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# Rejection Sensitivity and Aggression: Unveiling the Mediating Role of Supportive Relationships and Emotion-Regulation

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This study aimed to investigate the relationship between Rejection Sensitivity (RS) and Aggression among emerging adults, examining the mediating roles of Emotion Regulation (ER) and Perceived Social Support (PSS). A quantitative, cross-sectional design was employed. 389 Indian emerging adults (ages 18-25) completed self-report measures of RS, Aggression, ER, and PSS. Spearman's correlation and mediation revealed a weak but significant positive correlation between RS and Aggression ($r = 0.114$, $p < 0.05$). ER significantly mediated 67% of the relationship between RS and Aggression ($â = 0.384$, $p = 0.009$), while PSS did not significantly mediate this relationship ($â = -0.0612$, $p = 0.255$). These findings suggest that difficulties in emotion regulation play a crucial role in how rejection sensitivity influences aggressive behaviors in emerging adults. This study contributes to the understanding of RS and Aggression in emerging adults by highlighting the critical mediating role of ER. The findings suggest that interventions targeting emotion regulation skills may be particularly effective in reducing aggressive behaviors among rejection-sensitive individuals. This research also emphasizes the need for further investigation into the complex interplay between internal emotional processes and external support systems in managing rejection sensitivity.

**Keywords:** Rejection Sensitivity, Aggression, Perceived Social Support, Emotion Regulation, Emerging Adults

Rejection Sensitivity (RS) is the predisposition to defensively expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection (Downey et al., 2000). Research suggests that individuals with high RS, regardless of gender, often respond to conflicts in relationships with aggression, which can significantly increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution. Studies on college students have shown that RS is associated with delayed entry into romantic relationships and heightened conflict after perceived rejection (Canyas et al., 2010). This heightened sensitivity to rejection affects not only the individuals themselves but also impacts their partners, straining relationship dynamics.

Emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) represents a developmental period characterized by growing independence, forming new relationships, and navigating complex social situations—all of which can act as triggers for RS. This period involves intense relationship-building that can magnify the effects of RS and highlight the need for self-regulatory competencies and supportive networks to manage rejection. As RS can lead to either withdrawal or aggressive behaviors, it is critical to understand the role of mediating factors, like perceived social support and emotion regulation, in potentially reducing aggressive responses and promoting healthier relationship functioning.

## Rejection Sensitivity and Aggression

Individuals with high RS tend to react to perceived rejection by withdrawing or responding aggressively. Expectations associated with rejection can influence behavioral responses: anxious expectations

typically result in withdrawal, whereas angry expectations often lead to aggression (Gao et al., 2019; London et al., 2007). For example, in adolescence, high RS was found to lead to both "fight" responses, such as aggression, and "flight" responses, like social withdrawal, depending on whether expectations were anxious or angry. Additionally, being disliked by peers increased angry expectations, especially in boys, while being liked reduced anxious expectations in both boys and girls (London et al., 2007). Supportive relationships seem to play a beneficial role by reducing feelings of loneliness associated with anxious expectations, although the effect on rejection-related aggression remains less explored.

Further research has shown that high RS individuals are more likely to form insecure attachment styles. For instance, rejection sensitivity negatively correlates with secure attachment styles and positively correlates with fearful, occupied, and dismissing attachment styles (Erozkan, 2009). High RS often leads to responses like aggression, which may create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where aggressive reactions to perceived rejection confirm rejection from others, straining relationships further (Ayduk & Gyurak, 2008). These findings highlight the impact of RS on interpersonal relationships, particularly in high-stress or emotionally charged situations.

**Rejection Sensitivity, Aggression, and Emotion Regulation**

Behavioral outcomes of high RS can heavily depend on an individual's self-regulatory abilities (Ayduk & Gyurak, 2008). Research by Ayduk et al. (2000) on adults who showed different capacities for delayed gratification as preschoolers demonstrated that those with higher RS but with strong self-regulation skills exhibited higher self-esteem and were less vulnerable to rejection-related issues later in life. Follow-up studies with the same cohort revealed that high RS individuals with good self-regulatory capacities were less likely to exhibit borderline personality features, emphasizing the importance of self-regulation in mitigating adverse effects of RS. Dysfunctional emotion regulation strategies, such as rumination, suppression, and catastrophizing, amplify negative emotions following rejection, making it harder to reframe experiences adaptively (Casini et al., 2022).

