Communicating media information about intimate partner violence: transformation process, legitimacy of violence, and gendered dynamics

Comunicando informações midiáticas sobre violência entre parceiros íntimos: Processo de transformação, legitimidade da violência e dinâmicas de gênero

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ABSTRACT: Based on the social representations approach and on the rumor paradigm, this study analyses the propagation and transformation of media information about intimate partner violence in communications between same-sex participants (N = 255). Results of qualitative and quantitative analyses illustrate the impact of pre-existing shared social knowledge on the transformation of the information propagated. They show that men assess violence as more legitimate than women and that this difference increases as intra-group communication progresses. The article concludes with the ideological issues underlying the propagation of information about intimate partner violence and the practical implications for combating this phenomenon.

Keywords: Domestic Violence; Social Representations; Communication; Gender; Media.

RESUMO: Com base na abordagem das representações sociais e no paradigma do rumor, este estudo analisa a propagação e transformação das informações midiáticas sobre violência entre parceiros íntimos em comunicações entre participantes do mesmo sexo (N = 255). Resultados de análises qualitativas e quantitativas ilustram o impacto do conhecimento social compartilhado pré-existente na transformação das informações propagadas. Eles mostram que os homens avaliam a violência como mais legítima do que as mulheres e que essa diferença aumenta à medida que a comunicação intragrupo progride. O artigo conclui com as questões ideológicas subjacentes à propagação de informações sobre violência entre parceiros íntimos e as implicações práticas para combater esse fenômeno.

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Introduction

As a global public concern, intimate partner violence (IPV) affects between 15% and 71% of women according to the country in which they are located (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2007). No country seems to be exempt from the issue of IPV, including those in which violence is strongly covered in political and media discourses. The French context is representative of this ambivalence, with IPV being a persistent and little denounced phenomenon despite the strong moral condemnation and the public health and prevention actions that surround it (Lelaurain & Fonte, 2022). Indeed, only 28% of French victims have already been to the police and only 16% of them have already filed a complaint (Morin et al., 2013). Moreover, two-thirds of the survivors are still living with their abuser (Bauer & Soullez, 2012). Considering the place and importance of IPV in the French context, this phenomenon is always likely to be at the heart of social communications in everyday life. Regularly, new cases of IPV against women are brought to the attention of the general public through the French mass media. Some of this information, because it involves famous personalities or because it bears witness to extreme violence leading to femicide, is the subject of strong regional or national media coverage and provokes lively social debates on male violence. The French public that becomes acquainted with them is naturally led to discuss them as part of the conversations that occur in daily life. This raises the question of how individuals transmit and transform media information about IPV, but also how this question can shed light on the help-seeking barriers encountered by survivors and the social acceptance of this violence among the general public.

Treatment of Intimate Partner Violence in the Media

The media is one of the most important institutional means of transmitting information in society and influencing people's perceptions of social phenomena. For these reasons, the literature has often focused on the role that the media can play in forming attitudes and opinions that lead to the non-recognition or even legitimization of violence against women (Gillespie et al., 2013). This issue is all the more important as the media pay increasing attention to IPV situations (Rollè et al., 2014). However, these situations are often described through individual circumstances that are decontextualized from the ideological and structural issues with which they are associated (Gius & Lalli, 2014), particularly from the point of view of male domination, which partly structures the socio-symbolic relations between the sexes (Nettleton, 2011). Instead, the media focus on cases of sudden and extreme physical violence that hide other less stereotypical forms of IPV such as those characterized by daily verbal and psychological violence (Isaacs, 2016). This editorial choice makes it possible to offer readers sensational stories, but in return favors the explanation of violence at an individual and psychological level rather than a socio-structural level (Sotirovic, 2003).

Media in a cultural context historically marked by patriarchal ideology also tends to present a description of IPV survivors and perpetrators that draws on gender stereotypes legitimizing male domination. For instance, women are presented as weak and passive people putting the needs of the family before their own needs (Das, 2012). In addition, the alleged infidelity of the female victim is often placed at the center of the story and male jealousy is then presented as an external force to the perpetrator that causes him to be violent despite himself (DeShong & Haynes, 2015). These common-sense explanations are often used to legitimize IPV (Lelaurain et al., 2018a, Lelaurain et al., 2019), particularly among perpetrators who strongly adhere to gender roles associated with the dominant heterosexuality (Nemeth et al., 2012). More generally, the idea of romantic love is very present in media

dealing with IPV cases (DeShong & Haynes, 2015). Male aggressors are often described as under the influence of a passionate and uncontrollable love (Gius & Lalli, 2014), which contributes to the perception of violence as a sign of intimacy and affection rather than as something problematic.

In summary, the mass media is thought to play a role in propagating and maintaining common sense knowledge that could legitimize male violence against women. How these institutions deal with IPV issues could therefore have important implications for public opinion and public policies (Carlyle et al., 2014). Indeed, media information is always likely to influence the survivors' choice of whether or not to use support systems as well as the nature of the assistance they may receive from the judicial and health systems (Isaacs, 2016). However, no research has yet focused on how media information about IPV situations is appropriated and discussed in everyday life by the general public who are exposed to it. This is an important issue for gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms involved in the acceptance of IPV. Indeed, our knowledge of a social phenomenon often comes through the mass media or other individuals who relay media information to us (Joffe, 2002). Answering the question of how individuals construct attitudes and opinions about IPV from this perspective requires the application of psychosocial approaches that conceptualize the articulation between media and interpersonal communication.

