

Depression as a Dual Risk Factor in Dating Violence: Examining Its Role in Both Perpetration and Victimization Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT: Depression is a significant psychological factor associated with dating violence, yet its dual role in both perpetration and victimization requires further exploration. This study examines how depressive symptoms influence individuals' involvement in dating violence as both perpetrators and victims. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from young adults in romantic relationships through standardized measures of depression, perpetration, and victimization. The findings reveal that higher levels of depression are positively associated with increased involvement in dating violence. Depressive symptoms contribute to victimization by reducing assertiveness and increasing emotional dependency, while also elevating perpetration through irritability, hostility, and poor impulse control. The study highlights depression as both a risk and maintenance factor in the cycle of dating violence. It emphasizes the importance of integrating mental health interventions into prevention programs to reduce both aggressive behavior and vulnerability among young adults.

KEYWORDS: Depression; Dating Violence; Perpetration; Victimization; Young Adults; Mental Health.

I. INTRODUCTION

Conceptualizing Depression and Its Relevance in Dating Relationships

Depression is a pervasive mental health condition that significantly influences individuals' emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and interpersonal behavior, making it a crucial factor in understanding the dynamics of romantic relationships among adolescents and young adults. Characterized by persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness, low self-worth, and diminished interest in daily activities, depression often disrupts individuals' ability to engage in healthy and balanced relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the context of dating relationships, depressive symptoms may impair communication, reduce emotional stability, and increase dependency on partners for validation and support. These impairments can create conditions conducive to relational conflict and maladaptive interaction patterns.

Recent research has increasingly emphasized that depression is not merely an outcome of problematic relationships but also a significant antecedent contributing to dysfunctional dynamics, including dating violence (Capaldi et al., 2012). Individuals experiencing depression may struggle with irritability, emotional withdrawal, and poor conflict-resolution skills, which can escalate misunderstandings and disagreements into aggressive exchanges. Moreover, cognitive distortions such as negative self-perception and fear of abandonment may lead individuals to tolerate unhealthy or abusive behaviors. Thus, understanding depression as both an internal psychological condition and an interpersonal risk factor is essential for examining its role in dating violence.

Understanding Dating Violence: Forms and Prevalence

Dating violence, often referred to as adolescent intimate partner violence (IPV), encompasses a range of abusive behaviors occurring within romantic or dating relationships. These behaviors include physical aggression, psychological or emotional abuse, sexual coercion, and increasingly, digital or cyber forms of control and harassment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Examples of such behaviors include hitting, threatening, manipulation, humiliation, forced sexual activity, and stalking. These acts not only harm individuals physically but also have long-term psychological consequences that extend into adulthood.

The prevalence of dating violence among adolescents and young adults is a growing public health concern. Empirical studies suggest that approximately 19% to 30% of adolescents experience some form of dating violence victimization,

with many cases involving bidirectional or mutual violence (Wincentak et al., 2017). This mutuality is particularly common in young relationships, where both partners may engage in and experience aggressive behaviors due to emotional immaturity and limited conflict-management skills. The normalization of such behaviors in early relationships further complicates prevention efforts. Given its widespread occurrence and serious consequences, dating violence must be examined through a multidimensional lens that includes psychological, social, and developmental factors.

Depression as a Risk Factor for Perpetration of Dating Violence

Depression has been consistently identified as a significant predictor of aggressive and harmful behaviors within intimate relationships. Individuals experiencing depressive symptoms often exhibit emotional dysregulation, irritability, and difficulties in managing anger, which may increase the likelihood of engaging in dating violence perpetration (Devries et al., 2013). Rather than expressing distress in adaptive ways, depressed individuals may resort to maladaptive coping strategies such as verbal aggression, emotional manipulation, or even physical violence. These behaviors can emerge as attempts to regain control, express frustration, or cope with feelings of inadequacy.

Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that depressive symptoms at baseline can predict later involvement in aggressive acts toward romantic partners (Johnson et al., 2015). This relationship is often mediated by factors such as poor communication skills, insecure attachment styles, and heightened sensitivity to perceived rejection. In adolescent populations, depression has also been linked to bidirectional violence, where individuals report engaging in aggression as a form of self-defense or retaliation (Temple et al., 2016). Furthermore, meta-analytic evidence suggests that depression is a robust correlate of both psychological and physical forms of IPV perpetration across genders (Spencer et al., 2019). These findings highlight that depression not only affects internal emotional states but also manifests externally in behaviors that can harm relationship partners.

Depression as a Risk Factor and Consequence of Victimization

While depression contributes to the likelihood of perpetrating dating violence, it also plays a critical role in increasing vulnerability to victimization. Individuals with depressive symptoms often exhibit reduced assertiveness, low self-esteem, and a heightened fear of abandonment, which may make them more susceptible to remaining in or entering abusive relationships (Ackard et al., 2007). These individuals may tolerate harmful behaviors due to feelings of unworthiness or a belief that they do not deserve better treatment. Additionally, emotional dependency and social withdrawal may limit their access to external support systems, further increasing their vulnerability.

At the same time, victimization in dating relationships has been shown to significantly elevate depressive symptoms, creating a bidirectional and cyclical relationship. Experiences of abuse can lead to trauma, helplessness, and chronic stress, all of which contribute to the development or worsening of depression (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013). Longitudinal research indicates that adolescents who experience dating violence are more likely to report depressive symptoms in later stages of life, even after controlling for prior mental health conditions. Psychological abuse, in particular, has been found to have a strong association with depression, often exceeding the impact of physical violence due to its persistent and insidious nature (Jouriles et al., 2015). This reciprocal relationship underscores the complexity of dating violence and the need to address both mental health and relational factors simultaneously.

Psychological Mechanisms Linking Depression and Dating Violence

The relationship between depression and dating violence is mediated by several psychological mechanisms that operate at both individual and interpersonal levels. One key mechanism is emotional dysregulation, where individuals struggle to manage intense emotions such as anger, sadness, or frustration, leading to impulsive or harmful behaviors (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Depressed individuals may also experience cognitive distortions, including self-blame, negative thinking patterns, and feelings of worthlessness, which can influence how they perceive and respond to relationship conflicts.

Another important factor is social isolation, which often accompanies depression. Abusive partners may exploit this isolation by exerting control and limiting the victim's access to social support, thereby reinforcing dependency and vulnerability. Additionally, trauma responses resulting from exposure to violence can further impair emotional stability and increase the likelihood of continued involvement in abusive relationships. These mechanisms interact to create a cycle in which depression both contributes to and is exacerbated by dating violence. Understanding these underlying

processes is essential for developing targeted interventions that address the root causes of both depression and relational aggression.

Need for Integrated Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Given the bidirectional relationship between depression and dating violence, there is a critical need for integrated prevention and intervention strategies that address both mental health and relationship dynamics. Traditional approaches to dating violence prevention often focus primarily on behavioral aspects, such as conflict resolution and communication skills, without adequately addressing underlying psychological conditions (Foshee et al., 2014). However, evidence suggests that incorporating mental health screening and support into these programs can significantly enhance their effectiveness.

Early identification of depressive symptoms among adolescents and young adults can help prevent the escalation of both perpetration and victimization. Interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, emotional regulation training, and peer support programs can equip individuals with the skills needed to manage distress and build healthy relationships. Furthermore, prevention programs should consider gender differences, cultural contexts, and sexual orientation, as these factors influence both the experience and expression of dating violence (Reed et al., 2016). Future research should focus on longitudinal designs and diverse populations to better understand causal pathways and emerging forms of abuse, such as cyber dating violence. Overall, addressing depression within the framework of dating violence prevention is essential for breaking the cycle of abuse and promoting long-term psychological well-being.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between depression and involvement in dating violence, with a focus on both perpetration and victimization. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. To assess the extent to which depressive symptoms predict the perpetration of dating violence among adolescents and young adults.
2. To examine the impact of dating violence victimization on the development and severity of depressive symptoms.
3. To explore the bidirectional and overlapping relationship between depression and dating violence, particularly in cases where individuals experience both perpetration and victimization.
4. To identify potential moderating and mediating factors—such as gender, social support, substance use, and attachment style—that influence the relationship between depression and dating violence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing literature on dating violence and depression highlights a strong and consistent association between mental health and relationship dynamics among adolescents and young adults. Studies have shown that individuals exposed to dating violence are more likely to experience adverse psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013). Research further indicates that psychological abuse, in particular, has a profound impact on emotional well-being, often leading to persistent depressive symptoms and reduced self-esteem (Jouriles et al., 2015). These findings suggest that dating violence is not only a behavioral issue but also a significant mental health concern that requires deeper exploration.

