

Research Paper

Understanding Self-Esteem among Victims of Dating Violence in Emerging Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Dating violence is a significant concern during emerging adulthood and can adversely affect psychological well-being, including self-esteem. The present study examined self-esteem among emerging adult victims of dating violence and investigated its relationship with psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion. The study also examined whether these dimensions significantly predicted self-esteem. Participants were emerging adults aged 18–26 years who had been involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least two months. Data were collected using purposive sampling. Dating violence was assessed using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2), and self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple linear regression were conducted. Findings indicated that minor psychological aggression was the most frequently experienced form of dating violence ($M = 21.37$, $SD = 2.65$), followed by minor physical assault ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 9.05$) and severe psychological aggression ($M = 12.95$, $SD = 4.97$). Self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with minor psychological aggression, $r = -.279$, $p < .05$, but was not significantly associated with other dimensions of dating violence. Several dimensions of dating violence were significantly positively intercorrelated, indicating that different forms of victimization may co-occur. $F(6, 51) = 1.464$, $p = .209$, although the predictors collectively explained 14.7% of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = .147$). None of the individual dimensions significantly predicted self-esteem. The findings suggest that psychological aggression may be particularly relevant to self-esteem, while the relationship between dating violence and self-esteem is complex and may involve the co-occurrence of multiple forms of victimization.

Keywords: *Dating Violence, Self-Esteem, Emerging Adulthood, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Sexual Coercion*

The young population today is experiencing significant social and developmental changes, particularly during the period of emerging adulthood (18–25 years), which is characterized by exploration in relationships, identity development, and increased independence (Arnett, 2009). In metropolitan areas, emerging adults are more likely to engage in social interactions and romantic relationships, with dating becoming increasingly common. In Western societies, romantic relationships are often considered an important

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aspect of adolescent and emerging adult development (Collins et al., 2009). Dating has become more commonplace in modern times, despite being viewed as less acceptable or even taboo in some countries in earlier decades (Varma & Mathur, 2015). Similarly, dating relationships have gained greater acceptance in Indian societies due to globalization, Westernization, and the expansion of internet use. These relationships are now recognized as important contexts for personal and emotional development rather than being viewed as temporary or insignificant experiences (Smetana et al., 2006).

Dating violence (DV), defined as a pattern of abusive behaviours occurring within romantic relationships that may result in physical, emotional, or psychological harm, has emerged as a significant public health concern worldwide (Siddaiah et al., 2025). Dating violence can affect both victims and perpetrators and commonly occurs in three major forms: psychological, physical, and sexual violence. Psychological violence involves non-physical behaviours intended to harm a partner's emotional and psychological well-being, including manipulation, emotional abuse, controlling behaviours, isolation, denial, and harassment (Cherrier et al., 2023). Physical violence refers to the intentional use of physical force against a partner, which may result in injury or, in severe cases, death. Such behaviours include acts such as hitting, slapping, punching, grabbing, or restricting a partner's movement (Saltzman et al., 1999).

Research indicates that emerging adults are particularly vulnerable to experiencing dating violence. Studies suggest that both men and women may engage in and experience psychological and physical forms of dating violence, highlighting that DV is not limited to one gender (Ayu et al., 2022). Dating violence has been associated with several adverse psychological outcomes. Victims of violent relationships have been found to experience difficulties such as post-traumatic stress symptoms, dissociation, anxiety, depression, and emotional distress (Callahan et al., 2003). Furthermore, dating violence among young people has been linked to dangerous behaviors such as substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, having multiple sexual partners, and forced sexual experiences (Howard & Wang, 2003).

Dating violence during emerging adulthood may contribute to several negative outcomes, including poor relationship quality, substance use, academic difficulties, depression, and anxiety (Hancock et al., 2017). Although discussions surrounding intimate partner violence frequently emphasize physical assault, psychological aggression, sexual violence, and controlling behaviours have received comparatively less attention. Furthermore, the effects of different forms of intimate partner violence on broader aspects of psychological well-being remain insufficiently explored (Matheson et al., 2015).

