The Relationship between Emotion Regulation and Relational Aggression: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract
Relational aggression poses significant risks to mental health and social peace. The ability to regulate emotion effectively has an effect on reducing adolescents' engagement in relational aggression. Yet, no systematic reviews were found on the link between emotion regulation and relational aggression in adolescents. Thus, this study aims to analyse the existing body of work on the association between emotion regulation and relational aggression in adolescents. Following the ROSES (Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses) reporting standards protocol and several systematic literature review guidance papers, 14 databases and search engines identified 8 relevant articles. Though the analysis revealed some mixed results, the majority of the studies reported that emotion regulation and its different strategies determine whether adolescents engage in relational aggression or not. This review presents a systematic synthesis of the literature and provides insight into designing targeted interventions to enhance emotion regulation techniques, therefore reducing relational aggression engagement in adolescents.
Keywords: Relational Aggression, Emotion Regulation, Emotional Management, Systematic Review, Adolescents

Introduction
Relational aggression is a social form of aggression that aims to harm or threatens to harm a person's social relationships and goals by deliberate means of manipulation, exclusion, rejection, and spreading rumors (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although the definition suggests higher relational aggression in girls due to greater emphasis on relationship goals, some scholars disagree (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Moreover, relational aggression is a form of aggression that is expressed directly or indirectly and requires social and linguistic abilities (Razmjoee et al., 2016; Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). This behavior typically is described as insidious, circuitous, and cold (Kokkinos et al., 2016; Risser, 2013), with perpetrators often displaying attitudes of shamelessness, indifference, and pride towards victims (Romera et al.,

2019). Although many recognize the negative impact of relational aggression, some view it as harmless and a normal phase that will pass with time (Murray- Close et al., 2016). However, similar to physical aggression, relational aggression can have equally, if not more harmful effects on adolescents (Riaz et al., 2018).

One factor that has been linked to relational aggression is emotion regulation. Emotion is a response to an event deemed relevant to the present goal (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). Emotion responses begin with assessing inward or outward emotion cues that activate experiential, behavioral, and physiological response tendencies—the sequence of processes to produce emotion (Gross, 1998; Gross & Jazaieri, 2014). Emotion regulation is a part of this process that can be deliberate or automatic, intrinsic or extrinsic, and regulate one's own emotions or those of others (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014; Gross & John, 2003).

According to Wachs and Wright (2018), traditional bullies and cyberbullies are prone to exhibit poorer abilities to interpret and describe emotions compared to non-bullies. Poor abilities to grasp one's own emotions may explain poor emotion regulation and involvement in bullying. Several studies have found a link between emotion regulation and relational aggression. For instance, Qian et al (2022), study demonstrated that the ability to manage or control emotion effectively lessens the tendency to perpetrate relational aggression. Similarly, certain emotion strategies like expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal also showed significant relationships with relational aggression (Kokkinos et al., 2019; Kokkinos & Voulgaridou, 2017).

Two constructs similar to relational aggression are indirect aggression and social aggression. Indirect aggression refers to "rejecting and excluding" (Feshbach, 1969, p. 250) in a way unknown to victims (Björkqvist, 1994). While social aggression is "…damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take direct forms such as verbal rejection, negative facial expressions or body movements, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion" (Galen & Underwood, 1997, p. 589). From these definitions, researchers agreed that the constructs overlap, but with some distinctions (Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2015). Cyberbullying is another such practice that Jiang et al. (2020) classify as online relational aggression. Thus, as Voulgaridou and Kokkinos (2015) suggested, the term 'relational aggression' was used throughout the study, referring to relational aggression perpetration.

Accordingly, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to provide a systematic and robust review of the relationship between emotion regulation and relational aggression. SLR is a systematic, transparent, and replicable process of finding, gathering, and synthesizing all scientific research available on a particular issue (Davis et al., 2014; Kraus et al., 2020). Although research on relational aggression has grown over the years (Eriksen & Lyng, 2016), a preliminary search has revealed inconsistent findings; accordingly, SLR is suitable for this matter (Okoli, 2015). The search also failed to find any systematic review of the relationship between emotion regulation and relational aggression among adolescents, which was the aim of this SLR. The following sections are: the method section describes the process of planning, searching, quality appraisal, and data extraction; the result section presents the report and synthesis; and the discussion reveals the study gaps.