From Media to Everyday Communication: The Role of Social Representations

The social representations approach (Moscovici, 2008) is a heuristic framework for studying how individuals reconstruct media information about IPV through everyday communications. SR can be defined as common-sense knowledge that is developed and shared by a social group in order to construct a common reality allowing its members to anticipate interactions with others and to legitimize their practices (Jodelet, 1989). They refer to an organized set of beliefs, opinions, images, stereotypes, metaphors and symbols that a

group collectively shares and that are found to constitute its social identity (Wagner, 1994). SR also contrast with scientific knowledge in that their maintenance is based on a principle of adherence and trust among members of the membership group rather than on evidence and demonstration (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). Everyday communications and social institutions such as mass media play a fundamental role in the emergence and transformation of SR (Wagner & Hayes, 2005). Not only does media information help to nurture communication between individuals, but also communications in turn help to transform this information as soon as it becomes an object related to the expectations of their membership groups. This phenomenon reflects the *process of anchoring* (Moscovici, 2008), which integrates new information transmitted by communications into pre-existing shared social knowledge in order to give it familiar meaning and social utility in accordance with the practices and axiological system of the reference group.

Men and women are particularly relevant reference groups for consideration when attempting to understand the differentiated ways in which media information about IPV situations can be propagated and transformed in communications. For instance, men perceive IPV against women as less severe (Hamby & Jackson, 2010) and less unacceptable (Dennison & Thompson, 2011) than women do. They are also more likely than women to not recognize the violence as such or to hold the victim as responsible for the situation (Sylaska & Walters, 2014). The socio-representational approach would explain these gendered differences by the idea that men and women do not maintain exactly the same systems of interpretation of reality during their socialization and throughout their interactions in everyday life. Still according to this approach, the greater tolerance of men towards male violence within heterosexual couples is symptomatic of a patriarchal social order, which governs the relations of domination between genders. Based on these considerations, Lelaurain et al. (2018b) explored the representations that emerge in communications when men and women discuss an IPV

situation in the French context. The results showed that different ideas were expressed according to the gender of the interlocutors when a discussion about the legitimacy or otherwise of the violence was initiated. For instance, communications between men focused on a naturalizing discourse related to the victim's non-conformity with traditional female roles as well as to the male violence perceived as instinctive, while communications between women focused more on violence as a natural male form of amorous expression. From the perspective of SR, the observations made by Lelaurain et al. (2018b) reveal two important considerations. The first is that the contents of communications about IPV situations are rooted in pre-existing social knowledge aimed at legitimizing male dominance over women in France. Indeed, participants are thought to draw on patriarchal beliefs shared in French socio-cultural context that establishes social inequalities between genders as natural (Guillaumin, 1992) and male violence as an expression of love in heterosexual couple relationship (Lelaurain et al., 2021). The second observation concerns the role of intra-group communication on the process of anchoring, to the extent that in France IPV situations seem to be considered on the basis of different pre-existing social knowledge depending on whether the discussions take place between men or between women. The present research proposes to examine these questions in greater depth by articulating the SR approach with other processes and modes of communication that can be used in everyday life to reconstruct the French media information transmitted about IPV situations.

Rumors as a Paradigm for Studying Everyday Communication

Rumors are one of the oldest and most widespread forms of interpersonal communication. They should therefore play a determining role in how men and women construct the representations they associate with IPV situations that they are likely to become informed of by the media. In concrete terms, a *rumor* can be defined as news whose accuracy cannot be verified or whose original source cannot be traced, but which acquires a status of

truth and spreads orally on the basis of trust in the communicator (Allport & Postman, 1947). It is also different from other modes of communication in that the meaning of the information is transformed during its successive communication between chains of people without the message being called into question (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2006).

Three interdependent processes are generally distinguished in the transformation of rumors studied with the communication chain procedure (Allport & Postman, 1947): the first consists in a progressive *reduction* of most of the information contained in the initial message in order to facilitate its memorization and transmission; the second leads to the *accentuation* of the information kept to encourage adherence to the message and the motivation to continue its transmission; and the third refers to the *assimilation* of the message into a new network of meanings making it possible to fill the information gaps induced by communication. These processes do not depend only on cognitive abilities related to information retention. They also respond to a socio-cognitive logic aimed at making new information conform to the SR that exist prior to its transmission (Bordia & DiFonzo, 2002; Green & Clémence, 2008) in order to reproduce the shared vision of the world within the group to which we belong (Rouquette, 1996a).

Applied to our research problem, these considerations invite us to question the normalizing function of same-sex communication in the propagation and transformation of media information related to IPV situations. Specifically, on the basis of asymmetric gender relations resulting from male domination granting women dominated status (Glick & Fiske, 1996), it can be expected that social judgments in favour of the male aggressor and in disfavor of the female victim will be expressed more in male-to-male than in female-to-female communications. These social judgements should then lead to a stronger legitimation of violence. To our knowledge, no research has focused on how individuals appropriate media information about IPV situations from the socio-cognitive processes that are involved in

everyday life communications. Yet this work is important for understanding the psychosocial mechanisms associated with the persistence of IPV from an ideological analysis perspective that articulates media communication and interpersonal communication.

