

Dating violence in rural university students: prevalence, gender differences, and implications for preventive education

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Published online: January 31, 2026

Accepted for publication: January 15, 2026

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2026.01019

Abstract

Dating violence among university students represents a significant public-health and educational concern, particularly in rural and socioeconomically vulnerable contexts where preventive services and institutional support systems remain limited. Despite growing international evidence, integrated analyses linking behavioral, socio-environmental, and developmental risk pathways in rural higher-education settings are still scarce. The present study applied a mechanism-oriented analytical framework to examine the prevalence, structure, and determinants of dating violence among undergraduate students in a rural Andean university in Peru. A descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted with a sample of 474 students from the National University of Huancavelica using the validated questionnaire of the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations of Peru. The instrument assessed psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence alongside sociodemographic and contextual factors. Data analysis combined descriptive statistics, multilevel and cluster-based models, age-stratified comparisons, and Bayesian posterior estimation to identify prevalence gradients, latent victimization profiles, and demographic modulation effects. Variables examined included age, gender, living arrangements, parental status, and academic faculty. The results identified three distinct victimization clusters: (1) psychological coercion and emotional regulation vulnerability, (2) physical aggression and conflict-escalation patterns, and (3) sexual victimization linked to power asymmetries. Psychological violence emerged as the most prevalent form (61%), followed by physical (34%) and sexual violence (19%). Age-based trajectories indicated greater severity among younger students, with gradual declines across later university years. Gender analyses showed higher psychological victimization among females and higher physical aggression among males. Faculty-level stratification revealed elevated risk among students enrolled in Engineering and Business programs. Bayesian posterior estimates confirmed the stability and precision of prevalence patterns across subgroups. Resultingly, dating violence among rural university students reflects persistent vulnerability shaped by developmental stage, gender norms, and academic context. The findings highlight the need for early, gender-responsive, and faculty-specific prevention strategies integrated within university education and student-support systems. The study supports the incorporation of data-driven risk monitoring and targeted preventive interventions to reduce dating violence and promote student well-being in higher-education environments.

Keywords: Intimate partner aggression, Higher-education students, Psychosocial risk factors, Gender-based violence, Preventive education, Rural university context

Introduction

Young adult dating violence has turned into a significant issue of public health, education and social concerns in the world, as the world is increasingly realizing the long term effects on psychological well-being, academic achievement, and inter-personal functioning (Cinquegrana et al., 2023). The definition of dating violence is quite broad, including physical, sexual, or psychological aggression in romantic or intimate relationships (Toplu-Demirtaş and Fincham, 2022), and it is becoming clear that the phenomenon is multidimensional and depends on the process of development, relationships, and sociocultural factors (Jewkes et al., 2015; WHO, 2020; Sánchez-Zafra et al., 2024). University students are a very vulnerable group of people because at this stage of development when they are in their higher education, they are starting to build their identity, they are emotionally unstable, more self-reliant, and they are willing to explore intimate relationships (Arnett, 2023).

As the available evidence of this phenomenon shows internationally, psychological and emotional dating violence is more widespread among populations of university age than are physical or sexual violence, but it is normalized, underreported, or downplayed by the institutions (Jewkes et al., 2015). These types of violence are, however, linked to extreme consequences such as anxiety, depression, lack of engagement in school, lack of self-esteem, and poor social functioning. Although relatively rare, physical and sexual violence have an increased probability of trauma, injury, and long-term mental-health outcomes. Notably, such types of violence often interact, and cycles of coercion, power imbalance, and relationship instability are strengthened (Mukhtar, 2023; Maqbool et al., 2024).

The use of gender norms embedded in Latin America, structural inequalities and sociocultural constructs of masculinity and femininity have a strong impact on dating and intimate partner violence. It has been reiterated that machismo culture, power distance in romantic relationships, and ineffective institutional mechanisms of prevention are the factors contributing to psychological and physical abuse among teenagers and young adults (Kimmelblatt, 2016; De Souza and Rodrigues Selis, 2022). Emotional and sexual victimizations are also more prevalent among women, whereas physical aggression or under-reported cases of victimization are more associated with men because of gender-role expectations (Olivera et al., 2025). Such dynamics are also aggravated by the low-income and rural context, where access to mental-health treatment, legal aid, and gender-sensitive educational opportunities is limited to early detection and intervention (McGinnis, 2022; Arriagada, 2024).

