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Predicting relationship outcomes from rejection sensitivity in romantic couples: testing actor and partner effects

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Abstract
This study sought to test actor and partner effects of rejection sensitivity on romantic relationship outcomes. In total, 200 participants (100 mixed-sex couples; mean age = 36.17 ± 11.11 years) completed questionnaire measures at a single timepoint. After controlling for participant age and relationship duration, results showed that personal rejection sensitivity, but not partner rejection sensitivity, predicted self-report relationship outcomes for both men and women. Higher levels of rejection sensitivity were associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment, and higher levels of jealousy and self-silencing behaviour. Rejection sensitivity was unrelated to relationship investment. Multiple mediation models further demonstrated that anxious and avoidant attachment styles mediated associations between rejection sensitivity and relationship outcomes. Analyses of couple similarity in rejection sensitivity showed that couples report worse relationship outcomes when both partners score high on rejection sensitivity. Overall, the study provides evidence that rejection sensitivity has an important role in relationship outcomes among couples. Creating awareness of the role of rejection sensitivity in relationship outcomes might be a useful approach to improving relationship quality.

Keywords Attachment · Jealousy · Relationship commitment · Relationship satisfaction · Self-silencing

Introduction

A happy and fulfilling romantic relationship is associated with psychological well-being and positive individual functioning (Gómez-López et al., 2019). A growing body of research is exploring the various psychological factors that contribute to a happy and fulfilling romantic relationship. For individuals, rejection sensitivity—the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection—has been found to predict important relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and commitment, relationship conflict, jealousy, self-silencing behaviour, and intimate partner violence (Gao et al., 2021; Mishra & Allen, 2023). The majority of findings on rejection sensitivity and romantic relationship outcomes to date have been derived using *self-ratings* of independent and dependent variables (Mishra & Allen, 2023). Personality theorists have highlighted the advantages of exploring effects at the level of the dyad in relationship-based research (Cuperman & Ickes, 2009; Stroud et al., 2010). In couples, researchers can explore questions such as how traits of one individual relate to outcomes as assessed by the other individual, or how similarity or dissimilarity in traits relate to relationship outcomes. The current study sought to test how *self-reported* rejection sensitivity, and *couple similarity* in rejection sensitivity, relate to both self- and partner-rated relationship outcomes (relationship satisfaction, commitment, jealousy, self-silencing, emotional investment, and attachment style) in romantic couples.

The rejection sensitivity model (Levy et al., 2001; Pietrzak et al., 2005; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010) outlines three components of rejection sensitivity: anxious expectations, ready perceptions, and intense reactions to rejection. Anxious expectations of rejection tend to originate from early maladaptive interactions with primary caregivers. Rejection sensitive individuals often perceive benign cues as indicative of rejection (as they are hypervigilant to rejection) and intense reactions to perceived rejection are

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often expressed through anger and hostility that, in turn, can elicit actual rejection from a romantic partner (Downey et al., 1998; Pietrzak et al., 2005). This reinforces initial anxious expectations about rejection that can feed-forward into future relationships in a cyclic fashion. The rejection sensitivity model predicts that components of rejection sensitivity can impact the quality of romantic relationships. First, anxious expectations of rejection predispose individuals to both avoid situations where they might encounter rejection and overestimate the probability of facing rejection in a potential romantic relationship. Second, since rejection sensitive individuals readily perceive their partner's benign actions as indicative of rejection, they tend to invest less in their relationships. This is a defensive mechanism to prevent damage to feelings of self-worth in the event that the relationship should end (Pietrzak et al., 2005). This decreased investment can have negative consequences such as recurrent thoughts of leaving the relationship (Machia & Ogolsky, 2021). Third, rejection sensitive individuals tend to have more intense reactions when faced with rejection, such as jealousy, hostility, and aggression. This overreaction to perceived rejection can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy and elicit actual rejection, reinforcing the initial anxious expectations (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010).

The rejection sensitivity model predicts that individuals with lower rejection sensitivity will have fewer negative and more positive romantic relationship outcomes. In terms of effects at the level of the individual, research has found that more rejection sensitive individuals tend to have more insecure attachment styles (e.g., preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, fearful-avoidant) in romantic relationships (DeWall et al., 2012; Set, 2019). More rejection sensitive individuals also tend to distance themselves emotionally and physically from their romantic partner (reducing opportunities for both rejecting and accepting experiences) that manifests in lower levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment (Besikci et al., 2016; Norona & Welsh, 2016). At the individual level, research has also found that more rejection sensitive individuals tend to invest less in their relationships (Young & Furman, 2013), express greater levels of jealousy (Murphy & Russell, 2018), and report being more submissive (Lee & Son, 2017; Norona et al., 2018) in their relationships. Moreover, a comprehensive meta-analysis of 60 studies (Mishra & Allen, 2023) found that high levels of rejection sensitivity were associated with a variety of negative romantic relationship outcomes including a greater likelihood of intimate partner violence.

Less research has explored rejection sensitivity as it relates to romantic relationship outcomes among romantic couples. However, there are a few notable exceptions. In a study of 80 heterosexual couples dating for an average of 17 months (Downey & Feldman, 1996), it was found that more rejection sensitive men and women tended to have partners who felt less satisfied in their relationship. Rejection sensitive men were also reported by their partners to express more jealousy, whereas rejection sensitive women were reported by their partners to show more hostility and be emotionally unsupportive. In another study of 92 heterosexual adolescent couples dating for an average of 55 weeks (Galliher & Bentley, 2010), higher levels of self-reported rejection sensitivity were associated with lower levels of self-reported relationship satisfaction and partner-reported relationship satisfaction, higher levels of self-reported relationship conflict and aggression, and higher levels of partner-reported relationship aggression among boys. Among girls, higher levels of self-reported rejection sensitivity were associated with higher levels of self-reported relationship conflict, a greater occurrence of giving-in (submission), and lower levels of self-reported relationship satisfaction. Partner-reported aggression and relationship satisfaction were unrelated to self-reported rejection sensitivity among girls (Galliher & Bentley, 2010).