**Rejection Sensitivity, Aggression, and Supportive Relationships**

Supportive relationships play a protective role in modulating RS. For example, adolescents liked by new peers at the start of middle school showed a reduction in anxious expectations (London et al., 2007). Similarly, college students in satisfying romantic relationships experienced a decrease in RS over time (Kang, 2006). In cohabiting couples, high RS individuals felt more accepted when their partners provided emotional support, while the absence of support increased feelings of rejection and anger (Kang et al., 2009). These studies indicate that supportive relationships can help reduce RS biases, fostering healthier emotional responses. Additionally, a lack of social support is linked to increased aggression, particularly among males, suggesting that supportive environments can enhance self-esteem, reduce emotional exhaustion, and lower aggression levels.

Understanding how perceived social support and emotion regulation mediate the relationship between RS and aggression could inform targeted interventions for individuals with high RS. Improving these mediators could reduce aggressive responses, enhancing both individual well-being and relationship quality.

### Objectives

1. To examine the effect of rejection sensitivity on aggression.
2. To examine the mediating role of perceived social support in the RS-aggression relationship.
3. To examine the mediating role of emotion-regulation skills in the RS-aggression relationship.

### Hypotheses

$H_0$1 There is no significant relationship between rejection sensitivity and aggression in emerging adults.

$H_0$2 There is no significant mediating role of perceived social support in rejection sensitivity and aggression relationship in emerging adults.

$H_0$3 There is no significant mediating role of emotion regulation in rejection sensitivity and aggression relationship in emerging adults.

## Method

### Study Design

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to explore the relationship between Rejection Sensitivity (RS) and Aggression, focusing on the mediating roles of Emotion Regulation (ER) and Perceived Social Support (PSS) among emerging adults in India. Data was gathered using online questionnaires. The cross-sectional design allowed for the examination of correlations and mediation effects within a single time point, providing insight into how the key variables interrelate among emerging adults. Spearman's correlation analyses were used to identify associations between RS and Aggression, and mediation analyses were conducted to evaluate the role of ER and PSS in influencing the RS-Aggression relationship.

### Participants

The current study proposed to employed 389 participants, the size was calculated using a sample size calculator for the emerging adults population in India who are approximately aged between 18 to 25 years. Non-probability sampling was employed, specifically utilizing a convenience sampling strategy. Inclusion criteria for participation included adults within the specified age range who possessed a fundamental proficiency in the English language to comprehend and effectively respond to the study measures. The exclusion criteria for the sample was anyone who does not fall in the age range of emerging adulthood and people with psychiatric disorders.

### Procedure

The data was collected online via google forms, distributed through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram. The data was collected between the months of June to August 2024. Four questionnaires were used for each of the four variables in the study and the form took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The following were the tools employed:

1. Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, Adult version (A-RSQ):

- Reliability: Correlates highly with original RSQ (r = .87)
- Validity: Established through correlations with related constructs (e.g., neuroticism: r = .32, social avoidance/distress: r = .34)

2. Buss and Perry's Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ):

- 29 items, 4 subscales
- Test-retest reliability: 0.78

3. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS):

- Internal reliability: Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.85 to 0.91 for subscales
- Test-retest reliability: 0.72 to 0.85 over 2-3 months

4. Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale – 16 item version (DERS-16):

- Internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha 0.92 to 0.94
- Test-retest reliability: 0.79 over 4-8 weeks

## Results

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Study Sample

| Variable | | N | Percent | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sex | Female | 206 | 53.0 | |
| | Male | 183 | 47.0 | |
| Age | | 390 | | 20.70 |
| Educational Qualification | | | | |
| | Secondary | 1 | 0.3 | |
| | Senior Secondary | 98 | 25.2 | |
| | Graduate | 226 | 58.1 | |
| | Post graduate | 63 | 16.2 | |
| | Job | 1 | 0.3 | |
| Place of Residence | | | | |
| | Urban | 270 | 69.4 | |
| | Rural | 78 | 20.1 | |
| | Semi urban | 41 | 10.5 | |
| Gross Household Income | | | | |
| Less than 5 lakhs per annum | | 168 | 43.2 | |
| 5 to 30 lakhs per annum | | 172 | 44.2 | |
| Above 30 lakhs per annum | | 49 | 12.6 | |

A total of 389 emerging adults aged 18-25 years participated in the study. The sample consisted of 206 females (53.0%) and 183 males (47.0%). All participants completed the survey, with no dropouts reported.

