

IMPACT OF BODY DISSATISFACTION ON DATING ANXIETY AMONG YOUNG ADULTS - MEDIATING ROLES OF SELF-ESTEEM AND SOCIAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT:

The present study aims to examine the impact of body dissatisfaction on dating anxiety with emphasis on the mediating roles of self-esteem and social comparison. A cross-sectional study using snowball sampling was conducted on one hundred and sixty-six young adults aged between 18-25 years using self-report questionnaires like Body shape questionnaires, Rosenberg self-esteem scale, Dating Anxiety Scale and Iowa Netherland Comparison Orientation Measure. The results of the present study confirms that higher levels of body dissatisfaction is associated with higher levels of dating anxiety at the level of significance 0.001. In addition, lower level of self-esteem and higher social comparison contribute to increased levels of dating anxiety at the level of significance 0.001. Therefore, mediation analysis indicated that both self-esteem and social comparison mediate the relationship between body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety, with self-esteem emerging as the strongest mediator. In conclusion, the findings of the present study shows partial mediation between body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety which states that body dissatisfaction influence dating anxiety both directly and indirectly through mediating variables which are self-esteem and social comparison.

Keywords: Body dissatisfaction, Self-esteem, Social comparison, Dating anxiety

INTRODUCTION:

Despite of having potential benefits of romantic relationships, such as emotional intimacy, companionship and psychological well-being, it also serves as a source of stress and insecurity among young adults. Fear of rejection, concerns about physical attractions or distress associated with perceived partner judgment accompanies the process of entering a relationship. In contemporary society, where physical appearance and social appeal are heavily reinforced from social media and how an individual is interacting digitally leads young adults to experience heightened evaluation apprehension during dating interactions. Glickman & La Greca, 2004 stated that dating anxiety refers to the fear, discomfort or nervousness experienced during romantic or dating situations due to the concerns related to negative evaluation or rejection. Individuals with higher social anxiety experience greater distress, embarrassment or discomfort during dating interactions (Strulov & Adreka, 2024).

When individual is experiencing higher anxiousness in dating situations, they prefer online communication as in person interaction becomes overwhelming (Stevens & Morris, 2007).

A substantial amount of researches suggests that body image concerns plays a significant role in the development of dating anxiety. Body dissatisfaction is referred to as negative thought or feelings about one's own body shape or weight or appearance or the discrepancy between ideal body image and actual body image (Heider et al., 2018). Significant researches concluded that appearance-based comparison predicts body dissatisfaction (Myers &

Crowther, 2009) or frequent comparison with idealized body images leads to negative body image and lower self-worth. Individuals who view themselves as physically unattractive may develop feelings of inadequacy or become excessively concerned how they are viewed in romantic situations. Mills et al. (2014) stated that individual avoids social interactions and experience adverse interpersonal difficulties who has higher body dissatisfaction. Swami et al. (2021) conducted a study in which body image concerns and social physique anxiety were significantly associated with higher dating anxiety among emerging adults.

According to Leon Festinger, social comparison is a psychological process in which an individual has a tendency to compare their abilities or opinions with others. This tendency is highly linked with body dissatisfaction and anxiety. Sunartio et al. (2012) shows the positive relationship between body dissatisfaction and social comparison among young adult women. Mostly individual frequently compare themselves to others who are perceived as superior in skill, achievements or status which is upward comparison are seen with low self-esteem, according to social comparison theory. Jiang & Ngien (2020) shows that social comparison mediates the relationship between Instagram use and lower self-esteem. Continuous and repeated comparison with more attractive individuals contribute to increased self-doubt and intensify the concerns of being negatively judged.

Even though previous studies have examined body dissatisfaction, self-esteem, social comparison and anxiety independently but there is a visible research gap which have explored how these variables collectively influence dating anxiety especially in Indian young adults. Therefore, this present study is a small attempt to examine the impact of body dissatisfaction on dating anxiety with mediating role of self-esteem and social comparison among young adults. Understanding these associations, might provide deep insight into the psychological processes influencing romantic interactions and emotional adjustments among emerging adults.

OBJECTIVES:

- i. To study the impact of body dissatisfaction on dating anxiety among young adults.
- ii. To study the impact of self-esteem on dating anxiety among young adults.
- iii. To study the impact of social comparison on dating anxiety among young adults.
- iv. To study the mediating roles of self-esteem and social comparison in the relationship between body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety.

METHODOLOGY:

1. Participants

The present study consists of a sample of 166 young adults aged between 18 and 25 years. Participants voluntarily took part in the study and were recruited from undergraduate and postgraduate students of private colleges of tricity using snowball techniques.