A study of 211 heterosexual young adult couples dating for at least 4 weeks examined the relationship between self-silencing behaviour (the tendency to suppress relationship concerns due to the fear of disintegration) and rejection sensitivity (Harper et al., 2006). Only individual-level effects were explored, with self-reported rejection sensitivity demonstrating a positive association with self-reported self-silencing behaviour – an effect that was stronger in men than in women. However, using that same data set, another study explored both actor and partner effects (Norona et al., 2016). The study found that boys' self-reported rejection sensitivity was positively related to partner self-silencing behaviour (but not personal self-silencing behaviour) and was unrelated to self-reported and partner-reported physical and verbal aggression. Among girls, self-reported rejection sensitivity was positively related to both self-reported and partner-reported self-silencing behaviour, but was unrelated to self- and partner-reported physical and verbal aggression (Norona et al., 2016). A final study explored the relationship between rejection sensitivity and partner's daily responsiveness among 75 German couples dating for an average of 2.7 years (Richter & Schoebi, 2021). For both men and women, self-reported rejection sensitivity was unrelated to perceived partner responsiveness (Richter & Schoebi, 2021).

Research gaps

To date, the research on rejection sensitivity has focused largely on individuals with few studies focusing on couples. One major drawback of general population sampling is that many individuals are not in a romantic relationship and this constricts the types of questions that can be asked, with

researchers often focusing on general relationship parameters (e.g., number of lifetime relationships, self-perceived mate value) in preference to those that require participants to be in a relationship (e.g., relationship commitment). Generalizing findings from studies based on individuals not in a romantic relationship to couples carries several drawbacks. In particular, individual-focused studies are constrained in scope as they predominantly reflect the viewpoints of unattached adults rather than couples. This disregards the contextual nuances inherent in romantic relationships (Barton et al., 2020). Even when studies incorporate individuals in relationships but omit their partners, they risk presenting a skewed and inadequate assessment of relationship quality (Cultice et al., 2022). This problem was highlighted in a study that evaluated relationship quality among participants in romantic relationships, who were requested to complete questionnaires twice, providing their own perspectives and that of their partner (Cultice et al., 2022). Upon comparison, it was found that highly rejection sensitive individuals had significantly distorted views from those of their partner. When perceived partner responses were compared with actual partner responses, clear differences were observed (Cultice et al., 2022).

The few studies available that have explored rejection sensitivity in couples provides further insight into how this trait connects to relationship parameters, but findings are far from conclusive with different designs and measures used across studies. There is evidence that self-reported rejection sensitivity relates to greater (partner-reported) partner self-silencing behaviour, partner perceptions of expressed jealousy, and partner-reported satisfaction with the relationship (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Norona et al., 2016). More research is needed to establish the robustness of these findings and further explore how similarity or dissimilarity in rejection sensitivity among romantic couples might also relate to relationship outcomes. The current research sought to explore how rejection sensitivity and similarity in rejection sensitivity relate to self-reported and partner-reported relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, expressed jealousy, self-silencing behaviour, and emotional investment in the relationship in the relationship. These variables were chosen as they have been established as correlates of rejection sensitivity at the individual level (Mishra & Allen, 2023), are relevant to couples, and relate to important life outcomes. Indeed, greater jealousy and self-silencing are associated with an increased risk of depression and intimate partner violence (Kyegombe et al., 2022; Pintea & Gatea, 2021), and satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships are associated with relationship quality and life satisfaction (Bucher et al., 2019; Körner & Schütz, 2021).

The present study also sought to test the potential mediating role of adult attachment style. Models of adult attachment (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) predict that positive or negative 'working models' of self and others are developed as a result of early attachment experiences. These working models are thought to provide a template for close relationships that influence interpersonal functioning in later life. Hypersensitivity to rejection might contribute to an insecure ('anxious' or 'preoccupied') style of attachment that, in turn, increases likelihood of negative relationship outcomes (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Previous research has found that more rejection sensitive individuals tend to display more maladaptive attachment styles (Demircioğlu & Göncü Köse, 2021; Özen et al., 2011), but whether rejection sensitivity relates to relationship outcomes (satisfaction, commitment, jealousy, self-silencing, and emotional investment) through the variance shared with attachment styles (a mediation effect) is unknown. Investigation into these associations can help to formulate more detailed theoretical models of rejection sensitivity in romantic couples that could potentially contribute to the development of more targeted interventions that show more successful outcomes (e.g., interventions targeting the reduction of jealousy in couples).