The Present Research

Drawing on both the SR approach and the rumor paradigm, this study looked at the socio-cognitive processes involved in transforming information about a IPV situation first reported in a French newspaper article and then discussed between individuals of same sex. First, we explored which information initially contained in the newspaper article was most likely to disappear or persist in communications (i.e., process of reduction). We then identified the common-sense knowledge shared in the French socio-cultural context that was drawn on in the communications to transform the initial information (i.e., processes of accentuation and assimilation). Finally, we determined which information was most likely to be propagated according to the gender of the interlocutors and the evolution of communications. Two hypotheses were also formulated. First, we predicted that, compared to women, men would perceive the violence suffered by the victim as more legitimate. We then predicted that the differences in judgements about the legitimacy of violence would increase between men and women as they transmitted information to their same-sex interlocutor.

Method

Participants

A total of 255 students (58.8% women) participated in this experimental study. Participants were aged from 17 to 27 years old ($M = 19.17$; $SD = 1.62$) and were enrolled at a university in southern France. They were divided into two different conditions according to their sex. To do this, 51 single-sex groups of 5 participants were formed (30 female groups and 21 male groups). Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the groups

corresponding to his or her sex. Note that only persons who identified themselves as male or female were included in the study.

Procedure

The recruitment was based on voluntary participation and no nominative data was collected. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study and a debriefing was proposed at the end of each participation. Participants were recruited via an online platform allowing students to take part in research conducted by university researchers. Participation in this research is part of their university training. The research was presented as a study to further understanding of the effects of communication on memory. The issue of IPV, which was at the center of the research problem, was not raised by the researcher in order not to influence the participants and to guarantee the spontaneity of their responses during the experiment.

The experimental procedure followed the classical communication chain protocol (Allport & Postman, 1947). The first participant of each group was taken to a quiet room isolated from the noise. He/she was instructed to read and memorize a newspaper article about an IPV situation. After two minutes, a second participant entered the room and the first participant was instructed to tell him/her from memory what he/she had read. The second participant was then asked to memorize the information received and not to communicate with his/her interlocutor to ask for clarification. When the message was transmitted, the first participant was placed in a nearby room away from other participants. He/she was then invited to answer a paper survey on the IPV situation that he/she had just discovered. At the same time, the second participant reported the information that he/she had received to a third participant. This operation was carried out until the fifth participant, who finally had to transmit what he/she had heard to one of the researchers conducting the research. For each group, the information transmitted in the communication chains was recorded. The order of

each participant was randomly defined by a draw system. In order to limit the gender effects of the researcher on outcomes, the researcher was consistently of the same sex as the groups of participants of whom he or she was in charge.

Material

The newspaper article presented an IPV situation. It came from a real online newspaper but the initial size of which had been reduced (see Appendix 1). This article told the story of a young man (Jonathan) involved in legal proceedings following a complaint by his partner (Morgane) about IPV. The man declared himself to be in psychological distress and admitted to having been slightly aggressive because he thought she had been unfaithful. The young woman did not corroborate her partner's comments and accused him of repeated violence against her. The testimony of lawyers from both parties was also presented in the newspaper article. The man's lawyer highlighted the exaggeration of the violence suffered by the complainant and attributed the cause of this violence to her infidelity as well as to the pathological functioning of the couple. Concerning the woman's lawyer, she considered that it was a case of IPV and recalled the number of women who were victims on French territory. The newspaper article concluded with the judgment that the court should soon render, to determine the responsibility of both partners. This article was chosen because it was representative of how IPV can be reported in newspapers to the extent that the accusations of infidelity against the declared victim are often put at the forefront of the story (DeShong & Haynes, 2015). Note that the demographics of the characters presented in the newspaper article were not indicated so that their social characteristics do not influence how participants may perceive them.

Measure

Based on a questionnaire from Lelaurain et al. (2019), we selected and adapted six items to assess the perceived legitimacy of the situation of violence presented in the

newspaper article. The items measured the perceived severity of the perpetrator's behaviour (e.g., "The behaviour of the male character is serious"), the perceived coercion of the violence on the victim's freedom (e.g., "The behaviour of the male character constrains the freedom of the female character"), as well as the victim's perceived responsibility for the violence (e.g., "The female character behaved in a provocative manner"). Responses are given on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) and averaged such that higher overall score represent stronger perceived legitimacy of the violence. Internal consistency was good (Cronbach's α coefficient between .70 and .80 according to the communication chains).

Data Analysis

Each step of the analysis was triangulated between two researchers. This strategy allowed us to bring credibility to results and reduce the risk of data over-interpretation or dependence on analyses specific to the subjectivity of a single researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). When the two researchers' analyses did not correspond, a discussion was initiated in order to explain and compare each other's subjectivities in order to reach a consensual decision.

