Young women's reactions and actions taken toward gender-based cyberviolence on Instagram

Reacciones y acciones de mujeres jóvenes ante la violencia machista en Instagram

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Abstract:

Recently, numerous studies have focused on the digitisation of the patriarchal system that has taken place over the last decade, as well as online gender-based violence. Nevertheless, there has been a paltry amount of research linked to identifying the effect of this phenomenon on the main victims, who are women. To address this shortcoming, the aim of this study is to identify how women react to the gender-based cyber-violence they experience online, and to determine their motives for taking action. The authors have used a mixed methodology by integrating a descriptive phase of the object of study with another that is explanatory, thereby enabling a broader perspective and deeper understanding of the phenomenon analysed. The findings reveal two ways that women proceed: reacting, or not reacting, which are linked to action and non-action in three different domains: Instagram, support networks, and justice systems. The reaction, or non-reaction, that women carry out, as well as the reasons they have for doing so, are influenced by gender mandates. In other words, faced with a domineering maleness, a subjugated femaleness has been observed in which women assume a role of passivity and victimisation.

Keywords:

Young women; gender-based cyber-violence; Instagram; support networks; justice systems.

Resumen:

Recientemente han sido numerosas las investigaciones que han focalizado su objeto de estudio en el proceso de digitalización experimentado por el sistema patriarcal en la última década y en las violencias machistas online. Sin embargo, se aprecia una carencia importante de investigaciones vinculadas a identificar cuál es la situación ante este fenómeno de las principales afectadas: las mujeres. Por este motivo, y siendo Instagram la plataforma de análisis elegida, el artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación orientada a identificar cómo reaccionan las mujeres ante la ciberviolencia machista recibida y observar qué motivos tienen para actuar. La metodología es mixta, integrando una fase descriptiva del problema de estudio y otra explicativa, permitiendo obtener una perspectiva más amplia y profunda del fenómeno estudiado. Los resultados revelan dos formas de proceder de las mujeres: reacción y no reacción, vinculadas a la acción y no acción en tres esferas diferentes: Instagram, redes de apoyo y organismos de justicia. Las reacciones o no reacciones que las mujeres llevan a cabo y los motivos que tienen para hacerlo están condicionados por los mandatos de género: ante la masculinidad dominante, se presenta una feminidad subyugada donde estas asumen un rol pasivo y de victimización.

Palabras clave:

Mujeres jóvenes; ciberviolencia machista; Instagram; redes de apoyo; organismos de justicia.

1. Introduction

1.1. Gender-based violence on social networks

In terms of social justice, the most important milestone brought about by social networks has been the creation of tools to combat certain inequalities, such as the one that exists between women and men. These networks have expanded the opportunities for women to communicate and engage in relationships, and they have also strengthened the democratic debate on this issue contemporary society (Herrera, 2013). However, as a result of digitisation in recent years, everything that occurs in cyberspace is merely an extension of what happens in the offline world, so that the patriarchal system and sexism have undergone a process of digitisation through which this asymmetry continues to persist and reproduce itself (Linares, 2018; Flores & Browne, 2017). According to a 2015 United Nations report, 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, insulting language and denigrating images in cyberspace are directed toward women and perpetrated by men. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the main objective continues to be the perpetuation of gender inequality, the procedures used are now different. In

fact, the processes are sometimes much more effective "due to their ability to exercise control, and because of their potential for being camouflaged and diluted as part of an atmosphere of "normality"" (Lorente, 2018, p.8).

In recent years, there have been a significant number of studies on gender-based violence on social networks (Bhutkar et al., 2021; Bosch & Gil-Juarez, 2021; Carlyle et al., 2019; Donoso-Vázquez, 2018; Flores & Browne, 2017; Linares et al., 2019; Serra, 2018), which has resulted in a differentiation between two types: that which occurs outside the context of a partner or ex-partner; and those that take place within it. Regarding the former, the most prominent type of cyberviolence is cyberbullying, which is a way of inflicting violence and solidifying positions of power between women and men in cyberspace (Ibáñez, 2014). A total of 20% of young women in the European Union have suffered cyberbullying (European Parliament et al., 2018), which has two main features: the negative effects in general, such as social and psychological difficulties; and the inability of these women to make full use of ICT without having underlying feelings of fear, shame, or humiliation (Torres Albero, 2013; Varela, 2019). The actions encompassing this type of violence include the following: trying to maintain regular contact with the victim by sending requests; issuing private messages and comments in posts; and circulating abusive messages that humiliate or shame women (Estébanez Castaño, 2010; Serra, 2018).

