

FROM REJECTION SENSITIVITY TO PEER SUSCEPTIBILITY: BODY IMAGE AS A BRIDGE

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Abstract

Adolescence is a pivotal developmental stage marked by heightened sensitivity to social acceptance. During this period, adolescents increasingly rely on peer feedback to form their sense of self and identity. Susceptibility to peer influence can be linked both to maladaptive behaviors and to adaptive changes (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). However, not all adolescents are equally influenced by their peers; certain personality traits may heighten this vulnerability (Belsky & Pluess, 2009). This study aims to investigate how susceptibility to peer influence is longitudinally related to rejection sensitivity and body image. Data were drawn from the longitudinal research project NAVIGATE. The study was conducted in a regional town in Lithuania. The sample consisted of students from six high schools, with a total of 746 students in grades 5 - 8. Participants were aged 10 – 14 years ($M = 12.33$, $SD = 1.17$). The sample was diverse in terms of family and socio-economic backgrounds but homogeneous in terms of ethnic background. Written parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to participation. The study was conducted across three waves over one academic year. The following measures were used: Resistance to Peer Influence scale (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), Children's Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey et al., 1998), Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1985). Significant concurrent correlations were observed among all study variables across all three time points. The longitudinal interplay between the study variables was analyzed using three waves of data collected one academic year. Both direct and indirect pathways were considered. At each time interval higher rejection sensitivity predicted lower body image, and lower body image predicted higher susceptibility to peer influence. Bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals confirmed indirect effect: Time1 rejection sensitivity predicted Time 3 susceptibility to peer influence via Time 2 body image ($\beta = .004$ [.001, .014]). Thus, the hypothesis was confirmed.

Keywords: *Rejection sensitivity, body image, susceptibility, adolescence.*

1. Introduction

Adolescence is marked by heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and an increased reliance on peers for feedback and validation (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). During this stage, susceptibility to peer influence becomes particularly pronounced and plays a central role in shaping adolescents' behaviors, attitudes, and emerging sense of identity. Importantly, susceptibility to peer influence is not inherently maladaptive: it can facilitate social learning and prosocial development, but it can also contribute to conformity to harmful norms depending on contextual and individual factors (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

Research shows substantial individual differences in susceptibility, even within similar peer contexts (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). These individual differences cannot be fully explained by peer norms or situational pressure alone, highlighting the importance of intrapsychic factors in shaping adolescents' responsiveness to peers. Identifying psychological characteristics that increase vulnerability to peer influence is therefore important for developmental research and for targeted prevention.

One such factor is rejection sensitivity (RS), defined as the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overreact to potential social rejection. In adolescence, elevated RS has been consistently associated with heightened emotional reactivity, interpersonal anxiety, and difficulties in peer relationships (Giovazolias, 2024). Adolescents high in RS may be especially motivated to avoid exclusion, increasing the likelihood of aligning their behavior with perceived peer norms.

However, RS may influence peer susceptibility indirectly through self-evaluative processes. Body image is a salient domain during early adolescence (Fardouly et al., 2020), and negative body image has been linked to greater attentiveness to peer feedback and increased conformity to peer norms across multiple behavioral domains, not limited to appearance-related behaviors. Longitudinal studies indicate that higher RS predicts lower body satisfaction (Yilmazer, 2025), which in turn has been associated with greater

responsiveness to peer norms. These findings suggest that body image may serve as a psychological mediator, translating a general social sensitivity into observable susceptibility to peer influence.

The present study examines longitudinal associations between rejection sensitivity, body image, and susceptibility to peer influence across three measurement waves in early adolescence. Using path analysis, the study tests whether higher rejection sensitivity is associated with subsequent changes in body image, and whether these changes are in turn associated with later susceptibility to peer influence. By modeling indirect pathways across time, this approach moves beyond concurrent associations and provides a more stringent test of developmental sequencing. In doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how dispositional social sensitivity may translate into differential susceptibility to peer influence during a critical period of adolescent development.

2. Design

Data were drawn from the research project, “Navigating through secondary school: the role of friends and parents (NAVIGATE)”. This study used a longitudinal design with three measurement waves across one academic year. The study was conducted in Lithuanian schools, providing a culturally specific adolescent sample. At each wave, participants completed measures of rejection sensitivity, body image, and susceptibility to peer influence.

3. Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine the longitudinal associations between rejection sensitivity (RS) and susceptibility to peer influence in early adolescence, with body image considered as a potential mediator.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and procedure

Participants included 746 students (355 girls, 391 boys) in 5th (92 boys, 79 girls; $M_{age} = 10.81$, $SD_{age} = 0.410$), 6th (104 boys, 93 girls; $M_{age} = 11.8$, $SD_{age} = 0.448$), 7th (94 boys, 84 girls; $M_{age} = 12.83$, $SD_{age} = 0.44$), and 8th (101 boy, 99 girls; $M_{age} = 13.72$, $SD_{age} = 0.464$) grades.