Two content analyses (Flick, 2014) were first conducted to examine the processes involved in transforming the information reported. The *first content analysis* aimed at studying the process of reduction according to the information initially presented in the newspaper article. As part of a deductive approach to applying the categories, the two researchers identified the main themes emerging from the article. Then they applied binary coding based on the presence or absence of each theme in all communication chains. The themes were considered as present only if they reflected the meaning given to them in the newspaper article. The *second content analysis* aimed to study the processes of accentuation and assimilation of the information communicated. Through an inductive category development approach, the two researchers identified emerging themes that were not present

in the newspaper article but were added or amplified by participants as the communication chains progressed. There was also an interest in linguistic operations significantly involved in the manipulation of sentences and expressions used in the article. To do this, the researchers performed a first reading of the transcribed communications and made annotations for each of them (for an illustration from a communication group, see Appendix 2). They then re-read all the transcripts in order to systematically categorize the transformations observed as the communication chains progressed. The transcript extracts in the results were translated from French into English and verified by a professional translator. These extracts illustrate the significant transformations of the information initially present in the newspaper article. The codes that follow them refer to the numbers of the group (G) and communication chain (C) from which they originate.

A lexicometric analysis was finally performed with the software IRaMuTeQ (2018) in order to explore discursive specificities according to the sex of participants and the communication chains. This analysis was carried out in two steps. First, the software allowed us to extract, quantify and categorize the lexical forms that were communicated in the chains within different thematic vocabularies. Categorizations were made according to a reasoned choice based on the most relevant themes identified by the content analysis. Then, we used a lexical specificity analysis method based on the hypergeometric law (Lafon, 1980). This analysis allows the over-or under-use of certain lexicons in each of the modalities of a considered variable from the calculation of a specificity index to be evaluated. The specificity index is generally considered significant from a value above $|2|$. A positive value of this index reflects an over-use of the lexicon in a variable modality, while a negative value reflects an under-use of this lexicon. In our case, we explored the uses of thematic vocabularies according to the variables "sex of participants" (female or male) and "order of communication" (first two chains or last two chains).

Results

Selection of Information Transmitted in Communications

As the communications progressed, the information propagated contained fewer and fewer words and details. The newspaper article contained 220 words; the information transmitted in the first chain contained an average of 187 words and the fifth chain 84 words. Table 1 shows the 16 themes identified in the newspaper article and their respective rates of presence in the fifth and final communication chain. The results of the first content analysis revealed a significant reduction in the majority of themes as information was transmitted through the communication chains. The violence denounced by the female character (74.5% presence), the intervention of the two lawyers (54.9%) and the accusation of infidelity by the male character (41.2%) were the themes that received the lowest reduction due to their high presence rate in the last channel. The themes relating to the court (21.6%), the legal judgment (23.5%) and the police arrest of the male character (19.6%), were also relatively present in the last chain.

Table 1

Percentage of Initial Themes Remaining in the Last Communication Chain

Initial themes	*n* (%)
Morgane says she is being abused by Jonathan	38 (74.5)
The lawyers intervene and plead	28 (54.9)
Jonathan accuses Morgane of infidelity	21 (41.2)
The journalist wonders who is responsible	18 (35.3)
Morgane complains to the police	18 (35.3)
The adjudication will be held soon	12 (23.5)
The court must clarify the facts	11 (21.6)
Jonathan admits to slapping Morgane	11 (21.6)
Jonathan is arrested by the police	10 (19.6)
It is thought to be a domestic violence situation	9 (17.6)
Morgane is accused of lying about the facts	3 (5.9)
Jonathan says he has made suicide attempts	2 (3.9)
Jonathan admits to having pushed Morgane	2 (3.9)
Jonathan is being questioned by the police	2 (3.9)
Both are said to want to hurt the other	1 (2.0)
Morgane is accused of exaggerating the facts	0 (0)

Source. The authors.

This observation suggests that the violence of the male character, the alleged infidelity of the female character, and the role of the judicial institution in this case were the items of information most often transmitted in communications. Such information seemed to have all the more importance in the communications as its strong presence contrasted with the disappearance of other types of information initially present in the newspaper article. The results of this initial content analysis then led us to explore the processes of accentuation and assimilation of the initial themes. The second content analysis aimed to answer this question.

Information Anchored in a Network of Meanings

The second content analysis first showed that, in line with what is typically produced by the rumor phenomenon, the source of the information was rarely communicated in the chains. Only 7.1% of participants indicated that their information was taken from a newspaper article without providing details of its origin, with the exception of one participant who specified it. Rather, the majority of participants chose to introduce their comments by explaining that it was a "story" (e.g., "so it's about a story of a couple…") before describing its content. These descriptions have given rise to many transformations that we have categorized into four meta-themes: minimization of violence, responsibility of the victim, pathologization of the couple, and condemnation of violence.

Minimization of violence.

A minimization of the violence suffered by the female character was observed in 40.2% of the communication chains. It gradually took place through linguistic operations whose function was to reduce the perceived seriousness of the violence. Adverbs such as "a little", "barely", "not really", "just" or "only" were thus added to de-dramatize the violence of the male character: "it was just a small slap, so it's not really violent" (G14–C4, woman), "it was only once, he doesn't beat her on a regular basis" (G31–C5, man). Other types of additions redefined the nature of violence in communication chains. As the chains progressed,

IPV became an "argument" or a "conflict" within several groups: "she filed a complaint following their argument" (G1–C4, woman); "they're arguing because Morgane cheated on Jonathan" (G4–C3, woman); "this story is about a conflict between a man and his wife" (G36–C4, man); "he's saying these are just minor things couples go through" (G20–C1, man). In two groups of men, violence became a "game" between the couple when the words of the male character or his lawyer were reported to justify the violence: "this violence is a part of a game they're playing, a violent game, like sexual violence and stuff like that, a game between the two of them" (G34–C3, man), "he says he didn't beat her, it was a game both of them used to play" (G40–C5, man).

