hetzel-Riggin et al., 2021; Messman-Moore & Brown, 2006), less negative perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour (e.g., Bohner et al., 2009; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Klement et al., 2019), and a lower probability of leaving the relationship (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2016; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020; Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b). The latter corroborates the detrimental effect of previous experience and myths acceptance on women's reactions to sexual violence.

Finally, contrary to what we expected in *Hypothesis 5*, the perpetrator's type of tactic did not moderate the relationship between previous IPSC experience / myths acceptance and risk response / perpetrator behaviour perceptions. Hence, the mediating effect of risk response and perceptions of the perpetrator's behaviour between previous IPSC experience and myths acceptance and probability of leaving the relationship occurred regardless of the perpetrator's type of tactic. This result could be congruent

with some previous research that found an absence of differences in the way in which women perceive positive and negative verbal coercion (e.g., Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020). Both forms of coercion include verbal strategies without the use of physical force. Therefore, it could be possible that, in the context of our study, the fact of having suffered sexual coercion or accepting myths may have a greater weight on women's perceptions of the situation and perpetrator, and on their decision to be more tolerant and to remain in their abusive relationship. It is very important to further explore and determine the key factors underlying women's assessments of sexual violence risk situations and their responses to them.

Limitations

The present study contributes to our understanding of the factors that prevent women from adequately perceiving sexual coercion in a relationship. Nevertheless, the study presented some limitations which must be taken into account when interpreting its results. First, it is important to acknowledge that women responded to a hypothetical scenario of intimate partner sexual coercion. In other words, the study's results are based on women's perceptions and intentions and the latter may not match their responses in equivalent real-life situations. Thus, we cannot say that the women's decisions regarding when they would leave the situation or relationship would predict their actual behaviour in real life.

Second, women were instructed to heighten their attention to threat-related stimulus in order to decide which sentence of the scenario made them feel uncomfortable and when they would leave the situation. Therefore, they knew in advance that something negative was going to happen, an advantage they would not have in real life and that may also have influenced their responses. Future research should replicate the present research exposing them to these types of situations in

different ways in order to achieve more realistic representations (e.g., video or audio clips) and favouring responses that would be as faithful as possible to real life.

Third, the present study assessed previous experiences of intimate partner sexual coercion over the last year, but it was not known whether women suffered these experiences with their current partner or in a previous relationship. This distinction should be considered in future studies. Indeed, past research has shown that there are differences in the way victims perceive and respond to situations of sexual violence depending on whether coercion was experienced in a previous relationship or with the current partner (e.g., Garrido-Macías, Valor-Segura, & Expósito, 2020b; Garrido-Macías & Arriaga, 2020). Along the same lines, other forms of victimisation were not assessed either: neither outside intimate relationships, nor outside the domain of sexuality. Therefore, differences among participants beyond their previous IPSC experience may have been related to our study's dependent variables in ways that we were unable to control. Future longitudinal designs are necessary in order to achieve a more adjusted analysis of variables that may be influencing sexual coercion perceptions and responses.

Conclusions

The current study contributes new knowledge regarding how women interpret an intimate partner's sexually coercive behaviour based on specific features of the situation, their own previous experiences, and their individual characteristics. Specifically, subtle verbal coercion tactics predict less negative perceptions of the situation and of the perpetrator, which could lead women to minimise harmful behaviour and remain in their abusive relationship. Furthermore, the results indicate that previous IPSC experience and sexual aggression myths acceptance contribute to greater acceptance of sexual coercion. These factors are therefore part of the key issues that

need to be addressed in order to prevent sexual violence and to help victims adequately perceive sexual violence situations. The findings presented here highlight the broad impact that certain variables (perpetrator's type of tactic, previous sexual coercion experience, and myth acceptance) have on women's reactions toward sexual coercion and their consequent risk of revictimisation. Further research is thus necessary in order to examine these factors more in depth and to prevent future sexual coercion experiences. Along the same lines, the results suggest some avenues to enhance the effectiveness of sexual violence prevention programmes. They could include egalitarian sex education, helping women to understand the limits beyond which a healthy sexual relationship may turn into sexual violence. Indeed, verbal sexual coercion is frequent in intimate relationships, yet it is harder to identify, interpret and respond appropriately. It is also more difficult to seek help. Thus, it is important to provide an adequate adaptive and healthy frame of reference, guiding couples towards correct assumptions as well as healthy and egalitarian behaviours.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between the Dependent Variables