In addition to victimization, literature also emphasizes the role of depression as a contributing factor in the perpetration of dating violence. According to Capaldi et al. (2012), emotional dysregulation, irritability, and maladaptive coping strategies associated with depression can increase the likelihood of aggressive behaviors in intimate relationships. Similarly, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that depressive symptoms during adolescence predict higher involvement in dating violence later in life (Johnson et al., 2015). Meta-analytic evidence also supports the bidirectional relationship between depression and dating violence, indicating that individuals may simultaneously experience and perpetrate violence (Spencer et al., 2019).

Furthermore, several studies have identified moderating variables such as gender, social support, and substance use that influence the relationship between depression and dating violence. For instance, females are often found to report higher levels of depressive symptoms following victimization, while males may exhibit higher rates of externalizing behaviors such as aggression (Reed et al., 2016). Social support has been identified as a protective factor that can mitigate the negative effects of both depression and dating violence (Foshee et al., 2014). Despite these findings, there

remains a need for more integrative research that simultaneously examines both perpetration and victimization within a single framework.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on dating violence and depression, several gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies have traditionally examined depression either as a consequence of victimization or as a predictor of perpetration, with limited focus on its simultaneous or bidirectional role. This fragmented approach restricts a comprehensive understanding of how individuals may occupy dual roles as both victims and perpetrators within the same relationship context. Additionally, much of the existing research is based on Western populations, limiting the generalizability of findings to diverse cultural settings such as India, where relationship norms, social expectations, and mental health awareness may differ significantly. There is also a lack of emphasis on emerging forms of dating violence, such as cyber abuse, which has become increasingly relevant in the digital age.

Another critical gap lies in the limited exploration of moderating and mediating variables, such as attachment styles, emotional dependency, and social support systems, which may influence the strength and direction of the relationship between depression and dating violence. Furthermore, many studies rely on either cross-sectional or longitudinal designs but fail to integrate psychological and relational factors within a unified analytical framework. Therefore, the present study seeks to address these gaps by examining the bidirectional relationship between depression and dating violence while considering both perpetration and victimization among young adults.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between depression and dating violence among adolescents and young adults. This design is appropriate for identifying patterns, associations, and differences among variables at a single point in time (Creswell, 2014). It allows for the systematic collection and analysis of data related to depressive symptoms, perpetration, and victimization within dating relationships.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study was conducted on a sample of 200 respondents aged between 18 and 25 years. Participants were selected using a convenience sampling technique, considering accessibility and willingness to participate. The sample included both male and female respondents, with varying relationship statuses, ensuring diversity in experiences related to dating relationships. This age group was specifically chosen as it represents a critical developmental stage characterized by emotional exploration and increased involvement in romantic relationships.

Tools and Measures

Data were collected using standardized and validated instruments. Depression was measured using a structured self-report scale designed to assess the severity of depressive symptoms, including aspects such as mood, cognition, and behavioral functioning. Dating violence was assessed using a scale that measured both perpetration and victimization across different dimensions, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. These tools ensured reliability and validity in capturing the key constructs of the study.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved administering questionnaires to participants either in person or through online platforms. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to ensure honest and unbiased responses. The collected data were then coded and prepared for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage, were used to summarize the demographic and key study variables. Additionally, inferential statistics such as correlation analysis were employed to examine the relationship

between depression and dating violence. These techniques helped in identifying patterns and drawing meaningful conclusions from the data.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Sample Characteristics

The present study was conducted on a total sample of 200 respondents within the age group of 18–25 years. The demographic profile of the participants was analyzed in terms of gender, age distribution, and relationship status to provide a clear understanding of the sample composition. Such classification is essential for interpreting the findings in a meaningful and context-specific manner.