Method
The method section followed Shaffril et al (2021b), steps in conducting SLR, that is, developing a protocol or following existing SLR guidelines; research question formulation; systematic searching strategies; quality appraisal; data extraction; and data synthesis.

Protocol Development/Referring to Guidelines
The initial stage started with establishing a protocol or referring to available sources as a layout to conduct SLR, reduce biases, and aid in review replication and validation (Okoli, 2015; Shaffril et al., 2021a; Xiao & Watson, 2019). Taking into consideration Shaffril et al. (2021b) opinion on non-health-related studies, this SLR followed Haddaway et al.'s (2017) ROSES (Reporting Standards for Systematic Evidence Syntheses) reporting standards protocol and was guided by SLR guidance papers from multiple fields, including Okoli (2015), Shaffril et al. (2021b), and Xiao and Watson (2019).

Formulation of Research Questions
Formulating research questions carefully determines the entire flow and process of the SLR (Shaffril et al., 2021b). The research questions for the systematic review were drafted using mnemonic of PEO (Population, Exposure of interest – independent variable, and Outcome/response – dependent variable; Moola et al., 2015). Hence, three elements were included in the research questions: adolescents (Population), emotion regulation (Exposure), and relational aggression (Outcome). The research question w*as* as follows: Is there an association between emotion regulation and relational aggression in adolescents?

Systematic Searching Strategy
In this stage, searching strategy devises suitable methods, sources, and criteria to search for related articles in manageable numbers (Okoli, 2015; Shaffril et al., 2021b). This strategy comprises three processes: identification, screening, and eligibility.

1. Identification
Identification is an approach to increase the number of articles presented in the search results (Shaffer et al., 2021b). The first method is to determine and enrich research questions with keywords. Keywords in English and Malay languages were searched using associated synonyms, terminologies, and variations from thesaurus, database keyword suggestions, and keywords used in past studies. The keywords generated were:

> Relational aggression: ("relational aggression", "relational bullying", "social aggression", "social bullying", "indirect aggression", "indirect bullying", "covert aggression", "perilaku agresif", and "buli memulau");
> Emotion regulation: ("emotion regulation", "emotion dysregulation", "emotion control", "affect regulation", "mood regulation", "cognitive reappraisal", "expressive suppression", and "regulasi emosi");
> Adolescent: ("adolescent", "student", "pupil", "teenager", "remaja", "pelajar", and "murid").

Next, determining the main and supplementary search methods. Considering that social science literature is spread across multi-disciplinary databases, on top of problems with inconclusive terms and concepts, indexing, and limited abstracts; Papaioannou et al. (2010)

propose multiple database searches. The main search method focuses on system searches from databases or search engines, including grey literature (Shaffril et al., 2021b). The supplementary search method is a manual search that helps locate articles undetected by the main search method (Chapman et al., 2010).

The study follows Gusenbauer and Haddaway (2020) suggestions on suitable databases and search engines, which included Academic Search Premier (EBSCO), Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, PubMed, SAGE, Scopus, Springer, and ScienceDirect as the main databases. Supporting databases were Dimensions.ai, Google Scholar, Mendeley, MYJurnal, and Semantic Scholar.

