

Research Paper

Touch Deprivation and Anxiety among College Students in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Touch deprivation or the shortage of haptic communication is an understudied yet quite a vital area of nonverbal communication. This study aims to understand how “Touch Deprivation and Anxiety Among College Students in The Covid-19 Pandemic”, it tries to assess how touch deprivation affects the anxiety levels in college students in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Snowball convenient data collection method was used to collect a total of 106 samples through e-forms and physical questionnaires. The tools used were Jason Wrench’s Touch Deprivation scale as well as Aaron Beck’s anxiety scale. The main statistical tools used was Correlation analysis to know if there is any kind of relationship between anxiety levels and touch deprivation levels in college students in the midst of a global pandemic. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between the two variables considered.

Keywords: *Touch Deprivation, Anxiety, College Students*

Touch can be considered as a powerful means of communication. Beyond being just the basic sense to understand and comprehend pain or temperature, it also communicates emotions as shown by many previous studies. The skin is unarguably the largest organ of our body and according to research findings a touch usually described to us as “good touch” signals our brain to release a hormone called oxytocin which is linked to a warm fuzzy feeling that also reduces stress and anxiety. This connection or need to be touched can see its origin right after birth of a child; the doctors recommend the parents to maintain skin to skin contact which, as proved by many researches shows to be highly beneficial in terms of immunity, emotional maturity, etc. in the future. When we do not feel or ‘get’ enough physical touch, our body produces cortisol which is known as stress hormone which can affect your heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, sleep issues, etc. We as humans are shown to crave touch, more so during these trying times where we are expected to practice social distancing. So, at a time like this where the pandemic which was expected to last for about a few weeks to a couple of months, continues to go on and on, the topic of touch deprivation and if at all it has any effects on our anxiety levels, especially

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among college students who are the population usually expected to meet new people, maintain relationships and have abundantly large social circles.

Touch starvation also known as skin hunger or touch deprivation describes the psychological or physical effects a person experiences due to having little to no contact with other humans or in some cases, even animals. The psychological symptoms can include depression, feelings of loneliness, insomnia and even low relationship satisfaction, etc. the physical effects can include symptoms like weakness, body pain and may even compromise our immune system. An article written on the Washington post by Lisa Bonos clearly shows through interviews how the Covid-19 pandemic and the touch deprivation that comes with it has affected people's emotions, decision making skills and even physical symptoms.

Anxiety can be said to be a body's natural reaction to stress. It usually is the brain's way of alerting us of possible danger and can be said to be a fear or apprehension about the future or present. Anxiety in small proportions is usually beneficial for us and is called eustress. However, when this stress or anxiety is in proportions where it interferes with our daily life, it becomes distress which is the harmful type of anxiety. This is usually a feeling of uneasiness or worry and incompleteness and may also be accompanied by physical symptoms like sweating, headaches, fatigue, breathlessness, etc.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tejada A., Dunbar R. & Montero M. (2020) This study titled "Physical contact and loneliness: Being touched reduces perceptions of loneliness" aims to address the connection between loneliness and physical contact and asks whether physical contact reduces feelings of loneliness. A total of 40 participants out of which were 13 males and 27 females who were tested for the effects of touch on loneliness. The results indicate that participants exposed to physical contact reported significantly lower scores in a short loneliness scale. The effects were particularly larger among single people, which could mean that lower loneliness among married people could be partly explained by the regular availability of physical contact. Participants in the laboratory settings also showed a faster reduction in heart rate, interpreted as a symbol of physiological wellbeing.

Field T., Poling S., Mines S., Bendell D. & Veazey C. (2020) This study titled "Touch deprivation and exercise during the COVID-19 lockdown april-2020" aims to dig deeper and introduce the concept of touch deprivation into the general population of people older than 18 years of age. The study used a total of 260 participants elder than 18 years of age and assessed them on a variety of stress related scales while also examining its correlation to living alone and exercise, etc. the results of the study showed a negative co-relation to between exercise and touch deprivation.