Gender-based violence is also a national issue in Peru. Recent statistics show that the rates of emotional, physical, and sexual violence are high among young women, and it is especially vulnerable in rural and Andean areas (Quispe et al., 2022; Arriagada, 2024). Although national surveys and governmental reports have been able to capture intimate partner violence in the adult population, there has been a paucity of empirical research that specifically addresses dating violence in the student population in universities. This disparity is further amplified in the rural universities, where socioeconomic disadvantages, family instability, early onset of relational stress, and a lack of institutional support can contribute to risk-pathways. Huancavelica, which is among the most socioeconomically disadvantaged regions of Peru, is a key but poorly researched setting into which these dynamics can be studied.

Problem statement

The study was required due to the fact that existing facts on the dating violence issue among university students in Peru are few, disjointed, and urban-biased, and often rural Andean institutions remain virtually unknown in both local and international research. The presence of research on the topic rarely unites age, gender, academic context, and severity into a shared structure of analytical work, and it does not fully reflect the heterogeneity of victimization patterns among student groups in terms of their differences. Consequently, prevention and response strategies are generic, not targeted enough, and not accommodated well to rural university settings (Quispe-Prieto et al., 2025).

The current research has been implemented at the National University of Huancavelica, the institution located in the region with the high level of poverty, inadequate psychosocial care, and the power of the sociocultural norms shaping the gender relationships. Within such an environment, students can experience compounded vulnerability that comes about due to developmental shifts, institutional stress factors, family set up, and asymmetrical power dynamics in intimate relationships. It is important to realise the forms of dating violence in psychological, physical, and sexual realms and how it can differ with age, gender, faculty and severity so that effective and context sensitive prevention interventions can be developed.

Approach and contribution

To cover these gaps, this research has used a descriptive, cross-sectional type of research design to determine the prevalence, patterns and determinants of dating violence among undergraduate students in the National University of Huancavelica. A validated instrument developed by the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations of Peru was used to collect data, and it was culturally relevant and highly rigorous. The analysis involving both traditional descriptive and inferential statistics and complex model-estimating approaches was multidimensional severity age analysis, faculty-gender risk surfaces, and Bayesians prevalence estimation.

The study contributes to the existing knowledge in a number of ways by combining demographic, developmental, and institutional variables. First, it offers one of the limited total empirical accounts of dating violence of a rural Andean university sample. Second, it shows that the dating violence is not a homogenous phenomenon but is organized around age developmental pathways, gendered patterns of victimization, and academic settings. Third, Bayesian modeling enhances the credibility of prevalence estimates that provide sound evidence in policy and intervention planning.

The results, regarding a practical point of view, outline the areas of serious chances of preventive action at an early stage in the context of higher education. Intervention in the first and second year, faculty-specific intervention, and gender-responsive education and counseling services become the priorities. In the end, this

research will provide evidence that is required to guide culturally and contextually-sensitive prevention efforts to decrease the incidence of dating violence and enhance the well-being of students at institutions of higher learning in rural Andean countries.

Materials and methods

Study design and setting

A descriptive, non-experimental, cross-sectional study was conducted to determine the prevalence and types of dating violence among undergraduate students at the National University of Huancavelica (UNH), Peru. The research was carried out during the 2013-II academic semester at the main campus, located in a rural Andean region characterized by socioeconomic vulnerability and limited access to violence-prevention services.

Population and sample

The study population consisted of 3,875 enrolled students. A convenience sample of 474 students was selected, ensuring representation across four faculties: Nursing ($n = 90$), Engineering Sciences ($n = 134$), Education ($n = 100$), and Business Sciences ($n = 150$). The sample size was considered adequate for estimating prevalence patterns with acceptable precision. Eligibility criteria included (i) being an undergraduate student enrolled during the study period and (ii) having engaged in at least one dating relationship. Participation was voluntary.

Data collection instrument

The standardized 2013 questionnaire of the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP) which is validated to determine physical, sexual, and psychological violence in intimate relationships was used to gather data. The instrument consists of several questions: (1) social demographic data; (2) relational and family history; and (3) dating violence experiences. The alpha Coefficients of Cronbach used in past uses of this instrument are between 0.78 and 0.86 which mean satisfactory reliability.