Responsibility of the victim.

In parallel with the minimization of male character violence, the analysis showed a tendency to increasingly accentuate the responsibility of the female character regarding the violent situation. This accountability was observed in 38.6% of the communication chains. It was mainly carried out through the progressive addition of qualifying adjectives (e.g., "deserved", "justified, "legitimate", "understandable", "liable", "responsible") which accentuated the words of the male character's lawyer: "basically, the lawyer said she didn't deserve it but that it was legit" (G9–C2, man); "he said it's not really domestic violence and that, well she was responsible for it" (G29–C2, woman). In this context, expressions from popular morality such as "it's the downside" or "she's not straight as an arrow either" were used to conclude that the victim would not be blameless.

In addition, participants tended to legitimize the violence suffered by the female character by gradually turning the alleged adultery into a proven adultery: "it's kind of normal that he got violent with her, since she apparently cheated on him" (G27–C1 woman); "because we don't know, maybe she asked for it because she cheated on him so he has every right to get mad" (G1–C1, man). This transformation sometimes led to an accentuation of the

importance attributed to the alleged infidelity of the female character in certain groups, to the detriment of the violence perpetrated by the male character whose references gradually disappeared over the communication chains (e.g., "this story is about infidelity", "a young man accuses his wife of cheating"). The accountability of the female character was also justified through the mobilization of socially devalued personality traits that lead to essentializing her behavior: "he justifies his actions by saying she cheated on him several times, that she's exaggerating, that it's because of her personality and so on, that his actions were legit because of all that" (G21–C4, woman), "she's mean so she is the one to blame" (G29–C2, woman) "he did say she was vicious" (G31–C2, man), "she's the one who cheated so he's in his right" (G42–C3, man).

Pathologization of the couple.

The idea of a pathological couple was accentuated in 17.3% of communication chains. This was first expressed through the mobilization of psychologizing terms (e.g., "nature", "need", "scheme") aimed at qualifying the functioning of the couple and reinforcing the idea of a sharing of responsibilities relating to violence: "they're both kind of nuts so, actually they have a problem and they're going on trial" (G29–C5, woman), "As a couple, they have a need to hurt each other, it's their nature" (G40–C1, man). In this context, the violence suffered by the female character was sometimes transformed into a situation in which the female and male characters were violent towards each other: "they want to hurt each other" (G40–C1, man), "both of them hurt the other, he hits her, she cheats on him" (G28–C1, woman).

Participants used several types of explanations to interpret the functional aspect of violence between the couple. For example, the couple appeared several times to take pleasure in suffering: "as a couple, they like to hurt each other a little without going too far" (G34–C2, man), "that's not really violence but a couple that likes hurting each other" (G50–C1, man). This masochistic tendency was reinforced by the addition of elements describing the female

character as passive in the face of the male character's violence (e.g., "she let him do it", "she didn't say a word"). Finally, violence became a means of expression between the two characters in order to maintain cohesion within the couple: "violence is their way of expressing themselves" (G49–C1, man), "it's the way their relationship works, they need to fight, to beat each other up to stand united" (G40–C2, man).

Condemnation of violence.

Condemnation of violence was expressed in 13.8% of communication chains. Present in a relatively marginal way, this condemnation was carried out by the addition of moral judgments aimed at supporting the inadmissibility of the violence: "he should be prosecuted because partner violence is not acceptable" (G21–C5, woman), "violence against women is wrong because it's a societal issue and it's forbidden, well you don't hit a woman" (G27–C1, woman), "this is unforgivable because he beat up a women, anyway, it's wrong to beat up a woman, it's unbearable" (G33–C1, man). Emphasizing the exceptional nature of the denunciation of IPV, the request for help of the female character among the authorities was then put forward as exemplary and courageous conduct: "she did the right thing by going to the police because there are a lot of abused women who do not report it" (G8–C2, woman), "it's a bit of an achievement, she's exemplary because most women keep these kinds of things to themselves" (G40–C4, man). In some communication chains, the exceptional nature of the denunciation of violence was finally perceived as proof of the honesty of the female character: "there are a few people who complain about that so it might be true" (G25–C3, woman), "Morgane's lawyer said very few women file complaints following these kinds of games so usually one does not press charges for that, so it means there really was violence" (G34–C3, man).