Gallace A. & Spence C. (2008) This review titled "The science of interpersonal touch: An overview" combines different studies done on touch deprivation and has formulated a conclusion that interpersonal interaction can have surprisingly powerful effects on people's behaviors and emotions. It also talks about the lack of research in the particular field.

METHODOLOGY

Research questions

- Is there any kind of significant relationship between anxiety and touch deprivation?
- In order to answer the above research question, the following objective was developed.

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Objective

- The main aim of the study is to find out if there is any correlation between touch deprivation and anxiety among college students.
- In order to achieve the objectives, the following hypothesis was developed and tested.

Hypothesis

- There is a significant correlation between touch deprivation and anxiety among college students.

Sample

The study consisted of 106 participants within the age group of 18-26. The participants were chosen from varied states of India by using snowball sampling method and collected through google forms and physical questionnaires.

Tools used

The Touch deprivation scale, developed by Jason S Wrench and Narissa N Punyanunt, the 20 item scale measures aspects of touch deprivation and its extent and effect on a person. The respondents can answer along a five point spectrum from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. It is measured from the score of 0 to 80. The scale talks about 3 features of touch deprivation, the absence of touch indicates a level where people can go about their daily life without touch for several days and not be affected by it, the second one talks about the longing for touch which falls into a zone where the absence of touch starts interfering with the person's mental health and daily life. The last one talks about the extreme version of touch deprivation so much so that people might be ready to engage in sexual activities to just be touched by another person. The scale was tested for reliability and validity and it has a high reliability and was accounted for various types of validity.

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) consists of 21 items with a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 3 and raw scores ranging from 0 to 63. It was developed in 1988 and a revised manual was published in 1993 with some changes in scoring. The BAI scores are classified as minimal anxiety (0 to 7), mild anxiety (8 to 15), moderate anxiety (16 to 25), and severe anxiety (30 to 63). The scale has a reliability score of 0.92 and a highly accounted validity score as well.

Procedure

Each trial began with the needed data collected from participants within the preselected age group.

Location of target was randomly collected from different states of India. The Data was collected through google forms and physical questionnaires. The tools were used to assess the touch deprivation and anxiety of the targeted population. The data was collected within the informed consent of all the participants involved. Only necessary demographics were obtained from the participants so that identities were kept hidden. The participants were assured that data would be confidential and only used for the purpose of study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Error mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Anxiety	106	12	48	22.58	.719	7.403	1.100	1.932
Touch deprivation	106	8	60	33.85	.980	10.087	0.248	0.569
Age	106	18	26	21.51	.155	1.599	0.203	0.886

Table 1 essentially indicates the comparison of the mean score, standard deviations and standard error mean of the population under consideration for Touch Deprivation and Anxiety. The table also shows that the normal distribution for the Anxiety scores of the Population is positively skewed and leptokurtic. The scores of Anxiety (Mean=22.58) clearly shows a moderate anxiety level, however, due to the positive skewness and leptokurtic curve, it depicts more tendency of the population towards mild scores of Anxiety levels. The table also shows the average moderately touch deprived population, thus putting them under longing for touch category of Touch Deprivation.

Table 2: Correlation

		Anxiety	Touch Deprivation
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	.729**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	106	106
Touch Deprivation	Pearson Correlation	.729**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	106	106

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the correlation of Anxiety to touch deprivation. It can be inferred from the table that a significant positive correlation (0.729) exists between Anxiety and Touch Deprivation, thus showing a moderate to high positive correlation between the two for college students in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The final results (Table 1) show that the mean Anxiety score of population under question falls in the moderate anxiety scale. The Table also shows that the touch deprivation also falls under the moderately touch deprived category. The table, also interestingly enough shows that the population is normally distributed throughout the study, however, it does show leptokurtic and positively skewed tendencies, indicating that the mean score is greater than the median and mode, which in turn can be interpreted as mild anxiety levels more prevalent and present in college students in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The last table (Table 2) shows that the scores of Anxieties and Touch Deprivation are moderately and significantly positively correlated, indicating that anxiety does increase with an increase in the Touch Deprivation levels. The results thus show that as the Touch deprivation of a person increases, their anxiety levels might increase, though, mildly. The results thus indicate that college students in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic might be facing anxiety issues solely based on the fact that they are not obtaining healthy, consented "Touch" from fellow humans.