Variables	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Risk Recognition	9.41 (2.18)	--	.553***	-.272***	-.017	-.008	-.076	-.036	-.034
2. Risk Response	12.08 (2.77)		--	.652***	.063	.112*	-.206***	.202***	.119*
3. Delayed Behavioural Response	2.67 (2.40)			--	.089	.137**	-.169***	.109*	.075
4. Acceptable Behaviour	1.70 (1.46)				--	.649***	-.199***	.055	.286***
5. Excusable Behaviour	1.63 (1.16)					--	-.293***	.160**	.246***
6. Probability of leaving the relationship	4.94 (1.75)						--	-.142**	-.271***
7. Previous IPSC Experience	2.36 (5.17)							--	.150**
8. Sexual Aggression Myths	2.21 (0.86)								--

Note. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

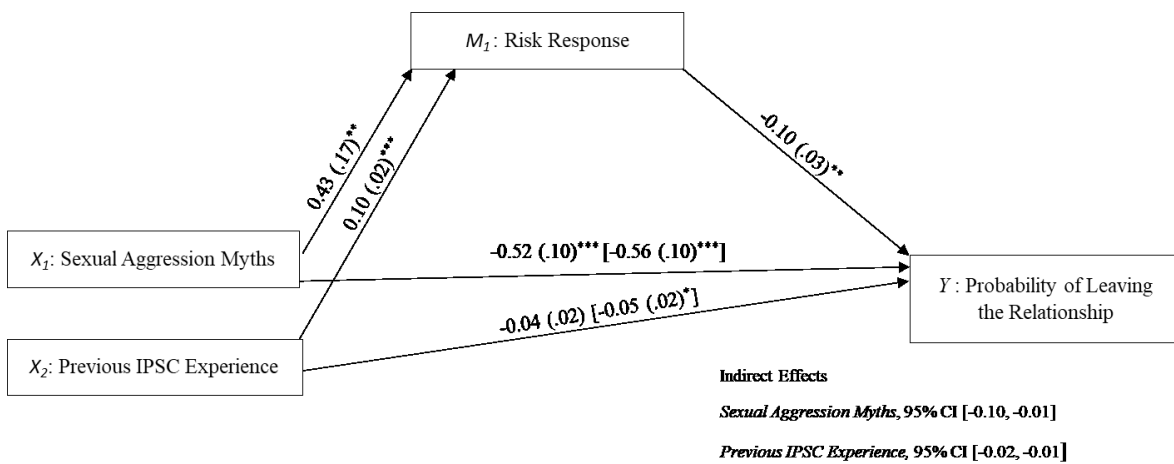
Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Hypothesized Contrasts

	<u>Positive Verbal Sexual Coercion</u>	<u>Negative Verbal Sexual Coercion</u>	F
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
Risk Recognition	9.39 (2.13)	9.43 (2.24)	0.19
Risk Response	12.52 (2.87)	11.57 (2.55)	8.34**
Delayed Behavioural Response	3.13 (2.73)	2.13 (1.79)	14.07***
Acceptable Behaviour	1.86 (1.56)	1.52 (1.32)	8.23**
Excusable Behaviour	1.77 (1.27)	1.45 (0.95)	9.92**
Probability of Leaving the Relationship	4.76 (1.74)	5.15 (1.75)	4.16*