Search strings containing the keywords were generated using operations like Boolean operators, phrase searching, truncation, wildcards, and field code when available (Shaffril et al., 2021b). Different databases and search systems allow different search strings; some allow entire search strings, while others have character restrictions (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). Figure 1 present the ROSES flow diagram for the SLR.
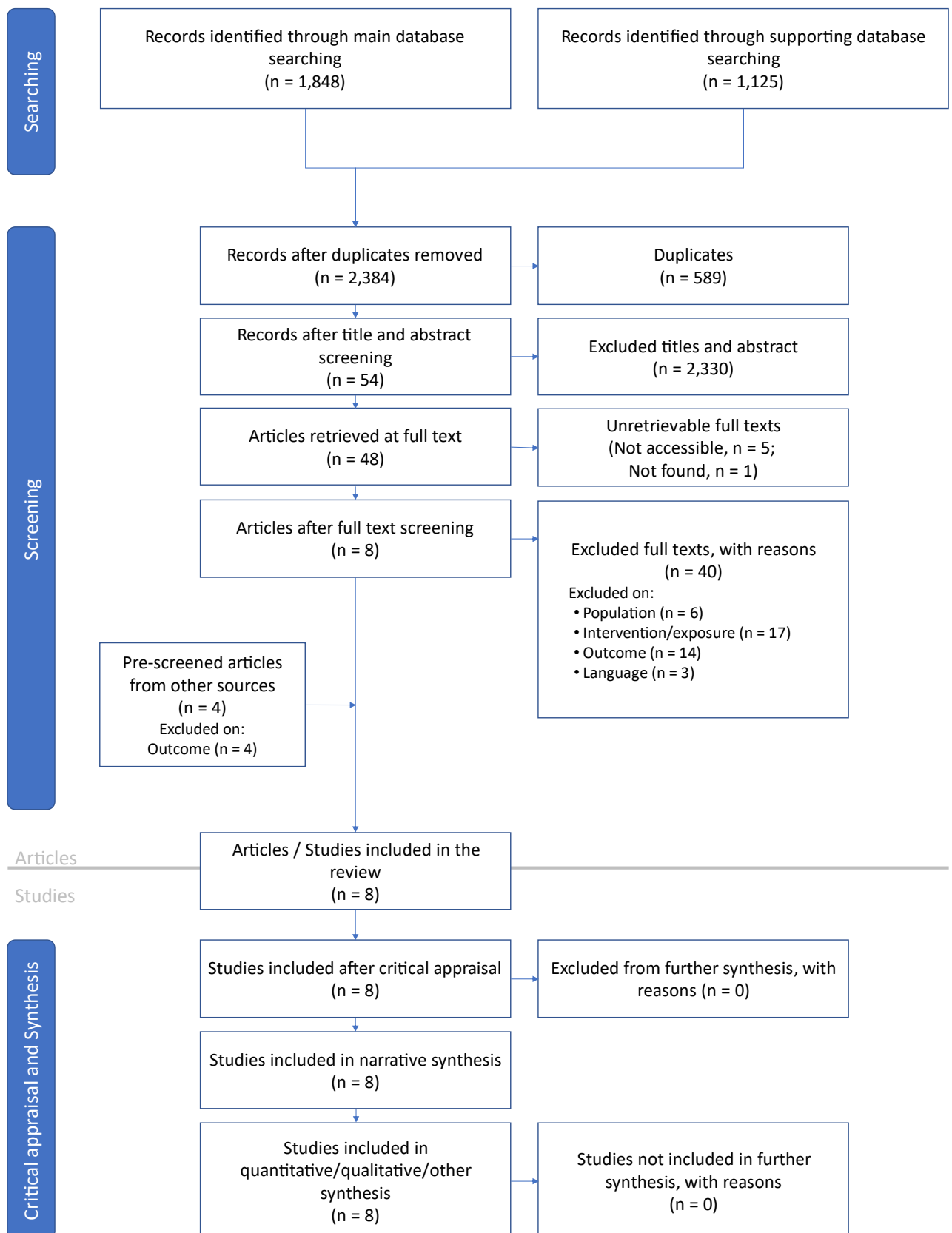
Figure 1ROSES Flow Diagram for Systematic Reviews. Version 1.0

2. Screening

Screening involves the process of inclusion or exclusion articles from the databases based on the criteria set by the researchers (Shaffril et al., 2021b). The first inclusion criterion was the presence of PEO, as mentioned in the research question (Table 1). This means that relational aggression (perpetrator) as the dependent variable, emotion regulation as the independent variable, and the population was normal school-going adolescents. Studies that focused on relational aggression were included. Other criteria were publication type, language, and publication period. Studies should be empirical studies from primary sources, in English or Malay, and within the period when the SLR was conducted, that is, between 2017 to 2024. Exclusion criteria were automatically filtered using the database filter function when available. Unrelated articles are excluded from the review.