Discursive Specificities According to Gender and Communications

Both content analyses showed that the themes of violence, infidelity and justice were at the heart of information transformation processes. In order to study the impact of the sex of participants and the order of communication on the transmission of these three central themes, a lexicometric analysis was carried out. To do this, all the lexical units associated with these themes were first categorized into three distinct thematic vocabularies. These lexical units showed that participants adopted a broader common-sense vocabulary than that used in the newspaper article to translate and adapt media information to the language of everyday life. The first thematic vocabulary referred to the lexicon used to express oneself about the violence of the male character. It grouped 25 different lexical forms for a total of 996 occurrences. The most commonly used forms were "beat" (n = 219), "hit" (n = 160), "domestic violence" (n = 118), "abuse" (n = 106), "violence" (n = 101), "slap" (n = 78) or "violent" (n = 43). The second thematic vocabulary concerned the lexical units used to evoke the alleged infidelity of the female character. It grouped only 6 lexical forms for a total of 287 occurrences. The forms used were "cheating" (n = 265), "adultery" (n = 8), "two-timing" (n = 5), and "infidelity" (n = 7). The third thematic vocabulary referred to the role of justice. It was the most used in communications as it grouped 47 forms for a total of 1402 occurrences. The most commonly used forms were "lawyer" (n = 430), "complain" (n = 243), "police" (n = 131), "court" (n = 101), and "charge" (n = 74).

The calculation of specificities via the hypergeometric law revealed an absence of significant difference between the modalities of considered variables regarding the use of thematic vocabularies associated with the violence of the male character and the infidelity of the female character (see Table 2). There was also no significant difference in the use of the thematic vocabulary associated with justice in communications between men or women in the However, the results showed that women in the last two chains used significantly more the

thematic vocabulary associated with justice than women in the first two chains or men in the first and last two chains.

Table 2

The Use of Thematic Vocabularies According to the Considered Variables

Thematic Vocabulary	First two chains		Last two chains	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Violence	–0.94	–0.97	0.93	1.43
Infidelity	0.56	1.00	–0.42	–1.83
Justice	–1.06	–0.30	2.25[a]	–0.86

Note. The values correspond to the indices of lexical specificities based on the hypergeometric law. A value greater than |2| is considered as significant ([a]).
Source. The authors.

**Impact of Gender and Communication on Legitimization**

The final analysis aimed to assess the perceived legitimacy of violence according to the sex of the participants and communication chains (see Figure 1). The variable "order of communication" was first dichotomized to facilitate comparison with the results of the lexicometric analysis. An analysis of variance with one within-subject independent variable was previously conducted to verify that the average perceived legitimization scores of violence were similar between the first two chains, but also between the last two chains. The results did not show any significant difference between the first chain ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.98$) and the second chain ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.04$; $F(48) = 0.85$, $p = .362$, $\eta^2_{par} = .02$), nor between the fourth chain ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.19$) and the fifth chain ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.13$; $F(49) = 0.04$, $p = .836$, $\eta^2_{par} = .00$). We were thus able to aggregate the scores of the first and second chain, as well as those of the fourth and fifth chain.

The average scores of legitimizations were then submitted to a two-way mixed analysis of variance with "gender of participant" (female or male) as a between-subject variable and "order of communication" (first two chains or last two chains) as a within-subject variable. The main effect of the variable "order of communication" was

nonsignificant, $F(1, 49) = 0.00$, $p = .971$, $\eta^2_{par} = .00$. In contrast, the main effect of the variable "sex of participants" ($F(1, 49) = 5.23$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_{par} = .09$) and the interaction effect between the variables "sex of participants" and "order of communication" ($F(1, 49) = 4.21$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_{par} = .08$) were significant. In the first two chains, women ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.71$) and men ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.75$; $t(49) = -0.44$, $p = .663$, Cohen's $d = -.09$) had the same legitimization score; but in the last two chains, men ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.86$) had a higher legitimization score than women ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.73$; $t(49) = -2.96$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = -.66$).

Figure 1

Legitimization of Violence According to Sex of Participants and Communication Chains
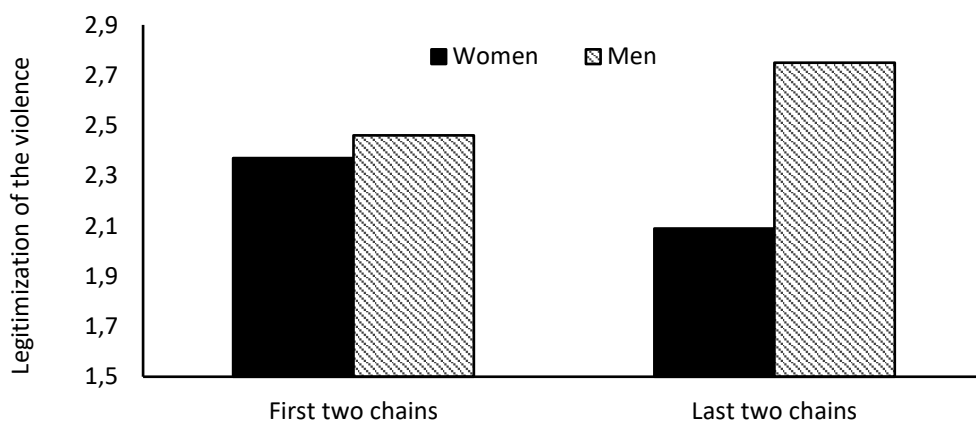
Source. The authors.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the propagation and transformation of media information related to IPV situations in same-sex communications. The results support the existence of processes that are characteristic of how rumors function in the ways in which men and women appropriate media information about victims and perpetrators of IPV. The experimental procedure of communication chains that we borrowed from the rumour paradigm allowed us to observe that individuals select and transform certain information rather than others when they communicate together. The themes of violence and infidelity