All 5-8th graders (attending 44 classrooms in 4 middle schools) in the community were invited to participate. Written parent consent and student assent were required for participation. Trained research assistants administered questionnaires in classes on computer tablets in September 2021, February and May 2022. The study was approved by the university ethics committee (Nr. 6/202). The initial participation rate was 65.2%. Of the 746 students who participated at Time 1, 740 also participated at Time 2 and 743 participated at Time 3. There were no differences in any study or demographic variables between students who did and did not participate at both time points.

4.2. Instruments

Susceptibility to Peer Influence. Participants completed three items (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007) from a conformity to peers scale. Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Internal reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .76$). **Rejection sensitivity.** Participants completed an abbreviated 6-item rejection sensitivity scale adapted from the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Downey et al., 1998). Internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = .71$). **Body image.** Participants were asked to complete three self-report items from Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1985). $A = .90$.

5. Results

Table 1. Interclass Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations.

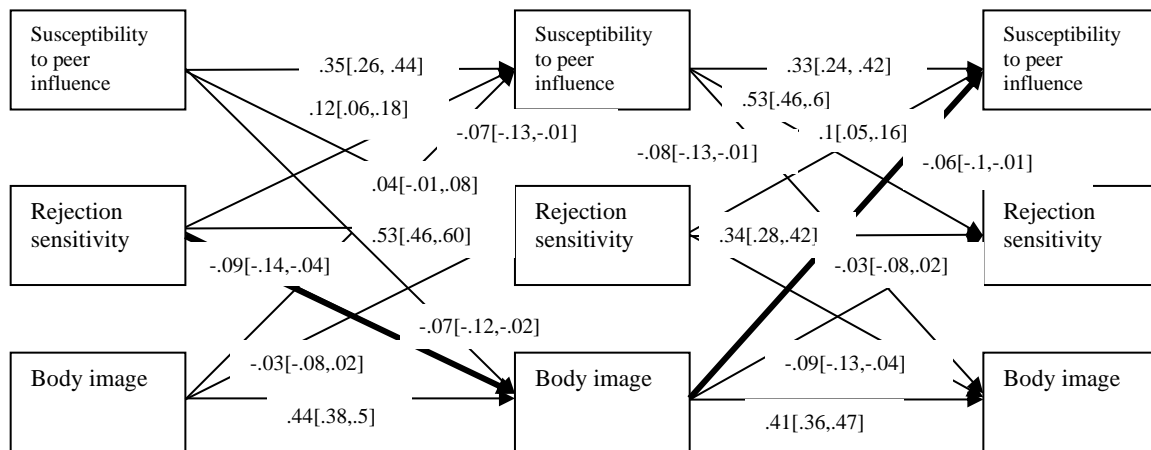
Variables	1	2	3	Mean (SD)
Susceptibility to Peer Influence	.428**	.328**	-.207**	2.21(.3)
Rejection Sensitivity	[.368**, .431**]	-.505**	-.237**	7.13(4.6)
Body image		[.483**, .561**]	-.260**, -.187**	3.24(1.16)
			.525**	
			[.493**, .538**]	

Notes. N = 746 for T1 variables, N=740 for T2 variables, N=743 for T3 variables. Median scores across three times are presented, with ranges in brackets. Autocorrelations are presented on the diagonal. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Significant concurrent correlations were observed among all study variables across all three time points (Table 1). RS was positively correlated with susceptibility to peer influence at all waves, body image was negatively associated with both RS and susceptibility to peer influence. Autocorrelations along the diagonal indicate moderate stability of each construct across time.

Figure 1 presents direct and indirect longitudinal associations from rejection sensitivity to body image and from body image to susceptibility to peer influence. Model fit was acceptable $\chi^2 = 26.04$, $p = .026$, $RMSEA = .035$ [.012, .055], $CFI = .992$. At each time interval higher rejection sensitivity predicted lower body image, and lower body image predicted higher susceptibility to peer influence. Bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals confirmed indirect effect: Time 1 rejection sensitivity predicted Time 3 susceptibility to peer influence via Time 2 body image ($\beta = .004$, 99%CI [.001, .014]). Thus, the hypothesis was confirmed.

Figure 1.



6. Conclusions

The present findings indicate that adolescents' rejection sensitivity (RS) predicts later body image dissatisfaction, which in turn increases susceptibility to peer influence. RS, as a dispositional social sensitivity, heightens adolescents' vigilance to social evaluation and motivates conformity to peer norms to avoid rejection (Downey et al., 1998). During adolescence, body image represents a salient domain of self-evaluation, sensitive to social comparison and peer feedback, with negative perceptions reinforcing conformity behaviors (de Vries et al., 2015). Our longitudinal mediation analyses suggest that body image partially explains how dispositional social sensitivity translates into greater susceptibility to peer influence, highlighting the mediating role of self-evaluative processes.

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