The current study

There is now good evidence that individuals who score higher on rejection sensitivity tend to report more negative relationship outcomes including higher jealousy, self-silencing, and aggression (Gao et al., 2021; Mishra & Allen, 2023). However, only a handful of studies have explored couples and fewer still have explored both actor and partner effects (Galliher & Bentley, 2010; Norona et al., 2016). Furthermore, we are unaware of any previous research that has explored similarity scores in rejection sensitivity as they relate to romantic relationship variables. In light of this, the current study sought to test how rejection sensitivity relates to romantic relationship outcomes (commitment, satisfaction, self-silencing, jealousy, and emotional investment), exploring individual-level effects, partner effects, and similarity scores. The study also sought to test attachment style as a potential mediator between rejection sensitivity and aspects of romantic relationships. At the level of both the individual and partner, it was hypothesised that higher levels of rejection sensitivity would relate to lower levels of relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and emotional investment in the relationship, and higher levels of self-silencing and jealousy. It was also hypothesised that anxious and avoidant attachment style would mediate associations between rejection sensitivity and relationship outcomes. In terms of similarity scores, it was hypothesised that couples would report worse relationship outcomes

when both members of a couple had high levels of rejection sensitivity.

Method

Design

The actor partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny & Ledermann, 2010) outlines the importances of testing individual effects on the self- and others in family and other dyadic settings. The current research tests actor effects, partner effects, and similarity score in rejection sensitivity on multiple relationship outcomes. Actor effects test the association between self-reported personal rejection sensitivity and self-reported personal perceptions of relationship outcomes (e.g., perceptions of personal levels of expressed jealousy in the relationship). Partner effects test the association between self-reported personal rejection sensitivity and partner-reported perceptions of relationship outcomes (e.g., partner perception of the target individual's expression of jealousy). Similarity scores test whether the level of similarity between romantic partners in levels of rejection sensitivity are associated with each partners' perceptions of relationship outcomes (e.g., whether scores for relationship satisfaction are lower if both partners score high on rejection sensitivity.

Participants

In total, 100 mixed-sex couples (M_{age} = 36.17 ± 11.11, range = 18–75 years) agreed to participate in the study. Participants in the sample described their ethnicity as Asian (75.5%), Caucasian (14.5%), Middle Eastern (3.5%), and Other (6.5%). Participants in the sample described their relationship as married (57.5%), engaged (11.0%), seriously dating (28.5%), and casually dating (3.0%). The mean relationship length for couples was 9.69 years with a standard deviation of 10.51.

Measures

Rejection sensitivity

The Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (ARSQ; Berenson et al., 2009) consists of nine hypothetical scenarios each consisting of two questions assessing rejection concern and rejection expectations. For example, scenario 1 includes the statement: "You ask your parents or another family member for a loan to help you through a difficult financial time" followed by the questions "How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your family would want to help you?", measured on a scale from 1 (*very unconcerned*) to 6 (*very concerned*), and "I would expect that they would agree to help as much as they can", measured on a scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 6 (*very likely*). Rejection sensitivity is scored by multiplying the level of rejection concern by the reverse of the level of rejection expectation for each scenario. The mean of the nine scores is used to establish an overall score for rejection sensitivity, with higher scores indicating greater rejection sensitivity. The ARSQ has demonstrated evidence of face, construct, and criterion validity in adult samples (Maiolatesi et al., 2022; Mishra & Allen, 2024). In the current study sample, internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was good at 0.84 and is consistent with that reported in the original scale development study (α = 0.74; Berenson et al., 2009).

Relationship satisfaction

Participants completed the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988). This questionnaire consists of seven items that assess the extent to which individuals are satisfied with their romantic relationship (e.g., "how well does your partner meet your needs") on a scale from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*). Items are summed to obtain an overall score for relationship satisfaction. Higher scores on the questionnaire are reflective of higher relationship satisfaction. The questionnaire has demonstrated evidence of convergent reliability in adult samples (Hendrick et al., 1998; Vaughn & Matyastik Baier, 1999). In the current study sample, internal consistency was lower than ideal at α = 0.60, and somewhat lower that that reported in the original scale development study (α = 0.86; Hendrick, 1988).

Jealousy

The Interpersonal Jealousy Scale (Martínez-León et al., 2018) consists of 18 items that assess the expression of jealousy. Each statement aims to capture the extent to which individuals actively engage in behaviours that would make their partners jealous. For example, the first question asks participants to rate the statement "I talk with my partner about my past romantic relationships to make them jealous" on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). The final score is obtained by summing all values, with higher scores reflecting more jealousy inducing behaviours. The internal consistency coefficient was excellent at α = 0.96, and consistent with that that reported in the original scale development study (α = 0.90; Martínez-León et al., 2018).

Relationship commitment

The Multiple Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory (Kurdek, 1995) consists of 24 statements each assessing the extent to which respondents feel committed towards their relationship (e.g., "One advantage to my relationship is having someone to count on"). Participants are required to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on a scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 9 (*extremely true*). The final score is obtained by summing scores across all items, with higher scores indicative of more commitment. Internal consistency in the current study sample was good at $\alpha = 0.81$ and consistent with that that reported in the original scale development study ($\alpha = 0.95$; Kurdek, 1995).

Attachment styles

The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (Fraley et al., 2000) is a 36-item measure of attachment styles. Participants are asked a series of questions about how they feel in an emotionally intimate relationship (e.g., "I'm afraid that I will lose my partner's love"). Participants report the extent to which they agree with the statement on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The questionnaire has found to have adequate test-retest reliability and construct, convergent, and discriminant validity (Sibley et al., 2005). In total, 18 items assess attachment-related anxiety, and 18 items assess attachment-related avoidance. Higher scores on each subscale are reflective of higher levels of anxiety and avoidance. Internal consistency coefficients were 0.85 (attachment-anxiety) and 0.83 (attachment-avoidance), and these are consistent with those reported in the original scale development study ($\alpha = 0.85$; Fraley et al., 2000).