were at the heart of the transformation of information: not only were these themes accentuated because of the significant reduction in the other information initially presented in the newspaper article, but they were also assimilated to common sense knowledge that helped to accentuate the responsibility of the female victim and to minimize male violence. More specifically, several transformations in communications seemed to have shifted the legal problem of male violence initially posed by the newspaper article into a moral problem of female infidelity. These transformations mainly concerned the accentuation of accusations of infidelity made against the victim. They often led participants to think of the victim's infidelity as a proven fact inherent in her psychology and to perceive the abuser's violence as a natural and understandable reaction. By placing the victim's infidelity at the heart of the story, the information transmitted thus reinforced the idea of a sharing of responsibilities within a couple represented as pathological, where both were violent towards the other.

Combined with the experimental procedure of communication chains, the SR approach makes it possible to understand that the selection and transformation of the information propagated in communications is not carried out in a random way. Indeed, if we consider that SR are reception systems for the appropriation of new information (Jodelet, 1989), individuals who become aware of an IPV situation should at the same time anchor this information within a network of pre-existing meanings consisting of stereotypes, norms and socially shared values in the socio-cultural context of reference. In the case of our results, the common-sense psychologies that tend to reduce the responsibility of the perpetrator and increase that of the victim must be considered as revealing of patriarchal cultural beliefs in which media information about IPV are anchored in the French context. Indeed, Lelaurain et al., (2018a) showed that the psychologization of the victim and the pathologization of the couple constitute socially shared lay explanations about IPV in France. They also showed that these explanations are anchored in patriarchal ideologies legitimizing gender inequalities such

as ambivalent sexism and domestic violence myths. These common-sense knowledge propagated in communications seem thus particularly symptomatic of the reproduction of an androcentric vision of society which offer individual explanations for IPV without questioning the structural and political causes of this violence (Lelaurain et al., 2018a).

Such considerations finally lead us to question identity issues through the practical functions that are at stake in the selection and transformation of information communicated on IPV situations. These functions could refer to issues of identity defense insofar as they aim to reinforce and reproduce a view of the world shared with the members of the in-group, but also to accentuate differences with the out-group whose morals and values may be perceived as being opposed to those of the in-group (Rouquette, 1996b). From this perspective, we first observed that participants legitimized male violence more when information was communicated between men than between women. This finding is consistent with our expectations to the extent that the literature shows that men generally report less negative attitudes toward IPV situations than women (Sylaska & Walters, 2014). As we also expected, our results showed that the difference in judgement between men and women about the legitimacy of violence increased as same-sex communications progressed. They can be explained by the fact that the thematic vocabulary associated with justice was increasingly used by women as they transmitted media information to each other. The greater use of this thematic vocabulary by women could then accentuate the perceived seriousness of male violence against a member of their in-group. More generally, the increase of the perceived legitimacy in communications between men is thought rather to reflect an increase of information likely to feed the idea that violence constitutes a justified and right response to infidelity. The results finally allow us to infer the impact of the anchoring process through which information communicated between individuals of the same sex can be assimilated to sexist and hetero-patriarchal norms. Information about IPV situations is indeed always likely

to resonate with traditional cultural expectations about women's sexual respectability and violence as a legitimate way of restoring male honor damaged by infidelity (Lelaurain et al., 2018a).

This experimental study provides an empirical contribution to the question of the psychosocial mechanisms at play in the persistence of gender violence from the perspective of "societal psychology" (Staerklé, 2011). It sheds light on the dynamic relationship between mass media, interpersonal communication, and the ideological context of reference in the formation of attitudes and opinions legitimizing male violence against women. Specifically, the systems of representations in which our participants have anchored institutional discourses illustrate the normalizing function of everyday communications about IPV situations. These communications are thought to lead to the reproduction of an ideological view of the world that tends to legitimize violence against women, particularly when it takes place within groups of men who are by definition the beneficiaries of male domination. For instance, a major result of this work is that the media information most likely to hold the victim accountable and minimize violence is also that most propagated in communications and the most assimilated to pre-existing social knowledge that accentuates its veracity. These observations point to the responsibility of the media in the maintenance of a societal climate likely to be a barrier to the social recognition of gender-based violence as well as to help-seeking by survivors of IPV (Lelaurain et al., 2017). A such societal climate is reflected by negative social judgments that are always likely to reinforce the shame and guilt often felt by victims, but also their feeling of powerlessness to cope with male violence. They highlight the need for ethical and deontological reflection on the part of journalists regarding the information they communicate about IPV situations and how it can be reappropriated in society.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has two main limitations. The first concerns the specificity of our sample, which does not allow the results to be generalized since the participants were students. However, as students occupy less dominant social positions in society, it can be expected that the legitimation of IPV may be more marked among more advantaged social groups. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the position occupied in the social hierarchy is an important predictor of adherence to myths legitimizing social domination such as those legitimizing male domination (Guimond et al., 2003). The second limitation relates to the instructions we gave participants. Specifically, they were asked not to communicate with their interlocutor when they were informed of the IPV situation. This is a procedure traditionally used in the experimental study of rumors via the communication chain procedure, but which has often been criticized because it does not capture the dynamic co-construction of conversations existing in everyday interactions (see Bordia & DiFonzo, 2002). An interesting project could therefore be to study more ecological modes of communication in which the receiver of the information can have the option of intervening and asking his or her interlocutor questions. This perspective would allow more detailed consideration of the communication processes involved in the transformation of information.