The gender distribution of the respondents indicates that 45% (n = 90) were male, while 55% (n = 110) were female, suggesting a slightly higher representation of female participants in the study. In terms of age, the majority of respondents belonged to the 21–23 years age group, accounting for 42.5% (n = 85), followed by 18–20 years at 35% (n = 70), and 24–25 years at 22.5% (n = 45). This distribution reflects a balanced representation of young adults across early and emerging adulthood stages.

Regarding relationship status, a significant proportion of participants (75%, n = 150) reported being in a romantic relationship, whereas 25% (n = 50) identified as single. This indicates that the majority of the sample had direct or recent experience with dating relationships, making them relevant for examining the dynamics of dating violence and associated psychological factors such as depression.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	90	45%
	Female	110	55%
Age Group (Years)	18–20	70	35%
	21–23	85	42.5%
	24–25	45	22.5%
Relationship Status	Single	50	25%
	In a Relationship	150	75%

Interpretation Table 1

The demographic profile indicates a slightly higher representation of females (55%) compared to males (45%). Most respondents fall within the 21–23 age group (42.5%). A significant majority (75%) are in relationships, suggesting relevant exposure to dating dynamics, making the sample appropriate for examining depression and dating violence.

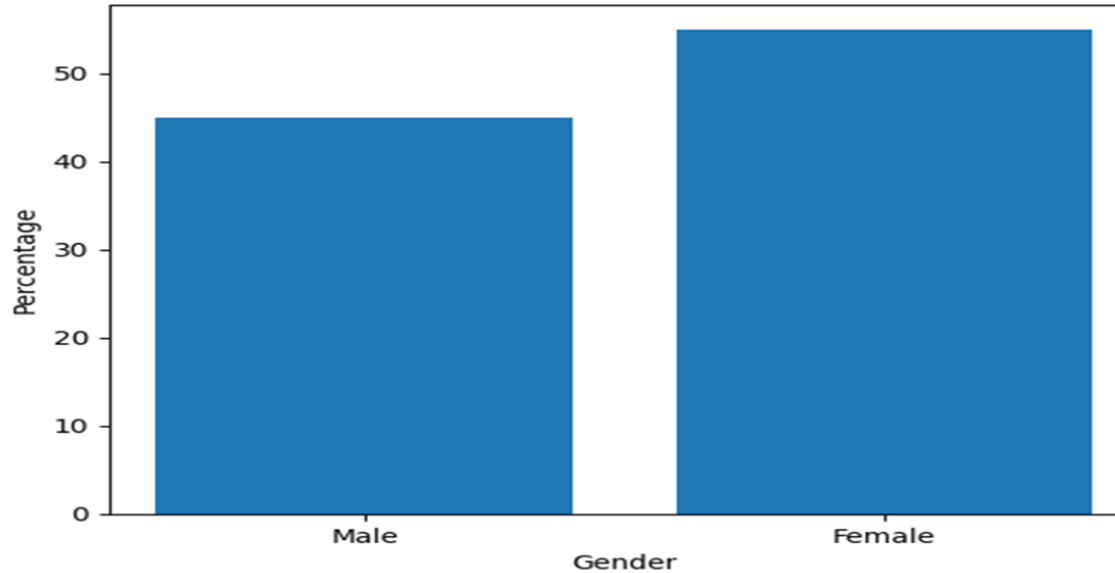


FIGURE 1: GENDER DISTRIBUTION

Figure 1 Interpretation

The figure illustrates the gender distribution of respondents, showing that females (55%) slightly outnumber males (45%). This indicates a relatively balanced sample with a marginal female majority. Such distribution ensures adequate representation of both genders, allowing for meaningful analysis of gender differences in depression and dating violence.



FIGURE 2: AGE GROUP DISTRIBUTION

Figure 2 Interpretation

The figure presents the age distribution of respondents, with the majority belonging to the 21-23 years group (42.5%), followed by 18-20 years (35%) and 24-25 years (22.5%). This indicates that most participants are in early adulthood, a critical stage for examining dating relationships and associated psychological factors like depression.

