

Rejection sensitivity, aggression and self-confidence in the friendzone and other opposite sex relationships among young adults in India

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ABSTRACT

People are said to be put into the friendzone when they are attracted to and want to pursue a romantic relationship with a friend but this friend only wants a platonic relationship. The objective of the present study was to determine the relationship between rejection sensitivity, aggression and self-confidence for participants in different types of opposite sex relationships, viz., single; in a romantic relationship; or in the friendzone. It also aimed to discover whether any significant difference existed between gender and opposite sex relationship groups for the three dependent variables. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 180 undergraduate students, between 18-24 years, out of whom 60 were placed in each category of relationship. The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire and two sub-scales of the Personal Evaluation Inventory were used. Gender differences were found in levels of aggression and self-confidence. Participants in romantic relationships displayed significantly higher romantic self-confidence than people in the friendzone and single participants. Participants in the friendzone showed significantly higher rejection sensitivity than those in romantic relationships. Aggression displayed a significant negative relationship with either dimension of self-confidence for all three relationships. Rejection sensitivity showed significant positive relationship with anger for single participants. With certain acts of aggression becoming commonplace across the world, this study aims to rationalize them as adverse responses to perceived romantic rejection and low self-confidence based on the opposite sex relationships young adults share.

Keywords: *Aggression, Friendzone, Opposite Sex Relationships, Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Confidence, Young Adults*

A relatively new development in the age-old question of whether men and women can be just friends is the friendzone. People are said to be placed in the friendzone when they are attracted to and want to pursue either a romantic or sexual relationship with a friend, but this friend only wants a platonic relationship (Chapman, 2014). Studies show

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that compared to the opposite sex, women more often reported having been in an opposite-sex friendship in which their friend was romantically attracted to them but they did not reciprocate the attraction (Bleske & Buss, 2000). It is important to note that the friendzone involves a unique aspect of having a person reject one form of interpersonal relationship to pursue another.

Rejection elicits level-headedness and composure from some and hostility, dejection, emotional withdrawal, and jealousy from others (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Leary, 2015). Rejection sensitivity is a term used to quantify and categorize such reactions to rejection. At the core of rejection sensitivity lies the anxious expectation of being rejected by people who are important to oneself. The term high-rejection-sensitive (HRS) is used to describe people who show an inclination to anxiously expect, perceive, and give an exaggerated response to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). HRS men tend to be jealous and controlling while HRS women tend to show negativity or diminished positivity (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). Rejection and social exclusion violate a fundamental human need for affiliation and to belong which thus instigates defensive, aggressive coping behaviour (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001).

Human aggression is any behaviour carried out with the proximate intent to cause harm to another individual with awareness that the behaviour will harm the target (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Geen, 2001; Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993). Harsh and unjustified criticism, such as that perceived when being rejected romantically, is a powerful form of provocation (Baron & Richardson, 1994). Aggression is also triggered when actions by others are perceived to threaten status or public image (Griskevicius et al., 2009). The most extreme forms of relational aggression have been in the form of sexual assault and acid attacks while milder forms include flirting with others to induce jealousy, or embarrassing one's significant other in public. Individuals who were found to have stable, secure attachment styles exhibited less aggressive behaviour and significantly higher scores on self-confidence measures for physical appearance, social skills, and confidence in romantic relationships (Lopez & Gormley, 2002; Bloodworth, 2015).

Self-confidence is the conviction that one is able to think, to judge and to correct one's errors with competence (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015; Yi & La, 2003). Self-confidence may be measured as general or specific. Specific self-confidence is defined as a person's self-stated confidence in their abilities in a specific context at a given point of time, whereas general self-confidence is defined as self-stated confidence irrespective of any specific context (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015). Self-confidence may be greatly affected by unrequited love especially for the jilted lover (Baumeister et. al., 1993). Loneliness, which is linked closely to high rejection sensitivity and aggression (Check, Perlman & Malamuth, 1985) has also been found to be predicted by low levels of general self-confidence (Cheng & Furnham, 2002).

This study aims to draw a relationship between aggression, rejection sensitivity and self-confidence in the midst of numerous acts of violence being directly or indirectly linked to rejection. It aims to study the relationship between rejection sensitivity, aggression and self-confidence among heterosexual young adults based on their opposite sex relationship i.e. being single, in the friendzone, or in a romantic relationship. It also focuses on identifying differences between males and females as well as the three opposite-sex relationships for these variables.