Emotional investment

Emotional investment was measured using the single item: "Who would you say is more emotionally involved in the relationship?" where participants responded on a scale from 1 (*I am much more involved)* to 7 (*My partner is much more involved*) (Felmlee, 1994). Higher scores on the question indicate lower levels of emotional investment. The question has not been subjected to critical validation tests but has demonstrated evidence of predictive validity in adult samples (Felmlee, 1994).

Self-silencing behaviour

The Silencing the Self Scale (Jack & Dill, 1992) consists of 31 statements each assessing the extent to which respondents have repressed feelings that might threaten the security of a relationship (e.g., "I don't speak my feelings in an intimate relationship when I know they will cause disagreement"). Participants are required to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The final score is obtained by summing all items, with higher scores representing more self-silencing behaviour. Internal consistency in the current study sample was good at $\alpha = 0.83$, and consistent with those reported in the original study ($\alpha = 0.86$; Jack & Dill, 1992).

Procedure

Adult mixed-sex couples were recruited through social media websites. Participants were provided information about the study (including the nature of the questions and details of counselling services should they experience any emotional distress) and were invited to participate and provided a link to access the questionnaire which they could complete at a time of their convenience. No external rewards were offered. Participants were requested to forward the same link to their partner if they felt comfortable sharing it. Inclusion criteria for the study was being over 18 years of age, being involved in a romantic relationship, and having English language proficiency skills. The full questionnaire took between 15 and 30 min to complete and the order of the individual questionnaires was randomized across participants. Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval from a university research ethics committee.

Statistical analyses

The data were tested for general assumptions of normality, linearity, and heteroscedasticity (skewness and scatterplots). Linear regression models were used to test associations between rejection sensitivity and relationship outcomes. The model predictors included the covariates of age and length of relationship, as well as both personal rejection sensitivity and partner rejection sensitivity. The dependent variables were relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, emotional investment, jealousy, self-silencing, and anxious and avoidant attachment styles. Multiple mediation models were also used to explore whether significant associations between rejection sensitivity and relationship outcomes was mediated by attachment (Fig. 1). Rejection sensitivity was set as the independent variable, anxious and avoidant attachment styles were set as mediating variables, and relationship outcomes were set as dependent variables. Both mediating variables were entered into the model together (i.e. a parallel mediation model). In each model, participant age and length of relationship were held constant. A bootstrapping procedure (with corrected bias) was conducted to calculate indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The

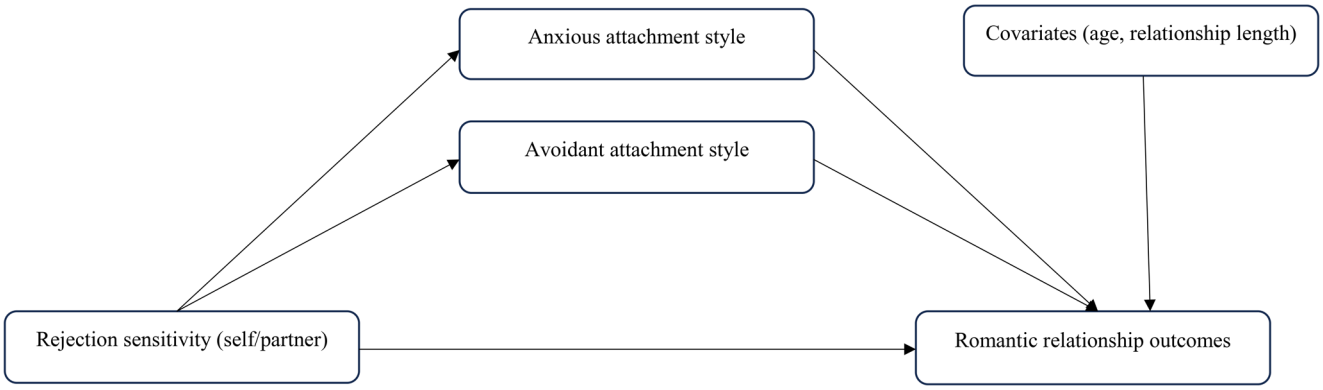

Fig. 1 Schematic representation of predicted multiple-mediation model

bootstrapping process involved 5000 resamples and the statistical significance of the indirect paths was determined using 95% confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Mediation models were run using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) model 4 for IBM SPSS 27.0. PROCESS is a computational tool for path analysis-based mediation models which generates confidence intervals using ordinary least squares regression.

To explore whether partner similarity scores in rejection sensitivity were important for relationship outcomes, analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to compare four groups: (i) couples where both men and women had high rejection sensitivity (each scored above the median for rejection sensitivity), (ii) couples where both men and women had low rejection sensitivity (each scored below the median for rejection sensitivity), (iii) couples where men had high, but women had low rejection sensitivity (men scored above the median, and women scored below the median for rejection sensitivity), and (iv) couples where women had high, but men had low rejection sensitivity (men scored below the median, and women scored above the median for rejection sensitivity). The median split has been used in previous research to compare relationship outcomes for high and low rejection sensitive individuals (Downey et al., 1998). Follow-up pairwise mean differences (MD) were computed for significant effects using Tukey's Honest Significance Difference (HSD) test. Effect sizes were interpreted as small ($\beta = 0.10$), medium ($\beta = 0.20$) and large ($\beta = 0.30$), in line with contemporary guidelines (Funder & Ozer, 2019).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for self-report variables are reported in Table 1 and findings from the regression models are reported in Table 2. A full correlation matrix for self- and partner-report variables is available in the Supplementary File. For both men and women, rejection sensitivity had a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction and commitment, and a positive correlation with jealousy, self-silencing behaviour, anxious attachment style and avoidant attachment style (see Table 1).

