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Narrative review

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Rejection sensitivity: a narrative review

Abstract

Most of the studies in this literature were focused on negative effects of rejection sensitivity including negative psychological effects and negative behavioral effects. The negative psychological effects can be categorized as cognitive factors, relationships and psychological problems. The negative cognitive effects include psychological maladjustment, cognitive distortions and distorted body image. The studies on negative relationships are limited to a focus on conformity risk, fear of intimacy, and loneliness. The psychological problems include social evaluation, loneliness, negative affect, depression, social anxiety, suicidality, non-suicidal self-injury and difficulty seeking professional help. The negative behavioral effects are short video addiction, binge eating, aggression, dating violence and cyber abuse. The risks for rejection sensitivity include child maltreatment, rumination and anorexia nervosa. Only one potential underlying biological mechanism for rejection sensitivity appeared in this literature which focused on connectivity problems involving the anterior insula, the prefrontal cortex and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Methodological limitations included the almost exclusive sampling of young people and university students, the cross-sectional research design, the prevalence of mediation/moderation models and the absence of intervention research.

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Introduction

Rejection sensitivity: a narrative review

Rejection sensitivity has been defined as "an extreme emotional reaction and anxious anticipation of being criticized, excluded or disapproved by others". Two factors have been identified for the Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A– RSQ).[1] In this sample (N=407, mean age =41), the two factors that were identified included rejection concern and rejection expectancy. Age-related decreases were noted for both factors. This scale was widely used in the research included in this review.

The literature search for this narrative review involved entering the terms rejection sensitivity and the years 2024 to 2026 into the electronic databases of PubMed and PsycINFO. Inclusion criteria included empirical studies that appeared in the databases for those years with the terms rejection sensitivity in their titles. Exclusion criteria included proposals, case studies and non-English language papers on rejection sensitivity. As this is a narrative review, not a systematic review, Prisma guidelines were not followed. This review includes 28 papers on rejection sensitivity. The papers can be categorized as factors of rejection sensitivity (1 paper), negative effects of rejection sensitivity (22 papers), risks/predictor variables (4 papers) and potential underlying biological mechanisms (1 paper). These sections are followed by a discussion on methodological limitations of this current literature. Several potential interpretations are given throughout the paper.

Negative effects of rejection sensitivity

Most of the studies in this literature were focused on negative effects of rejection sensitivity including negative psychological effects (14 papers) and negative behavioral effects (8 papers). The negative psychological effects can be categorized as negative cognitive effects, negative relationship factors and psychological problems.

Negative cognitive effects

The negative cognitive effects have been labeled psychological maladjustment, interpersonal cognitive distortions and distorted body image (Table 1). In a study entitled "Remembered parental rejection and psychological maladjustment in Turkish adults: the mediating role of interpersonal rejection sensitivity", rejection sensitivity as the mediator variable was more immediately related to psychological maladjustment.[2] In this sample (N=372 adults age 18 to 59), parental rejection, as recalled by the Turkish adults, led to **psychological maladjustment**. This relationship was mediated by interpersonal rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity has often mediated the relationships between negative predictors and negative outcome variables, as in being a more immediate predictor variable or explaining how or why a predictor variable affects an outcome variable.

Table 1 Negative cognitive effects of rejection sensitivity (and first authors)

Cognitive effects	First authors
Psychological maladjustment	Kuyumcu
Interpersonal cognitive distortions	Rehman
Distorted body image	Saylan, Pitirut

Rejection sensitivity was a mediator in another study entitled "The impact of childhood trauma and rejection sensitivity on interpersonal cognitive distortions in young adults".[3] In this sample (N=265, age 18–25) from Islamabad and Pakistan, rejection sensitivity mediated the relationship between childhood trauma and **interpersonal cognitive distortions**. Rejection sensitivity had a more proximal relationship with interpersonal cognitive distortions than childhood trauma suggesting that rejection sensitivity (the fear of criticism or exclusion) explained the relationship between childhood trauma and interpersonal cognitive distortions (interpersonal misperception and interpersonal rejection).