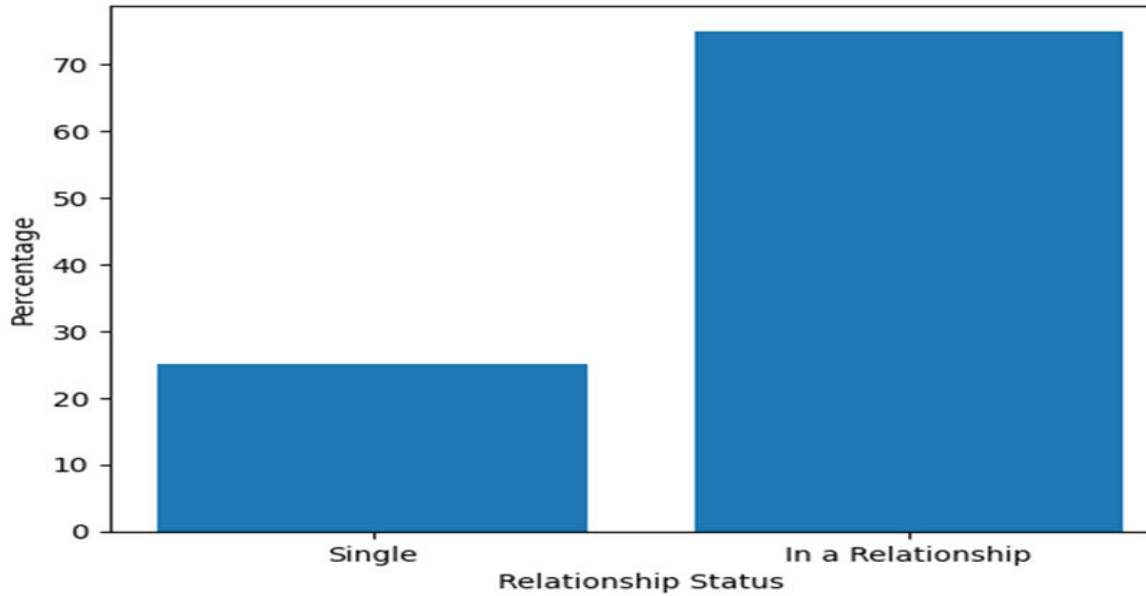


FIGURE 3: RELATIONSHIP STATUS DISTRIBUTION

Figure 3 Interpretation

The figure depicts the relationship status of respondents, revealing that a majority (75%) are currently in a relationship, while 25% are single. This distribution indicates that most participants have direct experience with romantic relationships, making the sample highly relevant for analysing dating violence and associated psychological factors such as depression.

Descriptive Statistics: Depression and Dating Violence

Depression was measured using a standardized psychological scale, while dating violence was assessed in terms of both perpetration and victimization using validated instruments. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values, were calculated to understand the distribution and variability of the key study variables.

The results indicate that the mean depression score among respondents was 18.5 (SD = 7.2), suggesting a moderate level of depressive symptoms within the sample. The perpetration score had a mean of 5.6 (SD = 3.1), indicating relatively lower engagement in aggressive behaviors. In contrast, the mean victimization score was slightly higher at 6.8 (SD = 3.7), reflecting a greater prevalence of experiencing dating violence compared to perpetrating it.

TABLE 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF STUDY VARIABLES

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Depression Score	18.5	7.2	5	36
Perpetration Score	5.6	3.1	0	12
Victimization Score	6.8	3.7	0	14

Table 2 Interpretation

The descriptive statistics indicate moderate levels of depression among respondents. Victimization scores are slightly higher than perpetration scores, suggesting that experiencing dating violence is more common than engaging in it. The variability in scores reflects individual differences in psychological state and involvement in dating violence within the sample.