For relationship satisfaction, there was a significant regression model for both men, $F(4, 95) = 6.30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.210$, and women, $F(4, 95) = 6.35$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.211$, with significant regression coefficients for personal rejection sensitivity, but not partner rejection sensitivity. The negative regression coefficients indicate that men and women who are more rejection sensitive tend to report less satisfaction in their relationship. For relationship commitment, there was a significant regression model for both women, $F(4, 95) = 5.06$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.176$, and men, $F(4, 95) = 4.73$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = 0.166$, $p < .001$, again with significant regression coefficients for personal rejection sensitivity, but not partner rejection sensitivity. The negative regression coefficients indicate that men and women who are more rejection sensitive report less commitment to their relationship. For jealousy, there was a significant regression model for both men, $F(4, 95) = 2.82$, $p = .029$, $R^2 = 0.106$, and women, $F(4, 95) = 5.34$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.184$, with significant regression coefficients for personal rejection sensitivity but not partner rejection sensitivity. The positive coefficients indicate that men and women who are more rejection sensitive tend to report greater levels of jealousy.

For self-silencing behaviour, there was a significant regression model for both men, $F(4, 95) = 3.41$, $p = .012$, $R^2 = 0.125$ and women, $F(4, 95) = 10.55$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.308$, with significant regression coefficients for personal rejection sensitivity but not partner rejection sensitivity. The positive correlations indicate that rejection sensitive men and women reported a greater prevalence of self-silencing behaviour in their relationship. Emotional investment in the relationship was not related to either personal or partner rejection sensitivity (see Table 2). For anxious attachment style, there was a significant regression model for both

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for main study variables for men and women

	Men		Women		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
	M	SD	M	SD									
1. Rejection sensitivity	9.70	4.75	8.87	3.22	-	**–0.30**	**–0.31**	**0.21**	**0.33**	0.10	**0.28**	**0.30**	**0.38**
2. Relationship satisfaction	27.88	6.91	27.39	6.64	**–0.46**	-	**0.65**	**0.37**	**–0.24**	0.08	**–0.36**	**–0.64**	**–0.77**
3. Relationship commitment	148.71	30.09	148.89	29.40	**–0.38**	**0.70**	-	0.16	**–0.31**	**0.20**	–0.08	**–0.20**	**–0.70**
4. Emotional Investment	4.19	1.99	3.52	1.80	–0.04	**0.23**	0.11	-	0.15	0.14	–0.19	**–0.23**	–0.19
5. Jealousy	41.74	32.57	39.37	28.40	**0.32**	**0.28**	**–0.28**	0.08	-	**0.21**	0.19	**0.28**	0.18
7. Self-silencing behaviour	92.78	16.60	90.42	15.81	**0.35**	**–0.31**	–0.13	0.01	**0.28**	0.08	-	**0.45**	**0.32**
8. Anxious attachment	49.34	21.41	49.46	20.77	**0.54**	**–0.51**	**–0.36**	0.13	0.13	0.13	**0.49**	-	**0.51**
9. Avoidant attachment	53.89	24.84	49.55	23.65	**0.54**	**–0.82**	**–0.72**	**0.21**	**0.21**	0.00	**0.42**	**0.54**	-

Correlations below the diagonal are self-report measures for men and correlations above the diagonal are self-report measures for women. Significant correlations ($p < .05$) are bolded. For men, correlations above 0.20 are significant at the 0.05 level and correlations above 0.30 are significant at the 0.01 level. A full correlation matrix with partner correlations is available in the Supplementary File. For women, correlations above 0.19 are significant at the 0.05 level and correlations above 0.27 are significant at the 0.01 level

men, $F(4, 95) = 9.93$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.295$, and women, $F(4, 95) = 5.30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.182$, with significant regression coefficients for personal rejection sensitivity but not partner rejection sensitivity. The positive coefficients indicate that more rejection sensitive men and women report a more anxious attachment style. For both men, $F(4, 95) = 11.55$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.327$, and women, $F(4, 95) = 7.18$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.232$, there was also a significant regression model for avoidant attachment style, with significant regression coefficients for personal rejection sensitivity but not partner rejection sensitivity. The positive coefficients indicate that more rejection sensitive men and women report a more avoidant attachment style.

Findings from the parallel mediation models are reported in Table 3. Mediation models were run for personal rejection sensitivity only as partner rejection sensitivity was unrelated to relationship outcomes. For relationship satisfaction, there was a significant indirect total effect for women, $\beta = -0.36$ (95% CI: -0.49, -0.22) and men, $\beta = -0.50$ (95% CI: -0.65, -0.33). Observation of individual coefficients showed that both anxious and avoidant attachment style mediated the association between rejection sensitivity and relationship satisfaction for women, but only avoidant attachment style mediated the association for men. For relationship commitment, the model for relationship commitment had a significant indirect effect for women, $\beta = -0.22$ (95% CI: -0.35, -0.10), and inspection of the coefficients indicated that both anxious and avoidant attachment style mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and commitment. The indirect effect was also significant for men, $\beta = -0.40$ (95% CI: -0.57, -0.24), however, the coefficients indicated that only avoidant attachment style mediated the relationship. For self-silencing behaviour, there was a significant indirect effect for men, $\beta = 0.30$ (95% CI: 0.15, 0.44), and women, $\beta = 0.15$ (95% CI: 0.05, 0.27). Observation of individual mediator coefficients indicated that only anxious attachment style mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-silencing for both men and women. Finally, for jealousy, the indirect effect was not significant for men, $\beta = 0.01$ (95% CI: -0.15, 0.21), or women, $\beta = 0.03$ (95% CI: -0.07, 0.15), indicating that neither anxious nor avoidant attachment style mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and jealousy for men or women (see Table 3).