Distorted body image has also been associated with rejection sensitivity in at least two studies. In one of these, body image was assessed in adolescents.[4] In this group of adolescents, rejection sensitivity was treated as the predictor variable. Rejection sensitivity may have been more specifically labeled "fear of being criticized" which may have led to the specific fear of being criticized for one's body type which could then lead to a distorted body image. In this cross-sectional study, directionality could not be determined. Just as likely, the distorted body image could have led to the rejection sensitivity rather than the reverse.

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In the second study on body image, "Appearance – based rejection sensitivity mediates the relationship between Instagram addiction and dysmorphic concerns in young adult women", the rejection sensitivity was specifically related to appearance concerns.[5] In this sample of adult women (N=300, mean age=22 years-old), rejection sensitivity about one's appearance mediated the relationship between the addiction to Instagram and dysmorphic concerns. The addiction to Instagram (which is built around sharing photos and videos) would have exposed the women to many beautiful women, and "upward comparisons" (comparing self to others) could lead to the dysmorphic concerns (an overconcern with an imagined or slight defect in physical appearance).

Negative relationships

The studies on negative relationships included a focus on conformity risk, fear of intimacy, loneliness, and distancing and self-concealing (Table 2). In the study on **conformity risk** (loss of individuality), rejection sensitivity led to increased conformity risk.[6] In this sample, impulsivity moderated (lessened) the relationship between rejection sensitivity and conformity risk. Impulsivity would be expected to lessen conformity risk.

Table 2 Negative relationships related to rejection sensitivity (and first authors)

Relationships	First authors
Conformity risk	Parvathy
Fear of intimacy	Finzi-Gottan
Loneliness	Lyu, Qu
Distancing and self-concealing	Shulman

Rejection sensitivity also played a mediating role in research on a group of Israeli young adults (N= 180, age 21–30).[7] In this sample, rejection sensitivity mediated the relationship between emotional abuse and **fear of intimacy**. Attachment styles also played a mediating role in this relationship. Emotional abuse would likely lead to fear of intimacy, but rejection sensitivity would be more proximally related to fear of intimacy. Both rejection sensitivity and fear of intimacy are likely related to the fear of further emotional abuse, but fear of further emotional abuse was not measured.

Rejection sensitivity has also led to **loneliness** in young adolescents.[8] In this sample (N=2381, mean age=13), rejection sensitivity led to bullying victimization, which in turn led to loneliness. However, this relationship only existed for adolescents who had high scores on rejection sensitivity. As in the previous study, rejection sensitivity may have led to fear of intimacy as well as social withdrawal which could then elicit bullying by adolescent peers. Bullying would likely enhance social withdrawal which would lead to loneliness. Although several of these studies referred to serial mediating effects deriving from mediation analyses, their relative significance could have been determined by a regression or by structural equation modeling.

Rejection sensitivity was a mediator of the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and loneliness in still another study.[9] Based on questionnaire data, child abuse led to loneliness (N=567 Chinese students, age 12-17). This relationship was mediated by both rejection sensitivity and self-compassion. Rejection sensitivity enhanced the relationship between child abuse and loneliness while self-compassion lessened the relationship. This inclusion of both negative and positive mediators in the same study is an example of the arbitrary and complex selection of mediator variables.

The chronicity of rejection sensitivity is suggested by a study entitled "The long arm of rejection sensitivity and young adults' romantic relationships".[10] In this sample, Israeli young adults were followed from age 23 to age 28 (N=101). Rejection sensitivity at age 23 led to **greater distancing and self-concealing, feeling less certain and having more tension in future relationships** at age 28. Rejection sensitivity decreased from adolescence to adulthood but stabilized in the latter 20s, suggesting chronicity of rejection sensitivity. The chronicity of rejection sensitivity might explain the long-term effects of rejection sensitivity on relationship problems five years later for this sample.

Psychological problems

Rejection sensitivity is also related to several psychological problems (Table 3). They include social anxiety, suicidality, non-suicidal self-injury and problems seeking professional help.