Violence involving a partner or ex-partner is sustained by various control mechanisms, among which romantic love is the main component used to normalise and reproduce the situations that occur within sexual-affective relationships (Garrido & Barceló, 2019; Varela, 2019). These control mechanisms include exhaustive monitoring of the publications women share, the comments contained in these publications, friends added, and the people with whom they establish cyber relationships. Hernández Óliver and Doménech del Río (2017) have concluded that 25% of women claim to have been controlled by their partners and/or ex-partners through mobile phones and online social networks. The consequences are diverse at the physical, psychological and socio-economic levels, affecting women's well-being, as well as their identity and dignity (Citrón, 2009; Crosas & Medina-Bravo, 2019).

Despite the diversity of research that addresses the substantial upsurge of sexism and violence against women in online spaces, there is a considerable lack of studies aimed at identifying the circumstances of the women who are the victims of this type of behaviour, how they react to violence, and how they deal with it, especially on Instagram, which is one of the most heavily-used platforms in Spain (IAB Spain, 2019).

1.2. Gender-based violence on Instagram

Instagram was created in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger with the aim of allowing users of both genders to share personal aspects of their lives through photographs. In search of immediacy, they wanted to encourage the creation, editing and publication of photographs in one's own space (Casado-Riera & Carbonell, 2018; Prades & Carbonell, 2016). Thus, they created a new form of communication and expression based on image and identity, which could be characterised as highly diverse, given its worldwide use. However, what is generally observed is a standardisation of the image of women and men linked to gender roles and stereotypes, which contributes to the continued reproduction of inequality between the genders (Ejea & Martínez-Romero, 2022). Consequently, women's self-representation is linked to socially-accepted standards of beauty and lifestyles, and they frequently share content in which they show their bodies, attributes, and attitudes that are

highly valued by patriarchal patterns (Tortajada et al., 2013), which entails the perpetration of symbolic violence against them (Bourdieu, 1999).

To be more specific, the way they display their identity and whether or not it conforms to gender roles and stereotypes is one factor that determines the type of violence they receive on this platform, which is generally carried out by men with whom they have no romantic or sexual relationship. In this context, the theory of ambivalent sexism by Glick and Fiske (1996) can be seen on Instagram (Bajo-Pérez & Gutiérrez-San-Miguel, 2022), whereby two forms of sexism and, as a result, two types of male gender-based violence are differentiated: benevolent sexism; and hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism rewards women based on gender roles and stereotypes, and idealises them for being part of these: in other words, as lovers, wives, and mothers. Hostile sexism, on the other hand, punishes those who do not reinforce this established, asymmetrical order, by displaying attitudes of prejudice, as well as discriminatory and harmful behaviour toward women (Bourdieu, 1996; Ejea & Martínez-Romero, 2022; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Considering the fact that women post mainly socially-accepted content on Instagram, the type of violence they experience the most is benevolent sexism (Bajo-Pérez & Gutiérrez-San-Miguel, 2022; Barry et al., 2017; García-Sánchez, 2019; Martínez-Pecino & García-Gavilán, 2019).

With regard to violence perpetrated by men who currently have, or have had, a romantic or sexual relationship with the women they attack, it has been observed that control and the deprivation of freedom dominate in the virtual space, either by denying their interaction, or influencing them to interact as they see fit, with users on this social network (Bajo-Pérez, 2022).

2. Objectives and methodology

2.1. Objectives

Due to the lack of research on the circumstances of women in the face of gender-based violence on Instagram, this article poses the following research questions:

Q1: What are the reactions of young women, and what actions do they take in the face of gender-based violence experienced on Instagram?

Q2: What are their reasons for reacting, or not reacting, to gender-based violence?

Thus, the overall objective is to identify the reactions that young women experience and the actions they take when they suffer male gender-based violence, focusing especially on the Instagram platform, which is one of the most widely used social networks in the world (Fernández, 2022).

This overall objective has been divided into two specific objectives as follows:

SO1: Examine the reactions and actions taken by young women in the face of gender-based violence experienced on Instagram.

SO2: Identify the reasons why the women react, or do not react, to such violence.

2.2. Methodology

To answer the research questions, a mixed methodology has been used (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the aim is to obtain a broader and deeper perspective of the phenomenon studied by reinforcing the validity of the results, thereby overcoming the limitations that would result from using each of the techniques separately (San-Miguel, 2020).

Due to the fact that the largest number of profiles in Spain are concentrated in the 18-35 year age group (Sanmarco, 2020; Statista, 2021), the sample is comprised of women in this age range who reside in Spain, both for the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study. Moreover, for logistical reasons, the women in the sample were required to have had an active Instagram account at some point in the previous 5 years, as it was necessary for the women to have used the platform in a recent period of time.