Self-esteem represents an important aspect of psychological well-being and refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their self-worth and self-perception. Exposure to emotional abuse, manipulation, and controlling behaviours in abusive relationships may negatively influence an individual's self-esteem and identity. Victims of emotional abuse may experience feelings of loneliness, guilt, confusion, fear, reduced self-worth, and diminished self-identity (Matheson et al., 2015). Similarly, previous research has demonstrated that dating violence victimization is associated with negative effects on self-worth and self-concept (Rill et al., 2009).

Dating violence is considered a complex and multifactorial phenomenon influenced by various psychological and behavioural factors. Previous studies have linked DV with substance use, suicidal behaviours, alcohol consumption, sexual risk behaviours, unwanted

pregnancies, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and eating-related difficulties (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Caballo et al., 2018; Eshelman & Levendosky, 2012; Holmes & Sher, 2013; Howard et al., 2013; Silverman et al., 2004). Among these factors, self-esteem has been identified as an important predictor associated with dating violence victimization. Research conducted among adolescents and young adults in different cultural contexts, including Spain and the United States, suggests that lower self-esteem is associated with increased vulnerability to dating violence and negatively affects victims' self-concept and self-image (Bolívar-Suárez et al., 2022).

Despite increasing recognition of dating violence as a major concern among emerging adults, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, much of the previous research has focused primarily on physical violence, while psychological aggression, sexual coercion, and their associations with self-esteem require further investigation. Second, limited research has examined how different forms and severity levels of dating violence are associated with self-esteem among emerging adults, particularly within the Indian sociocultural context. Third, gender-related differences in the relationship between self-esteem and dating violence victimization remain unclear and require further exploration. Therefore, the present study aims to enhance understanding of the relationship between self-esteem and dating violence victimization among emerging adults by examining how different forms of dating violence relate to individuals' self-perceptions and psychological well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the level of self-esteem among victims of dating violence in emerging adulthood.
2. To examine the prevalence and severity of different forms of dating violence (psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion) experienced by emerging adults.
3. To examine the relationship between self-esteem and different dimensions of dating violence among victims in emerging adulthood.
4. To determine whether dimensions of dating violence significantly predict self-esteem among victims in emerging adulthood.

Hypotheses

- **H₀₁:** There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and the dimensions of dating violence among victims in emerging adulthood.
- **H₀₂:** The dimensions of dating violence (psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion) do not significantly predict self-esteem among victims in emerging adulthood.

Sample

The present study comprises of emerging adult who are victims of dating violence aged between 18 to 26 years. The emerging adults who were in a heterosexual romantic relationship for at least two months' duration were considered. Commitment levels were permitted to range from casual dating to cohabiting or engaged, but excluded marital relationship. The sample of the study consisted of 58 participants, which included 28 males and 31 females from Mumbai region. Purposive sampling method was employed to collect the desired data.

Tool used in the Study

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996) is a 78-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure the frequency of psychological, physical, sexual, and injurious perpetration and victimization in romantic relationships within the last year. Instructions were modified to only assess violence in participants' current relationships. The severity of IPV victimization of emerging adults was categorized into three groups (absence, minor only or severe) for each form of violence, psychological, physical and sexual.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale by Morris Rosenberg (1965) is used to measure self-esteem among the emerging adults. It consists of 10 items. The self-esteem is scored as a Likert scale. The response to each of the 10 items is based on a four-point scale namely "Strongly Agree" (SA), "Agree" (A), "Disagree" (D) and "Strongly Disagree" (SD). The test re-test reliability is 0.85.

RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Self-Esteem and Dating Violence among emerging adults

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Self-Esteem	12.22	2.35
Minor Psychological Aggression	21.37	2.65
Severe Psychological Aggression	12.95	4.97
Minor Physical Assault	13.00	9.05
Physical Assault (Severe)	2.90	3.04
Sexual Coercion (Minor)	7.10	5.43
Sexual Coercion (Severe)	4.10	4.23

As shown in Table 1 descriptive statistics, participants' mean self-esteem score was 12.22 ($SD = 2.35$). Minor psychological aggression had the highest mean score ($M = 21.37$, $SD = 2.65$) among the several types of dating violence, indicating that it was the most common type of victimization in the sample. Minor physical assault ($M = 13.00$, $SD = 9.05$) and severe psychological violence ($M = 12.95$, $SD = 4.97$) came next. Participants reported comparatively lower levels of physical assault ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 3.04$), severe sexual coercion ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 4.23$), and minor sexual coercion ($M = 7.10$, $SD = 5.43$). The comparatively high standard deviations for sexual coercion and physical assault show significant variation in individuals' experiences of various types of dating violence.