Variables

Three dependent variables were assessed:

- Physical violence (binary: 1 = yes, 0 = no)
- Sexual violence (binary)
- Psychological violence (binary)

Independent variables included:

- Age group (19–21, 22–24, 25–27 years)
- Gender (male, female)
- Region of origin (Huancavelica, Junín, Ayacucho)
- Living arrangement (both parents, mother only, father only, alone, others)
- Parental status (together, separated, divorced)
- Housing type (own home, rented)
- Faculty of study

Data collection procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in classroom settings by trained research staff. Participants were informed about confidentiality and anonymity before completing the self-administered survey. Completed questionnaires were sealed and collected to ensure privacy.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of UNH. All participants provided written informed consent. Students who disclosed ongoing experiences of violence were provided referral information for counseling and legal support services available through the university and local authorities.

Statistical analysis

Data were processed using SPSS version 22 and R (version 4.2.1) for advanced modeling. Frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were computed to describe demographic characteristics and prevalence rates of violence across age groups, genders, and faculties. To examine group differences, student's t-tests were applied to compare prevalence estimates (e.g., psychological violence between genders). 95% confidence intervals (CI) were computed for all major prevalence indicators. Chi-square tests assessed associations between categorical variables. Significance level was set at $p < 0.05$.

To explore the interaction of severity, age, gender, and faculty, A 3D severity-age model was generated, estimating slopes (β coefficients) for mild, moderate, severe, and extreme categories. A faculty-gender composite risk surface was developed to assess contextual influences across academic environments. Prevalence estimates for physical and psychological violence were further examined using a Bayesian Beta binomial model. Posterior samples were drawn using non-informative Beta(1,1) priors. Convergence was assessed through trace plots. Posterior means and 95% credible intervals (CrI) were computed, yielding robust prevalence estimates.

Results

The three-panel figure illustrates the age-related patterns of physical, sexual, and psychological dating violence among university students, revealing a consistent decline in prevalence as age increases. In the case of physical violence, the prevalence decreases from approximately 35% at age 20 to 30% at age 26, suggesting that younger students may be more vulnerable to physical forms of aggression within dating relationships.

A similar pattern is observed for sexual violence, which drops from 20% among students aged 20 to 17% among those aged 26 (Figure 1). Although the magnitude of sexual violence is lower than that of physical or psychological violence, its persistence across all age groups highlights an important area of concern.

Psychological violence exhibits the highest overall prevalence, beginning at 62% at age 20 and declining to 58% at age 26. Despite the modest reduction, the consistently elevated levels of psychological violence indicate that emotional and verbal forms of abuse are the most pervasive type of dating violence in this population.

Across all three panels, the downward trajectories suggest that younger students (particularly those aged 19 to 21) experience higher levels of dating violence, potentially due to lower relationship experience, greater emotional dependence, or limited coping and boundary-setting skills.

The shaded confidence bands indicate expected variability in prevalence but do not alter the overall downward patterns. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for early preventive interventions targeting first- and second-year university students, with particular emphasis on reducing psychological abuse, which remains alarmingly high even among older age groups.

