

INVESTIGATION OF SOCIAL APPEARANCE ANXIETY AMONG HEALTH SCIENCE STUDENTS

Tamknat Ilyas¹, Mehak Hamna Zahra Gilani², Rabia Majeed³, Mamoon Anwar⁴,
Ramsha Rasheed⁵, Sania Maqbool^{*6}

^{1,3}Assistant Professor SHS UMT

^{2,4}Lecturer SHS UMT

⁵Lecturer HND Qarshi University

^{*6}Focal Person & Lecturer DPT Qarshi University

¹tamknat.ilyas@umt.edu.pk, ²hamnagilani206@gmail.com, ³rabia.majeed@umt.edu.pk,

⁴mamoon.anwar@umt.edu.pk, ⁵ramsha.rasheed@qu.edu.pk, ^{*6}sania.maqbool@qu.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *

Sania Maqbool

Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to determine the prevalence of social appearance anxiety and to examine the impact of social appearance on self-esteem and overall well-being.

Methodology: A cross-sectional study was conducted on 385 participants selected via convenient sampling. The sample involved students from Health Science Institutes across Lahore, aged between 18 and 25 years. Data was collected through an online survey that employed the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS). Data was analyzed using SPSS V21 and one-way ANOVA.

Results: The mean SAAS score was 27.98 with a SD of 5.116, with results ranging from 16 to 48. Statistical analysis with one-way ANOVA showed that there was no significant difference in SAAS scores based on height with a value of $p=0.175$. However, a statistically significant difference was found based on age $p=0.037$, with the 32-36-year age group showing the highest mean anxiety score of 32.00.

Conclusion: There is a high prevalence of social appearance anxiety among the health sciences students in Lahore, with age being a significant contributing factor.

INTRODUCTION

The human being, often described as a social animal, is an inherently social individual. Being part of a group and being admired are two of the most fundamental human aspirations. Since social connections are essential to survive and reproduce, humans have an innate need to belong to and be a meaningful part of something greater than ourselves, whether it be family, friends, workplace, a religion, or etc.

"Negative body image" refers to unpleasant thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions regarding one's

body in general or in connection to any specific bodily characteristic. This can lead to a perception that one is less attractive and less beautiful than others, making one uncomfortable in one's own skin (1). Social anxiety disorder (SAD), often known as social phobia, is a disproportionate fear of social situations, such as being observed or interacting with strangers. It can cause significant discomfort and self-doubt.

Appearance Anxiety is a social phenomenon involving many disciplines such as philosophy,

psychology, sociology, communication, and management, and it has become a huge social problem in recent years, greatly affecting the value orientation of youth, the public order and morals of society. Students' appearance concern has a significant influence on their mental health, with the primary causes being family, school education, and societal circumstances (2). Hart et al. defined social appearance anxiety as a social anxiety in which the individual's external appearance perceived various negativities, the person interacted with in the social environment was negatively evaluated, and he/she experienced negativities related to his/her body appearance in the direction of this negative message (3).

One of the contributing factors to development of negative body images is long term use of the internet. It can lead to the changes in one's cognitive patterns and self-consciousness to one's flaws. In publications, films, and television shows, standards for the "ideal body type" are followed; the constant pressure to meet the societal beauty standards affects one's self-esteem and quality of life greatly. This condition was observed commonly among the Allied health students of Faculty of Nursing, Izmir, Turkey (2).

Different studies were conducted over time to discover the relationship between social appearance anxiety and related factors like happiness, body image, and academic performance. The perception about body appearance has been linked with the unusual loss of social interest and loss of performance in students (4). It is known that students who lack a perception of having an ideal body image experience significant social anxiety. During this period, most young people explore new areas, meet new people, and form new social bonds.

However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific prevalence of social appearance anxiety and the influence of demographic stressors like age and height within the population of health science students in Lahore. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to determine the prevalence of body image concerns and appearance-related stressors among health science students and to examine the impact of social appearance on self-esteem and overall well-being.

Literature Review

Research has explored the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-efficacy, particularly among university students. One study by Vural et al established that self-efficacy and social appearance anxiety did not differ by gender, but they did differ by department. Furthermore, it was also concluded that participants' social appearance perceptions differed by class. The research indicated that this can induce a variety of related psychological conditions, including body dysmorphic disorder, social anxiety, and more. As a result, it is critical to research students' appearance concern and the elements that influence it. (3)

During high school and college, most young people explore new areas, meet new people, and form new social bonds. The relationships they form will be initially perceived based on their outer appearance. In this context, the university years are a critical time in a person's life, and stressful situations can have an influence on a person's relationships, academic accomplishments, self-esteem, and professional career. Vural et al's study revealed that concerns over one's social appearance can lead to psychological symptoms such as sadness, worry, and tension (3).

