EARLY INVALIDATING ENVIRONMENTS PREDICT DATING VIOLENCE

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Abstract

Violence in adolescent dating relationships is a common and serious public health problem that involves a growing number of youth and adolescents worldwide. Over one in three Canadian youth have experienced or perpetrated adolescent dating violence in the past 12 months (Exner Cortens et al., 2021). Prior research on teen dating violence has documented the scope and seriousness of this problem, with a consensus that violence within the context of intimate relationships is emotionally and physically costly to youth. This invalidating environment, combined with others such as childhood maltreatment and peer rejection, can further make youth more vulnerable across different social contexts, with rejection sensitivity being a potential moderator. The associations between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, rejection sensitivity, and dating violence were examined in adolescent dating relationships in a community sample of 331 Canadian adolescents. Using mediation-moderation models, results indicated that there was a direct effect from childhood maltreatment to adolescent dating violence victimization and an indirect effect from childhood maltreatment to adolescent dating violence victimization when accounting for peer rejection. In terms of dating violence perpetration, there was a statistically significant indirect effect when accounting for peer rejection, suggesting that peer rejection fully mediated the relation between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence perpetration. Rejection sensitivity did not moderate these associations. This study is an important step in exploring the interrelated risk factors associated with violence in adolescent relationships that can be used to identify areas for targeted preventative measures for this overlooked and understudied phenomenon in young Canadians.

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of growth and identity development. It is also the time when many youths enter their first romantic relationship. However, not all dating relationships are nurturing. In fact, by age 15-19, 24% of adolescent girls have already experienced intimate partner violence (Johnson et al., 2024; Sarsinha et al., 2022). Although there are no data on the global prevalence findings among adolescent boys, estimates suggest they, too, are at similar risk for victimization and perpetration (Swedo et al., 2019). Due to the amount of time adolescents spend with their parents, peers, and romantic partners, these relationships play a critical role in their psychosocial adjustment. Early experiences of invalidation from peers and family members, such as childhood maltreatment and peer rejection, can lead to violence in other relationships, which, in adolescence, are commonly romantic relationships. This link between poor treatment and violence could be explained by rejection sensitivity which makes individuals sensitive to cues of not being loved or cared for. In the present study, I examined how early invalidating environments such as childhood maltreatment and peer rejection predicted adolescent dating violence (victimization and perpetration). I also examined rejection sensitivity as a moderator of the link between poor treatment and adolescent dating violence.

Literature Review

Attachment Theory

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), individuals are born with an intrinsic drive to seek proximity to caregivers in times of danger and threat to protect them from harm, alleviate stress, and provide comfort (Stover et al., 2018). Interactions with available and responsive attachment figures provide a secure attachment with positive mental representations of self, high self-esteem, and the ability to maintain positive and supporting relationships (Stover et al., 2018). In contrast, unavailable or abusive caregivers promote insecure attachment styles, low self-esteem, a fear of rejection, and dependency on others (Stover et al., 2018). Early attachment evolves with experiences during childhood and adolescence—children form mental representations of their self and interpersonal relationships based on their history with significant caregivers. Specifically, building a cognitive-affective understanding of interpersonal relationships which serves as a prototype for future relationships. Accordingly, caregivers play a

significant role in the mental, physical, and social development of youth. Experiences of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment can derail optimal development in these domains.

Childhood Maltreatment

The World Health Organization (WHO; 2020) defines childhood maltreatment as the abuse and neglect of children under the age of 18 and consists of all types of physical and/or emotional abuse, such as sexual abuse, neglect, and negligence that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power. Harsh parenting (e.g., emotional abuse, neglect) is the most common form of childhood maltreatment and is experienced by 6 in 10 (62%) Canadians before age 15 (Statistics Canada, 2021). All types of child abuse have been associated with mental health problems, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Afifi, 2014), along with impaired cognitive flexibility, difficulty with emotional regulation, and more pervasive psychological sequelae such as personality disorders or complex posttraumatic stress disorder (Vaillancourt et al., 2017). Childhood maltreatment is problematic both in the short and long term. Not only does childhood abuse and violence impact youth themselves, but it can be a means of teaching youth to be violent toward others they are close to, which in adolescence often means romantic partners.

More than 9 in 10 people who experienced childhood physical or sexual abuse said that it was not reported to the police, child protective services, or another agency, and all types of childhood maltreatment were linked to higher rates of violence victimization in adulthood (Statistics Canada, 2021). There is a clear link between adverse childhood experiences and negative outcomes in adulthood, including being a victim of violence (Statistics Canada, 2021). The 2019 General Social Survey (GSS) on victimization measured four types of childhood maltreatment: physical abuse, sexual abuse, witnessing violence in the home, and harsh parenting. Results indicated that each type of violence was associated with a higher risk of victimization in adulthood. Longitudinal data from the 2019 GSS on Canadian Safety (Victimization) of individuals aged 15 or older indicated that women who were abused as children were victimized at a rate four times higher than those who were not abused as children. For men, the rate was twice as high among those who were abused as children, suggesting that violence in one domain (e.g., home) is a significant risk factor for violence in other domains in adulthood.

Like attachment theory, social learning theory (Bandura, 1973) suggests that parents may foster aggressive behaviour in children and adolescents through modelling and reinforcing problematic behaviour. Thus, children who experience harsh parenting, aggression, or view violence as normal, acceptable, or a means of expressing feelings, releasing tension, and exerting control over others may have that behaviour reinforced and rewarded (Bandura, 1973; Hipwell et al., 2014). Researchers have consistently found support for the association between exposure to violence, adolescent aggression, and behavioural problems (Ireland & Smith, 2009). For example, Hamby et al. (2012) reported that caregiver-perpetrated physical abuse was closely associated with dating violence victimization among adolescents aged 12 to 17. This exposure to violence and perpetration of aggressive behaviour in dating relationships has been shown to be moderated by anxious attachment styles (Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010); those with high exposure to family aggression and high anxious attachment had greater perpetration of dating violence, suggesting that both attachment theory and social learning theory play a role in explaining future relationship violence.

Parent-to-child aggression can manifest in a variety of ways, such as inconsistent discipline and psychological control, which have all been associated with physical dating abuse in adolescence (Basting, 2021; Temple et al., 2018). Similarly, parent-adolescent conflict resolution is also associated with later conflict resolution with romantic partners (Collins et al., 2009), meaning unskilled communication and negative emotionality can lead to poor quality interactions with romantic partners. Therefore, youth who have experienced more familial instability, maltreatment, and social disadvantage show an unaccelerated push toward dating violence, most likely due to unmet intimacy needs and rejection (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999) and a weak foundation or prototype of healthy relationships. Consequently, if a child is exposed to violence, they could internalize this behaviour, leading to intergenerational trauma. The intergenerational transmission hypothesis posits that children may later become violent as adults either because they were abused as children or because they witnessed interparental abuse (Foshee et al., 2004; Holt et al., 2008; Markowitz, 2001). That is, adolescents can learn to be violent toward dating partners by observing or internalizing the behaviour of other important role models such as parents (Foshee et al., 2004), implying that violence begets violence.

Childhood Maltreatment and Adolescent Dating Violence

Relationship violence refers to any attempt to control or dominate another person by causing some level of harm, including physical (e.g., hitting, punching, shoving), sexual (e.g., non-consensual sex, unwanted touching), or psychological control (e.g., isolating partner, name-calling, threats; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Adolescent dating violence is characterized by the use and experience of physical aggression. Although less common than psychologically aggressive forms (Smith et al., 2002; Teten et al., 2009), physical aggression is still of concern and can escalate to other types of aggression (Hipwell et al., 2014). Adolescent dating violence is also more likely to be bidirectional (Johnson, 2006; O'Leary et al., 2008), with higher rates of severity and injury (Hipwell et al., 2014; Swahn et al., 2010). A key function of romantic relationships is to make people feel loved and accepted and promote well-being. However, many relationships can be violent and do not service this function (Furman & Feiring, 1999). Provincial data show that physical adolescent dating violence perpetration is prevalent for 18% of girls and 6.2% of boys in Quebec, with psychological adolescent dating violence perpetration being 51.2% for girls and 38% for boys (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021). However, most researchers have focused on individual relationships as opposed to the co-occurrence of developmentally damaging factors such as childhood maltreatment and peer rejection.