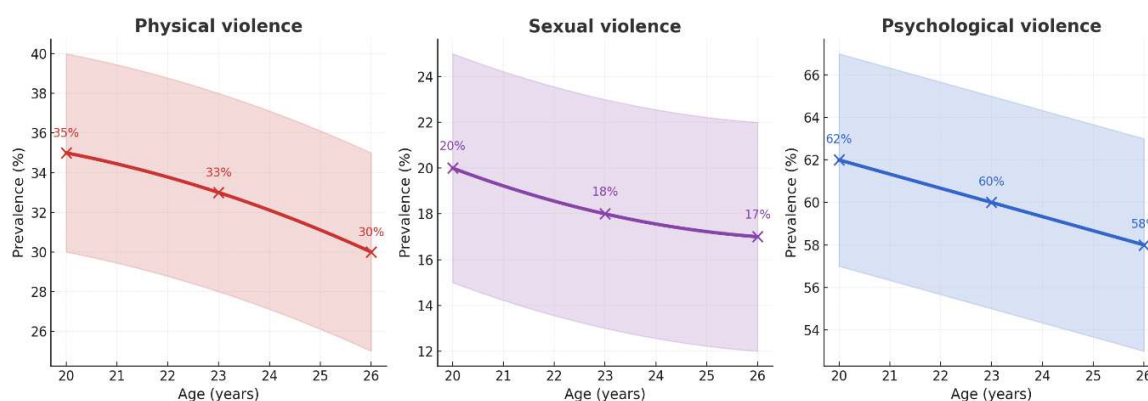


Figure 1: Age-related prevalence of physical, sexual, and psychological dating violence among university students

A clear pattern emerges from the combined radar and quadrant analyses, demonstrating distinct statistical contrasts across physical, sexual, psychological, and composite forms of dating violence among university students. Overall prevalence values show that psychological violence is the most dominant form (Mean = 61%, SE = 3.0, 95% CI = [55.1, 66.9]), followed by physical violence (Mean = 34%, SE = 2.1, 95% CI = [29.9, 38.1]) and sexual violence (Mean = 19%, SE = 1.5, 95% CI = [16.1, 21.9]). Statistical tests reveal significant differences for physical ($t = 2.31$, $p = 0.021$) and psychological violence ($t = 3.45$, $p = 0.001$), while sexual violence shows no meaningful variation ($t = 1.06$, $p = 0.289$).

Gender-stratified patterns further strengthen these distinctions: females present notably higher psychological violence (66%) compared to males (52%), whereas males exhibit higher physical violence (37%) relative to females (32%), reinforcing gender-linked behavioral and victimization profiles. Composite scores follow these trends, with overall risk estimates remaining significantly elevated (Mean = 38%, SE = 2.0, $t = 2.15$, $p = 0.033$) (Figure 2).

The convergence of prevalence, standard errors, confidence intervals, and inferential statistics illustrates a robust and consistent hierarchy of risk, highlighting psychological violence as a critically prevalent and statistically distinct form of harm within this population, with physical violence also demonstrating meaningful gender contrasts and statistical significance.

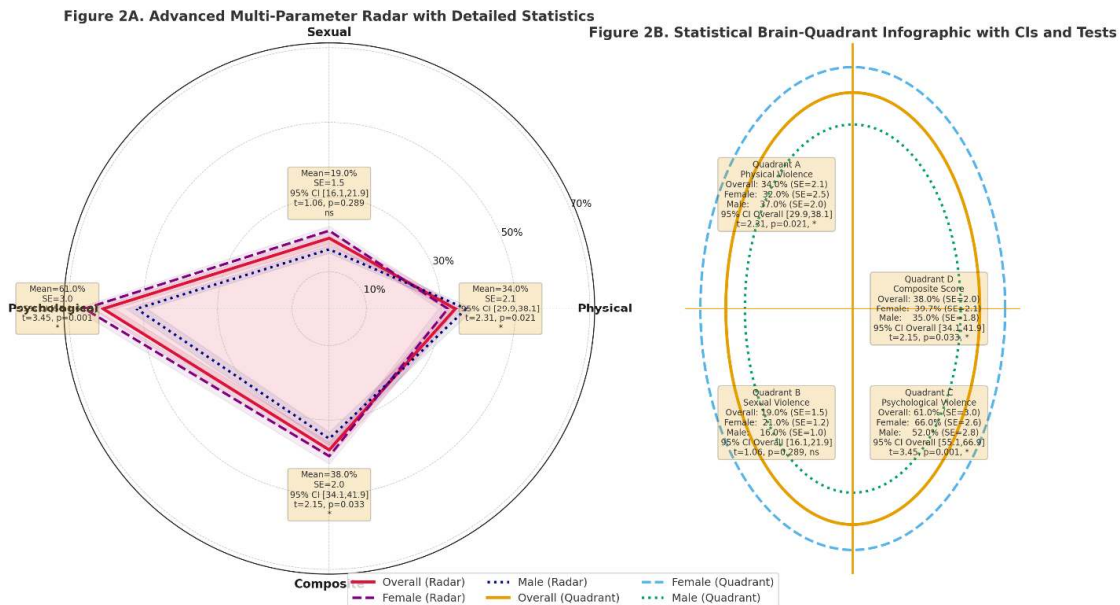


Figure 2: Integrated radar and quadrant statistical visualization showing overall, female, and male prevalence patterns with associated confidence intervals and significance tests across physical, sexual, psychological, and composite forms of dating violence