Table 1
SLR Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
PEO	P - Adolescents aged 10 to 18	Non-adolescents, animal, diagnosed
	E – Emotion regulation as IV	mental disease
	O – Relational aggression as DV	Emotion regulation not as IV
		Relational aggression not as DV
Publication type	Indexed Journal (research articles), thesis, book chapters	Non-indexed journals, Review paper, conference proceedings, commentary
Language	English and Malay	Non-English or Malay
Publication period	Between 2017-2024	Before 2017

3. Eligibility

Eligibility focuses on the manual screening of suitable articles for data extraction, aiming to eliminate unrelated articles and minimize the shortcomings of technology in database searches (Shaffril et al., 2021b). The first stage involved screening articles based on titles and abstracts that fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Screen articles were downloaded for full-text screening. Inaccessible articles for reasons like access restrictions and non-replies from authors were discarded from the study. Supplementing the main search method is manual search; comprised of handpicking, backward tracking, forward tracking, and a combination of the two. These strategies include searching in the reference section of selected articles or the recommendation option in databases, using Google Scholar's 'Cited by' search option, and contacting authors (Chapman et al., 2010; Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Quality Appraisal

The selected articles must be evaluated for quality before data is extracted for further analysis (Shaffril et al., 2021a). The articles' quality is assessed using Hong et al.'s (2018) Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018, which allows critical evaluation of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research. The criteria are rated on five questions that assess the methodological quality of a study. Hong et al. (2018) discourages excluding any low-quality studies, while Okoli (2015) noted that quality assessment is just an affirmation process. According to Xiao and Watson (2019), high-quality research should serve as the

foundation for the synthesis and direction of the conclusion, followed by medium-quality papers and low-quality articles that support the review.

Data Synthesis
Data were extracted on an Excel spreadsheet based on the research question (Shaffril et al., 2021b) overseen by a supervisory committee. The extracted data provides information that assists the researchers in answering the study question. A codebook is created to ensure accurate categorization and classification of concepts and themes, which is critical for reaching accurate conclusions (Xiao & Watson, 2019). The data extracted comprises the following (Table 2): Author(s), year, countries, number of participants, age, frequency, association, and study design.

Data Synthesis
A qualitative synthesis was utilized to develop a summary of quantitative studies and meaningful conclusions from the extracted data (Okoli, 2015). The analysis method is a textual narrative synthesis of the shared characteristics decided by the researchers (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

Results
During the initial search, 2973 articles were found, with 1,848 from main databases and 1,125 from supporting databases. A total of 589 articles were deleted due to duplicates identified using Mendeley and manual searches resulted in 2,384 articles for further analysis. Articles were then screened based on the titles and abstracts, leaving only 54 articles to be downloaded. The remaining 2,330 articles were excluded due to publication type, date before 2017, relevance to the research question, non-adolescent respondents, and languages other than English or Malay. Six articles could not be found or were not accessible; consequently, only 48 articles were downloaded for full-text screening. After full-text read, 40 articles were excluded for missing information on key variables, resulting in only 8 articles. The supplementary search method found four more related articles: one article each from handpicking, and one article from backward and forward tracking. However, all for were excluded due to not fulfilling the inclusion criteria. Therefore, the total number of studies included in the systematic review were 8.

Table 2
Table of Findings

Author (Year)	Country	N (Age)	*Association*	Study Design	Quality
Ettekal & Ladd (2019)	America	482 (11-18)	Emotion dysregulation and Relational aggression Grade 5/8/11, r = .23 - .30*	CS LG	5/5 5/5
Kokkinos et al. (2019)	Greece	518 (12-16)	Expressive suppression and Reactive relational aggression, r = .14** Expressive suppression/ Cognitive reappraisal and Proactive relational aggression = NS	CS	3/5
Kokkinos &	Greece	347	Cognitive reappraisal and Proactive	CS	3/5