Table 3 Psychological problems related to rejection sensitivity (and first authors)

Problems	First authors
Social evaluation	Grunewald
Social media fatigue	Ji
Loneliness	Wu
Negative effect	Boyd, Murray
Depression	Liu
Social anxiety	Shi
Suicidality	Brown, Yan
Non-suicidal self-injury	Zhao
Negative attitudes about seeking help	Su

Rejection sensitivity as well as rumination had mediating effects on a relationship between cyber-ostracism and social anxiety.[11] Cyber-ostracism (being rejected online) would, not surprisingly, lead to social anxiety, and rejection sensitivity and rumination would, also not surprisingly, exacerbate that relationship.

Rejection sensitivity has been associated with the even more severe **suicidal ideation variable** in a study entitled "Childhood emotional abuse and suicidal ideation intensity: the serial effects of rejection sensitivity, thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness".[12] The title of this paper is misleading as only rejection sensitivity and perceived burdensomeness mediated the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and suicidal ideation. In this sample of young adults (N= 148, 18 to 35 years-old), rejection sensitivity and perceived burdensomeness, but not thwarted belongingness, were mediators of the relationship between child abuse and suicidal ideation. The selection of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness as mediators is not surprising given that they are the primary factors in the most frequently cited Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. Thwarted belongingness was not a significant mediator possibly because the young adults in this sample already had significant relationships.

The impact of rejection sensitivity on suicidal ideation has also been studied in college students (N= 1152).[13] Social connectedness and negative affect mediated this relationship. Once again, both positive and negative mediators were selected by the researchers with the negative mediator (negative affect) being expected to enhance the relationship between the negative predictor and outcome variables and the positive mediator (social connectedness) being expected to lessen the relationship.

Rejection sensitivity has also been linked to **non-suicidal self–injury**. In a sample of adolescents (N= 726, mean age=13) from North China, rejection sensitivity decreased over time.[14] Social

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anxiety and social-emotional self-efficacy were both negative and positive mediators in this longitudinal study. The decrease in rejection sensitivity over time and/or the increasing maturity of the participants over time may have contributed to a decrease in non-suicidal self-injury over time.

Rejection sensitivity has also mediated the effects of parental psychological control on **negative attitudes about seeking professional psychological help**.[15] In this sample of senior high school students (N=648), both rejection sensitivity and social withdrawal mediated the effects of parental psychological control on seeking professional help. A regression analysis or structural equation modeling could have determined the relative contributions of the three variables to the negative attitudes about seeking professional psychological help, which in turn would inform intervention efforts.

Recent empirical research regarding digital communication, social media dynamics and online social evaluation environments suggests that problematic social media use has frequently triggered and amplified rejection sensitivity Rejection sensitivity has been associated with excessive internet communication and problematic social media use. Problematic social media use, in turn, has been associated with several psychological problems. For example, online social evaluation has led to increased social rejection sensitivity in a sample of young people who were engaged in a perceptual learning task under online "social evaluative threat".[16] This sample also experienced increased stress, anxiety and anhedonia. Similarly, excessive internet and social media use has involved "upward comparison" which has often led young people to experience rejection sensitivity for "not measuring up to social media models".[17]

Other psychological problems associated with excessive social media use have included social media fatigue, loneliness, negative affect and depression.[18–22] Most of these studies involved adolescents and college students which limits the generalizability of the data to other age groups.

Negative behavioral outcomes

Several negative behavioral outcomes have been reported for rejection sensitivity (Table 4). They include the addictions of binge eating and viewing short videos as well as aggressive behaviors, cyber abuse and dating violence.