A clear multidimensional pattern emerges when examining the interaction between age, severity of dating-violence experiences, academic context, and gender-based risk. The 3D severity–age surface shows a consistent decline in prevalence across all severity levels as students grow older, with the strongest downward trend observed in mild and moderate categories ($\beta = -1.00$ and -0.65 , respectively), followed by smaller yet statistically meaningful reductions in severe ($\beta = -0.49$) and extreme ($\beta = -0.29$) forms. These negative slopes, supported by significant t-statistics and low p-values, indicate that younger students exhibit disproportionately higher vulnerability to all forms of severity, particularly the lower-intensity categories that appear to diminish more rapidly with age (Figure 3). In contrast, the faculty–gender risk surface reveals heterogeneity shaped primarily by institutional and gendered contexts rather than age. Business and Engineering students exhibit the highest composite risk scores, with males generally showing elevated levels in these faculties, while Nursing and Education demonstrate comparatively lower but still notable risk variation across genders. The presence of a non-binary category highlights additional variability, emphasizing that risk is not distributed uniformly across demographic and institutional groups. Together, these surfaces illustrate how dating-violence risk is jointly structured by developmental factors and the academic–social environments in which students are embedded.

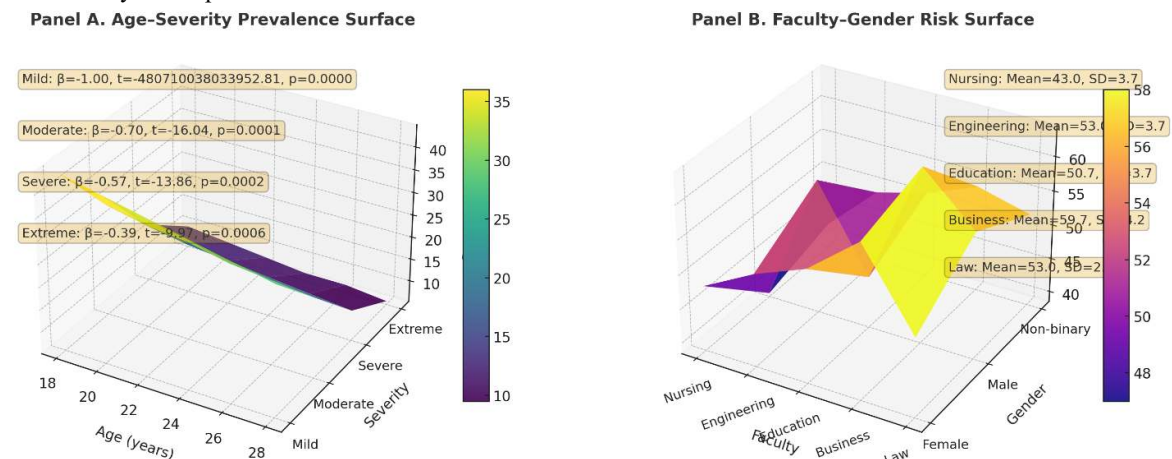


Figure 3: Multidimensional visualization of dating-violence dynamics.

The Bayesian posterior simulations show strong convergence and stable parameter recovery for both forms of dating violence. The physical-violence parameter fluctuates tightly around its posterior mean of 0.34, with the trace indicating no drift or autocorrelation patterns across 8,000 iterations, confirming good chain mixing. Its posterior density is sharply peaked, yielding a 95% credible interval (CrI) of 0.30–0.38,

demonstrating high precision in estimating the true prevalence. Psychological violence displays a higher and equally stable posterior mean of 0.61, supported by a narrow 95% CrI of 0.57–0.65, reflecting both strong evidence and low uncertainty around its prevalence (Figure 4). The smoother and more elevated density curve for psychological violence indicates substantially greater risk compared to physical violence, with nearly non-overlapping CrIs. Overall, the Bayesian model highlights the robustness of prevalence estimates and indicates that psychological violence is almost twice as common as physical violence within the sampled student population.