Future research should further examine the interaction between media communication and patriarchal ideologies underlying power and domination relationships in the social acceptance of IPV against women. An original research question here would be to examine how media information about the different positions held by the male perpetrator in the social hierarchy are likely to influence the attitudes and opinions of the general public about this type of violence. For example, it has been shown that the American media treat male IPV perpetrators differently according to their racial affiliation (Pepin et al., 2015). Compared to black perpetrators, white perpetrators are likely to be less criminalized and pathologized,

benefit more from mitigating circumstances, and their violence to be more contextualized within a mutual conflict between the couple. It would then be interesting to experimentally manipulate the racial affiliation of the perpetrator in the context of a newspaper article reporting an IPV situation, and then to explore the effects produced by such information. This type of research would provide a better understanding of the media's influence on public opinion about the causes of IPV in intersectional contexts where the privileges of male domination intersect with the privileges associated with other relationships of domination.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Appendix 1

Jonathan F., aged 22, was arrested by the police following a call from his partner, Morgane G., to report that her partner had assaulted her. When questioned in police custody, the man admitted having given her a "little slap" and having "pushed her against the bed" because of her behavior: "She lies, she cheats on me. Since I've been with her, I've made two suicide attempts." For her part, the young woman claimed to have been assaulted five times: "He accuses me of cheating on him, he takes revenge on me."

"We mustn't go too fast", pleaded Jonathan F's lawyer. "The complainant began by exaggerating the violence she had suffered. Here we are confronted with a couple who want to hurt each other, that's how they work. And then, by cheating on her partner, she is not blameless." Morgane G.'s lawyer, stated that this was a case of domestic violence and recalled the statistics provided by the French government: "223,000 women suffer violence from their previous or current partner. You should know that only 16% of them dare to file a complaint."

Who is responsible? Each party presented its view. But the judgment will attempt to clarify the facts by next month in the Chauny Court.

Appendix 2

Example of Analysis of the Transformations of Information Transmitted in Chains

Illustration with group 28 (female participants)	Elements of analysis
CHAIN 1 So, **this story is about a couple**, Jonathan and Morgane. Can't remember how old they are but she, she calls the police to report that her boyfriend beat her up so they go to the precinct and they put him in custody he testifies and all. He says he did slap her gently and pushed her on the bed because she lied about cheating on him and she says he abused her five times and after that they go to court and their lawyers plead but his/her lawyer says "**well actually none of them are straight as an arrow because she cheated on him, as a couple they hurt each other, he hit her and she cheated**". Then they talk about the rate of violence, well the rate of **battered women** in France but I can't remember and there are 16% of women who dare to report their husband for abuse.	a. In the first chain, the source of information disappears and becomes a "story". The term "domestic violence" also disappears in favour of "battered women" or "abused women". These two transformations are reproduced in the following chains. b. An adverb of degree is added from the second chain onwards to redefine the violence in a less serious

CHAIN 2

So **this story is about a couple**, Jonathan and Morgane, 22 years old and actually Morgane goes to the police to report that Jonathan hit her. Well, basically her boyfriend said it's not true, that he **just gave her a gentle slap** a couple of times but that's it and she insists that he abused her several times. Then they meet with lawyers and **they end up recognizing that both of them did wrong because she cheated on him and he abused her**. Finally, they say 16% of **women are abused** in France.

CHAIN 3

The story is actually about a couple, the girl, she's named Morgane the guy is Jonathan. Morgane files a complaint saying he abused her and he says it's not true, that he **just slapped** her. Then in court, people realize it's not true, that both of them did wrong because she cheated on him and he abused her, and they conclude by saying 16% of **women are abused** in France.

CHAIN 4

So the story is about a couple, Morgane and Jonathan. Morgane files a complaint against Jonathan because he hit her then Jonathan denies it by saying it was **just a slap** but when they finally go to court **they realize both did wrong since Jonathan hit Morgane, but Morgane cheated on Jonathan** and the conclusion is that 16% of **women are abused** in France.

CHAIN 5

So there's a couple Jonathan and Morgane. Morgane files a complaint because Jonathan hits her and he denies it. Then, after Morgane pressed charges **they realize both did wrong since Jonathan hits Morgane, but Morgane cheated on Jonathan** and all this is to say that 16% of **women are abused** every year.

way (i.e., "he just slapped her"). This adverb is used in the following chains.

c.   The discourse of the perpetrator's lawyer is accentuated in the first chain by adding a popular expression that reinforces the idea of shared responsibility for violence (i.e., "neither of them are as straight as an arrow"). This element undergoes an important transformation from the second chain and eventually stabilizes in the following ones. More precisely, the defense lawyer disappears from the story and his discourse is confirmed by the verdict of the court: the infidelity of the female character becomes as true as the violence perpetrated by the male character and everyone ends up acknowledging their own share of responsibility.