During adolescence, many youths enter their first romantic relationship. According to the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, more than four in ten (45%) teens aged 15 to 17 who had reported being in a relationship at some point since the age of 15 had stated that they experienced some form of abuse or violence at the hands of a dating partner. This included equal proportions of teen girls (46%) and teen boys (46%) in this age group and represents almost 142,000 young people across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024). By middle adolescence (ages 14-17), most teens have been involved in at least one romantic relationship and report more frequent interactions with their partners compared to their parents, friends, or siblings (Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Rose, 2015). Historically, adolescence has been described as a developmental period of ‘storm and stress’ (Rubin et al., 2009), resulting in adolescent romantic relationships playing a critical role in psychosocial adjustment and identity development (Basting, 2021). Dating violence during the formative years of adolescence and young adulthood can lead to severe mental health consequences (Bossarte et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2020; Taylor & Mumford, 2016), impacting physical, sexual, reproductive, and social development not only in the short-

term but also long-term, possibly resulting in death (Aparício et al., 2014; Lee at al., 2024). Physical dating violence has been shown to negatively impact interpersonal skills, peer acceptance, and expectations of others in close relationships (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Hipwell et al., 2014). Compared to youth who do not experience teen dating violence in their relationships, those who do are at a higher risk of long-term negative physical and behavioural health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, violence, eating disorders, risky sexual behaviour, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Ackard et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017; Foshee et al., 2013; Lee at al., 2024).

Youth growing up in abusive homes can learn from their families that violence is a tool for maintaining relationships and solving fights (Giordano et al., 2010; Volz & Kerig, 2010; Wolfe et al., 1998). This is likely why, for some, exposure to violence perpetrated by a caregiver in childhood and adolescence is linked to dating violence in adolescents' romantic relationships (Kaura et al., 2004). Witnessing interparental violence or experiencing violence by caregivers is associated with choosing romantic partners that act abusively toward them and to whom they act abusively toward as well (Volz & Kerig, 2010; Wolfe et al., 1998). This pattern allows the cycle of abuse to continue without even realizing the adopted attitudes of accepted violence (Choi et al., 2017). This acceptance of violence can also accompany generations of traditional beliefs regarding male-female relationships, such as the acceptability of male violence against women (Lichter et al., 2004; Truman et al., 1996), which increases the risk of relationship violence and attitudes justifying violence (Lichter et al., 2004). Researchers have noted that among adolescent boys and girls, those who reported more traditional gender roles experienced the highest levels of violence in their romantic relationships (Lichter et al., 2004). This suggests that youth who hold more traditional attitudes about their relationships, such as acceptability of male violence against women, could be more likely to idealize their partners and be less likely to end the relationship following a violent encounter, placing them at a higher risk of on-going violence (Lichter et al., 2004). In this regard, positive attachment is important for healthy interpersonal development, and childhood maltreatment challenges this positive attachment. This leads to a poor foundation and understanding of relationships, which can lead to problematic prototypes for future relationships (i.e., relationships involving adolescent dating violence).

Violence in adolescent dating relationships is a common and serious public health problem that involves a growing number of youth worldwide. Over one in three Canadian youth

have experienced or perpetrated adolescent dating violence in the past 12 months (Exner Cortens et al., 2021). In the United States, 1 in 12 high school students experience physical dating violence or sexual dating violence (CDC, 2020). Between 2009 and 2022, there was an average rate of 239 victims of teen dating violence per 100,000 population. Following a period of decline from 2009 to 2014 (-22%), rates of teen dating violence have increased by 33% since 2015, with similar increases for girl and boy victims (Statistics Canada, 2024). Prior research on teen dating violence has documented the scope and seriousness of this public health problem with a consensus that violence within the context of intimate relationships is emotionally and physically costly to youth (Giordano et al., 2010; Silverman et al., 2001). Similarly, researchers have noted the influence childhood factors such as experiencing abuse and maltreatment have had on adolescent dating violence and have found that witnessing intimate partner violence, childhood physical and sexual abuse, and weak parent-child bonds have all been associated with perpetrating intimate partner violence in the future (Capaldi et al., 2012; Chase et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 2010). On a similar note, adolescents who have been involved in violent dating relationships are also more likely to report positive attitudes toward abuse than those who have not (Henton et al., 1983; Lichter et al., 2004), suggesting that attitudes toward violence can be passed down generationally and can be just as harmful as the violence itself. Specifically, creating a narrative that violent behaviour within all relationships is acceptable both to perpetrate on others and to themselves. This is directly harmful to young and vulnerable adolescents who are exploring their identities and still forming bonds.

Across several exploratory models, there is consensus concerning the developmental foundations for teen dating violence perpetration, including family violence (i.e., maltreatment, domestic violence exposure) along with factors such as poverty, suggesting that parenting styles and unstable romantic relationships are risk factors for teen dating violence (Cohen et al., 2018) and should be studied longitudinally. In 2021, the national prevalence for adolescent dating violence victimization in Canada was 11.8% for physical aggression and 27.8% for psychological aggression, and the highest rate was among youth experiencing social marginalization. Additionally, perpetration prevalence was 7.3% for physical aggression, 9.3% for psychological aggression, and 7.8% for cyber aggression. (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021). Despite this, no national datasets currently report on adolescent dating violence perpetration in Canada, making it more difficult to offer targeted prevention supports and understand the health

impact on Canadian youth (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021). This signifies an increased need for longitudinal literature examining adolescent dating violence within Canadian youth.

One significant issue with adolescent dating violence is that it can often translate into marriage or adult romantic relationships. Minor dating violence precedes serious marital violence in 25% to 50% of cases and is similar to violence that is found in marital relationships (Furman & Feiring, 1999). Even though some of this violence could cease by adulthood, many individuals may persist in their violent ways (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Magdol et al., 1998), leading to more dangerous outcomes. Since many forms of violence in adolescent relationships are learned from role models (Jouriles et al., 2012), if this violence continues, it could create a perpetual cycle of violence, adding to the high rates of intimate partner violence currently present in society.

Peer Rejection and Adolescent Dating Violence

Another invalidating social environment that is often overlooked in the dating violence literature, but could contribute to teen dating violence, is peer relationships. Adolescence is a time when peer relationships become more salient; young people are more likely to spend time with same-aged peers, often with reduced supervision, making them a great source of influence on attitudes, activities, and emotional well-being (Brown, 2009; Harris, 1995). The framework of Bandura's social learning theory (1986) suggests that individuals' behaviour is in part learned through observing and internalizing observed behaviour in one's environment, suggesting that young people can mirror not only their parents' behaviour but also their peers'. As adolescents develop their own identities and gain more experience in interpersonal relationships with their peers, peer rejection can impede the development of future healthy interpersonal relationships and could normalize aggression, including within dating relationships (Cava et al., 2021; Hunt et al., 2022). Similar to parents, relationships with peers can also function as prototypes for romantic relationships in which they act as a testing ground for experiencing and managing emotions in the context of voluntary relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Connolly et al., 2004). The concern is when peer relationships are not positive and are nuanced with factors such as rejection, and poor emotional regulation strategies, especially if childhood maltreatment or family violence already exists in their lived experience.

Peer rejection refers to being actively disliked by one's peers, and this dislike may or may not be accompanied by various degrees of victimization, exclusion, or intentional isolation from peer groups and activities (Knack et al., 2012; McDougall et al., 2001). Peer rejection is related

to a variety of maladaptive outcomes, such as anxiety, loneliness, social withdrawal, and depression (Beeson et al., 2020). Ten to 15% of youth are rejected by their peers (Martín-Antón et al., 2016; McKown et al., 2011), and this type of interpersonal difficulty is stable across time. For example, in one study, almost half of rejected youth were still rejected one year later, and 30% remained rejected after four years (Davis & Allen, 2021). At a time when the need for peer approval is high (Schacter et al., 2019), the experience of being disliked by peers can take a serious toll on adolescents' mental health and social-emotional adjustment (Juvonen, 2013). Although peer rejection can be a marker of pre-existing behavioural problems like aggression, the experience of being rejected by peers can also be an independent contributor to future maladjustment above other risk factors (Schacter et al., 2019), which can present itself in future interpersonal relationships as conflict and violence (Cava et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2013). Peer rejection, like childhood maltreatment, negatively impacts the mental health of targets who show higher depression symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and low life satisfaction (Cava et al., 2021; Guhn et al., 2013). Peer rejection has also been linked to greater hostility (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Holt & Espelage, 2005) and poorer psychological functioning (Brown et al., 2009; Choi et al., 2017). Many of the issues that come from peer rejection mirror those that come from family violence and can lead to poorer social skills, which Dishion et al. (2008) theorized can result in fewer positive/reinforcing experiences and more negative peer experiences compared to their more socially skilled peers, making them more vulnerable across different social contexts, including romantic relationships in adolescence.