With regard to the first phase (quantitative), an exploratory/descriptive study was carried out in which the authors examined the type of gender-based violence experienced by women on Instagram for the purpose of contextualising the problem. For data collection, a survey with closed questions was developed and disseminated online, using the non-probability snowball sampling technique (Baltar & Gorjup, 2012).

After the variables were operationalised, three blocks were created: Block 1 was made up of 6 questions aimed at revealing the socio-demographic variables of the respondents; Blocks 2 and 3 addressed violence on Instagram, both outside and within the context of a partner or ex-partner relationship, respectively. Each block consisted of 16 dichotomous questions (yes or no answers) in which various violent actions on Instagram were presented, as well as 2 multi-response questions aimed at gathering information regarding the actions these women take in the face of this cyber violence, in addition to the negative feelings and emotions they experience as a result. The number of questionnaires correctly completed amounted to 258 between November and December of 2020. The analysis was carried out using the statistical programme known as IBM SPSS Statistics 26, in which the descriptive statistics for each block and existing variable were analysed.

To answer the research questions, once the contextualisation had been carried out and the types of gender-based violence suffered by women on Instagram had been found, we examined the kinds of reactions they experienced and the actions they took in these situations, as well as their main reasons for taking such action, or for not taking action. Therefore, in the second phase of the study, a qualitative methodology was used to observe the real situation by using strategies that allowed interpretation of the facts in order to analyse and draw conclusions for the purpose of gaining a greater understanding of the phenomenon studied (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 1996).

A semi-structured interview was selected as the instrument for data collection, which is a process of communication between the researcher and the person providing information. These interviews consisted of two blocks: one was composed of pre-established topics and questions; the other was made up of spontaneous questions that arose during the conversation, of the emergent type, which were introduced based on the narrative and discourse of each participant in order to achieve more depth and reflection. The script for the structured part was developed according to the exploratory study phase carried out previously, along with the research questions that emerged from it. Thus, the core topics were as follows: socio-demographic questions (age, profession, and place of origin); Instagram usage (hours spent per day on Instagram, content shared, number of followers, and the relationship with them); perception and reception of male gender-based violence on Instagram (amount

of violence experienced on Instagram and the types of violence); reactions and actions taken in the case of having suffered violence, and the reasons for taking action (action taken in response to violence experienced and the reasons for doing so).

To carry out the interviews, voluntary participation was requested and information was shared by email, WhatsApp, and applications such as LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter. Likewise, a request was made to resend the email to other women who might be interested in participating in the study. Consequently, the strategy used was non-probability snowball sampling (Baltar & Gorjup, 2012), a process that concludes when the saturation point is reached (Barribal & While, 1994), or in other words, when the ideas, discourse, and experiences of the interviewees start to be repeated in such a way that no additional relevant nor innovative information is provided for the analysis. The interviews were conducted in February and March of 2022.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted, all of which took place on the Google Meet platform. The camera and audio were activated at all times, allowing for better rapport between the two parties. At the beginning of the interviews, the purpose and objectives of the study were explained, along with a commitment to confidentiality and anonymity, and verbal consent was obtained from the interviewees as well.

Interpretive hermeneutics were used for the analysis, the main objective of which is to interpret and reveal the meaning of the discourse in order to make it comprehensible, focusing on the subjective experience of individuals and groups and how they perceive the world (Gadamer, 1996). Due to the general nature of this approach, each researcher is responsible for establishing the procedure to be followed. To analyse the interviews, activities were carried out on three levels. At the first level, the words of the interviewees were precisely reproduced and transcribed verbatim. At the same time, complementary annotations were added to the transcripts, such as new avenues of research that may have been revealed, or the mood and emphasis used in addressing the various issues. At the second level, Atlas.ti software was used, in which the data were analysed by applying codes to the text. Next, using the constant comparison method, a search was made of similarities and differences between the interviewees' discourses, thus assigning different core meanings which, depending on the context, were identified as issues or sub-issues. At this level, the main ideas were also identified for all the discursive variables and distinctive features, in addition to the collectively shared concepts. Finally, at the third level, interpretation and reconstruction of the issues and sub-issues was carried out, and categories were created based on the literature, the social context, and evidence that is commonly supported from a feminist perspective.

In this way, 23 different codes were assigned, resulting in two categories: reaction and non-reaction, which are linked to taking action and not taking action, respectively, and three domains, or contexts: Instagram, support networks, and justice systems.