According to research, some people are more prone to recalling erroneous information about incidents that never occurred in their lives. Elements, such as personality traits, appear to be associated with memory performance, because these people prefer to focus on their own inner selves rather than on external indications. Social anxiety causes memory deficiencies for events that happen to other people. A 2022 research by Neufeld et al found that when SAD was not diagnosed, people with low percentile rankings in personality trait dominance, i.e., those with poor self-esteem, recalled more true information about the tale than those with high percentile ranks. The findings might aid in the creation and refinement of therapeutic intervention strategies (5).

Previous cross-sectional research suggests that social anxiety symptoms and negative peer experiences with appearance are predictors of body dysmorphic disorders via appearance-based rejection sensitivity. However, very little is known regarding the long-term effects of parental appearance rejection on

body dysmorphic disorders. As a result, the purpose of Brekalo et al's 2022 study was to investigate the longitudinal mediation of appearance-based rejection sensitivity with social anxiety symptoms, recalled peers' appearance-based rejection as predictors, mother and paternal appearance-based rejection as predictors, and body dysmorphic symptoms as an outcome. The findings confirm the rejection sensitivity theory as well as the long-term influence of unfavourable peer encounters on impaired body dysmorphic disorders. However, further study on recalled parental bad experiences is required (6).

The frequency of social anxiety disorder (SAD), appearance anxiety, and eating disorders (ED) is increasing among young people. Jin et al.'s 2022 study used network analysis to investigate the relationship and potential interaction processes between social appearance disorders, appearance anxiety, and eating disorders. Both eating disorders and social appearance disorders symptoms were linked to appearance concern. There were significant variations in the symptom correlations between appearance anxiety and social appearance disorders between men and women. As a result of this study, it is clear that young people should get body-positive therapies and should question the normative body image discourse, which may help reduce symptoms of social appearance disorders and eating disorders (7).

Previous research has concentrated on the comorbidity of appearance anxiety and social anxiety, but few studies have concentrated on the protective function of self-compassion as underpinning this process among young individuals. With the rising incidence of appearance anxiety and social anxiety amongst youth, it is critical to investigate elements that might protect against the symptoms of these diseases. As a result, the goals of Gao et al.'s study were to investigate the effects of appearance anxiety and social anxiety, and then to see if self-compassion has a protective impact on social anxiety. P value was $p < 0.001$. Individuals with high appearance anxiety were also more likely to have social anxiety, however self-compassion mitigated this association. These findings gave a starting point for investigating innovative

techniques to treating social anxiety and also provide useful insights for self-compassion training. (8)

In recent years, the frequency of social appearance anxiety among teenagers has grown. One of the causes of this issue might be attributed to appearance-oriented social media programmes. Adolescent attachment patterns, like many other forms of anxiety, may play a role in social appearance anxiety. Positive youth development levels in teenagers, on the other hand, may have a protective function against social appearance anxiety. Several researchers have looked into Instagram's serial mediator functions. Positive youth development was found to adversely influence social appearance anxiety. Furthermore, a 2023 study indicated that anxious-avoidant attachment and social appearance anxiety had important moderating roles in the association between healthy youth development and Instagram addiction. (9)

Methodology

This cross-sectional study aimed to investigate the prevalence of social appearance anxiety among health sciences students in Lahore. The sample population included 385 health sciences students (both male and female), selected using non-probability convenience sampling. Participants, aged 18-25 years, were recruited from various health science institutions across Lahore. Students with major physical illnesses were excluded.

To calculate the sample size, the WHO sample size calculator was used. It had a 95% confidence level, a standard deviation of 4, and a margin of error of 0.57. After accounting for a 5% attrition rate, the final sample size was 385 participants.

Data was collected using the **Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS)**, a 16-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess anxiety related to appearance-based social evaluation. The questionnaire yields a total score range of 16-80, based on a 5 point Likert rating per question. Higher scores indicated greater social appearance anxiety. An online questionnaire was distributed to eligible students. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were strictly maintained; participation was completely voluntary.

Data was analyzed using SPSS version 21. Descriptive statistics (tables, pie charts, histograms, bar charts) were computed. An independent sample t test was applied to assess differences in social appearance anxiety across age and height categories.

385 students participated in this study, with ages ranging from 17 to 25 years. The mean age was 21.92 ± 2.39 years. Degree duration ranged from 2 to 5 years. After data collection, SPSS (version 21) was used for analysis. Means and standard deviations were used to depict demographic findings and categorical feature frequency.