2. Measures

The Body Shape Questionnaire-8C (BSQ-8C) which is derived short form of body shape questionnaire used to screen and measures concerns about body shape and body dissatisfaction to the extent where they feel worried, uncomfortable or preoccupied with their body appearance (Evans, C., & Dolan, B., 1993). It consists of 8 items which are rated on a likert scale, ranging from 1 for never to 6 for always. Higher scores indicated higher frequency of body shape issues. Welch et al. (2012) have demonstrated that the scales have high level of internal consistency, test-retest reliability and convergent validity.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) measures global self-esteem or individual's overall sense of self worth and self acceptance (Rosenberg, 1965). This questionnaire has two dimensions: self-competence and self-linking. It is a self-report measure consist of 10 items, ranging from 0 for strongly agree to 3 to strongly disagree. Higher levels of scores depict high levels of self-esteem. Robins et al. (2001) have demonstrated that the scales have high levels of chronbach's alpha, internal consistency, reliability and validity.

The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) is developed by Gibbons and Buunk. It is a self-report measure, made to assess an individual's tendency to engage in social comparison. It consists of 11 items which are based on two dimensions: ability comparison and opinion comparison. Items are ranging from 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree. Schneider et al. (2011) shows high level of internal consistency, reliability and validity.

Dating Anxiety Scale (DAS-A) is a self-report tools which is used to assess the anxiety experienced during romantic situations (Glickman and La Greca, 2004). It consists of 26-item self-report questionnaire based on 3 factors which includes fear of negative evaluation by a partner, distress during interactions and discomfort in mixed-sex groups. Items ranging from 1 for not at all characteristic to 5 for extremely characteristic for me. It has high reliability, validity and chronbach's alpha (Calvert et al., 1987)

Demographic information include age, gender, dating experience, educational background and relationship status.

3. Procedure

Participants were recruited from private college of tricity It was carried out by circulating the questionnaires through online platforms such as email and social media. Only participants who were interested in participating in the study were given a questionnaire which comprises detail or the purpose of the study along with self-report questionnaires. It was requested to give out the questionnaire to a friend or a fellow student. A total one hundred ninety two questionnaires were circulated and 166 responses were collected.

RESULTS

Table1 : showing the inter-correlations and descriptive statistics of variables

Inter-correlation	1	2	3	4
1. Body Dissatisfaction		.206**	.359**	-.424**
2. Social Comparison	.206**		.245**	-.059
3. Dating Anxiety	.359**	.245**		-.439**

4. Self-Esteem	-.424**	-.059**	-.439**	
5. Mean	20.36	34.98	59.49	25.31
6. Standard deviation	8.56	3.84	18.86	5.06

**p<.001

Table 2: showing the direct and indirect effects of body dissatisfaction on dating anxiety (Model 4; N = 166).

Effect	Effect(b)	SE	t	p	95% CI
Direct Effect	0.37	0.17	2.22	0.28	[.04,.70]
Indirect Effect					
Total	0.42	0.11			[.23,.64]
Via SE	0.33	0.09			[.17, .53]
Via SC	0.09	0.04			[.01,.19]

NOTE: Unstandardized coefficients. CIs for indirect effect are biases-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5000 resamples). SE = self-esteem; SC = social comparison.

DISCUSSION:

A diverse set of participants were randomly selected across college students. The sample size was (N = 166), in which age ranges from 18-25 years with the median age of participants being 22 years old, 24.1% of the participants were 22 years old, 6.6% 18 years, 11.4% 19 years, 19.9 years, 13.9% 21 years, 14.5% 23 years, 6.0% 24 years and rest below are 3.6% is of 25 years old. 41% are male and 59% are female participants in which 66.3% were in a relationship and 33.7% participants were single. But all the participants have an experience being in a relationship or ever went on a date. Majority of the participants were undergraduate students in the present study.

A summary of the mean, standard deviation, bivariate relationship for all the variables are provided in the Table 1. The results of the present study shows a significant moderate positive relationship between body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, it can be concluded that higher an individual is dissatisfied with their physical appearance, more the person will be anxious in their romantic relationships or in the dating environment. The significance level for this correlation (i.e. $p < 0.001$) level shows that there is a very low probability of finding such correlational accidentally. The findings explains that individuals who had negative perceptions about their body image often become concerned about how they are being evaluated by their potential romantic partners. The present findings is consistent with previous researches. Swami et al. (2021) indicates that more an individual is dissatisfied with their physical appearance, more the person will be anxious in their romantic relationships or in the dating environment. There will be significant influence of appearance-related concerns during romantic interactions, which leads to increased self-consciousness, insecurity and anxiety. Whereas appearance-related concerns are experienced by the individual, in which there will be higher chance to feel pressured to be thin especially for women or masculine body for men (Barnhart et al., 2022). The link between body image and