Findings from the ANOVA models are reported in Table 4. For men's reported relationship satisfaction, there was a significant difference between groups, $F(3, 96) = 3.45$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2 = 0.097$, with follow-up post-hoc tests showing that men reported lower satisfaction in couples where men had high and women had low rejection sensitivity compared to couples where both partners had low rejection sensitivity, $MD = 5.27$, $SE = 1.87$, $p = .029$. There was also

Table 2 Linear regression models for self-report variables regressed on actor and partner rejection sensitivity for both men and women

	Satisfaction	Commitment	Emotional Investment	Jealousy	Self-silencing	Anxious attachment style	Avoidant attachment style
Men							
Age	–0.43**	–0.32*	0.00	–0.30	0.29	0.31*	0.47**
Length of relationship	0.50**	0.50**	0.18	0.13	–0.14	–0.29*	–0.55**
Rejection sensitivity	–0.44**	–0.36**	–0.04	0.31**	0.35**	0.53**	0.53**
Partner rejection sensitivity	–0.04	–0.11	–0.18	0.00	0.10	0.03	0.02
Women							
Age	–0.48**	–0.28	–0.45**	0.17	0.47**	0.27	0.43**
Length of relationship	0.36*	0.32*	0.38*	–0.18	–0.01	–0.25	–0.40**
Rejection sensitivity	–0.38**	–0.35**	0.13	0.41**	0.37**	0.38**	0.41**
Partner rejection sensitivity	–0.07	0.11	0.02	–0.05	0.08	0.18	0.13

Standardised regression coefficients reported

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

Table 3 Mediation models testing whether significant associations between personal rejection sensitivity (IV) and relationship outcomes (DVs) are mediated by anxious attachment style (M_1) and avoidant attachment style (M_2)

	IV to M_1	M_1 to DV	Indirect effect$_1$ (95% CI)	IV to M_2	M_2 to DV	Indirect effect$_2$ 95% CI	Total effect
Men							
Relationship satisfaction	0.53**	−0.09	−0.05 (−0.16, 0.05)	0.57**	−0.80**	−0.45 (−0.58, −0.31)	0.04
Relationship commitment	0.53**	0.04	0.02 (−0.10, 0.14)	0.57**	−0.75**	−0.42 (−0.59, −0.27)	0.01
Self-silencing	0.53**	0.35**	0.18 (0.05, 0.32)	0.57**	0.20	0.12 (−0.01, 0.24)	0.05
Jealousy	0.53**	−0.10	−0.05 (−0.18, 0.07)	0.57**	0.11	0.06 (−0.06, 0.23)	0.30*
Women							
Relationship satisfaction	0.37**	−0.33**	−0.12 (−0.22, −0.04)	0.41**	−0.58**	−0.24 (−0.35, −0.14)	−0.02
Relationship commitment	0.37**	−0.25**	0.09 (0.03, 0.17)	0.41**	−0.44**	−0.31 (−0.44, −0.19)	0.14
Self-silencing	0.37**	0.34**	0.13 (0.04, 0.24)	0.41**	0.05	0.02 (−0.05, 0.10)	0.22*
Jealousy	0.37**	0.16	0.06 (−0.02, 0.18)	0.41**	−0.08	−0.03 (−0.12, 0.05)	0.38**

Standardised coefficients reported. All models controlled for age and relationship length. Because emotional investment did not have significant effects in regression models, it was not tested in mediation analyses

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

a significant difference between groups for men's jealousy, $F(3, 96) = 4.98$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = 0.135$, and women's jealousy, $F(3, 96) = 4.59$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = 0.125$, with follow-up post hoc tests showing that women reported higher jealousy in couples where women had high rejection sensitivity compared to couples where both partners had low rejection sensitivity, $MD = 26.20$, $SE = 7.56$, $p = .004$. Similarly, men reported higher jealousy in couples where men had high rejection sensitivity compared to couples where women had high rejection sensitivity, $MD = 23.64$, $SE = 8.70$, $p = .039$, and couples where both partners had low rejection sensitivity, $MD = 26.20$, $SE = 8.62$, $p = .016$. Men also reported higher jealousy in couples where both partners had high rejection sensitivity compared to when both partners had low rejection sensitivity, $MD = 23.53$, $SE = 8.71$, $p = .040$.

Results also showed a significant difference between groups for women's relationship commitment, $F(3, 96) = 4.34$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2 = 0.119$, with follow-up post hoc tests indicating that women reported higher commitment in couples where men had high rejection sensitivity compared to couples where women had high rejection sensitivity, $MD = 25.40$, $SE = 7.92$, $p = .010$. However, women reported lower commitment in couples where women had high rejection sensitivity compared to couples where men had high rejection sensitivity, $MD = 23.91$, $SE = 7.85$, $p = .016$. The regression model for women's self-silencing was also significant, $F(3, 96) = 3.17$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = 0.090$, with follow-up post hoc tests indicating that women reported less self-silencing in couples where women had low and men had high rejection sensitivity compared to couples where both partners had high rejection sensitivity, $MD = 12.45$, $SE = 4.38$, $p = .027$.