Results

Table 1: This table indicates the variations in age, height, and sports degree duration amongst the sample population.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	385	17	36	21.92	2.393
Height	385	4	7	5.0970	0.30959
Degree Duration	385	2	5	4.48	0.794
Valid N (list wise)	385				

The mean SAAS score was 27.98 ± 5.116 , with scores ranging from 16 to 48. Approximately 12%

of participants scored below the mean, indicating mild social appearance anxiety, while the majority exhibited moderate to high levels of anxiety.

Table 2: This table shows the descriptive analysis of scores of Social Appearance Anxiety Scale in health sciences students.

Stats	SAAS Score
Valid	385
Mean	27.98
Std. Deviation	5.116
Minimum	16
Maximum	48

Analysis based on height categories revealed no statistically significant difference in social appearance anxiety scores ($p = 0.175$) (Table 3). However, age-based analysis showed a significant

difference ($p = 0.037$), with students aged 32–36 years demonstrating higher social appearance anxiety compared to younger age groups (Table 4).

Table 3: Height-based analysis results.

Variables	4 to 4.11 (n=9)		5 to 5.11 (n=348)		6 to 7 (n=28)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
SAAS-Total	26.00	4.770	28.14	5.089	26.68	5.416	1.753	.175

Table 4: Age-based analysis results.

Variables	17 to 21 (n=157)		22 to 26 (n=222)		32 to 36 (n=6)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
SAAS-Total	27.39	5.188	28.29	5.019	32.00	4.733	3.322	.037*

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the prevalence of social appearance anxiety among health sciences students and to explore its impact on overall wellbeing of the students. The findings show that social appearance anxiety is highly prevalent within this population, with more than half of the participants experiencing anxiety levels above the mean.

To collect data, a convenience sampling technique was used with a total sample of 385. Inclusion criteria consisted of students who are currently enrolled in the field of health sciences across different institutions in Lahore. SAAS was used to evaluate the prevalence of social appearance anxiety among the sample population.

The observed mean SAAS score suggests that concerns related to physical appearance and social evaluation are common among health sciences students. This aligns with previous research highlighting the relationship between social anxiety, low self-esteem, and heightened sensitivity to appearance-based evaluation (5). The findings can aid in the creation and refinement of therapeutic intervention strategies.

There was no association between height and social appearance anxiety, suggesting that physical characteristics may not affect one's cognitions as much as their subjective perceptions and societal pressures. In contrast, the significant association with age indicates that older students may experience increased anxiety due to increased self-comparison, professional expectations, or prolonged exposure to appearance-based social standards.

These findings are consistent with earlier studies reporting that age-related and psychosocial factors contribute to increased vulnerability to social appearance anxiety. For example, Jin et al's study investigated the relationship between social

appearance disorders, appearance anxiety, and eating disorders. This study concluded that young people should get body-positive therapies and should question the normative body image discourse, which may help reduce symptoms of social appearance disorders and eating disorders. (7)

A past study of Brekalo stated that social anxiety symptoms and negative peer experiences with appearance are predictors of body dysmorphic disorders via appearance-based rejection sensitivity. The findings confirmed the rejection sensitivity theory as well as the long-term influence of unfavourable peer encounters on impaired body dysmorphic disorders. (6)

To conclude, social appearance anxiety was found to be a common issue among health sciences students with more than 94% students affected by it. Only 6 percent of students had no social appearance anxiety while the rest of them experienced it to at least some degree. Age emerged as the primary factor contributing to social appearance anxiety among the students.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social appearance anxiety is a prevalent issue among health sciences students in Lahore. More than 50% of students experience moderate to high levels of anxiety related to their physical appearance in social settings. Age was identified as a significant contributing factor, whereas height showed no meaningful association. These findings emphasize the need for early screening, awareness programs, and support services within health sciences institutions to address social appearance anxiety and promote mental well-being among students.

Limitations

The study focused mainly on social appearance anxiety, overlooking the possible causes and it only targeted students of health sciences while other discipline students may have similar issues. It lacked generalizability as the sample consisted of students from only one city, Lahore. The study's time horizon was cross sectional, thus no follow-ups could be made to observe changes and effects.

Recommendations

1. The study recommends future researchers to assess other students from disciplines other than Health Sciences.
2. The current study also recommends future researchers to include a sample from different age strata including older adults.
3. It is recommended to do research that is general to the whole population and not specific to one city.
4. It is further recommended to conduct a research that is longitudinal in nature so a pattern of changes could be noticed.

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