Since adolescence is a time when romantic relationships typically begin, the maintenance of healthy peer relationships is fundamental to the development of norms, values, and beliefs regarding social interactions (Capaldi et al., 2001; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). If adolescents' peer relationships are punitive, invalidating, or hostile, this could serve as a bad example of what to expect in their romantic relationships (like the association with caregiver abuse). For example, Arriage and Foshee (2004) found that after controlling for interparental violence, having friends who were perpetrators or targets of violence was strongly associated with an adolescent's own experience as both a perpetrator and target of dating violence due to seeing it as acceptable dating behaviour (Capaldi et al., 2012). Indeed, much like witnessing violence in the home, youth who affiliate with peers who have positive attitudes toward physical violence are more likely to use this type of behaviour in their dating lives. For example, adolescent boys who were

members of male friendship dyads that made derogatory comments about girls and women, were more likely to direct physical aggression toward their dating partners than adolescent boys who were members of non-aggressive friendship groups (Capaldi et al., 2001; Ellis et al., 2013). This reflects longitudinal research showing that youth who grow up in homes with marital violence were more likely to condone that violence as being justifiable (Lichter et al., 2004).

Against this backdrop, it can be said that being disliked by peers can impair an adolescent's ability to successfully navigate interpersonal relationships, by interfering with opportunities to acquire important interpersonal competencies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ladd, 1999). Adolescents who are shunned by peers lack access to a key context for practicing social skills (Juvonen, 2013) compared to their well-liked peers and can therefore be less sociable (Schacter et al., 2019). Recognizing the relevance of the peer context for adolescents' romantic relationship functioning, researchers have recently considered peer risk factors for romantic dysfunction, especially dating aggression. A meta-analysis of nine studies found that adolescent peer mistreatment (victimization, rejection) was specifically associated with romantic aggression (Garthe et al., 2017). Additionally, the association between peer victimization, mistreatment and dating violence victimization in adolescents has been found across several studies (Brooks-Russell et al., 2013; Cuevas et al., 2014; Debnam et al., 2016; Cava et al., 2021; Sabina et al., 2016). This link has also been demonstrated in studies of co-occurring victimization, indicating that being rejected and mistreated by peers was strongly associated with being a victim of physical dating violence (Cava et al., 2021). Researchers have recognized the importance of investigating the concept of polyvictimization, which is how victimization in one context (e.g., within the peer context or family) might increase the likelihood of victimization in another context (e.g., victimization in dating relationships). Although existing longitudinal studies have shown that adolescents victimized by their peers are vulnerable to becoming victims of teen dating violence (Brooks-Russell et al., 2013; Cava et al., 2018; Hunt et al., 2022), there is little research examining mechanisms contributing to adolescent dating violence in the context of both family and peer maltreatment and rejection.

Rejection Sensitivity and Adolescent Dating Violence

Since childhood maltreatment and peer rejection are invalidating environments, we should expect that those who have experienced these hostile interpersonal environments will also experience more violence in their dating relationships. This could be because rejection sensitivity makes them more sensitive to cues of not being loved or cared for. Therefore, rejection sensitivity could be a potential mechanism for understanding the association between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, and adolescent dating violence (Volz & Kerig, 2010). Rejection sensitivity is defined as "the disposition to anxiously or angrily expect, readily perceive and overreact to rejection" (Downey et al., 1997, p. 85).

The need to belong is universal across all ages of development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As children approach early adolescence, peers become more important for their social development as it can help solidify their social identity (Beeson et al., 2020). When this need for inclusion is not met (through family and peer mistreatment) and rejection occurs, it can lead to negative outcomes such as social withdrawal, solitude, and depression (Rubin et al., 2009). To account for the connection between experiencing rejection in important relationships (with parents and peers) and the social-cognitive interpersonal difficulties that come with that, Downey et al. (1997) have proposed the concept of rejection sensitivity. The rejection sensitivity model, which draws from attachment, social-cognitive, and interpersonal theories, hypothesizes that rejection sensitivity develops when children's emotional needs are repeatedly met with rejection by caregivers or other important people in their lives (Downey et al., 1999; Levy et al., 2001). As a result, youth expect that they will be rejected in every aspect of seeking social support and become hypervigilant and subsequently overly reactive to rejection in ambiguous situations. In the case of perceived or assumed rejection, youth high on rejection sensitivity respond with defensive emotions or hurt, anxiety, or anger, which can then lead to maladaptive interpersonal skills and strategies such as hostility, aggression, or withdrawal (Downey et al., 1998; Levy et al., 2001). These poor strategies impede youth's ability to have positive social interactions and build healthy relationships with others and can often undermine their ability to benefit from positive relationships (London et al., 2007), making them more vulnerable to mental health problems and violence in their adolescent relationships.

Rejection sensitivity can be activated by both parents and peers. Parents can communicate rejection to their children through physical or verbal abuse and emotional neglect

(Downey et al., 1998). Peers can communicate rejection through overt physical or verbal victimization, exclusion, rumour spreading, or ignoring (Coie & Koeppl, 1990; Furman & Feiring, 1999). These types of hostile interpersonal interactions can trigger concerns about rejection, therefore making individuals more likely to react intensely when they perceive or experience rejection in their romantic relationships, making rejection sensitivity one plausible mechanism for adolescent dating violence. A growing body of literature has documented the relationships between rejection sensitivity, aggression, and victimization (Gao et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2015; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2016). Specifically, Ayduk et al. (2008) found that relative to individuals with low levels of rejection sensitivity, individuals with high levels of rejection sensitivity behaved more aggressively toward the rejector (see also Gao et al., 2021). Research by Erozkan (2015) examined the relation between childhood trauma and rejection sensitivity in a group of late adolescents and found a positive relation between rejection sensitivity and subdimensions of childhood trauma, physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and sexual abuse. In line with this, a meta-analysis showed that heightened rejection sensitivity was positively associated with both aggression perpetration and victimization (Gao et al., 2021), which could easily be aimed at romantic partners, given their salience. These associations suggest rejection sensitivity's presence as a mediator between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, and future adolescent dating violence.

Sensitivity to rejection can explain the risk of adolescents' involvement in violent romantic relationships in several ways (Downey et al., 2000). First, theorists studying child maltreatment propose that youth from abusive homes can become involved in dating relationships to find the acceptance and security they are missing from their caregivers (Mueller & Silverman, 1989). Therefore, childhood maltreatment might increase the likelihood that they will become involved in romantic intimacies before they are developmentally and emotionally ready for them (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Second, in addition to this rush to become involved in romantic relationships, rejection sensitivity could lead to an overvaluation of partners who are attentive and who seek a rapid intensification of commitment early in the relationship by youth (Downey et al., 1999). This could place individuals high on rejection sensitivity at risk of becoming involved in dating violence (Volz & Kerig, 2010; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998) and more willing to remain in those abusive relationships because of their need for acceptance and connection. Consistent with this idea, Brendgen et al. (2002) found that rejection sensitivity

mediated the link between parent-to-child aggression and dating violence in a longitudinal sample. This association was, however, only examined in boys and did not consider variations such as perpetration and victimization. Similarly, research by Volz and Kerig (2010) found no relation between rejection sensitivity and dating violence victimization. However, the research by Downey et al. (1996) could explain why rejection sensitivity plays a part in predicting dating violence perpetration but not victimization. A key aspect of the rejection sensitivity model is that individuals respond to real or imagined threats of rejection, so an angry or aggressive reaction to perceived rejection might lead to active ways of coping, such as perpetrating violence in the relationship rather than tolerating violence (Volz & Kerig, 2010).