In this regard, reaction and non-reaction are understood as consequences of the violence experienced, triggering action or non-action, respectively, in confronting such violence (Lorente, 2007). Likewise, actions taken on Instagram are considered operations that take place on the platform and in the online space without directly affecting the offline reality. On the other hand, support networks are those that provide assistance that is material, instrumental, emotional, etc. (Aranda & Pando, 2013), aimed at women who have suffered gender-based violence. These are different from institutional networks, which consist of organisations aimed at providing support, tools, and solutions for this type of violence, in addition to informal

networks composed mainly of family members and friends (Estrada et al., 2012). Finally, justice systems refer to judicial courts and law enforcement agencies where human rights abuses such as gender-based violence are reported and penalised.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative results

With regard to the prevalence of male gender-based violence experienced outside the context of a partner or ex-partner, Table 1 shows the rankings, from highest to lowest. The violence with the highest rate of occurrence suffered by the female respondents (38%) involves the massive amount of messages sent by men, in which the women do not reply. The second highest is linked to stereotyping and objectifying their bodies (31.6%), followed closely by the conviction that men view their content compulsively (30.5%). Likewise, 27% have received sexual content without having asked for it, while 26.6% have received messages, insults, or reproaches for being in favour of feminism, and 20.7% have received humiliating messages and insults such as "whore", "slut", or "butch".

Similar percentages were found among those who felt abused by insults, verbal aggression, and threats (16.8%), intimidating messages (16.4%), and comments alluding to some aspect of their body that is considered to be a defect by social standards (16%).

The figure of 13.3% of the respondents have felt ashamed and humiliated for behaving in a way that is not considered socially acceptable, and 10.5% have witnessed their messages and defamations being shared with others.

The least prevalent types of gender-based violence are identity theft on Instagram (5.9%), suffering explicit threats of physical and psychological harm to both them and their families (5.1%), receiving messages that question their professional value or discredit their competence in the workplace (3.5%), and threats of extortion or blackmail through forewarnings of posting sexual content in which they appear (2%).

Table 1. Gender-based violence experienced on Instagram outside the context of a partner or ex-partner relationship

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON INSTAGRAM	PERCENTAGE
Receiving a huge number of messages to which the women do not respond.	38.3%
Receiving comments in which the women are treated as sex objects.	31.6%
Knowing that someone has been continuously and compulsively viewing your content.	30.5%
Receiving sexual content without requesting it.	27%
Receiving messages, rebukes, or insults for taking a stance in favour of feminism.	26.6%
Receiving obscene expletives or insults such as "whore", "slut", "butch", "you're only good for scrubbing the floor", etc.	20.7%

Feeling reviled by insults or threats.	16.8%
Receiving intimidating messages.	16.4%
Receiving insults or comments that refer to some aspect of their bodies considered to be a defect by social standards.	16%
Feeling ashamed or humiliated for behaving in a way that is not considered socially acceptable.	13.3%
Having had some of their private messages shared with others.	10.5%
Receiving or being aware that messages and defamatory remarks about private aspects of their lives have been shared.	10.5%
Having had their identity stolen or having had a profile created in order to impersonate them.	5.9%
Suffering explicit threats of physical or psychological harm to themselves or their families.	5.1%
Receiving messages questioning their professional value or discrediting their competence on their jobs.	3.5%
Being threatened with extortion or blackmail through forewarnings of posting sexual content in which they appear.	2%

Source: created by the authors

Table 2 shows the prevalence of gender-based violence in the context of a couple, ranked from highest to lowest. The gender-based violence with the highest rate of occurrence reported by the women (29.8%) was being rebuked for the people they follow or who follow them. The second highest rate of occurrence of male gender-based violence, with a difference of more than eight percentage points from the first, is linked to suggestion or coercion by the aggressors that they should delete a particular contact (21.6%).

Other forms of male gender-based violence that a high percentage of women reported having suffered are the following: receiving rebukes related to some content they have shared (19.7%); experiencing reproaches related to the comments they receive on their posts (19.5%); references made by the aggressors as to when they last logged on to the social network (18.8%); suggesting or forcing them to stop following a certain person (17.6%); and prohibiting them from talking to a contact (14.7%).

Near the mid-range of the table we find other gender-based violence that is noteworthy as well, although the percentages are not as high as those mentioned above. In this range, 12.7% of the women have reported that their partners or ex-partners have stolen their mobile phones or other electronic devices in order to spy on their conversations on Instagram; 11.1% have received a massive number of messages without replying to them; 9.5% have felt coerced into showing the conversations they have had on Instagram; and 9.3% have been forced not to share a specific type of content on the platform.