Table 2 Intercorrelation Among Dating Violence Dimensions and Self-Esteem Among emerging adults

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-Esteem	—					
2. Minor Psychological Aggression	-.279*	—				
3. Severe Psychological Aggression	-.173	.140	—			
4. Minor Physical Assault	-.157	-.068	.724**	—		
5. Severe Physical Assault	-.111	-.094	.202	.277*	—	
6. Minor Sexual Coercion	-.111	-.150	.631**	.843**	.240	—
7. Severe Sexual Coercion	.069	-.253	.413**	.582**	.145	.713**

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .05$.

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Pearson's correlation analysis (Table 2) focused on the associations between the different aspects of dating violence and self-esteem. Participants who experienced higher levels of minor psychological aggression also tended to report lower levels of self-esteem, as seen by the substantial negative association between self-esteem and minor psychological aggression. Severe psychological violence, minor or severe physical assault, and minor or severe sexual coercion, however, did not substantially correlate with self-esteem.

Among the dating violence dimensions, several significant positive correlations were observed. Severe psychological aggression was strongly associated with minor physical assault, $r = .724$, $p < .01$, minor sexual coercion, $r = .631$, $p < .01$, and severe sexual coercion, $r = .413$, $p < .01$. Minor physical assault showed strong positive relationships with minor sexual coercion, $r = .843$, $p < .01$, and severe sexual coercion, $r = .582$, $p < .01$, as well as a moderate positive association with severe physical assault, $r = .277$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, minor and severe sexual coercion were strongly positively correlated, $r = .713$, $p < .01$.

Overall, these findings suggest that while only minor psychological aggression was significantly associated with reduced self-esteem, different forms of dating violence tended to co-occur, particularly psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion.

Table 3 Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Self-Esteem from Dating Violence Dimensions among emerging adults.

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	p
Minor Psychological Aggression	-.243	.125	-.276	-1.946	.057				
Severe Psychological Aggression	-.011	.093	-.023	-.117	.907				
Minor Physical Assault	-.022	.072	-.085	-.308	.759	.147	.047	1.464	.209
Severe Physical Assault	-.062	.105	-.080	-.593	.556				
Minor Sexual Coercion	-.088	.122	-.201	-.720	.475				
Severe Sexual Coercion	.113	.105	.204	1.077	.286				

To determine if the six aspects of dating violence significantly predicted emerging adults' self-esteem, multiple linear regression analysis was employed. The combined characteristics of dating violence were not significant predictors of self-esteem, according to the overall regression model, which was not statistically significant $F(6, 51) = 1.464$, $p = .209$.

14.7% of the variance in self-esteem was explained by the model ($R^2 = .147$). However, after adjusting for the number of factors in the model, the adjusted R^2 was .047, meaning that the predictors explained about 4.7% of the variance in self-esteem. Therefore, the total predictive value was not statistically significant even though the model explained a tiny percentage of the variance.

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Minor psychological aggression showed the highest standardized regression coefficient ($\beta = -.276$, $p = .057$) among individual predictors. This implies a negative association in which low levels of self-esteem were often linked to increased exposure to mild psychological aggression. Nevertheless, the standard level of statistical significance ($p < .05$) was not reached by this result. Therefore, rather than being a strong predictor of self-esteem, modest psychological aggressiveness should be seen as reflecting a marginal or near-significant tendency.

There were slight negative correlations between self-esteem and severe psychological aggression ($\beta = -.023$, $p = .907$), minor physical assault ($\beta = -.085$, $p = .759$), and severe physical assault ($\beta = -.080$, $p = .556$), but none of these factors significantly contributed to the prediction of self-esteem. Similarly, self-esteem was inversely correlated with modest sexual coercion ($\beta = -.201$, $p = .475$), although this correlation was not statistically significant. Severe sexual coercion and self-esteem showed a slight but positive connection ($\beta = .204$, $p = .286$) that was not statistically significant.

