

Relationship between Social Anxiety and Eating Attitudes among Young Girls

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Introduction

The period of transition from childhood to adulthood is characterized by significant changes in physique, emotions, intellect, social roles, relationships and expectations. In this critical time, many young people may feel insecure about their appearance which may cause social physique anxiety among them.¹ To cope with this problem they usually try to use remedial behaviors intended to change their physical appearance through healthy or unhealthy behaviors such as spitting-vomiting, dieting and other disturbed eating attitudes.² Disturbed eating attitudes are unhealthy or seem to be different from that of the overall population.³ Research suggests that young women tend to perceive pressure from the society to look thin and develop fears of being negatively evaluated by the others leading to development of these disturbed eating patterns.⁴

The findings of a study emphasize the impact of constant exposure of elusive body images through media such as television, internet, and movies to young people might consequently develop disturbed eating attitudes among them.⁵ Because fear of negative evaluation force them to become over-concerned about others evaluation and social approval. Therefore, they might struggle harder to personify the social ideals of attractiveness and thinness to protect them from negative social outcomes.⁶ Research findings revealed correlation between eating disturbance

and various social anxiety fears including fear of evaluations by others, social appearance anxiety and social interaction anxiety. The findings further showed the unique predictive role of fear of negative evaluation in thinness and restraint whereas social appearance anxiety in bulimic symptoms, body dissatisfaction and eating concerns.^{7,8}

This study was conducted to examine the relationship between social anxiety and eating attitudes among young girls in Pakistan. It was hypothesized that there would be significant correlation between social anxiety and eating attitude. It was further hypothesized that social anxiety would be significant predictor of eating attitudes among girls. Third hypothesis was girls with less education level would have more disturbed eating attitudes.

Subjects, Methods and Results

Correlational research design was used in the study. A convenient sample of 500 young girls having age range from 14 to 24 years were recruited after taking informed consent in this study from various schools and colleges of Sargodha through convenient sampling technique. Urdu versions of Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale⁹ and Eating Attitudes Test¹⁰ (consists of three subscales including dieting, bulimia and food preoccupations, and oral control) and were used. Data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 22.0). The analysis indicated that there was significant positive correlation of social anxiety with dieting subscale (Table-1).

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Authors Contribution

SM conceptualized the project. NM did the data collection and literature search. Statistical analysis, drafting, revision and writing of the manuscript were done by NM & SM.

Table 1: Correlation between social anxiety and eating attitudes. (N = 500)

| Variable | Mean | SD | α | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|----------------|-------|------|----------|----|------|-------|-------|
| Social anxiety | 21.20 | 7.53 | .83 | -- | .15* | .08 | .07 |
| Dieting | 7.06 | 5.46 | .61 | -- | ---- | .36** | .32** |
| Bulimia | 2.35 | 2.39 | .35 | -- | ---- | ---- | .35** |
| Oral control | 4.45 | 3.19 | .30 | -- | ---- | ---- | ---- |

* $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.001$

Table-2 manifests simple linear regression analysis computed for dieting, a subscale of eating attitudes as dependent variable and social anxiety as independent variable. The value of ΔR^2 0.15 indicates 2% variance in the outcome variable can be accounted for, by the predictor [F (1,498) = 11.10, $p < 0.01$]. Results states that social anxiety ($\beta = .15$, $p < 0.01$), was significant positive predictor of dieting.

Table 2: Regression analysis for social anxiety predicting eating attitudes. (N = 500)

| Variables | Dieting | | |
|----------------|---------|--------------|--------|
| | β | ΔR^2 | F |
| Social Anxiety | .15* | .020 | 11.10* |

* $p < .01$

Table-3 shows Mean, standard deviation and F-values for students belonging to three education levels. The findings indicate significant mean difference on eating attitudes among students [F (3,497), $p < 0.001$]. The findings indicate that students belonging to Matric (M = 16.69, $p < 0.001$) significantly scored higher on eating attitudes as compared to students belonging to BA (M = 7.49, $p < 0.001$), FA (M = 13.81, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3: Difference in level of education on eating attitudes among girls (N = 500)

| Variable | Matric (n = 99) | | FA (n = 211) | | BA (n = 190) | | F | p |
|------------------|-----------------|-------|--------------|------|--------------|------|------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Eating attitudes | 16.69 | 10.29 | 13.81 | 8.02 | 12.48 | 7.49 | 8.30 | .000 |

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Comments

Disturbed eating disorders are specifically prevalent among young girls in both developed and under developed countries for many years and increasing very rapidly. One reason for disturbed eating attitudes might be age. This age period is considered as a period of emotional turmoil as many physical and emotional changes are happening which can affect the health and routine of adolescents in many directions. Social pressures could be another factor as it causes anxiety among young people that they must meet the set criteria of physical beauty in their society which consequently developed disturbed and maladaptive eating attitudes. Present study will be helpful for the clinicians and parents with reference to Pakistani culture to understand possible causes of social anxiety and eating attitudes, and it would also be helpful in developing interventions for disturbed eating attitudes.

Conflict of interest: None of the authors have any competing interests.