The least prevalent forms of gender-based violence are the following: requesting passwords for their Instagram accounts (6.3%); receiving violent messages, insults, or threats (5.2%); experiencing threats of extortion or blackmail by publishing sexual content in which the women appear (2.1%); publishing sexual content without their consent in which the women

appear (1%); and publishing content without their consent in which the women are humiliated, embarrassed, or in which their personal or work lives are portrayed as dubious (1%).

Table 2. Gender-based violence experienced on Instagram in the context of a partner or ex-partner relationship

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON INSTAGRAM	PERCENTAGE
Receiving rebukes as a result of the people they follow, or the people who follow them.	29.8%
Receiving suggestions or coercion to delete a contact.	21.6%
Being rebuked for some content they have shared.	19.7%
Receiving reproaches for comments they receive on their posts.	19.5%
Receiving comments related to the last time they logged on.	18.8%
Receiving suggestions or being forced to stop following someone.	17.6%
Being prohibited from talking to a certain contact.	14.7%
Having their mobile phone or other electronic device stolen to spy on their conversations.	12.7%
Sending a huge number of messages to which the women do not respond.	11.1%
Forcing them to show the conversations they are having.	9.5%
Forbidding them to share a specific type of content.	9.3%
Ask them for their account password.	6.3%
Receiving threats or insults.	5.2%
Being threatened with extortion or blackmail by forewarning about the publication of sexual content in which they appear.	2.1%
Publishing sexual content in which they appear without their consent.	1%
Posting humiliating content without their consent in which they are embarrassed about their personal or work life.	1%

Source: created by the authors

3.2. Qualitative results

All the women interviewed reported having experienced, in one way or another, gender-based violence on Instagram perpetrated by men, regardless of their socio-demographic background and their use of the platform. Moreover, they are certain that their personal situation is not an isolated case, as they are aware that many of the women around them have suffered the same phenomenon: "I feel really sad to say this, but the strange thing is that women don't tell anyone that they've experienced violence on Instagram" (Interviewee 14).

All the interviewees who have experienced violence in the context of a couple affirm that this is an extension of the violence suffered in the offline reality, and it is striking that on all the occasions, it has been perpetrated by their ex-partners and not by their current partners.

This situation places the interviewees in a complicated position in which they have to decide how to deal with this situation. As a result, three key areas were identified: Instagram, support networks, and justice systems. In this regard, two ways of proceeding in each of these areas have been observed: reaction, and non-reaction, which are linked to action and non-action, respectively. Diverse cases have been found in which women decide to take action, or not take action, in each of the key areas according to various factors such as their personal situation, the perceived seriousness of the violence, and the risk it poses for them, "above all, depending on the intensity of the insults, the frequency, etc." (Interviewee 10).

As the key areas are not mutually exclusive, different casuistries can be observed as follows: some women have not taken action in any of the three areas; some have taken action in one area; and some have taken action in two or three of the areas.

3.2.1. Action and non-action taken on Instagram

If we focus on the women who have taken action on Instagram to minimise or eradicate the gender-based violence they have experienced, we can see that the most common action, and in the vast majority of cases the only one, is blocking. This is due to the fact that taking this action is easy, as it only takes a few seconds, and it prevents any kind of engagement on the platform: "You just use the easiest option, which is blocking" (Interviewee 1). In this way, the aggressor cannot find the woman's account nor communicate with her. Moreover, this option makes any kind of relationship impossible in the event that the aggressors create another Instagram account using the same email address, which gives the women some peace of mind: "The violent messages I receive are cut off, because on Instagram, if you block a person, you can block all the accounts that person created, so even if some people continue to bully you, if you block them directly from all the accounts, they'll never be able to contact you again on Instagram" (Interviewee 13).

Removing the aggressor from their list of Instagram followers is also an option that the women frequently use, especially for those who have private accounts, as it denies the offenders access to view their accounts. However, this option does not provide much security because the aggressors can still search for and locate the women's accounts and contact them: "I just removed him from my list of friends, and that's it (...) of course, if he really wants to, he can look for me somewhere else, but it's not so easy" (Interviewee 5).

Finally, the apprehension and distress experienced by these women in the face of the violence to which they have been subjected sometimes compels them to respond directly to their aggressors to express their disagreement and anger. However, it is interesting that this action is usually carried out when the women have reached the breaking point of "anger and rage" (Interviewee 9), which is an outburst rather than a premeditated act. Thus, angry replies from women are not common., and one of the main reasons is to avoid the counter-attack strategy used by men, since the aggressors issue insults and violence with increasing intensity after the first attack: "On some occasions, I've responded when I was boiling with anger, and I would tell them, you're a pathetic fool, and he would respond by posting things like 'slut', or 'we know all you women love it', etc." (Interviewee 8).