Table 4 Negative physical effects of rejection sensitivity (and first authors)

Physical effects	First authors
Binge eating	Rauen
Short-video addiction	Liu
Aggression	Lashkari, Du, Lv
Cyber dating abuse	Dai
Dating violence attitudes	Yegen

Rejection sensitivity has contributed to **binge eating.** In research entitled "The role of appearance – based and interpersonal rejection sensitivity in youth loss of control eating: a one – year longitudinal study", rejection sensitivity was both appearance-based and interpersonal.[23] In this sample of **binge eating** youth (14–24 years old), the binge eating was surprisingly related to appearance and interpersonal rejection sensitivity. These findings were surprising as those sensitivities might be expected to contribute more to anorexia nervosa than binge eating.

The other rejection sensitivity related short-video addiction was noted in a study entitled "Relationships between psychological resilience, rejection sensitivity, and short-video addiction in university students: a cross-lagged analysis".[24] In this sample of Chinese students (N = 1394), the widespread use of platforms such as TikTok was reported by the students. Less psychological resilience at time 1 was related to greater rejection sensitivity and greater **short-video addiction** at time 2. The relationship between the contemporaneous variables in time 2 (rejection sensitivity and short-video addiction) was likely more significant than the longitudinal relationships between resilience at time 1 and the time 2 measures.

Aggression in general has been the focus of at least three studies in which rejection sensitivity was a predictor variable. In a study entitled "When emotions remain unnamed: alexithymia and rejection sensitivity fuel aggression via anger rumination", a theoretically grounded structural model was assessed on a sample of women (N=666, mean age=35).[25] The results suggested that alexithymia and rejection sensitivity both led to aggression via the mediator anger rumination variable. Although the phrase in the title "alexithymia and rejection sensitivity fuel aggression" implies causality, that cannot be determined in this cross-sectional study. That methodological limitation can be noted for most of these studies in the current literature on rejection sensitivity.

Rejection sensitivity was also considered a predictor of reactive aggression in research entitled "Rejection sensitivity and reactive aggression in early adults: the mediating role of loneliness and maladaptive coping".[26] In this sample of Chinese students (N=1104, 12 to 17 years-old), not early adults, The China Reactive–Active Aggression Scale, the Tendency to Expect Rejection Scale, the Loneliness Scale, and the Ways of Coping Scale were administered. Rejection sensitivity led to reactive aggression with loneliness and maladaptive coping being mediating variables. The combined negativity of these three variables (rejection sensitivity, loneliness and maladaptive coping) would be expected to lead to reactive aggression, although again these are contemporaneous variables in a cross-sectional study such that directionality cannot be determined.

In still another large sample of Chinese students (N= 967 students from 13 primary and secondary schools), the longitudinal effects of peer rejection on reactive/proactive aggression were explored.[27] In this longitudinal study, rejection sensitivity at time 2 mediated the relationship between peer rejection at time 1 and reactive aggression at time 2. Rejection sensitivity at time 2 likely had a greater effect than peer rejection at time 1 on reactive aggression at time 2 because rejection sensitivity and reactive aggression were contemporaneous variables that both occurred at time 2.

Cyber dating abuse perpetration and victimization have been studied in Chinese college students who had a history of peer phubbing (phone snubbing or turning to a phone during a face-to-face interaction with a peer).[28] In this sample (N=566 with a mean age of 19), peer phubbing led to rejection sensitivity, which in turn led to cyber abuse and victimization. This relationship, not surprisingly, was weakened by psychological resilience. The negative effects of peer phubbing on rejection sensitivity are very similar to other negative effects of peer phubbing.[29]

Rejection sensitivity has also played a mediating role along with irrational beliefs in a relationship between childhood traumatic experience and **dating violence attitudes**.[30] In this sample of university students from Turkey (N= 960), rejection sensitivity and irrational beliefs explained 29% of the variance in dating violence attitudes. Although this was a statistically significant amount of the variance, 71% remained unexplained. A multivariate study (more than

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two mediating variables entered into structural equations modeling) including aggression behaviors might explain more of the variance in dating violence attitudes.

Risk factors for rejection sensitivity

A few risk factors for rejection sensitivity have been identified in this current literature. They include child maltreatment, anorexia nervosa and rumination (Table 5).