Table 4 Couple similarity and dissimilarity in rejection sensitivity on measured outcomes

	Men high, women low	Women high, men low	Men low, women low	Men high, women high	F
Men					
Relationship satisfaction	24.96 (6.66)	29.52 (6.67)	30.24 (5.04)	26.67 (8.08)	3.45*
Relationship commitment	138.88 (30.49)	151.36 (32.00)	159.96 (20.65)	144.00 (33.43)	2.47
Self-silencing behaviour	97.00 (16.83)	88.60 (17.39)	88.04 (13.59)	97.88 (16.82)	2.66
Jealousy	55.08 (36.37)	31.44 (16.99)	28.88 (16.39)	52.42 (44.49)	4.98**
Emotional investment	4.20 (2.18)	3.64 (1.89)	4.96 (1.82)	3.92 (1.91)	2.17
Women					
Relationship satisfaction	27.88 (6.64)	25.36 (7.13)	29.58 (6.84)	26.63 (5.41)	1.92
Relationship commitment	157.68 (22.03)	132.28 (32.68)	156.19 (29.86)	149.13 (26.19)	4.34**
Self-silencing behaviour	83.76 (17.19)	93.44 (14.65)	88.58 (15.17)	96.21 (14.03)	3.17*
Jealousy	34.00 (23.24)	53.16 (35.08)	26.96 (14.00)	44.04 (31.24)	4.58**
Emotional investment	3.80 (1.68)	3.56 (1.91)	2.81 (1.50)	3.96 (1.94)	2.12

Group means and standard deviations reported. *Men high women low* refers to couples where men have high and women have low rejection sensitivity, $n = 25$, *women high women low* refers to couples where women have high and men have low rejection sensitivity, $n = 25$, men low women low refers to couples where both men and women have low rejection sensitivity, $n = 26$, men high women high refers to couples where both men and women have high rejection sensitivity, $n = 24$

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

Discussion

This study sought to test actor and partner effects of rejection sensitivity on romantic relationship outcomes. Results indicated that more rejection sensitive individuals reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment, and higher levels of jealousy and self-silencing behaviour. Rejection sensitivity was unrelated to emotional investment in the relationship. Multiple mediation models further demonstrated that anxious and avoidant attachment styles mediated associations between personal rejection sensitivity and self-reported relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, jealousy, and self-silencing behaviour. Partner rejection sensitivity was unrelated to romantic relationship outcomes. However, analyses of couple similarity scores in rejection sensitivity showed that couples reported worse relationship outcomes when both partners scored high on rejection sensitivity. Overall, the results indicate that rejection sensitivity has an important role in the quality of romantic relationships among couples.

The finding that personal rejection sensitivity had a medium-large negative association with self-reported relationship satisfaction and commitment, for both men and women, is consistent with previous research (Mishra & Allen, 2023). Importantly, partner rejection sensitivity did not contribute further explained variance and was unrelated to relationship satisfaction and commitment for men and women. This finding differs from previous research that found partner rejection sensitivity is an important predictor of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Galliher & Bentley, 2010). This discrepancy might reflect differences in study design (as personal rejection sensitivity was controlled for in the current study) or could reflect population-based differences, as the current study included a large population of Asian adults (collectivistic culture). That is, expressing dissatisfaction and low commitment might be more internalized and covert in collectivistic cultures, compared to individualistic cultures, potentially reducing effect sizes (see Goodwin et al., 2012). The findings from analyses on couple similarity scores largely align with regression models, and there was no indication that satisfaction and commitment are lower when both individuals score high on rejection sensitivity. However, there was evidence that women low in rejection sensitivity were willing to commit more to the relationship when their partner was high in rejection sensitivity. This could reflect the greater commitment required for a relationship to succeed when a partner is high in rejection sensitivity.

The finding that personal rejection sensitivity had medium-large positive associations with expressed jealousy and self-silencing behaviour is consistent with previous research (Mishra & Allen, 2023). Partner rejection sensitivity did not contribute further explained variance and was unrelated to self-silencing and expressed jealousy for both men and women. Previous research has not explored partner effects on expressed jealousy, but findings for self-silencing differ from previous research that found adolescent boys' and girls' rejection sensitivity was associated with their partners' self-silencing behaviour (Norona et al., 2016). This discrepancy might reflect differences in sample age, with adult couples having more experience with relationships in general, and further research is needed to explore potential age moderation effects. Regarding couple similarity scores, there was no indication that jealousy was more common when both partners scored high on rejection sensitivity (compared to just one partner scoring high). However, jealousy was less common among men and women when both partners scored low on rejection sensitivity (compared to when one or both partners scored high on rejection sensitivity). Importantly, women reported greater levels of

self-silencing in couples where both partners had high rejection sensitivity, compared to when only one partner scored high on rejection sensitivity. This finding provides new evidence that rejection sensitivity similarity is important for relationship outcomes.

The finding that emotional investment in the relationship was unrelated to personal or partner rejection sensitivity, for men and women, is inconsistent with findings observed in previous research (see Hafen et al., 2014; Lee & Son, 2017; Mishra & Allen, 2023). This finding could reflect differences between study populations (e.g., age, culture), but could also reflect the validity and reliability of the questionnaires used to measure investment. As noted in the method, these measures have not been subjected to critical validation tests and the single item measure might not have been sufficient to adequately capture individual investment into the relationship.