By contrast, women who have not reacted and not taken any action on Instagram have done so in order to eliminate the problem and prevent it from becoming an ongoing situation: "I don't answer them right away" (Interviewee 3); "I just leave it as a viewed message, and later I might say something like, I've seen your reaction, and I've got nothing to say to you" (Interviewee 7). Thus, the women believe that if they react, in some way they will be fuelling a situation of insults going back and forth. This is especially true in circumstances where the comments they would like to make are aimed at reprimanding the actions committed against them, as they realise that the situation would just become bigger and bigger and, in the end, they would be the ones most affected: "You learn that it's better not to fall into their trap. It's better just not to reply, and not make any comment" (Interviewee 9).

Some of them also consider not responding as a sign of courtesy. In other words, they feel uncomfortable, but they do not express their discomfort in order to avoid being rude, or to avert a situation in which the men who have committed cyberviolence toward them might feel bad: "I don't want to be rude like them, because I just don't like to insult people" (Interviewee 6). "I don't like to tell people to go to Hell, because I don't enjoy making people feel bad. And on top of that, I'm the one who feels bad for being rude to people" (Interviewee 6).

All the actions taken or not taken described above have been either a reaction or non-reaction to violence perpetrated outside the context of a partnership or ex-partnership. However, in the area of violence perpetrated in the context of a partner or ex-partner, there is unanimous agreement that non-reaction is the best course to follow, or in other words, the women feel it is best to stop sharing content on Instagram for fear that the violence will continue: "I stopped uploading things because I knew it would start an argument, and I stopped posting photos just to avoid conflict" (Interviewee 9). "I felt that if I posted things, even if I wanted to, I would be told off by my partner" (Interviewee 7).

3.2.2. Action and non-action using support networks

With regard to taking action or not taking action, no differences were found between violence perpetrated either outside or within the context of a partnership or ex-partnership.

Support networks perform the essential task of protection, so they are a refuge for many women. As such, those who have reacted by taking action through these networks have done so by relying on those that are informal, such as their close circle of family and friends, in the search for empathy and to avoid feeling alone in the process. Thus, the family is highly important

in these situations: "My family, my older cousins, my aunts and uncles who I trust... I always talk to them" (Interviewee 10). Friends are a great source of support as well: "My friends were my salvation" (Interviewee 8).

This type of help is especially relevant at the symbolic level, as the most common task involved is giving support and advice: "I told my friends about the situation, and they told me either not to answer, or to block him directly" (Interviewee 2). Furthermore, providing various resources to help face the situation is also important: "I talked to friends, and I talked to a relative, and both of them told me that if it went any further, we would look for information to take some kind of legal action" (Interviewee 10).

In addition, some of the interviewees have also found support from other women who have gone through similar situations, creating links and bonds of sisterhood between those who have experienced such violence first hand. However, this union has not come about through institutional feminist organisations or women's associations that fight against gender-based violence. Instead, most of them have originated on the social networks themselves. Thus, one of the greatest benefits of forging this union is the feeling that their situation is not unique, and that "other women have experienced similar problems" (Interviewee 10). This has led to deeper understanding: "I can tell you that psychologically, this has helped me the most, because by hearing other experiences similar to your own, it somehow creates a bond" (Interviewee 10). This helps women acquire effective tools for freeing themselves from the situation and overcoming these circumstances. As one woman comments, "By talking to other people who tell you they've gone through the same thing, and they explain what happened to them, you end up sharing your own situation with them, and you help each other get out of it together" (Interviewee 8).

Regarding women who have not reacted and not taken action in seeking support networks, the main reason given is that they believed they could manage it themselves, "without the involvement of third parties" (Interviewee 2). In addition, there is also concern for their families and the need to avoid putting them through a bad situation: "I didn't want them to be worried about me, or to feel the pain of asking themselves, 'what's happening to my daughter'" (Interviewee 9).

3.2.3. Action and non-action in justice systems

There are different opinions regarding justice systems and reporting gender-based violence. There is a general belief that this avenue entails many difficulties, as well as the consequences that women have to face. One of the most significant factors that influence the decision of women to either take action or not take action using the justice system is the trust they have in this institution. Consequently, no differences have been found between violence occurring outside or within a partnership or ex-partnership. In this sense, the degree of trust is generally very low, yet in spite of this reality, two approaches have been identified: on the one hand, despite not feeling any trust toward these systems, some women are willing to take this route; and on the other hand, some women have a level of distrust that is rigid and immovable.