It is important to note that although everyone experiences rejection to a certain degree, individuals high on rejection sensitivity differ in their expectations of what rejection is and the intensity of their reactions to rejection (Downey et al., 1999). Experiencing both parental and peer rejection is related to the development of rejection sensitivity (McLachlan et al., 2010). However, some evidence suggests that rejection sensitivity is strongest when adolescents also have low parental acceptance, implying an interactive nature across contexts (McLachlan et al., 2010). It is then imperative, from a preventative lens, to focus on the relationship between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection and adolescent dating violence perpetration, and rejection sensitivity as the mediator, specifically because during adolescence, individuals are more attuned to indicators of peer acceptance and rejection due to school transitions, and new social networks (London et al., 2007).

Rejection sensitivity is also an understudied potential mechanism for the association between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, and adolescent dating violence (Volz & Kerig, 2010). To date, only a few studies have been published on the relation between rejection sensitivity and dating violence involvement. Galliher and Bentley (2010) reported findings from 92 adolescent romantic couples consistent with the rejection sensitivity model, positing that rejection-sensitive individuals interpreted their interactions more negatively, which led them to behave in ways that compromised the quality of their relationships. In a sample of 217 male college students, Downey et al. (2000) found that men who reported relatively high investment in romantic relationships and had anxious expectations of rejection reported higher rates of dating violence. Finally, in a study of adolescent girls, results showed that rejection sensitivity

prospectively predicted higher rates of girl-perpetrated physical aggression during romantic conflicts (Purdie & Downey, 2000).

In sum, the relationship between rejection sensitivity and adolescent dating violence has been found in men and women. However, mixed results suggest that more research is needed on this topic in relation to adolescent dating violence. In Gao et al.'s (2021) recent meta-analysis, a significant overall effect for both the rejection sensitivity-aggression and rejection sensitivity-victimization associations was found, and after adjusting for potential bias, the association between rejection sensitivity and victimization was still significant. One significant limitation of previous work in this area is a reliance on cross-sectional findings, thus precluding the ability to examine the direction of effects. Moreover, despite the growth in adolescent dating violence, there is a lack of attention on this topic in Canada. Therefore, the present thesis is an important step to examine the interrelated risk factors associated with violence in adolescent dating relationships to help identify targeted preventative measures for this overlooked and understudied phenomenon in young Canadians. The focus of my thesis is on examining the temporal associations between childhood maltreatment and peer rejection, with rejection sensitivity as the mechanism for conflict in adolescent dating relationships in a community sample of Canadian adolescents aged 15 to 20.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I explored relationship dysfunction through the framework of Bandura's social learning theory (1986), which suggests how individual behaviour, in part, is learned through observing and internalizing behaviour in one's environment, suggesting that young people can learn and perpetrate violence by mirroring it. Therefore, experiencing, viewing, and justifying violence due to the normalization of it within their personal environment could make individuals more likely to internalize it as an acceptable response, increasing the likelihood of engaging in it in future relationships allowing adolescent dating violence to take place. This phenomenon is also known as the intergenerational transmission of violence (Widom & Wilson, 2014). Similarly, previous studies have cited attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1973) as being rooted in this research, as it proposes that children form mental representations of relationships based on their history with significant caregivers. This cognitive-affective understanding of relationships works as a prototype for future relationships, making it essential for research on adolescent dating violence when looking at variables such as childhood maltreatment and peer

victimization. Using these two frameworks, my research provides insight into the mechanisms that contribute to adolescent dating violence to help create more directed preventative measures prior to adolescence.

Current Study

Research Objectives

The association between childhood maltreatment and peer rejection in relation to adolescent dating violence has been examined independently (Cava et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2017; Garthe et al., 2019; Hipwell et al., 2014; Hunt et al., 2022), but rarely in one longitudinal model. My objective was to explore this association in a longitudinal format with rejection sensitivity as a moderator.

Research Questions and Predictions

The following research questions are addressed in my thesis:

1. Do childhood peer rejection and childhood maltreatment predict dating violence victimization and perpetration in early adulthood?
2. What role does rejection sensitivity play in this association?

Based on the literature reviewed herein, I predicted that adolescents subjected to violence in their childhood would be more likely to experience violence in their future dating relationships (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Garthe et al., 2019; Volz et al., 2010). Similarly, it has been shown that the experience of peer rejection in adolescence is significantly associated with romantic aggression (Schacter et al., 2019). Since being victimized in one context is more likely to lead to victimization in another context (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2022), I also predicted that adolescents exposed to more than one type of victimization would be more likely to experience and perpetrate violence in adolescent dating relationships. To date, only a few studies have been published on the relation between rejection sensitivity and dating violence involvement, with mixed results. However, it is plausible that rejection sensitivity makes individuals sensitive to cues of not being loved or cared for, so I predicted it could be a potential moderator for understanding the association between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, and adolescent dating violence.

Methods

Procedure

Data from the McMaster Teen Study, a prospective longitudinal investigation of youth mental health, bullying, and development that began in 2008 when youth were in Grade 5 (T1) and has continued annually for 14 years until 2023 (T15), was used for the study. In 2008, participants in grade 5 (M_{age} = 10.91; 53% girls) were recruited from 51 schools randomly selected in Southern Ontario. Eight hundred and seventy-five students agreed to take part in the longitudinal arm of the study, and 80% participated. Participants were offered two formats to complete the survey (online or paper) from T2 to T15 (95% chose to complete the assessments online). Ethics approval was received annually from associated university ethics boards and relevant school boards. Parental consent and participant assent were collected for the student portions of the survey until age 16, and then participant consent was obtained thereafter. Participants were compensated for completing the survey, and telephone interviews were compensated with a gift card worth $10 to $100, depending on the year of participation.

Participants

The analytic sample for my thesis included individuals who had data on any of our measured variables (*n*=529), of which 42.9% were boys/men (*n*=227) and 57.1% were girls/women (*n*=302). Data collected from Time 6 (T6; Grade 10; age 16) through Time 10 (T10; Postsecondary; age 20) were used. Measures of peer rejection and rejection sensitivity collected from grades 10 to 12 (T6 to T8) were used. Data on adolescent dating violence perpetration and victimization collected at assessment time age 19 (T9) and age 20 (T10) were used. Retrospective accounts of childhood experience of violence data were collected at age 19 (T9) or age 20 (T10) if they did not respond at T9 was used.

At Time 1, the median household income of the sample was $70,000 to $80,000, and 74% of the parents reported to have obtained post-secondary education; the median average household income was just over $70,000. Given that participants were randomly selected from public school boards with varied incomes and the majority having completed post-secondary education, the sample represented a community sample from which it was drawn (Vaillancourt et al., 2013). The analytic sample included individuals who had data on any of our measured variables.

Measures

Childhood Experiences of Violence. The Childhood Experiences of Violence Questionnaire Short Form (CEVQ-SF; Walsh et al., 2008) was developed to reduce response burden while obtaining the same basic information as the full version. It has seven stem questions, including bullying (two items), physical punishment (one item), and the two most readily identifiable maltreatment types, physical aggression (three items) and sexual aggression (one item). Research has shown the internal consistencies in the CEVQ were $\alpha = .89$ for physical aggression (PA) and $\alpha = .90$ for sexual aggression (SA) (Tanaka et al., 2012). In the CEVQ-SF, $\alpha = .85$ for PA. These results showed that both CEVQ versions had moderate-to-good reliability in measuring PA, SA, and their severe forms where applicable (Tanaka et al., 2012), making it a reliable, valid, and informative instrument for assessing exposure to violence and maltreatment among youth. In the current study, the CEVQ-SF was administered at T9 as a retrospective measure (and again at T10 for any participants who did not report on this measure the previous year). The three items related to physical abuse and one item related to sexual abuse had a Cronbach's α of 0.70.

Peer Rejection. The Behaviour Assessment System for Children, Second Edition self-report of personality adolescent version (BASC-2 SRP-A; Reynolds, 2004) is a multi-method, multidimensional measure of behaviour and self-perceptions of people between the ages of 2 and 25. Perceived peer rejection was measured using items from the interpersonal subscale of the BASC-2 SRP-A. Participants endorse statements using a true/false format or rate the frequency using a 4-point scale (never, sometimes, often, almost always) pertaining to how their peers perceive them (e.g., "Other kids hate to be with me"). The adaptive scales (i.e., interpersonal relations and self-esteem) have high factor loadings on personal adjustment (.74 and .70) since peer rejection is a reversal of the interpersonal relations scale. Cronbach's α for the peer rejection items were very good at all time points (T6 to T8: Cronbach's α ranged from .74 to .83).

Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships. The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory Short Form (CADRI-S; Wolfe et al., 2001) – Victimization and Perpetration measures intimate partner violence. The CADRI-S is a self-report instrument of dating violence and partner aggression in youth romantic relationships (Fernández- González, et al., 2012). It includes ten items and five subscales: physical violence, threatening behaviour, sexual abuse, relational abuse, and verbal/emotional abuse. Items are answered on a four-point

scale ranging from “never” to “often” as well as an “N/A” response. The CADRI-S has acceptable consistency for high school students (α = .81; Fernández- González et al., 2012). Concurrent validity was assessed by correlating scores on the CADRI-S with scores from the full CADRI, and in both studies, correlations were strong for men and women (*r* = .71–.96) (Fernández- González et al., 2012). The CADRI-S covers the same content areas as the CADRI and has preliminary evidence of reliability and validity, making it useful in studies aiming to understand associations between dating violence and other variables (Exner-Cortens et al., 2016). The ten items related to dating violence *perpetration* at T9 and T10 had a Cronbach’s *a* ranging from .62 to .79. The ten items related to dating violence *victimization* at T9 and T10 had a Cronbach’s α ranging from .67 to .89. Dating violence victimization strongly correlated at T9 and T10 (r=.37, p<.001) along with dating violence perpetrations at T9 and T10 (r=.37, p<.001) allowing us to combine them.

Rejection Sensitivity. The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale-II (BFNE-II; Carleton et al., 2006) is a revised version of the BFNE (Leary, 1983). In the McMaster Teen Study, the BFNE-II was used to assess rejection sensitivity via youth self-report until T9 (Age 19-20). The scale has 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all characteristic of me) to 5 (extremely characteristic of me) and summed to create a total score. Carleton et al. (2007) reported that the internal consistency of the BFNE-II was excellent (α = .95) and that the scale fits a 2-factor solution; one theoretical (i.e., social anxiety and fear) and one method. The method-based factor comprises items from the scale that are reverse-worded. The BFNE-II has been validated in undergraduate students 18 years to 39 years of age (Carleton et al., 2007) and has also shown moderate convergent and discriminant validity when BNFE-II items were correlated with measures of social anxiety (Mattick et al., 1998). These findings support the utility of the revised items and the validity of the BFNE-II as a measure of the fear of negative evaluation (Carleton et al., 2007). Cronbach’s alpha was very good for rejection sensitivity at all time points assessed (T6 to T8: α = .97 at all time points).

Analytic Plan

For my analysis, mediation moderation models were explored in SPSS using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). In Model 1, I examined the mediation effect of peer rejection (mediator) on the relation between childhood maltreatment (independent variable) and adolescent dating violence (perpetration and victimization; dependent variables). Within the

model, I examined the following steps to test for mediation: Step 1 - childhood maltreatment predicting adolescent dating violence (perpetration and victimization). Step 2 - childhood maltreatment predicting peer rejection. Step 3 - childhood maltreatment and peer rejection predicting adolescent dating violence (perpetration and victimization). In this final step, evidence of full mediation was found if the effect of childhood maltreatment predicting adolescent dating violence was non-significant, and partial mediation was found if the effect was significant but diminished. Indirect effects are reported with percentile bootstrapped confidence intervals (5000 samples). See Figure 1. In Model 2, rejection sensitivity was examined as a moderator of the paths from peer rejection and childhood maltreatment predicting adolescent dating violence (perpetration and victimization). In Model 3, gender was examined as a moderator. See Figures 2 and 3. If evidence of moderation was found (i.e., a significant R^2-change), moderation effects were explored at +/-1SD of the moderator (for continuous) or using unweighted effects coding (for dichotomous). Results are first reported for adolescent dating violence victimization, then perpetration.

Figure 1: *Model 1 Peer Rejection as Mediator of Childhood Maltreatment and Adolescent Dating Violence*

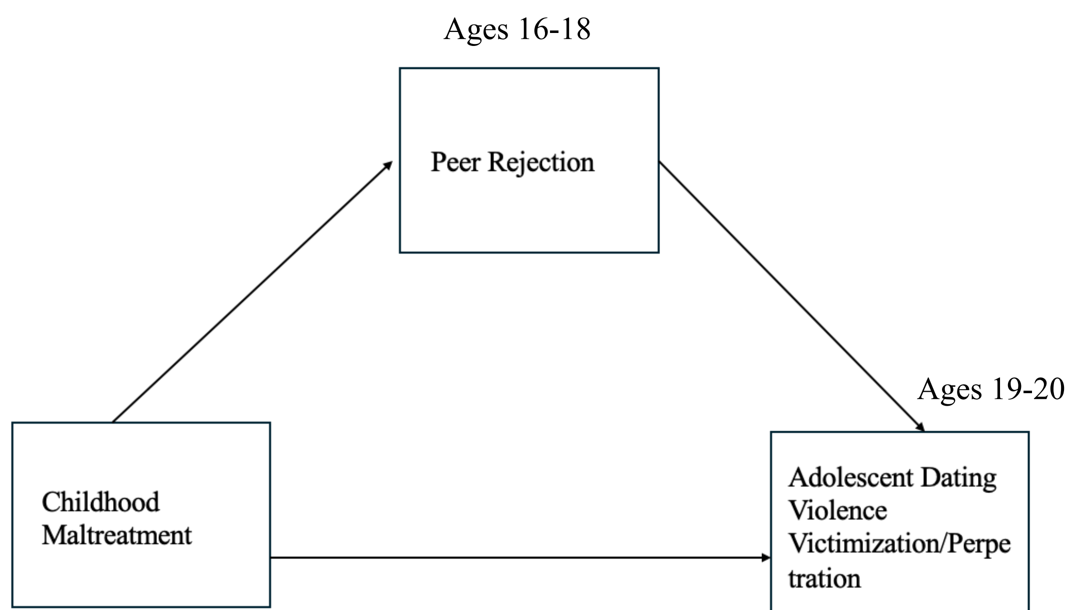


Figure 2: *Model 2 Rejection Sensitivity as Moderator*

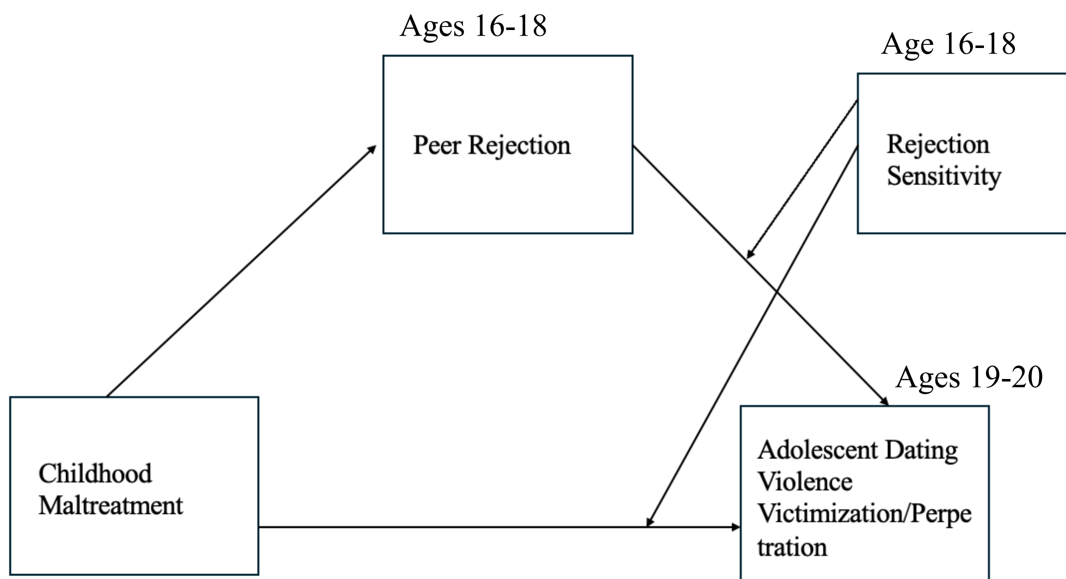
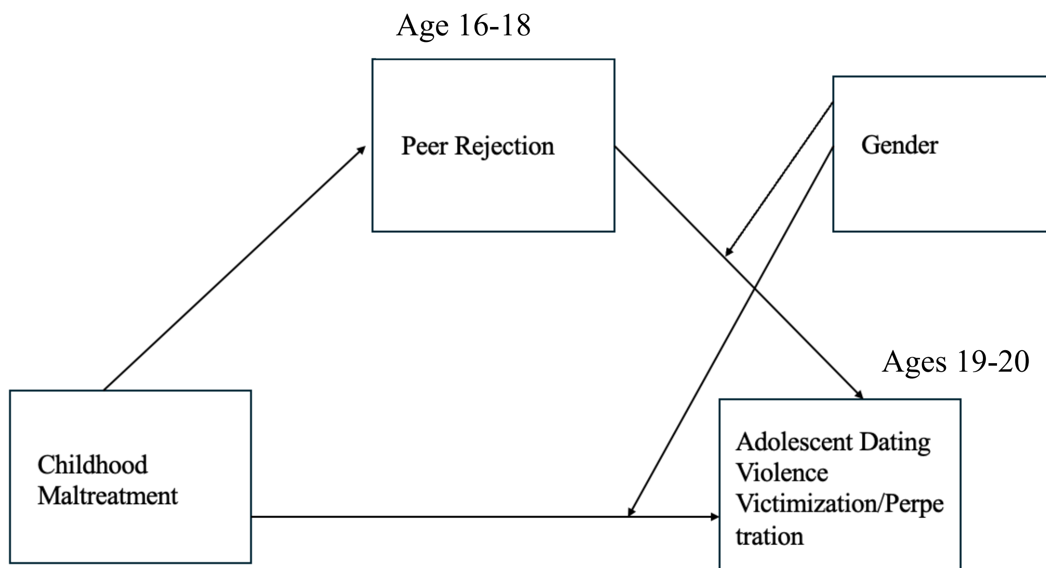