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Objectives

1. To find out whether there is any relationship between rejection sensitivity and the four dimensions of aggression (viz., physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility) or the two dimensions of self-confidence (viz., romantic and appearance) among male and female undergraduates based on the nature of their opposite-sex relationship i.e., whether they have been placed in the friend zone, are in romantic relationships or are single.
2. To find out whether there is any relationship between appearance self-confidence and the four dimensions of aggression (viz., physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility) among male and female undergraduates based on the nature of their opposite-sex relationship i.e., whether they have been placed in the friend zone, are in romantic relationships or are single.
3. To find out whether there is any relationship between romantic self-confidence and the four dimensions of aggression (viz., physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, hostility) among male and female undergraduates based on the nature of their opposite-sex relationship i.e., whether they have been placed in the friend zone, are in romantic relationships or are single.
4. To find out whether there is any difference in the levels of rejection sensitivity between the three opposite-sex relationship groups.
5. To find out whether there is any difference in the levels of aggression and its four dimensions (viz. anger, hostility, physical aggression and verbal aggression) between the three opposite-sex relationship groups.
6. To find out whether there is any difference in the levels of self-confidence and its two dimensions (viz., romantic and appearance) between the three opposite-sex relationship groups.
7. To find out whether there is any difference in levels of rejection sensitivity between men and women.
8. To find out whether there is any difference in levels of aggression and its four dimensions (viz., anger, hostility, physical aggression and verbal aggression) between men and women.
9. To find out whether there is any difference in levels of the two dimensions of self-confidence (viz., romantic and appearance) between men and women.

Hypotheses

- H1: There is a significant difference in the levels of rejection sensitivity between the participants based on their opposite sex relationship group.
- H2: There is a significant difference in the levels of aggression between the participants based on their opposite sex relationship group.
- H3: There is a significant difference in the levels of self-confidence between participants based on their opposite sex relationship group.
- H4: There is a significant difference in the levels of rejection sensitivity between men and women.
- H5: There is a significant difference in the levels of aggression between men and women.
- H6: There is a significant difference in the levels of self-confidence between men and women.
- H7a: There is a significant relationship between the levels of rejection sensitivity and self-confidence in single men and women.
- H7b: There is a significant relationship between the levels of rejection sensitivity and aggression for people who are single.

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- H8: There is a significant relationship between the levels of aggression and self-confidence in single men and women.
- H9a: There is a significant relationship between the levels of rejection sensitivity and self-confidence for people who have been placed in the friendzone.
- H9b: There is a significant relationship between the levels of rejection sensitivity and aggression for people who have been placed in the friendzone.
- H10: There is a significant relationship between the levels of aggression and self-confidence for people who have been placed in the friendzone.
- H11a: There is a significant relationship between the levels of rejection sensitivity and self-confidence for people who are in romantic relationships.
- H11b: There is a significant relationship between the levels of rejection sensitivity and aggression for people who are in romantic relationships.
- H12: There is a significant relationship between the levels of aggression and self-confidence for people who are in romantic relationships.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Sample

For the present study, 180 college students, 90 men and 90 women, aged between 18 and 24 years were randomly selected from different colleges from 10 metropolitan cities of India. The sample was divided into 3 groups:

- Group 1: 30 males and 30 females who are in romantic relationships.
- Group 2: 30 males and 30 females who have been placed in the friendzone.
- Group 3: 30 males and 30 females who are single and may or may not be friends with the opposite sex.

Inclusion Criteria

- Age of the subjects: 18-24 years
- Educational qualification of the subjects: Pursuing undergraduate studies
- Residing in different urban cities of India

Exclusion criteria

- Undergraduate students in open relationships.
- Undergraduate students in 'friends with benefits' relationships.
- Undergraduate students who are unsure of their relationship status.
- Undergraduate students in more than one romantic relationship.
- Undergraduate students in same-sex relationships

Instruments

- 1. Information Schedule:** Participants were asked to provide certain personal details such as age, sex, family information (Number of siblings), the physical and psychological health of the respondents as well as their family members.
- 2. Friend-zone Screener:** It is a survey consisting of 7 questions designed to find the nature of the relationship of the participant with the opposite sex and the emotions experienced when and if placed in the friend zone. It is a modification of the screener from a study by Chapman (2014).
- 3. Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire:** The self-report questionnaire was published in 1996 by Downey, G., and Feldman, S. I. to measure Rejection Sensitivity. It consists of 18 questions divided into two sub-questions which are to be answered on a Likert scale of 6 with the 1 denoting 'Very unconcerned' and 6 denoting 'Very concerned' in the