Regarding the first approach, some women have reacted and filed a complaint. However, this option is not very common, and the women who have done so are not sure that the situation will be resolved to their satisfaction: "I directly filed a complaint, and they told me they would take those messages to cybersecurity and ask them to investigate the situation, but they don't do it. They tell you what you want to hear, but in the end, you don't know if they've done anything or not" (Interviewee 8). Nevertheless, the women try not to lose hope that the system can work effectively, as this allows them to feel safe about reporting abuse: "I really make an effort to trust the system. I try to believe that all judges are committed to their work and do

their job with good intentions (…) I want to believe they'll try to help me and realise that I'm right" (Interviewee 10). In spite of this, the women bemoan the fact that they often come face to face with reality when they realise that they are not legally protected against this type of cyberviolence. As one woman states, "In this type of bullying, nothing's guaranteed. If someone sends you these types of messages on Instagram, there are no consequences. The justice system doesn't intervene. In that sense, they don't take it seriously" (Interviewee 4).

On the other hand, in the second approach there is a total rejection of the justice system, resulting from the ironclad and unshakeable distrust these women have in it: "My trust in the justice system is zero" (Interviewee 11). The system has been accused of offering accessibility in filing complaints, but of not providing the necessary security and protection afterward: "I think the justice system wants to give a positive image, as if they make a strong effort to protect women, but they don't. They really don't" (Interviewee 7). The direct consequence of this mistrust is not taking action, which means women usually do not file a complaint, despite having suffered gender-based violence through Instagram. Among the reasons given for not taking action are the following:

Firstly, they have the feeling that if they decide to report bullying, they will not be taken seriously, due to the belief that "the authorities wouldn't think it was a serious matter" (Interviewee 13). Consequently, as another woman states, "It takes away the incentive to report abuse, because you know nothing is going to happen" (Interviewee 2). In cyberspace, this feeling partially occurs due to the fact that there are many cyberbullying incidents that are not considered violent as such: "I don't think they believe it's serious when someone is sending you dick pics every day, or sexually harassing you on Instagram, but it *is* serious" (Interviewee 4).

This is partly due to a lack of specialised training of the staff working in these institutions, which is considered another impediment to reporting abuse, as women believe they will not receive the support they need nor find the empathy and sensitivity they expect from these professionals. Consequently, there are situations in which the support staff are sceptical of what the women say and the stories they tell: "The police and the civil guard should be specialised and know how to attend to these women, because if they start to question the person and ask, 'but are you sure', or 'was it really like that', and they start asking questions that make me feel uncomfortable, then I might just decide not to file a complaint" (Interviewee 12).

Likewise, the idea that the emotional cost of filing a complaint is too high for the sentence the aggressor will receive, which is insufficient in the women's opinion, is also very important. As one interviewee put it, this often leads women to demand "other measures that go beyond just spending a night in jail and back to life as usual tomorrow, as if nothing happened" (Interviewee 7). In addition, there is a certain fear that in the future this situation could be turned against them if the aggressors decide to bully them for revenge: "Why am I going to be in an uproar and cause a big scene if tomorrow this person is going to be back on the street and come after me? What's the point of me complaining? To make my situation worse?" (E7).

Thus, we can see that the fear of not being taken seriously, the lack of specialisation of the people who work in the justice system, and the high emotional cost are the factors that determined the women's decisions not to take the matter before the courts. Nevertheless, one testimony that stands out is that of a woman who, despite all the factors involved in not taking action described above, regrets not having reported the abuse, because in her words, "I realised that by not complaining, it could happen to someone else" (Interviewee 9). Thus, in addition to coping with the violence she experienced, she also felt guilty for

not having prevented possible violence against other women: "You feel burdened by the fact that it might happen to someone else because you didn't say anything" (E9).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of the present research have identified three areas in which action can be taken against male cyberviolence: Instagram, support networks, and justice systems. In this regard, it has been observed that the way of proceeding is connected to reaction or non-reaction which, in turn, is linked to taking action or not taking action, respectively. Regarding reaction and taking action on Instagram in association with violence committed outside the context of a partner or ex-partner relationship, both blocking and reporting of the aggressor's account are very common. These techniques are easy to perform and highly effective, due to the fact that gender-based violence usually stops when these strategies are used (Estébanez & Vázquez, 2013). Responding with rage is another action that is sometimes taken, yet this response is not very common due to women's fear of the possible consequences, and to their desire not to appear rude and surly. Thus, this conduct is seen as an extreme action carried out when women cannot bear any more pressure and simply explode, yet it generates profound discomfort for those who display such rage, as it goes against their usual way of behaving. This is the main reason given by the women as to why they have not reacted nor taken action on Instagram, and have simply chosen to ignore the comments instead, so as not to appear brutish and insulting. This behaviour is closely linked to gender stereotypes, which mandate that women should be conciliatory, polite, accommodating, sympathetic, and empathetic to everyone (Bosch & Gil-Juarez, 2021; Linares et al., 2019; Serra, 2018), even to those who act violently toward them (Estébanez & Vázquez, 2013).