Figure 3: *Model 3 Gender as Moderator*



Results

Missing Data

The sample included anyone who had data on any of our key variables (*N*=529), after missing data analysis, 331 participants had data on all the variables of interest. Little's missing completely at random (MCAR) test was statistically significant ($\chi^2(186) = 236.734$, $p = .007$), indicating that missing data were not missing completely at random. I further examined if missingness on each variable was related to observed scores on other variables. Missing peer rejection scores at T7 was associated with higher dating violence victimization (*M*=0.248) compared to those not missing data on peer rejection at T7 (*M*=0.159). Missing rejection sensitivity scores at T7 was associated with higher levels of dating violence victimization (*M*=0.243) than those with T7 scores (*M*=0.162). Additionally, missing scores of childhood maltreatment were associated with lower levels of rejection sensitivity at T7 (*M*=2.223) than those with childhood maltreatment scores (*M*=2.666).

Those in the analytic sample (*N*=529) were compared to those in the longitudinal sample who did not have data on any of the variables in our study at the time points used in the present study (*N*=174) on gender, household income and education, along with race/ethnicity. The proportion of girls/women and boys/men who were included and not included in the sample was statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 9.87$, $p < .001$), such that our analytic sample had more girls/women (57.1%) than boys/men (42.9%). The analytic sample was more likely to have higher average parent education, $t(2.664) = -7.541$, $p = 0.103$, $d = -0.56$ (*M*= 2.680 for those not selected and *M*=3.247 for those who were selected), and higher average parent income $t(31.163) = -7.704$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.33$ (*M* = 6.409 for those selected and *M*=5.074 for those not selected). Racialized participants made up 27% of the non-selected sample compared to 16% of the selected sample, χ^2 (1, $N = 787$) = 13.138, $p < .001$, which is a significantly lower proportion in the analytic vs. non-analytic sample.

Because adolescent dating violence data had high levels of skew and kurtosis, a natural log transformation was used (Kline, 2011). After transformation, all values of skewness and kurtosis were under the recommended ranges (i.e., under 3 for skewness and under 10 for kurtosis; Kline, 2011).

Descriptive Statistics

The correlations, means, standard deviations (*SD*) and *p*-values for rejection sensitivity, peer rejection, and adolescent dating violence experiences at each time point are provided in Table 1. Peer rejection and rejection sensitivity positively correlated with dating violence perpetration and victimization at most time points, with the exception of some (see Table 1).

The frequency of participants that experienced childhood maltreatment was 17.4% (N=92) out of our analytic sample, while 339 reported no maltreatment history. Out of all participants that experienced maltreatment in childhood and adolescence, 35.9% were boys and 64.1% were girls. There was high across-time stability for peer rejection and rejection sensitivity (see Table 1). Accordingly, time 6 to time 8 were combined into composite variables. The Cronbach alpha for the new composites for peer rejection was α=.77, and rejection sensitivity was α=.81. Composites of peer rejection, rejection sensitivity positively, and dating violence perpetration and victimization were correlated (see Table 2).

Levene's test for equality of variances was first examined, and if the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated (i.e., Levene's test was significant at $p<.05$), the adjusted *t*-test results and corresponding adjusted degrees of freedom were examined. An independent samples *t*-test by gender was significant for the composite variable of peer rejection $t(458.936)=-5.881$, $p<.001$, with girls having higher scores than boys (M=0.587, SD=0.997 for boys; M=1.337, SD=1.840 for girls). *T*-test by gender was not statistically significant for rejection sensitivity, $t(511)=-6.147$, $p=.409$.

Independent samples t-test was also run for maltreatment and showed statistical significance with peer rejection, $t(100.997)=-4.066$, $p<.001$, suggesting there was a difference in peer rejection levels between those who were maltreated (M=1.773, SD=2.112) and those who were not maltreated (M=0.806, SD=1.243). No significant difference was found for rejection sensitivity in individuals that were maltreated vs. not maltreated during childhood, $t(414)=-3.116$, $p=.0.467$. The t-test by maltreatment also showed statistical significance with dating violence victimization $t(80.513)=-5.711$, $p<.001$, suggesting there is a difference between maltreated individuals (M=0.140, SD=0.159) and non-maltreated individuals (M=0.293, SD=0.318) on adolescent dating violence victimization.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Peer Rejection, Rejection Sensitivity and ADV*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	8	10	*M*	*SD*	*N*
1. PREJ T6		.616**	.397**	.377**	.292**	.295**	.230**	.233**	.287**	.140*	0.95	1.81	435
2. PREJ T7	.616**		.550**	.269**	.439**	.283**	.281**	.197**	.313**	.156*	0.99	1.83	424
3. PREJ T8	.397**	.550**		.255**	.342**	.444**	.261**	.176**	.249**	0.126	0.94	1.58	432
4. RS T6	.377**	.269**	.255**		.627**	.523**	.155*	.200**	.138*	.180*	2.64	1.08	447
5. RS T7	.292**	.439**	.342**	.627**		.639**	.160*	.156*	.147*	.175**	2.60	1.05	433
6. RS T8	.295**	.283**	.444**	.523**	.639**		.126*	.119	.066	.166*	2.61	1.06	448
7. DVP T9	.230**	.281**	.261**	.155*	.160*	.126*		.466**	.710**	.353**	0.142	0.177	296
8. DVP T10	.233**	.197**	.176**	.200**	*156*	.119	.466**		.382**	.786**	0.146	0.178	284
9. DVV T9	.287**	.313**	.249**	.138*	.147*	.066	.710**	.382**		.426**	0.183	0.244	296
10. DVV T10	.140*	.156*	0.126	.180**	.175**	.166*	.353**	.786**	.426**		0.161	0.196	284

Note: *p<.05 **p<.01; PREJ=peer rejection, RS=rejection sensitivity, DVP= dating violence perpetration, DVV=dating violence victimization.

No statistical significance was found with maltreatment and dating violence perpetration, *t(*345)=-2.990, *p*=.096. *T*-tests carried out by gender to explore outcomes of dating violence perpetration, *t(*348)=-3.147, *p*=.184 and victimization, *t(*348)=-1.443, *p*=.507 also showed no statistically significant differences. A chi-square test of independence indicated that there was no statistical significance between boys and girls who were maltreated or not, χ^2 (1, *N* = 431) = 0.985, *p* = .321.