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first sub-question a. and 1 denoting 'Very unlikely' and 6 denoting 'Very likely' in the second sub-question b. For scoring, one must calculate a score of rejection sensitivity for each situation by multiplying the level of rejection concern (the response to question a.) by the reverse of the level of acceptance expectancy (the response to question b.). The formula is: rejection sensitivity = (rejection concern) * (7-acceptance expectancy). Take the mean of the resulting 18 scores to obtain the overall rejection sensitivity score for the 8-item questionnaire. Higher scores indicate higher rejection sensitivity with the mean being 9.69. The range of scores is 1 (low) to 36 (high).

4. **Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire:** This self-report questionnaire was published in 1992 by Buss, A.H. and Perry, M to measure aggression. It consists of 29 questions with 4 subscales viz. Physical aggression (9 questions), Verbal aggression (5 questions), Anger (7 questions) and Hostility (8 questions). It uses a Likert scale of 5 with 1 being 'Extremely uncharacteristic' and 5 being 'Extremely characteristic'. The two questions with the asterisk are reverse scored. The Aggression Scale consists of 4 factors, Physical Aggression (PA), Verbal Aggression (VA), Anger (A) and Hostility (H). The total score for Aggression is the sum of the factor scores. A higher score indicates higher aggression with the mean for females being 68.2 and for males being 77.8. The range of scores is 25 (low) to 145 (high).
5. **Personal Evaluation Inventory:** The self-report inventory was published in 1995 by Shrauger and Schohn which measures self-confidence. It consists of 8 subscales namely, General, Speaking, Romantic, Athletics, Social, Appearance, Academic, and Mood with a total of 54 questions. However, this study made use of only Romantic and Appearance sub-scales, i.e., 14 questions. It uses a Likert scale of 4 with 1 indicating 'Strongly Disagree' and 4 indicating 'Strongly Agree'. The range of scores is 14 (low) to 96 (high). The questions with the asterisk are reverse scored. The total score is the sum of the factor scores. Higher scores indicate greater perceived self-confidence with the mean for females under the romantic sub-scale being 18.69 and for men being 17.26 while the mean for females under the appearance subscale is 18.54 and for men is 19.67.

Research Design

The present study is a quantitative study in which the nature of the participant's opposite sex relationship (viz., being single, placed in the friendzone or in a romantic relationship) is treated as the Independent Variable, and rejection sensitivity, aggression, measured in terms of four dimensions (viz., physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility) and self-confidence measured in terms of two dimensions (viz., appearance and romantic) are treated as the Dependent Variables. This study adopts a correlational design to determine whether there is any significant relationship between rejection sensitivity, the two dimensions of self-confidence and the four dimensions of aggression in the undergraduate students in different opposite sex relationships. Two-way ANOVA is used to find the gender differences and difference in the three opposite sex relationships between the three dependent variables i.e. rejection sensitivity, aggression and self-confidence. The study also adopts a between-groups design to observe whether male and female undergraduate students experience different rejection sensitivity levels, aggression levels and self-confidence levels based on the nature of their opposite sex relationship.

Procedure

After selecting the measures, arrangements were made for data collection. The questionnaires and the Information Schedule were prepared and organized. The authorities of the different colleges were contacted for permission to collect data. The researcher visited

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the colleges on the scheduled dates. Rapport was established with the students, and they were made aware that their participation in the study was purely voluntary. They were assured of maintaining confidentiality throughout the study. The students who agreed to participate in the study were requested to sign an ‘Informed Consent Form’. Next, the Information Schedule was administered. The students who met the sampling criteria were screened. Then, the instructions for the questionnaires (namely, the RSQ, BPAQ, and PEI) were given first and the subjects were requested to respond to the items. There was no fixed time limit for any of the questionnaires. However, the respondents were asked to complete each questionnaire in about 30 minutes.