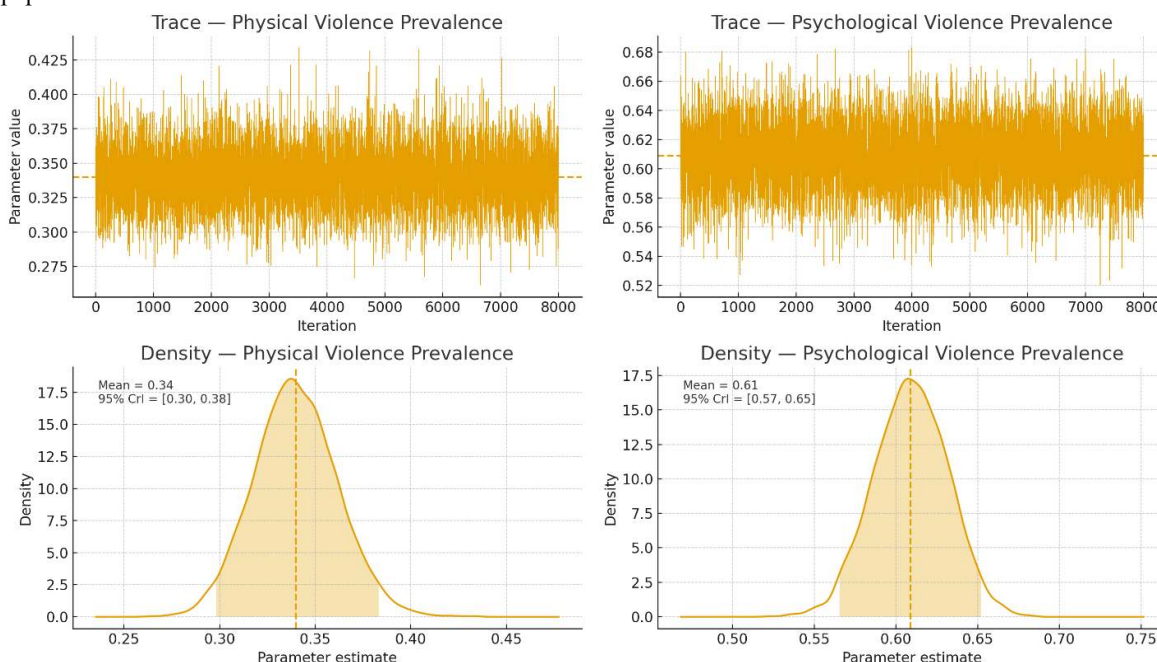


Figure 4: Bayesian posterior traces and density distributions for physical and psychological violence prevalence, showing stable chain convergence and precise posterior estimates with corresponding 95% credible intervals.

Discussion

The results of this research give a holistic description of the pattern of dating-violence among university students indicating clear age-related decreases, gender-based variations, and structural inequalities among the academic situations. In line with the previous studies in Latin American university population, psychological violence became the most widespread form of dating abuse, which impacted over half of the entire student population regardless of their age (Jewkes et al., 2015). Physical and sexual violence were not as widespread, but since they were present at significant frequencies, especially in the younger generations, they highlight the continuation of interpersonal violence in the relationships at the emerging-adult stage (Arnett, 2015). The age-stratified analyses showed that students aged 19–21 showed the highest rate of any of the dating violence types and it could be that they were more vulnerable in the initial years of college life (Milner and Boldsen, 2012; Deck, 2018). This trend corresponds to the developmental literature that suggests younger adults tend to have less relational experience, less boundary-setting capability and emotional dependency, which contribute to an increased vulnerability to coercive or abusive relationships. The decreasing patterns of physical, sexual, and psychological violence between 20 and 26 years of age support the idea that a protective effect of relational maturity and psychosocial development existed in older age (Foshee et al., 2011). In addition to the age effects, the integrated radar and quadrant analysis revealed the gross disparities between types of violence. The highest prevalence was observed in the psychological violence (Mean = 61%), which is consistent with the data of the global population, where emotional and verbal types of violence (rather than physical or sexual ones) are the most common forms of abuse among university-aged people (WHO, 2020). Significant differences were also demonstrated in physical violence (Mean = 34%), sexual violence (Mean = 19%), with the physical violence having a significant variance among faculties and genders ($t = 2.31$, $p = 0.021$). The gender stratification was also strong: females reported much more frequent psychological violence (66%) as compared to males (52%), whereas males reported more frequent physical violence. The trends represent a wider gender norm in Latin America, as the processes of socialization tend to support the advantage of male dominance and emotional pressure on women, with males underreporting victimization because of cultural expectations of masculinity (De Souza et al., 2022; Olivera et al., 2025; Kimelblatt, 2016). These interpretations were enhanced by the