The mean age of participants was 20.70 years. Educational qualifications varied, with the majority being graduates (58.1%, n=226), followed by those with senior secondary education (25.2%, n=98), post-graduates (16.2%, n=63), and a small number with secondary education or job status (0.3%, n=1 each). Most participants resided in urban areas (69.4%, n=270), followed by rural (20.1%, n=78) and semi-urban areas (10.5%, n=41). Gross household income was distributed across three categories: less than 5 lakhs per annum (43.2%, n=168), 5 to 30 lakhs per annum (44.2%, n=172), and above 30 lakhs per annum (12.6%, n=49). There were no missing data reported for the variables of interest.

### Outcome data

The mean scores for the main variables were Rejection Sensitivity (RS): 19.8 (SD = 2.76), Aggression: 93.3 (SD = 17.7), Difficulty in Emotion Regulation (DERS): 41.8 (SD = 14.3), Perceived Social Support (MSPSS): 4.93 (SD = 1.22).

A Spearman's correlation analysis was conducted due to non-normal distribution of data. The results showed a significant weak positive correlation between Rejection Sensitivity and Aggression ($r = 0.114$, $p < .05$). Results showed a significant weak positive correlation between Rejection Sensitivity and Difficulty in Emotion Regulation ($r = 0.116$, $p < .05$), a significant weak negative correlation between Rejection Sensitivity and Perceived Social Support ($r = -0.171$, $p < .001$). There was a significant weak negative correlations between Rejection Sensitivity and subscales of Perceived Social Support: Significant Other ($r = -0.150$, $p < .01$), Family ($r = -0.105$, $p < .05$), and Friends ($r = -0.150$, $p < .01$).

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

| | Aggression | Difficulty in Emotion Regulation | Perceived Social Support | Significant Other | Family | Friends |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rejection Sensitivity | 0.114* | 0.116* | -0.171*** | -0.150** | -0.105* | -0.150** |
| Aggression | | 0.396*** | -0.022 | -0.019 | 0.050 | -0.042 |

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

Table 3. Mediation Table

| | Effect | Estimate | p | % Mediation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Difficulty in Emotion Regulation | Indirect | 0.384 | 0.009 | 67.0 |
| | Direct | 0.189 | 0.519 | 33.0 |
| | Total | 0.573 | 0.077 | 100.0 |
| Perceived Social Support | Indirect | -0.0612 | 0.255 | 8.80 |
| | Direct | 0.6339 | 0.052 | 91.20 |
| | Total | 0.5727 | 0.077 | 100.00 |

Mediation analysis showed that Difficulty in Emotion Regulation as mediator had an Indirect effect: â = 0.384, p = .009 (67.0% mediation), direct effect: â = 0.189, p = .519 (33.0% mediation), and total effect: â = 0.573, p = .077. Perceived Social Support as mediator had an indirect effect: â = -0.0612, p = .255 (8.80% mediation), direct effect: â = 0.6339, p = .052 (91.20% mediation), Total effect: â = 0.5727, p = .077. These results suggest that Difficulty in Emotion Regulation significantly mediates the relationship between Rejection Sensitivity and Aggression, accounting for 67% of the total effect. In contrast, Perceived Social Support does not significantly mediate this relationship, accounting for only 8.8% of the total effect.

## Discussion

The study aimed to explore the relationship between Rejection Sensitivity (RS) and Aggression, examining the mediating roles of Emotion Regulation (ER) and Perceived Social Support (PSS). Results indicated a significant but weak positive correlation between RS and overall Aggression (r = 0.114, p = 0.025). Notably, ER was found to mediate 67% of the relationship between RS and Aggression (â = 0.384, p = 0.009), while PSS did not significantly mediate this relationship, accounting for only 8.8% of the mediation effect (â = -0.0612, p = 0.255). These findings suggest that difficulties in regulating emotions are a key factor in how RS influences aggressive behaviors.