Table 2. *Correlations between Peer Rejection, Rejection Sensitivity and ADV*

	1	2	3	4	*M*	*SD*	*N*
1. Peer Rejection T6, T7, T8		.513**	.322**	.277**	1.01	1.57	508
2. Rejection Sensitivity T6, T7, T8	.513**		.202**	.181**	2.62	.95	513
3. Dating Violence Perpetration T9, T10	.322**	.202**		.778**	0.14	0.17	350
4. Dating Violence Victimization T9, T10	.277**	.181**	.778**		0.17	0.21	350

Note: *p<.05 **p<.01

Model 1: Adolescent dating violence victimization - mediation

In Step 1, I explored childhood maltreatment predicting adolescent dating violence victimization. I found that childhood maltreatment predicted adolescent dating violence significantly *b*=0.148, *t*(329)=5.432, *p*<.001, R^2=.082, (*F*(1,329)=29.503, *p*<.001)

In Step 2, I explored if childhood maltreatment predicted peer rejection and found that the relationship between childhood maltreatment to peer rejection was significant *b*=1.027, *t*(329)=4.850, *p*<.001, R^2=0.067, (*F*(1, 329) = 23.526, *p* <.001). In Step 3, when childhood maltreatment and peer rejection were entered in the regression model together predicting adolescent dating violence victimization, the model explained 15.4% of the variance in adolescent dating violence victimization, R^2=0.154, (*F*(2, 328) = 29.92, *p* <.001). Childhood maltreatment significantly predicted adolescent dating violence victimization (*b* = 0.111, *p*<.001, as did peer rejection (*b* = 0.036, *p*<.001). The indirect effect of childhood maltreatment predicting adolescent dating violence victimization through peer rejection was statistically

significant, *b*=0.037, 95% CI [0.012-0.073], suggesting that peer rejection partially mediated the relation between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence victimization.

Model 1: Adolescent dating violence perpetration - mediation

In Step 1, I found that childhood maltreatment significantly predicted adolescent dating perpetration, *b*=0.052, *t*(329)=2.429, *p*=.016, R^2=.018, (*F*(1,329)=5.899, *p*<.001).

In Step 2, I found that childhood maltreatment predicted peer rejection in the model for adolescent dating violence perpetration *b*=1.027, *t*(329)=4.850, *p*<.001, R^2=.067, (*F*(1,329)=23.526, *p*<.001). In Step 3, when childhood maltreatment and peer rejection were entered into the regression model together predicting adolescent dating violence perpetration, the model explained 9.8% of the variance in adolescent dating perpetration, R^2=.098, *F*(2,328)=17.904, *p*<.001). Childhood maltreatment did not significantly predict adolescent dating violence perpetration (*b*=0.022, *p*=.299) but peer rejection did predict adolescent dating violence perpetration (*b*=.029, *p*<.001). The direct effect of childhood maltreatment on adolescent dating violence perpetration was not significant, but the indirect effect through peer rejection was significant, *b*=0.030, 95% CI [.012-.050], suggesting that peer rejection fully mediated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence perpetration.

Model 2: Adolescent dating violence victimization – moderation (rejection sensitivity)

When rejection sensitivity was examined as a moderator, R^2=0.163, (*F* (5, 325) = 12.698, *p* <.001), results indicated that it did not moderate the association between childhood maltreatment and dating violence victimization, *b*=0.036, *p*=.251, or the association between peer rejection and dating violence victimization, *b*=-0.006, *p*=.417.

Model 2: Adolescent dating violence perpetration – moderation (rejection sensitivity)

Similarly, when rejection sensitivity was examined as a moderator in the model for adolescent dating violence perpetration, R^2=.107, (*F*(5,325)=7.790, *p*<.001), results indicated that it not moderate the association between childhood maltreatment and dating violence perpetration, *b*=-0.015, *p*=.526, or the association between peer rejection and dating violence perpetration, *b*=-0.002, *p*=.698.

Model 3: Adolescent dating violence victimization – moderation (gender)

Next, I examined the moderating role of gender, R^2=0.180, (*F* (5, 325) = 14.298, *p* <.001). Gender did not moderate the association between childhood maltreatment and dating

violence victimization, b=-0.097, p=.085, but the effect of peer rejection predicting adolescent dating violence victimization was moderated by gender, b=-0.043, p=.037. Specifically, the slope was steeper for boys b =0.0750, p<.001, than for girls b=0.033, p<.001, which suggests that the strength of the association between peer rejection and adolescent dating violence victimization was stronger for boys than girls. The indirect effect of childhood maltreatment predicting adolescent dating violence victimization was statistically significant for boys, b=0.077, 95% CI [0.010-0.174], and for girls, b=0.033, 95% CI [0.008-0.071]. The index of moderated mediation was -0.044, 95% CI [-0.130-0.023], which was not statistically significant as the confidence interval included zero.

Model 3: Adolescent dating violence perpetration – moderation (gender)

Similarly, the role of gender was examined for adolescent dating violence perpetration, $R^{2=}$.136, (F(5,325)=10.217, p<.001). Gender did moderate the association between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence perpetration b=-0.102, p=.019. Specifically, the slope was steeper for boys b=0.083, p=.016, than for girls b=-0.019, p=.470, which suggested childhood maltreatment was a significant predictor of adolescent dating perpetration for boys. The effect of peer rejection predicting adolescent dating violence perpetration was not moderated by gender, b=-0.030, p=.069.

Discussion

Understanding the longitudinal link between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, and adolescent dating violence is important, given how pivotal and formative the adolescent years are for youth development (Aparício et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2024). Based on data from Statistics Canada (2024), the rate of teen dating violence is 45%. Additionally, according to police reports, between 2009 and 2022, there were 41,057 individuals aged 15 to 17 who were victims of teen dating violence in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024). Studies from different cultures and contexts also indicate that adolescents frequently encounter violence in their dating relationships, which can be severe in nature (Jennings et al., 2017; Pereda et al., 2022). Despite the short- and long-term damage that adolescent dating violence can bring, researchers have seldom examined this relation in adolescents using a longitudinal design. Using a social learning theory framework, my aim was to examine the longitudinal relation between childhood maltreatment and peer rejection on adolescent dating violence victimization and perpetration while exploring the moderating role of gender and rejection sensitivity. Maltreatment and rejection across multiple environments can

promote the expectation of abuse or rejection in new relationships or contexts (Volz & Kerig, 2010).

Results indicated that childhood maltreatment and peer rejection predicted adolescent dating violence victimization, and that peer rejection partially explained (i.e., mediated) the relation between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence victimization, supporting my initial predictions. This finding provides support for social learning theory; maltreated individuals likely learn that violence can be normal in relationships due to modelling by their caregivers (Bandura, 1986). This early invalidating environment is in turn associated with future victimization in other relational contexts, thus allowing the cycle of abuse to continue (Choi et al., 2017). It is well documented that youth growing up in abusive homes can learn how violence is a tool for maintaining relationships and solving arguments (Giordano et al., 2010; Volz & Kerig, 2010; Wolfe et al., 1998). Witnessing interparental violence is also associated with choosing partners that act abusively (Volz & Kerig, 2010; Wolfe et al., 1998). This, coupled with the experience of being disliked by peers, can impair an adolescent's ability to navigate relationships successfully, as shown in the present study. Similarly, researchers have documented that adolescents (perpetrators and non-perpetrators) have difficulty recognizing abusive behaviour, which legitimizes the use of violence in their romantic relationships (Borges et al., 2020), thus making it important for adolescent dating violence to be considered a notable threat to the wellbeing of youth.

One of the longstanding theoretical explanations for adolescent dating violence is that exposure to maltreatment in multiple environments, such as by parents or peers, may lead to the continuation of violence, resulting in significant negative outcomes for both victims and perpetrators (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Exner Cortens et al., 2021; Vaillancourt et al., 2017). I expected childhood maltreatment and peer rejection to also predict adolescent dating violence perpetration. Results indicated that peer rejection fully mediated the relation between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence perpetration. This finding also aligns with the intergenerational transmission of violence (Widom & Wilson, 2014), along with social learning theory (Bandra, 1986) in that individuals who have been hurt by both parents and peers might start to perpetrate violence in other relationships (Lichter et al., 2004).