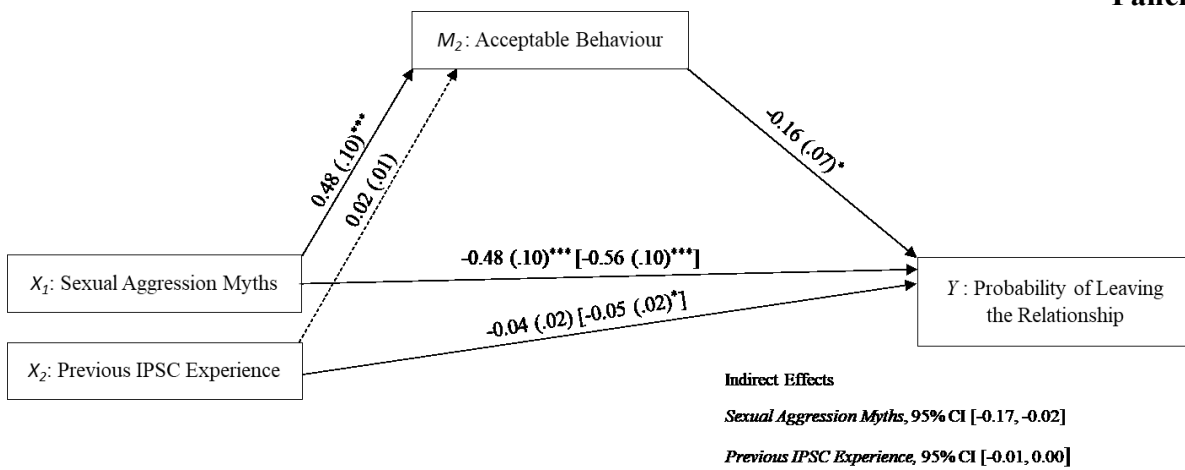
Note. Table values are means and standard deviations (in parenthesis, italicized) presented to reflect hypothesized contrasts (Hypothesis 1a, 1b, and 1c).

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Panel A



Panel B



Panel C

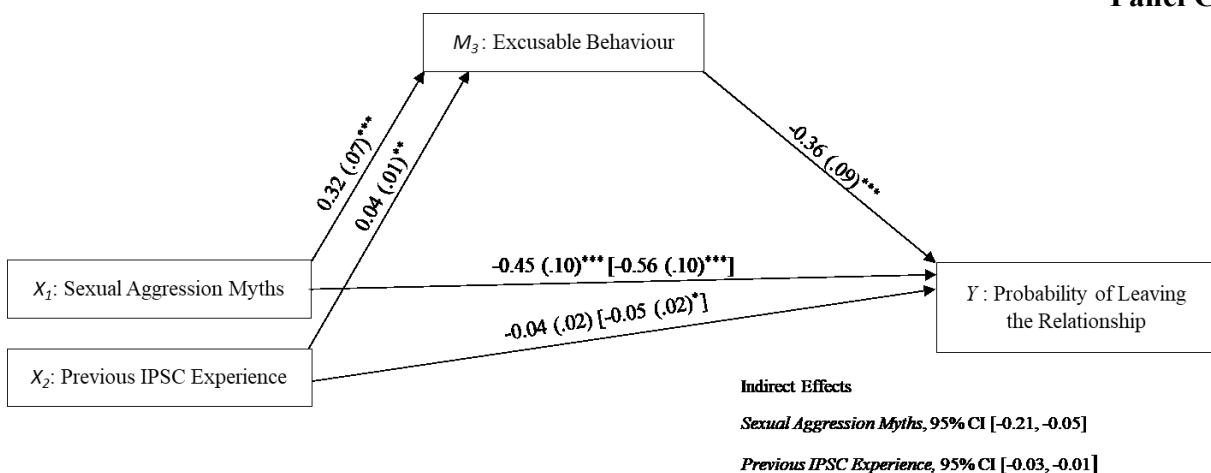


Figure 1. Mediation model displaying the indirect effects of sexual aggression myths and previous IPSC experience on probability of leaving the relationship via risk response (Panel A), acceptable behaviour (Panel B), and excusable behaviour (Panel C). All responses value are unstandardized estimates (b values), with their SE reported between parenthesis. Total effects appear within brackets. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$