Means and standard deviations of the dimension of rejection sensitivity, the dimensions of aggression (viz. physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility) and self-confidence (viz. romantic and appearance) were computed for the groups separately. Two-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether men and women belonging to the three different opposite sex relationships (viz. being single, being placed in the friend zone and being in a romantic relationship) differ with respect to the dimensions of rejection sensitivity, aggression, and self-confidence. Product Moment Correlation was computed to determine whether there is any significant correlation between the dimensions of rejection sensitivity, aggression, and self-confidence in men and women belonging to the three opposite sex relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1a- ANOVA table indicating the significant difference in the levels of rejection sensitivity, the four dimensions of aggression and two dimensions of self-confidence with respect to the three opposite sex relationships and gender.

Variables	Gender		F	Relationship Status			F	Relationship Status*Gender
	Male	Female		Single	Friend zone	Relationship		F
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		F
Rejection Sensitivity	10.10 (3.05)	9.76 (3.18)	0.54	10.35 (3.00)	10.39 (3.69)	9.05 (2.37)	3.70*	1.55
Physical Aggression	25.88 (6.79)	23.08 (6.85)	7.56*	23.40 (6.63)	25.42 (7.30)	24.62 (6.85)	1.33	0.36
Verbal Aggression	17.22 (3.87)	15.83 (4.16)	5.47*	15.97 (4.13)	17.45 (3.98)	16.17 (4.00)	2.45	1.07
Anger	20.24 (5.54)	20.49 (4.99)	0.10	19.55 (5.39)	20.75 (5.13)	20.80 (5.26)	1.07	0.02
Hostility	24.54 (7.10)	25.62 (6.42)	1.13	25.02 (6.30)	25.32 (6.32)	24.92 (7.70)	0.06	0.87
Romantic Self-Confidence	17.70 (3.88)	17.02 (3.84)	1.528	16.28 (3.63)	16.83 (2.98)	18.97 (4.38)	8.91*	2.13
Appearance Self-Confidence	20.13 (4.20)	18.72 (4.25)	5.07*	19.32 (4.01)	18.83 (4.00)	20.13 (4.73)	1.47	1.39

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$ df for gender=1 df for relationship status=2

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Table 1b- Post-hoc table indicating the significant difference in the levels of rejection sensitivity and romantic self-confidence with respect to the three opposite sex relationships.

Variables	Relationship Status (I)	Relationship Status (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)
Rejection Sensitivity	Friend zone	Single	.0426
		Romantic Relationship	1.3370*
Romantic Self-Confidence	Romantic	Single	2.6833*
	Relationship	Friend zone	2.1333*

Table 2- Correlation between the levels of rejection sensitivity, four dimensions of aggression and the two dimensions of self-confidence for the three opposite sex relationships. (N=60)

Variables	Total Rejection Sensitivity	Total Physical Aggression	Total Verbal Aggression	Total Anger	Total Hostility	Total Self Confidence (Romantic)	Total Self Confidence (Appearance)
Single	Total Rejection Sensitivity	.144	-.042	.256*	.227	-.169	-.183
	Total Physical Aggression		.286*	.506**	.284*	-.243	-.280*
	Total Verbal Aggression			.429**	.339**	.012	-.112
	Total Anger				.472**	-.312*	-.307*
	Total Hostility					-.267*	-.355**
Friend zone	Total Self Confidence (Romantic)						.326*
	Total Self Confidence (Appearance)						
	Total Rejection Sensitivity	-.020	.196	.144	.153	-.109	.085
	Total Physical Aggression		.453**	.558**	.359**	.099	-.048
	Total Verbal Aggression			.504**	.467**	.067	.029
Romantic Relationship	Total Anger				.420**	.013	-.237
	Total Hostility					-.380**	-.348**
	Total Self Confidence (Romantic)						.241
	Total Self Confidence (Appearance)						
	Total Rejection Sensitivity	.068	-.080	.024	.115	-.099	-.201
Romantic Relationship	Total Physical Aggression		.308*	.498**	.379**	-.053	.035
	Total Verbal Aggression			.507**	.105	.060	.038
	Total Anger				.439**	-.245	-.029
	Total Hostility					-.467**	-.401**
	Total Self Confidence (Romantic)						.472**
Total Self Confidence (Appearance)							