In the context of a partner or ex-partner, it is interesting that none of the women interviewed have reacted to the violence experienced on Instagram. The main reason is to avoid starting arguments that might lead to confrontation and recrimination from their partners or ex-partners. In this way, they avoid responding with equal violence and take a passive stance in order to avoid an escalation of the bullying, or to make the violence stop altogether by changing their mindset and seeing bullying as a normal part of life for some people, which offers a way of protecting themselves from the suffering they experience.

On the other hand, family and institutional support networks are also highly important in helping women overcome these situations (Claramonte & Gutiérrez-Vázquez, 2018). In spite of this, however, the women interviewed have not relied on institutional organisations, but instead have depended on family, friends, and peer groups as the fundamental pillars of assistance. Thus, the women who have taken action in seeking these support networks have done so by searching for understanding and guidance, as well as emotional rather than instrumental help (Piedra et al., 2018).

Conversely, the reasons given by women who have not taken action in seeking help from support networks are twofold: on the one hand, they believe that this type of situation is not serious enough to seek help, and that they can cope with it on their own; and on the other hand, they do not want to worry their families. On this point, we can see that the failure to take action is also influenced by the idea that women must look after the well-being of everyone, and at the same time take care of their families, so that everything is in harmony, even when they themselves are not (Castillo-Mayén & Montes-Berges, 2014; Linares et al., 2019; Monreal et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2019; Tortajada et al., 2013; Varela, 2019).

With regard to taking action in the justice system, there is a clear relationship between having trust in the system and filing a complaint. Bearing in mind the existence of widespread distrust in the criminal justice system, filing a complaint is not a very common action. The reasons for this lack of trust and failure to take action are diverse. However, the main reason given by the women is feeling that they will not be taken seriously due to the fact that these actions are part of cyberspace, and their physical safety is apparently not at risk. Additionally, other aspects such as the lack of specialised training of the people who work in the justice system is also highly relevant, as it can lead to double victimisation, receiving poor attention, questioning the victim's story, and even blaming the victim, especially when the violence is linked to benevolent sexism and is carried out after the publication of content in which the victims show their bodies (Calala. Women's Fund, 2020; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Serra, 2018; Linares et al., 2019).

Thus, although most of the violence that women experience through Instagram is linked to benevolent sexism, which is reinforced by gender stereotypes (Bajo-Pérez & Gutiérrez-San-Miguel, 2022), taking action or not taking action, and the reasons that lead to either approach, are also clearly influenced by gender mandates (Linares et al., 2019). Moreover, through the use of such directives, when confronting male dominance, a subjugated female is presented in which women assume a role of passive victimisation (Millett, 1970) by not directly confronting violence. Consequently, it has been observed that most women choose to use restraint in their reactions for various reasons: to stop the violence against them, yet without entering into direct conflict with their aggressors; to lessen the consequences, but without compromising the well-being of their close circle of family and friends; to not raise their voices uncontrollably when a violent situation is experienced, yet feeling guilty for not breaking the cycle of violence nor protecting their peers by speaking out, thereby perpetuating the role of women who are good, polite, submissive, and compliant, as well as good mothers, daughters, and wives (Butkowsk et al., 2020; Linares et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2019; Varela, 2019).

To sum up, in the face of gender-based violence experienced on Instagram, the interviewees proceed in a socially-accepted way, or in other words, according to what is expected of them due to the fact that they are women. Thus, if we bear in mind that the violence carried out on Instagram is linked to gender roles and stereotypes, the way of taking action or not taking action is linked to these two factors as well. As such, it seems logical to emphasise the need to overcome these roles and stereotypes through education in equality and to provide women with effective tools to confront gender-based violence. Likewise, it is essential to raise awareness about this problem and to achieve a strong commitment among the various organisations and platforms involved for the purpose of addressing this issue in a multidisciplinary way in order to eradicate it.

Finally, the authors consider it necessary to mention some of the limitations of this study. The first is that the representation of the questionnaire sample is not representative, which prevents the extrapolation of the results to the entire universe. Regarding the second limitation, in the analysis of violence outside the partnership realm, the authors have not considered whether such violence is also present in the offline reality of the interviewees, which prevents a more in-depth analysis of the results. For these reasons, future lines of research should increase the response base of the questionnaire in order to achieve greater representativeness of the sample, in addition to conducting a more in-depth and diverse analysis of other questions that have not been addressed in this study.

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6. Specific contributions of each author

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7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest involved in this article.

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