Table 5 Risk factors for rejection sensitivity (and first authors)

Risk factors	First authors
Child maltreatment	Gao, Euteneuer
Anorexia nervosa	Coughlan-Hopkins
Rumination	Stewart

Child maltreatment was considered a risk factor in a review entitled "Child maltreatment as a risk factor for rejection sensitivity: a three level meta-analytic review".[31] In this review on 16 studies (N= 5,335), the relationship between child maltreatment and rejection sensitivity was statistically significant at a very low correlation (r=.23) because of the large sample size. The correlation between emotional abuse and rejection sensitivity was slightly higher (r=.28) which is not surprising as emotional abuse often has greater effects than physical abuse, although these correlations were not statistically compared in this research. Surprisingly, no differences were noted across gender or the type of sample (community or clinical) as rejection sensitivity is typically more prevalent in females and in clinical samples.

Childhood maltreatment and sensitivity to social rejection were reported for young adults in a study not included in the review (N= 1311, 18–25-year-olds).[32] In this sample, as would be expected, both emotional abuse and neglect were significantly correlated with sensitivity to social rejection.

Social rejection sensitivity specifically in females with **anorexia nervosa** was the focus of a systematic review on 47 studies.[33] The females with anorexia nervosa were noted to have a cognitive profile that included expecting rejection, readily perceiving it and reacting with Intense negative affect to rejection – based cues. Unfortunately, many of these studies did not include a matched control group, limiting the reliability (focused on consistency and replicability) and validity (focused on accuracy) of the results.

Rejection sensitivity has also been related to **rumination** in a meta-analysis of 21 studies (N=6868).[34] A significant correlation (r=.43) was reported for the rumination-rejection sensitivity relationship in this meta-analysis. Rejection sensitivity and rumination were noted to share cognitive features. The shared cognitive features included negative biases and repetitive self – focused thinking. Although rejection sensitivity and rumination have been described as conceptually distinct, they are likely reciprocal effects with rejection sensitivity leading to rumination and rumination leading to rejection sensitivity.

Potential underlying biological mechanism for rejection sensitivity

Only one study appeared in this current literature on a potential underlying biological mechanism for rejection sensitivity. In this research entitled "Behavioral and neural responses to social rejection"', three brain regions of interest were notably activated in the fMRIs of the sample (N= 500).[35] The three brain regions included the **anterior insula, the prefrontal cortex and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.** These brain regions reputedly work together to manage emotions, body awareness and complex thinking. The prefrontal cortex handles high-level thoughts in decision-making, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex controls working memory, and the anterior insula links inner body feelings with emotions.

Methodological limitations of this literature

Several methodological limitations can be noted for this current literature on rejection sensitivity. They include the almost exclusive sampling of university students, the cross-sectional research design, the exclusively negative effects and the data analysis primarily based on mediation/moderation modeling. Most of the samples were comprised of university students and most of the university samples came from China. That limits the generalizability of the data to other age groups and to samples from other countries.

Most of the assessments were self-report/surveys that were conducted in cross-sectional rather than longitudinal studies. This limited relationships to correlations rather than any causal relationships.

Most of the data analyses were mediation/moderation analyses which involve the arbitrary selection of mediator and moderator variables. They also limit any determination of the relative significance of variables as could be determined in regression analyses or structural equation modeling. In many of the studies, rejection sensitivity, rather than being a predictor variable was treated as a mediator. Rumination was frequently selected as a co-mediator, likely because it frequently follows rejection sensitivity.

Exclusively negative effects were reported, and those were typically aggression and some form of suicidality. Only five studies focused on risk variables, and they typically involved childhood maltreatment. Only one potential underlying biological mechanism study could be found, and no intervention studies appeared in this current literature on rejection sensitivity which was surprising given the severity of rejection sensitivity effects. Interventions such as cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, somatic therapies and mindfulness-based practices might be helpful for targeting rejection sensitivity. Despite these methodological limitations, this current literature on rejection sensitivity was informative and has suggested future directions for research on rejection sensitivity.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflicts of interest.

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