Voulgaridou (2017)		(11-16)	relational aggression, r = -.25** Expressive suppression and Proactive relational aggression, r = -.23** Cognitive reappraisal and Reactive relational aggression, r = .11* Expressive suppression and Reactive relational aggression = NS		
Kokkinos & Voulgaridou (2021)	Greece	1020 (11-16)	Anger rumination and Indirect proactive relational aggression, r = .43** Anger rumination and Direct proactive relational aggression, r = .31** Anger rumination and Direct reactive relational aggression, r = .44** Anger rumination and Indirect reactive relational aggression, r = .32**	CS	4/5
Monopoli et al. (2022)	America	775 M(12.33) SD(1.18)	Emotion dysregulation and Verbal/ Relational bullying, r = -.51** Emotion dysregulation and Cyberbullying, r = -.44**	CS	3/5
Pirc et al. (2023)	Slovenia	202 (12-14)	Emotional control and Relational aggression, r = −.38**	CS	3/5
Qian et al. (2022)	China	1,594 (12-18)	Emotional management/ control and Relational aggression = 2.43 [1.55, 3.82]** OR (95%CI)	CS	4/5
Safdar & Khan (2019)	Pakistan	350 (13-18)	Emotion dysregulation and Aggression, r = .86** Emotion dysregulation and Proactive/Reactive relational aggression, r = .78**	CS	4/5

Notes. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

1. CS representing Cross-sectional research design and LG – Longitudinal research design

2. NS represent non-significant result

3. OR = odds ratio; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; r = Correlation coefficient

4. 2/5 to 3/5 represent medium-quality studies; 4/5 to 5/5 represent high-quality studies

Demographics of Participants
The number of respondents from studies included in the systematic literature review ranged from 202 to 1594 (n = 5288). Respondents' ages ranged from 11 to 18 years old. Most of the studies included adolescents aged 11 to 18 years (3 studies). Two studies focused on early adolescents, while three focused on early to middle adolescents. As for study design, most studies conducted cross-sectional research (7 studies) and only one mixed research design.

Lastly, for the country of the study origin, the highest number of studies were found in Greece (3), followed by America (2), and the rest with one study (Slovenia, China, and Pakistan).

Association Results
Studies showed varying ways measurements were used to determine the relationship between emotion regulation and relational aggression. Three studies measured emotion dysregulation and five studies measured emotion regulation strategies. For instance, studies measuring emotion dysregulation found a positive relationship with relational aggression (2 studies; $r = .23 - .86$, p $< .05 - .01$). One study displayed an inverse relationship with verbal/relational aggression and cyberbullying ($r = - .44 - .51$, p $< .01$).

Some studies focused on different emotion regulation strategies. For example, two strategies of emotion regulation, that is, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression, have been linked with reactive and proactive relational aggression. These studies reported mixed results; one study showed that expressive suppression negatively relates to proactive relational aggression ($r = - .23$, p $< .01$) and positively relates to reactive relational aggression ($r = .14$, p $< .01$). In another study, cognitive reappraisal correlated negatively with proactive relational aggression ($r = -.25$, p $< .01$) and positively with reactive relational aggression (r = .11, p $< .05$). Both studies did report non-significant in some of the results between all four variables

Another emotion regulation strategy measured was emotional control and management and relational aggression. Two studies demonstrate significant negative relationships with relational aggression ($r = -.38$, p $< .01$). The last measures of emotion regulation strategies were anger regulation or anger rumination. Only one study focused on anger rumination and the functions of relational aggression, which found a significant positive relationship ($r = .31 - .44$, p $< .01$).

Quality of Studies
Table 2 showed the quality appraisal using MMAT. Overall, 4 articles were rated as high-quality studies (i.e., 3 fulfilled four criteria and 1 fulfilled five), and 4 studies were rated as moderate-quality studies, which met three or two criteria. None were rated as low-quality. All studies fulfilled the fifth criterion, that is, using appropriate statistical analysis. Only one study met the criterion of using a suitable sampling technique; 8 studies fulfilled the target population criterion; 7 studies used appropriate measurements; and 4 demonstrated a low risk of non-response bias.