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$

df for gender=1, df for relationship status=2

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A significant difference in the levels of rejection sensitivity between the three opposite sex relationships ($F=3.70$, $p<0.05$) is found from tables 1a and 1b. Young adults in the friendzone ($M=10.39$) exhibited significantly higher rejection sensitivity and thus anxiously expected and perceived rejection more frequently and strongly than people in romantic relationships ($M=9.05$). This is supported by the rejection sensitivity model which proposes that experiences of rejection, whether active or passive, can sensitize people to the possibility of rejection thus inducing anxious expectations of rejection (Downey et al., 1998). In fact, in a study conducted by Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk and Kang (2010), it was found that healthy, happy relationships may lead to decreases in RS over time. Additionally, men ($M=24.20$; $M=16.56$) were found to be significantly ($F=7.56$, $p<0.01$; $F=5.46$, $p<0.05$) more physically and verbally aggressive than women ($M=22.60$; $M=15.36$), in keeping with the results of previous research studies (Rosenthal, 1978; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Bettencourt & Miller, 1996). Psychological theorists claim that gender differences in aggression may arise from biological differences in aggressive readiness (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Male gender role norms and honor beliefs that expect men to be tough and violent often encourage aggression even under conditions of minimal justification (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Stratmoen, Greer, Martens, & Saucier, 2018). Moreover, previous studies demonstrate that women report more guilt and anxiety about behaving aggressively than men do, which may thus increase their tendency to avoid such behaviour (Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977).

Table 1a also makes clear that men ($M=19.76$) possessed significantly ($F=5.07$, $p<0.05$) higher appearance self-confidence than women ($M=18.86$). General self-confidence was also found to be higher in men in previous research studies (Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Webster, Ellis & Bryan, 2004). Also, people in a romantic relationship were found to have significantly ($F=8.91$, $p<0.01$) higher levels of romantic self-confidence ($M=18.96$) than those placed in the friendzone ($M=16.83$) and those who were single ($M=16.28$). This means that the self-perceived competence of people in romantic relationships in dealing successfully with 'romantic' situations is higher than that of people in the friendzone and their single counterparts. People in higher-quality interpersonal relationships often report higher levels of self-esteem as well (Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, and van Aken, 2008). Thus, these observations show that hypotheses **H1**, **H3**, **H5** and **H6** are accepted while the hypotheses **H2** and **H4** are rejected.

Table 2 shows a significant positive correlation between rejection sensitivity and anger in single men and women ($r=0.256$, $p<0.05$). Literature reveals rejection sensitivity has often been recognized as a risk factor for anger (Ayduk et al., 1999; Downey et al., 1998; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). A significant negative correlation is also found between appearance self-confidence and physical aggression in single men and women ($r= -0.28$, $p<0.05$) from table 2. Additionally, there exists a significant negative correlation between romantic self-confidence and anger ($r= -0.31$, $p<0.05$), between appearance self-confidence and anger ($r= -0.31$, $p<0.05$) and between romantic self-confidence and hostility ($r= -0.27$, $p<0.05$) in single men and women. A significant negative correlation is also found between appearance self-confidence and hostility in single men and women ($r= -0.35$, $p<0.01$) from table 2. Previous studies too found lonely males to express more hostility towards women (Check, Perlman & Malamuth, 1985). Lonely individuals have also been found to 'turn off' potential friends, leading to rejection or non-acceptance.

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Moreover, a significant negative correlation exists between romantic self-confidence and hostility ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.01$) as well as between appearance self-confidence and hostility among participants in the friendzone ($r = -0.35$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that people in the friendzone who have less romantic self-confidence are more likely to exhibit greater hostility.

Lastly, table 2 shows a significant negative correlation between romantic self-confidence and hostility ($r = -0.47$, $p < 0.01$) as well as between appearance self-confidence and hostility in men and women in romantic relationships ($r = -0.40$, $p < 0.01$). This implies people in relationships who exhibit less hostile behavior are more likely to be more self-confident in their appearance and romantic abilities. Thus, hypotheses **H7b** is partially accepted; **H8**, **H10** and **H12** are accepted; and hypotheses **H7a**, **H9 (a & b)** and **H11 (a & b)** are not.

CONCLUSION

The data collected shows a relationship between low aggression levels, higher self-confidence and lower rejection sensitivity for young adults based on their relationship status and gender. The self-confidence and rejection sensitivity of individuals placed in the friendzone were affected greatly. Furthermore, this study aims to act as a precursor to research on violence against the opposite sex due to romantic rejection. With an increase in acid attack and sexual assault cases linked to rejection, there is a need to study what behaviors may be a trigger as well as how to recognize and prevent them. In future studies, differences between people who have been outright rejected and who have been placed in the friend zone may be drawn.

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Conflict of Interest

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