In examining the role of rejection sensitivity as a moderator between childhood maltreatment, peer rejection, and adolescent dating violence, no effect was found with adolescent

dating violence perpetration or victimization. This deviated from my initial prediction and previous literature showing that the relation between adolescent dating violence and rejection sensitivity does exist (Volz & Kerig, 2010). Past studies have examined relational insecurity as an underlying mechanism (e.g., Volz & Kerig, 2010), which refers to the desperation to maintain an intimate relationship at all costs (Purdie & Downey, 2000), which was not accounted for in the present study. Previous experiences of rejection can make individuals sensitive to rejection in other environments (Downey et al., 1999; Levy et al., 2001). This established finding might not have presented in this study because of low statistical power. Given that rejection sensitivity can be activated by both parents and peers (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Gao et al., 2021; Purdie & Downey, 2000), replicating the present study with a larger *longitudinal* sample is important to determine if rejection sensitivity does indeed moderate the relation between invalidating environments and future dating violence experiences.

Considering the mixed outcomes between boys and girls in research on adolescent dating violence, I also examined the moderating role of gender. Gender did not moderate the relation between childhood maltreatment and dating violence victimization. However, gender did moderate the relation between peer rejection on adolescent dating violence victimization, such that boys who experience higher levels of peer rejection report greater dating victimization than girls. Studies on gender differences in adolescent dating violence often reveal mixed findings. The present findings do align with provincial rates for dating violence perpetration in Quebec. In Quebec, 18% of girls and 6.2% of boys reported physical dating violence perpetration, and 51.2% of girls and 38% of boys reported psychological dating violence perpetration (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021; Théorêt et al., 2021). These findings suggest that girls might perpetrate more violence in adolescent relationships than boys. Additionally, the indirect effect of childhood maltreatment on adolescent dating violence victimization was statistically significant for both boys and girls, but the moderated mediation was not statistically significant. This, again, could be due to low power.

Gender moderated the relation between childhood maltreatment and adolescent dating violence perpetration, with a stronger association observed in boys than girls. This suggests that boys who reported experiencing maltreatment were more likely to perpetrate dating violence than girls. This finding supports the framework proposed by Bandura (1986) and further validated by Cava et al. (2021) and Hunt et al. (2022), indicating that witnessing and

experiencing violence can increase the likelihood of perpetrating violence in future relationships (Capaldi et al., 2012; Chase et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 2010). Additionally, this aligns with my prediction that relationships with parents can serve as a prototype for romantic relationships.

It is interesting to note that gender moderated different paths in the victimization (peer rejection moderating adolescent dating violence victimization) and perpetration model (maltreatment moderating adolescent dating violence perpetration), but both models were stronger for boys suggesting that they report more involvement with dating violence when rejected by peers or maltreated by caregivers. There are several reasons why adolescent boys might show higher dating violence perpetration and higher victimization than adolescent girls. One reason could be due to the type of violence examined. Researchers have highlighted that relational and sexual violence perpetration rates are higher for males than females, but physical violence perpetration rates are higher for females than males. Moreover, relational violence victimization has been shown to be higher for males than females (Courtain et al., 2021). In the present study, the measure of adolescent dating violence did encompass physical, emotional, and sexual violence, but I did not separate them by type due to issues with statistical power.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The results of the present study extend the existing literature on prototypes of relationship dysfunction, namely adolescent dating violence. There are currently few longitudinal studies exploring adolescent dating violence with predictors such as peer rejection, childhood maltreatment, and moderators such as rejection sensitivity in one model, which highlights the need for more comprehensive longitudinal research investigating the developmental contexts in which violence occurs in youth relationships. Without having well-tailored provincial and global approaches to reduce and prevent adolescent violence at the peer, family and romantic level, these cycles of abuse and violence will likely continue into long-term relationships, resulting in significant mental health consequences.

Although the current investigation contributed to the developmental understanding of relationship dysfunction in the context of early experiences of violence, there remain some limitations to the current study. First, although the initial analytic sample was fairly large, after accounting for missing data on variables, the final sample was small (n=331) and likely underpowered for the complex analyses used in the present study. The small sample size may result from attrition, including people dropping out or relocating over the years. For future

longitudinal research on adolescent dating violence outcomes, a larger sample size could provide different results due to higher statistical power. Moreover, men are more susceptible to dropping our due to attrition, resulting in a higher proportion of women in the sample. Focusing on retaining participants at greater risk of dropping out could help with the gender imbalance in the sample.

Second, rejection sensitivity is based on the perception of rejection that can be hard to measure and score accurately. Previous studies have used the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) by Downey et al. (2006), focused specifically on perceptions of rejection in 18 hypothetical interactions. The RSQ has been adapted for use with both children and adults to enhance its relevance to potential rejection across age groups. Using a specific scale such as this to measure rejection sensitivity could help us capture the perception of rejection more accurately in future studies, potentially making the moderating relation between rejection sensitivity and adolescent dating violence more visible, as has been found in previous literature (Gao et al., 2021; McLachlan et al., 2010). Third, the sample was 73% White, and 27% represented a racialized population, which does align with the community sample within southern Ontario. However, future research on larger and more diverse samples would be beneficial and create more generalizable results.

Educational and Clinical Implications

The findings of my thesis highlight the harmful impact that adverse experiences such as childhood maltreatment and peer rejection can have on adolescents' future interpersonal relationships. With the rise of adolescent dating violence (Johnson et al., 2024), young adults are more at risk than ever. Furthermore, considering how romantic relationships during adolescence are more multifaceted than is often assumed, it is essential to implement more directed preventative measures that target adolescent dating violence before it even begins. Childhood maltreatment and peer rejection are already significantly negative experiences that make youth vulnerable to a variety of mental health concerns, but the findings of the present study show they predict involvement in future dating violence, which highlights the importance of preventative measures. Reducing early adversity in the home and at school is important to stop the cycle of violence that affects multiple generations. There are essential programs like the KIND (kinship, improving relationships, no violence and developing skills) program that is a tailored systemic intervention to address adolescent perpetrated family and dating violence (Moulds et al., 2023).

For bullying victimization, the KiVA anti-bullying program is efficacious (Salmivalli et al., 2012). Similarly, an effective school-based approach in Canada known as the Fourth R program focuses on relationship knowledge being taught in the same way as reading, writing, and arithmetic in classrooms as the Fourth R (for relationships). The Fourth R is also designed to involve the school and community in modelling appropriate relationship behaviour (Wolfe et al., 2009). Community projects developed by the Canadian Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network (PREVNet) to address youth dating violence include Speak Out, which is focused on bridging the knowledge and expertise of youth and service providers to prevent dating violence among LGBTQI2S adolescents, along with other programs such as Dating Safe, a dating violence prevention program for youth in Vancouver and Surrey, British Columbia (PREVNet, 2024).

The present findings also have clinical implications for psychotherapy and counselling practitioners to advocate for changes within schools and help children at risk navigate and access relevant resources to help prevent their involvement in violent relationships. From a therapeutic lens, many approaches can help reduce the cycle of violence that is evident in adolescent dating violence, such as third-wave treatments based on mindfulness and trauma symptoms (Mitchell & Wupperman, 2023). Being able to navigate and understand the layers of childhood maltreatment and peer rejection and the associations between these factors will help in creating more targeted and preventative treatment plans for clients with these presenting problems. Gaining insight into the developmental underpinning of adolescent dating violence can help support researchers and clinicians to develop strategies and provincial policies to reduce dating violence and support victims of adolescent dating violence while preventing perpetration through ongoing research.

The lack of national datasets currently reporting on adolescent dating violence involvement in Canada makes it difficult to offer targeted prevention supports and understand the health impact on Canadian youth (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021). Accordingly, there is a need for more population-based longitudinal research so interventions can be appropriately developed. The Government of Canada has recently announced 11 projects over the next five years that will focus on youth dating violence prevention across Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024). These projects will promote healthy relationships through the delivery of evidence-based interventions and training for service providers and educators, by supporting these efforts

through population-based research, we can help reduce the prevalence of dating violence and provide a safer future for youth living in Canada.

Conclusion

Early invalidating environments on outcomes of adolescent dating violence victimization and perpetration were examined. This research helps fill a gap within the literature by gaining a better understanding of the *longitudinal* associations between these early negative interpersonal experiences and subsequent adolescent dating violence. Adolescents can maintain maladaptive behaviour patterns well into adulthood. Therefore, adolescent dating violence can often translate into adult romantic relationships. Moreover, because minor dating violence often precedes serious marital violence in 25% to 50% of cases (Furman & Feiring, 1999), it is important to address the root causes of dating violence early.

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