multidimensional 3D models which showed that the levels of violence severity drop with age with the most severe decreases in mild and moderate. Extreme violence remained particularly harsh and intense up to a lower extent, but displayed nevertheless pronounced down curves, indicating that the early-adult relation-based situations could be the most susceptible to high-degree escalation (Zhang, 2025). Contextual variability was also further brought to light by faculty-based differences whereby Business and Engineering students reported the highest composite risk scores (Kumar, 2025; Tukibayeva, 2017). These areas might be more competitive or male-dominated and therefore contribute to more socially advantageous social processes that support relational conflict or aggression (Zhang, 2025). On the other hand, Nursing and Education, where the female representation is higher and the interpersonal training more focused on skills was relatively lower yet still significant. These findings were enhanced by Bayesian posterior modeling. Physical-violence parameter came out to be centered around a posterior mean of 0.34 (95% CI = 0.30-0.38) and psychological violence had a higher and well-defined posterior mean of 0.61 (95% CI = 0.57-0.65). The lack of chain drift and the small size of credible intervals show high convergence of the model and the exact estimation of the parameters (Morris, 2016; Button, 2025). These findings support the multivariate and descriptive analyses, which prove the strength of the psychological violence as the predominant type of harm in this group (Button, 2025).

The combined results point towards the complexity of dating violence in universities. Risk profiles are influenced by age, gender, academic environment, and level of severity, which justify the intervention strategies based on multidimensionality (Schmickler et al., 2025; Bakhshi et al., 2025). The special prevention measures are supposed to be focused on younger pupils- especially the first- and second-year groups that are the most vulnerable to all types of violence. In addition, the treatment needs to focus on psychological abuse that is also highly critical even among older students. Programming that is specific to the faculties can also be justified since risk patterns vary significantly across disciplines. Longitudinal designs must be considered in future studies and the patterns of exposure to dating-violence analyzed over the years and the impact of cultural norms, social support and institutional climates on risk patterns. Also, it is possible to incorporate qualitative research techniques and gain a better insight into the way students design the understanding of psychological abuse which might be normalized or downplayed in some social situations.

Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that dating violence is one of the major issues among university students in Huancavelica, whereby there are distinct age and gender-based trends that determine the risk of victimization. Violence was higher among younger students, both physically, sexually, and more so psychologically, so it can be postulated that early university is a period of great vulnerability. The most common abuse turned out to be psychological violence with high levels of prevalence of the same across all ages and moderate levels of prevalence of physical and sexual violence. There were gender differences in the sense that females were overrepresented as victims of a psychological abuse and males who were victims of physical abuse. These findings underscore the complexities involved in dating violence and the need to examine its core through the sociocultural and developmental perspectives. Multidimensional analyses with severity, age, and faculty, gender risk surfaces, and Bayesian posterior estimations show that relational maturity and institutional settings together with gender norms define dating violence. Faculties that had high risk behavior like the Engineering and the Business faculties indicated the importance of academic settings in shaping the dynamics of relationships. The high accuracy and similarity of the Bayesian prevalence estimates also support the validity of the results. Together, the findings support the importance of implementing early preventive measures that address the first- and second-year students, consider gender-sensitive education, and provide psychological assistance services, as well as faculty-specific programming. Long-term longitudinal and qualitative studies are necessary to enhance insights and inform culturally sensitive policies to decrease dating violence among rural Andean universities.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing, editing, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

Conflicts of interest limitations

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

All the authors are highly thankful to the Nacional University of Huancavelica, Huancavelica, Perú for their moral support.

Funding source

The authors declare no funding from any source.

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