Overall, the findings indicate that, when included in the regression equation, none of the six aspects of dating violence were significant predictors of self-esteem on their own. Minor psychological aggressiveness had the strongest negative correlation with self-esteem, and the correlation came close to statistical significance, but there was insufficient data to draw the conclusion that it was a significant independent predictor. The non-significant overall model may suggest that factors other than dating violence experiences—such as interpersonal support, coping strategies, relationship attributes, personality traits, and other more general psychological or social processes—have an impact on emerging adult self-esteem. Additionally, when multiple kinds of dating violence are included simultaneously in the regression model, the overlap between them may lessen each dimension's distinct predictive impact.

DISCUSSION

This study focused on the relationship between several aspects of dating violence among emerging adults and self-esteem. Experiencing more instances of small psychological aggression was inversely correlated with self-esteem ($r = -.279$). This research suggests that actions like emotional manipulation, controlling behaviors, humiliation, and insults may have a detrimental effect on a person's sense of self-worth. The result is in line with earlier studies that have shown a connection between psychological violence and reduced psychological functioning and self-esteem (Hernández-Lorenzo et al., 2023).

However, there was no discernible relationship between self-esteem and severe sexual coercion, minor and severe physical assault, or severe psychological aggressiveness. This does not necessarily imply that there are no psychological effects because the relationship may be affected by other factors such as psychological distress, coping, social support, and relationship functioning (Cherrier et al., 2023).

Several aspects of dating violence showed a high association with one another. Severe psychological violence was positively connected with minor physical assault ($r = .724$), mild sexual coercion ($r = .631$), and severe sexual coercion ($r = .413$). Minor physical assault was also substantially correlated with both minor and severe sexual coercion ($r = .843$ and $.582$, respectively), even though there was a significant association between minor and severe sexual coercion ($r = .713$). These findings suggest that several forms of dating violence may happen in tandem rather than independently (Hernández-Lorenzo et al., 2023).

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Multiple regression analysis revealed that the six dating violence aspects did not substantially predict self-esteem ($F(6, 51) = 1.464, p = .209$). The model explained 14.7% of the variance in self-esteem ($R^2 = .147$) with an adjusted R^2 of .047. Minor psychological hostility exhibited the strongest negative regression coefficient ($\beta = -.276, p = .057$), despite not being a statistically significant independent predictor. Additionally, none of the other predictors were significant.

The significant bivariate connection between minor psychological aggression and self-esteem, followed by its non-significant regression impact, may be explained by the significant overlap among dating violence characteristics. However, multicollinearity cannot be ascertained without VIF and tolerance statistics. Because of the limited sample size ($N = 58$), there might be reduced statistical power. Overall, the findings indicate a complex relationship between dating violence and self-esteem; no dating violence dimension independently predicts self-esteem when considered concurrently, yet small psychological aggression is strongly linked to reduced self-esteem.

The relatively small sample size may have limited the statistical power of the regression analysis. A sample size of 58 participants and six variables may make it difficult to statistically detect relatively small or moderate effects. This notion is particularly relevant to mild psychological aggressiveness, where the standardized coefficient was comparatively greater than those of several other predictors but did not achieve statistical significance ($p = .057$). Future studies with larger sample sizes might have more statistical power to assess if the observed pattern suggests a reliable link.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings suggest that dating violence and self-esteem have a complex relationship. Minor psychological violence was significantly associated with poorer self-esteem at the bivariate level, indicating the possible importance of psychological forms of victimization in understanding self-evaluative functioning among emerging adults. However, none of the six dating violence variables independently predicted self-esteem when considered concurrently in the regression model. The findings suggest that the association between dating violence and self-esteem may not be well explained by a single characteristic of victimization. Rather, the co-occurrence of different forms of dating violence along with more general psychological and interpersonal issues may be the cause of inequalities in self-esteem among emerging adults.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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