Discussion
The objective of the study was to provide a systematic analysis of the association between emotion regulation and relational aggression in adolescents. A total of 14 databases and search engines were searched, which resulted in 27 related articles included in the review. The analysis revealed that emotion regulation significantly influences relational aggression perpetration, and different ways of measuring emotion regulation provide a better understanding of the relationship.

Studies measuring emotion regulation mostly found that poor regulation of emotion increases the likelihood of engaging in aggression. For example, high emotion dysregulation

strongly influences engaging in proactive and reactive relational aggression and general aggression (Safdar & Khan, 2019). A long-term effect was also reported in Ettekal and Ladd (2019) study, in which high emotion dysregulation increased adolescents' relational aggression in Grades 5, 8, and 11. Similarly, scoring low in dimensions of emotion dysregulation like emotional control, emotional self-awareness, and situational representativeness increases the chances of engaging in relational or verbal aggression and cyberbullying (Monopoli et al., 2022).

Different strategies of emotion regulation have also been explored and found to have varying results. For instance, Kokkinos et al. (2019) and Kokkinos and Voulgaridou (2017) have explored the relationship between two emotion regulation strategies, that is, expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal with functions of relational aggression. High expressive suppression is significantly related to reactive relational aggression (Kokkinos et al., 2019). Whereas, high cognitive reappraisal decreased engagement in proactive relational aggression but increased reactive relational aggression (Kokkinos & Voulgaridou, 2017). The authors also found that poor expressive suppression increased proactive relational aggression. In contrast, there was no link between expressive suppression or cognitive reappraisal and proactive relational aggression (Kokkinos et al., 2019), or between expressive suppression and reactive relational aggression (Kokkinos & Voulgaridou, 2017).

Other emotion regulation strategies were demonstrated in Pirc et al. (2023) and Qian et al. (2022) studies. Both studies examined the link between emotional control or management and relational aggression and revealed that having good emotional control or management helps to stray away from relational aggression.

Alternative measures of emotion regulation strategies found in the review was anger rumination or anger regulation. Kokkinos and Voulgaridou (2021) studied the association between anger rumination and different forms and functions of relational aggression. The results showed a significant correlation between anger rumination and indirect proactive relational aggression, direct proactive relational aggression, direct reactive relational aggression, and indirect reactive relational aggression. This indicates that adolescents prone to use higher anger rumination strategy are more likely to engage in all forms and functions of relational aggression.

Based on the review, it is clear that emotion regulation plays a significant role in influencing relational aggression among adolescents. Some of the intervention efforts that can be taken as a preventive measure against adolescents' relational aggression perpetration start at home. It's important for parents to adopt emotion coaching rather than dismissing styles to help adolescents develop positive emotional competence and regulation (Khairi et al., 2022). This suggests that awareness programs and training on parent emotional socialization styles should be developed to guide parents in effectively socializing, displaying, and regulating emotions. These programs should also involve coaching adolescents on how to manage negative emotions and understand the consequences of improper emotion regulation.

To develop those programs, more studies are needed. Future studies can focus on specific emotion regulation strategies like expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal.

Similarly, more studies are needed on specific forms of aggression, like relational aggression, and its relationship with different strategies of emotion regulation. This is important because certain forms of aggression influence certain outcomes, like relational aggression, which Hurst (2017) suggests affects social adjustment particularly on psychological adjustment. Furthermore, there is a need for more exploration in countries with limited studies on this topic, such as Asian countries with different cultural orientations compared to Western countries. It is important to note some limitations of this study. Firstly, the focus was mainly on emotion regulation and relational aggression among adolescents. The search was also confined to 14 databases and search engines, and the review only included studies from 2017 to 2024.

Conclusion

The study presents systematic review of recent studies on risk factor of emotion regulation on adolescents' relational aggression. The review indicates the importance of regulating emotion properly and effectively in lowering chances of engaging in relational aggression. This review highlights the need for future studies to explore different strategies of emotion regulation and examining which strategies works best to prevent relational in adolescents.

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