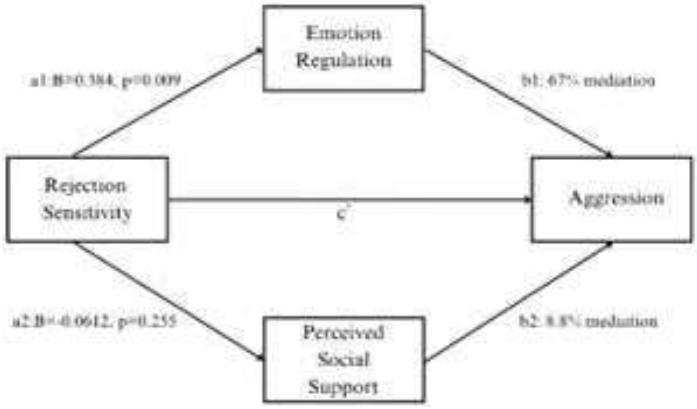


Figure 1. Path a1 is direct path from Rejection Sensitivity to Emotion Regulation.

Path a2 is direct path from Rejection Sensitivity to Perceived Social Support. Path b1 is direct path from Emotion Regulation (ER) to Aggression. Path b2 is direct path from Perceived Social Support (PSS) to Aggression. c' is the direct path from Rejection Sensitivity (RS) to Aggression, accounting for the mediating effects of ER and PSS.

**Finding 1: Rejection Sensitivity is positively correlated with Aggression**

The first hypothesis proposed that there would be no significant relationship between rejection sensitivity (RS) and aggression in emerging adults. Contrary to this hypothesis, results indicated a significant but weak positive correlation between RS and aggression ($r = 0.114$, $p = 0.025$), suggesting that higher levels of RS are modestly associated with increased aggression. This aligns with prior research that links RS to heightened defensive behaviors, including aggression, particularly in response to perceived rejection (Downey et al., 2000). Individuals with high RS often have a heightened tendency to perceive interpersonal threats, leading to aggressive behaviors as a defensive response to protect against anticipated rejection (Sherman & Flynn, 2001; Gao et al., 2019). The weak correlation, however, suggests that while aggression is one possible response to RS, it may not be the predominant reaction for all individuals with high RS. As noted by Downey et al. (2000), individuals with high RS may also respond with withdrawal or social avoidance, which are equally significant but non-aggressive responses. This nuanced finding indicates that RS may lead to a spectrum of responses, where aggression is one among several outcomes.

Given these results, future research should explore other behavioral manifestations of RS, such as withdrawal and social isolation, to gain a comprehensive understanding of how RS affects interpersonal dynamics. Furthermore, examining variables that might moderate the RS-aggression link, such as personality traits, attachment style, or coping strategies, could shed light on factors that contribute to aggressive tendencies in some high-RS individuals but not others.

**Finding 2: Perceived Social Support does not significantly mediate the RS-Aggression relationship**

The second hypothesis posited that perceived social support (PSS) would not significantly mediate the relationship between RS and aggression. The study results supported this hypothesis, with PSS accounting for only 8.8% of the total effect on the RS-aggression link, and the mediation effect was not statistically significant ($\hat{a} = -0.0612$, $p = 0.255$). This finding contrasts with prior literature emphasizing the buffering effects of social support on negative outcomes related to RS (London et al., 2007; Kang et al., 2009). Social support is traditionally viewed as a protective factor that mitigates psychological distress by promoting feelings of acceptance and reducing feelings of loneliness, which can, in turn, decrease aggression (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

However, the non-significant effect of PSS suggests that, for emerging adults, internal mechanisms such as emotion regulation (ER) may be more influential in managing rejection-related aggression than external support. This age group is at a developmental stage characterized by increased independence and a gradual transition from reliance on social support networks to individual coping mechanisms (Arnett, 2000). It is possible that the perception of external support may not sufficiently alleviate the interpersonal stressors associated with RS in this population. Another consideration is the specific cultural context of the sample, as collectivistic cultural norms may influence

how support is perceived and utilized in ways that differ from Western contexts, where much of the existing RS and social support literature originates (Kang, 2006).

Future studies could benefit from examining how different types of social support (e.g., support from family vs. friends) might affect high RS individuals and if these effects differ based on cultural background or individual differences in independence.