dating anxiety is studied which highlights that negative body image and social physique anxiety are associated with greater dating anxiety (Swami et al., 2022). Subsequent hypothesis states that social comparison is positively associated with dating anxiety ($r = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$). It can be concluded that more the individual compare themselves with others, more the individual will experience anxiousness in their dating life. The significance level of the findings is at the level of 0.001n which suggests the probability of having the results are very low. One of the reason why individual face dating anxiety is because of the upward comparison which they do when they feel dissatisfied with their body image (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2009). According to the findings, more the individual engage themselves into the social comparison more they will feel anxious when they are engaged in romantic interactions. Previous researchers have studied the relationship of social comparison with social or general anxiety, in which findings demonstrates that both upward and downward appearance-related comparison is positively associated (Pradeepa & Kavya, 2024). When an individual is engaged in upward comparison, the individual will feel low self-esteem. Next subsequent hypothesis states that self-esteem and dating anxiety are negatively associated, ($r = -0.43$, $p < 0.001$). The findings depict that adults with lower self-esteem are more prone to experience anxiousness in the dating scenarios. The significance level is 0.001, which indicates that probability of results occurring by chance is extremely low. Puțaru and Rusu (2021) in their study found that lower self-esteem is significantly associated with higher dating anxiety among young adults which is similar to the findings of the present study. Wray and Stone (2005) mentioned that individual with low self-esteem and high anxiousness, are at high risk of making adverse choices for themselves. First three hypothesis of the study are consistent with the findings which states that body dissatisfaction, social comparison and self-esteem have correlation with dating anxiety.

The last hypothesis of the study states that self-esteem and social comparison would mediate the relationship between body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety. The mediation analysis conducted using PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples showed that the indirect effects of body dissatisfaction on dating anxiety were statistically significant. The total indirect effect was significant (effect = 0.42, Boot SE = 0.11, 95% CI [.23, .64]), and since the confidence interval did not include zero, this confirms the presence of mediation.

Body dissatisfaction was found to influence dating anxiety through both self-esteem and social comparison. In particular, higher body dissatisfaction significantly predicted lower self-esteem ($b = -0.25$, $p < .001$), which in turn was associated with higher dating anxiety ($b = -1.33$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect through self-esteem was significant (effect = 0.33, Boot SE = 0.09, 95% CI [.17, .53]), indicating that reduced self-esteem is an important mechanism through which body dissatisfaction increases dating anxiety.

In a similar way, body dissatisfaction also significantly predicted higher levels of social comparison ($b = 0.09$, $p < .01$), which further contributed to increased dating anxiety ($b = 0.93$, $p < .01$). The indirect effect through social comparison was also significant (effect = 0.09, Boot SE = 0.04, 95% CI [.01, .19]), suggesting that engaging in social comparison plays a role in this relationship.

Moreover, the direct effect of body dissatisfaction on dating anxiety remained significant even after accounting for both mediators ($b = 0.37$, $p < .05$, 95% CI [.04, .70]), indicating partial mediation. Overall, these findings suggest that body dissatisfaction affects dating anxiety not only directly but also indirectly by lowering self-esteem and increasing social comparison, with self-esteem having a stronger mediating influence.

Limitations of the study:

Despite its valuable findings, the study is not without limitations. They used a cross-sectional design which limits the ability to establish casual relationships and examine developmental changes over time. In addition, several relevant variables, including parenting styles, parental relationship patterns, previous traumatic or adverse relationship experiences and residential background (rural or urban) were not incorporated, although these factors may have a substantial impact on body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety.

Implications:

The study has some practical implication. It could assist psychologists, counsellor and educators in understanding emotional challenges faced by young adults in dating contexts. Intervention strategies focusing on strengthening self-esteem, improving body acceptance and reducing excessive comparison could help individuals manage their dating related stress. Therapies like cognitive restructuring, self-compassion exercises or confidence building techniques may be beneficial. Awareness spread by educational institutes can promote awareness regarding healthy relationships, realistic body standards and emotional-well-being.

CONCLUSION

Young adulthood is the crucial stage which is defined by the development of identity, emotional maturity and close interpersonal relationships. At this stage, there are issues regarding appearance, self-worth and comparison among peers which can impact the confidence in romantic situations. The present study aimed to explore the impact of body dissatisfaction, self-esteem and social comparison which are linked to dating anxiety among young adults.

The findings show that dissatisfaction with one's own body image was associated with greater discomfort and fear in dating situations. Those who are lower in self-esteem were more likely to experience insecurity and hesitation in romantic interactions whereas consistent comparison with others leads to heightened sense of inferiority. In addition to these, the study states that self-esteem and social comparison contribute to explaining the association between body dissatisfaction and dating anxiety. It states that negative perceptions about our own appearance could increase anxiety not only directly, but it also lowers our confidence and encourages distorted comparisons.

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