The finding that attachment style mediated associations between rejection sensitivity and relationship outcomes highlights important shared variance between rejection sensitivity and attachment that aligns with previous research (DeWall et al., 2012; Set, 2019). There were some notable differences in the mediation analyses based on gender, with anxious attachment style appearing as a more important mediator for women. Moreover, anxious attachment style was an important mediator in the experience of relationship satisfaction and commitment for women, whereas avoidant attachment style was an important mediator for both men and women. This finding is consistent with research showing that women are more likely to develop anxious attachment styles in general (Donges et al., 2015; Weber et al., 2022), with anxious attachment style having stronger associations with life outcomes among women (Reis & Grenyer, 2004; Weber et al., 2022). However, a meta-analysis of 118 independent samples showed that attachment avoidance had a greater negative impact on constructive interaction between partners for men compared to women (Li & Chan, 2012). Further investigation is required to determine the gender-specific role of attachment styles on relationship satisfaction for men and women.

The current study also found that, for both men and women, an anxious attachment style (but not an avoidant attachment style) mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-silencing behaviour. This could potentially indicate that individuals who experience higher levels of rejection sensitivity are more prone to attachment issues, which in turn could contribute to self-silencing behaviour. Previous literature further highlights an association between depression and self-silencing (Pintea & Gatea, 2021), suggesting the need for future research to examine the potential role of mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, in the interplay between rejection sensitivity, attachment styles, and self-silencing. There were no mediation effects for jealousy indicating that attachment is relatively unimportant for understanding the connection from rejection sensitivity to expressed jealousy. However, the results of the present study suggested that for both men and women, rejection sensitivity in one or both partners exacerbates feelings of jealousy. Future studies should aim to explore more individualistic factors (e.g., self-esteem) that could potentially explain the relationship between rejection sensitivity and jealousy.

Limitations

Strengths of this study include high ecological validity (sampling of couples), testing multiple mediation models to explore shared variable, and novel analyses of couple similarity scores in rejection sensitivity. However, there are some important limitations that need to be considered in order to more fully interpret study findings. First, the sample predominantly consisted of married mixed-sex Asian couples, and it is unknown whether findings are likely to remain consistent across cultures, sexualities, ethnicities, or couples at various stages of their relationship. Because of this, results should be interpreted in light of the demographics of the sample. Second, there is always a possibility of sampling bias, as couples experiencing difficulties in their relationship might be less likely to volunteer to participate in a study assessing relationship outcomes. Such sampling bias might have attenuated some effect sizes and future studies might look to explore recruitment methods that encourage couples to participate regardless of their relationship quality.

A third limitation is that while rejection sensitivity effects on relationship satisfaction were observed, it is unknown whether this manifests in greater wellbeing and life satisfaction in general. Future research might look to explore whether rejection sensitivity effects on relationship outcomes manifest in higher or lower levels of wellbeing (see Efeoglu & Sen, 2022). While single items measures can provide valid assessments of the construct of interest (Allen et al., 2022) and internal consistency can be somewhat unreliable for scales with few items (Osburn, 2000), further validation work is needed to help establish the quality of these measures. Finally, data were collected at a single time point and therefore the study does not provide information on cause and effect. Future research might look to use longitudinal or experimental methods to help establish whether rejection sensitivity (and rejection sensitivity similarity) relate to change in relationship quality over time, and whether interventions that aim to create awareness of rejection sensitivity effects can help improve the quality of romantic relationships.

Implications

The finding that rejection sensitivity scores are important for relationship outcomes among couples has implications for theory and research development. As it stands, the rejection sensitivity model does not make clear predictions regarding how personal and partner rejection sensitivity interactions might affect relationship variables. Although findings were somewhat mixed regarding similarity scores, there was some evidence that relationship outcomes are worse when both partners have high rejection sensitivity (and somewhat better when both partners have low rejection sensitivity). Since much of the literature on rejection sensitivity focuses on romantic relationships, a useful progression in theory development might be for the rejection sensitivity model to make predictions for couples in addition to individuals. For instance, the model could include distinct predictions for how relationship variables might differ in couples where men are highly rejection sensitive versus those where women are high rejection sensitive (e.g., couples where women are highly rejection sensitive might have worse relationship outcomes). The model could further hypothesize how some relationship outcomes might be worse when both couples score high on rejection sensitivity. Although further investigations are required to make new predictions, the current findings aid in extending the scope of the model to include how each partner's rejection sensitivity might affect dyadic outcomes.

The results from the present study indicate that couples where both partners had high rejection sensitivity tended to have worse relationship outcomes compared to couples where both partners had low rejection sensitivity. These findings might be used to inform practices used by marriage counsellors to improve relationship outcomes. For example, marital psychotherapists should be encouraged to administer rejection sensitivity measures to both members of a couple to help identify high risk cases. Creating awareness that the couple are more high risk could help those couples develop strategies to help combat aversive outcomes (associated with two highly rejection sensitive persons) when they arise. Mental health professionals might also consider using attachment-focused interventions (see e.g., Diamond, 2004) to reduce fear of rejection and abandonment. Such interventions might be included as part of counselling (e.g., a specialised form of interpersonal therapy) whereby coping techniques (e.g., emotion regulation when faced with rejection) are taught to manage rejection from romantic partners.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study has found that personal rejection sensitivity (but not partner rejection sensitivity) is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment, and higher levels of jealousy and self-silencing behaviour. Multiple mediation models further demonstrated that anxious and avoidant attachment styles mediated these associations, with an avoidant attachment style appearing most important for men and an anxious attachment style also important for women. Rejection sensitivity was unrelated to relationship investment in relationship. The findings of the current study have potential implications for relationship and marriage counsellors in terms of identification and mitigation of interpersonal issues resulting from high rejection sensitivity in romantic couples. We recommend further studies across various cultures, age groups, and sexual orientations, to further understand the role of rejection sensitivity on relationship quality among couples.

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