### Finding 3: Emotion Regulation significantly mediates the RS-Aggression relationship

The third hypothesis proposed that emotion regulation (ER) would not significantly mediate the RS-aggression relationship. This hypothesis was not supported, as ER emerged as a significant mediator, accounting for 67% of the RS-aggression relationship (â = 0.384, p = 0.009). This substantial mediation effect highlights ER as a key factor in understanding how RS leads to aggression. Research supports the notion that individuals with high RS often struggle with adaptive ER strategies, increasing their susceptibility to maladaptive responses like aggression (Ayduk & Gyurak, 2008; Casini et al., 2022). The tendency of high RS individuals to ruminate, catastrophize, or suppress emotions exacerbates their emotional arousal, making it difficult for them to regulate negative emotions associated with perceived rejection (Aldao et al., 2016).

These findings emphasize the importance of ER in modulating aggression in RS individuals. High RS individuals with poor ER skills may experience intense emotional reactions to perceived rejection, leading to impulsive, aggressive behaviors as they struggle to manage their heightened emotions. The significant mediating role of ER aligns with broader transdiagnostic theories, which identify ER difficulties as a core mechanism underlying various psychopathologies, including aggression (McRae & Gross, 2020). The study's findings emphasize that improving ER skills in high RS individuals could be a valuable approach to reducing aggression. Interventions that promote adaptive ER strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and mindfulness, could equip high RS individuals with the tools to manage their emotional responses to perceived rejection more effectively (Aldao et al., 2016).

The impact of ER also calls attention to the potential interplay between RS and other mental health conditions characterized by ER deficits, such as borderline personality disorder (BPD), which frequently co-occurs with high RS (Ayduk et al., 2000). Future research could further explore the role of ER within these co-occurring conditions, examining whether targeting ER interventions in individuals with both high RS and BPD traits could lead to more robust reductions in aggression.

## Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the findings offer valuable insights, several limitations should be addressed. The study relied exclusively on self-reported data for measuring RS, aggression, ER, and PSS, which may be subject to response biases. Self-report measures are prone to underreporting or overreporting due to social desirability or recall biases, which can affect the validity of the results (Althubaiti, 2016). Future studies should consider incorporating objective or observational measures of aggression and ER to strengthen the findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, as data were collected at a single point in time (Levin, 2006). Longitudinal research would help clarify the causal pathways in the RS-ER-aggression relationship and determine whether improvements in ER lead to sustained reductions in aggression over time.

The generalizability of the findings is also limited by the sample, which consisted solely of emerging adults in India. Cultural norms and societal expectations may influence how RS, aggression, ER, and PSS manifest in this population, potentially differing from other cultural contexts. Replicating this study with diverse cultural and age groups could help verify whether the findings extend to broader populations.

## Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between rejection sensitivity (RS) and aggression in emerging adults, with a focus on the mediating roles of emotion regulation (ER) and perceived social support (PSS). Results indicated a weak but significant positive correlation between RS and aggression, suggesting that heightened RS is associated with increased aggression, though other responses, like withdrawal, may also be common. Emotion regulation emerged as a significant mediator, accounting for 67% of the relationship between RS and aggression, underscoring the importance of adaptive ER skills in managing aggression for high RS individuals. These findings align with existing literature, which emphasizes that poor ER increases susceptibility to maladaptive responses like aggression, especially when faced with perceived rejection (Ayduk et al., 2000; Casini et al., 2022).

Unexpectedly, PSS did not significantly mediate the RS-aggression link, accounting for only 8.8% of the total effect. This finding suggests that in emerging adults, internal mechanisms such as ER may be more influential in managing rejection-related aggression than external support systems. This developmental stage often involves greater independence, which may lessen the impact of social support (Arnett, 2000).

The findings highlight the potential value of interventions that focus on enhancing ER skills for high RS individuals, potentially through cognitive-behavioral techniques or mindfulness-based approaches. By equipping individuals with tools to manage intense emotional reactions, these interventions could reduce aggression and improve interpersonal functioning. Future research should explore these relationships longitudinally and across different cultural contexts to assess the generalizability of these findings. Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of RS and aggression in emerging adults, suggesting that ER plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative impact of RS on aggressive behaviors, while the role of PSS may vary based on developmental and cultural factors.

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