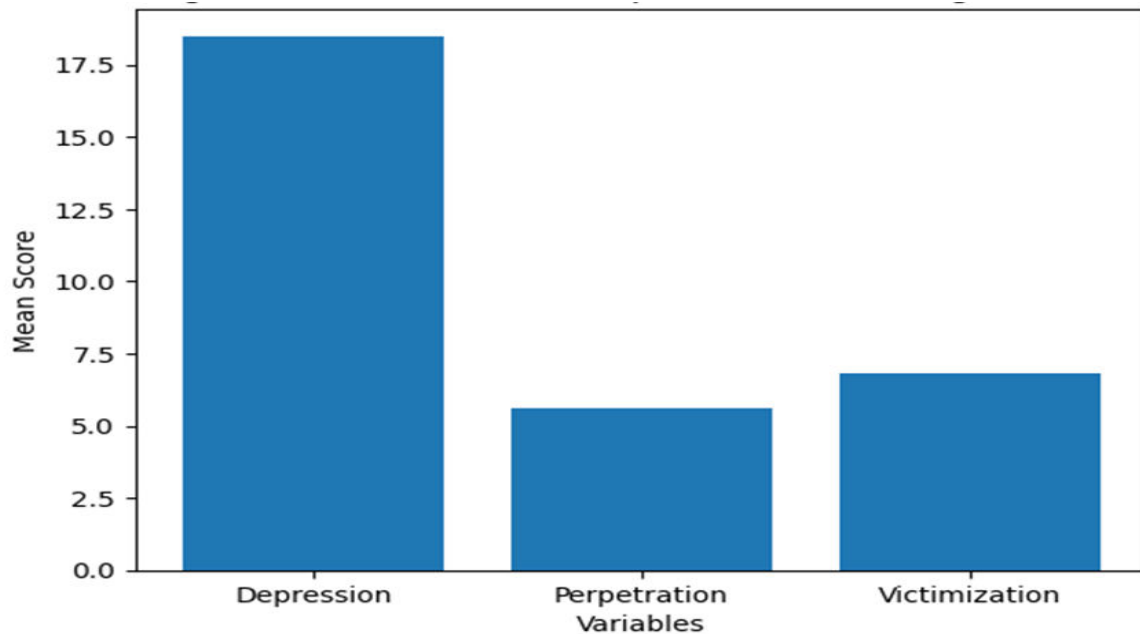


FIGURE 4: MEAN SCORES OF DEPRESSIONS AND DATING VIOLENCE

Figure 4 Interpretation

The figure shows that the mean depression score is significantly higher compared to perpetration and victimization scores. Among dating violence variables, victimization is slightly higher than perpetration. This indicates that respondents experience more depressive symptoms and are more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of dating violence.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study reveal a significant association between depression and involvement in dating violence, encompassing both perpetration and victimization among adolescents and young adults. The descriptive analysis indicates that participants reported moderate levels of depressive symptoms, with victimization scores slightly higher than perpetration scores, suggesting that experiencing dating violence is more prevalent than engaging in it. This pattern highlights the vulnerability of young individuals in romantic relationships, particularly those experiencing emotional distress.

The results further suggest that depression plays a dual role, functioning both as a predictor and an outcome of dating violence. Individuals with higher depressive symptoms are more likely to exhibit irritability, emotional dysregulation, and poor coping mechanisms, which may contribute to aggressive behaviors toward partners. Simultaneously, depressive individuals may demonstrate reduced assertiveness and increased emotional dependency, making them more susceptible to victimization. This bidirectional relationship creates a cycle in which depression and dating violence reinforce each other. These findings underscore the importance of integrating mental health interventions within dating violence prevention programs. Addressing depressive symptoms through early identification and psychological support can help reduce both the risk of perpetration and vulnerability to victimization, ultimately promoting healthier relationship dynamics.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the significant role of depression in influencing both perpetration and victimization in dating violence among adolescents and young adults. The findings demonstrate that depression is not only a consequence of experiencing violence but also a critical risk factor that increases the likelihood of engaging in or being exposed to abusive behaviors. The bidirectional relationship identified in the study suggests that depressive symptoms and dating violence reinforce each other, creating a harmful cycle that affects individuals' mental health and relationship quality.

The study emphasizes the need for integrated prevention strategies that address both psychological well-being and relational dynamics. Early screening for depression, along with interventions focused on emotional regulation, communication skills, and healthy relationship practices, can help reduce the prevalence of dating violence. Additionally, incorporating mental health support within educational and community-based programs can enhance resilience among young individuals. Overall, addressing depression is essential for breaking the cycle of dating violence and promoting safer, healthier relationships.

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