Aaron Beck while he conceptualized anxiety to develop his questionnaire to measure the anxiety in a person, said that more than the anxiety or the thought provoking this reaction, the reaction of the person to the particular thought is what is anxiety and the reaction can be modified so as to provide the person with relief.

Jason Wrench and Narissra M. Punyanunt talked about haptics (study of touch as a non-verbal communication) in their measure and they talk about 3 features. They say that most people long for touch when it was a normal part of their daily life but fail to get so now.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Scope and objectives

Touch can be said to be a crucial and significant part of our daily life. It can be considered to be a critical part of our social and emotional growth. The biological and physiological approaches say that a “good” and consented touch releases oxytocin which is essentially considered to be the “happiness” hormone. However, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we can say that our life quite literally depends on not touching and limiting the human contact and interaction we have, which is why a lot of anxiety starts welling up, proving to be occasionally hazardous to people. This study tries to prove the positive connection between being touch deprived and anxiety. The area of “touch deprivation” is quite interesting thus making it a scope of many further studies. The aim of this particular research, however, is fulfilled as it shows us how Touch affects our level of anxiety during such trying times.

Instruments used

- The Touch deprivation scale, developed by Jason S Wrench and Narissra N Punyanunt, the 20 item scale measures aspects of touch deprivation and its extent and effect on a person. The respondents can answer along a five point spectrum from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. It is measured from the score of 0 to 80. The scale was tested for reliability and validity and it has a high reliability and was accounted for various types of validity.
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Sample

A sample of 106 college students between the age of 17-26 were considered and sampling was done using snowball sampling and recorded with the help of physical questionnaires as well as e-forms. The participants were all chosen from India to avoid huge cultural biases.

The Hypothesis thus formulated for the present study were as follows and the findings prove that the hypothesis which are mentioned below are to be accepted.

H1: There is a significant correlation in the Anxiety and Touch deprivation levels in college students in the COVID-19 pandemic.

SPSS version 20.0 was employed for the processing and the detailed analysis of data collected. The statistical method used to test the hypothesis was Pearson's product moment correlation.

Findings of study

The study conducted concludes that people who involve in a regular practice of Zumba (at least twice a week) show significant difference in certain aspects of well-being and self-consciousness as compared to those who did not involve in regular Zumba practice. There is a difference in the sub scale of well-being such as autonomy, personal growth, positive relations and purpose in life along with a difference in some of the aspects of self-consciousness such as public self-consciousness and social anxiety between the two groups. The study also concludes that a negative correlation exists among autonomy sub-scale of well-being and private self consciousness and among autonomy and total self-consciousness. The study thus suggests that Zumba is a workout that incorporates fitness moves with dancing. It provides a workout for your entire body along with an aspect of enjoyment as it involves dancing, this helps to build endurance and strengthens the heart. Studies show that Zumba also improves coordination and posture, as well as full body toning. It aids mental health. Zumba fitness can consider as an effective measure for improving well-being and self-consciousness as indicated by our study thus indicating towards a balanced social and personal life.

Limitations

- The researcher has tried their best to avoid any bias or inconsistencies in the study. However, the fact that significant bias and errors may have crept in due to the nature of the study is not ignorable.
- The questionnaires used in the study were self-report inventories, so a response bias may have occurred.
- The Touch-Deprivation scale as well as the Anxiety shows the perceived levels which might not always indicate the actual levels experienced by the person.
- The sample chosen was of college students and it might not hold good for other aspects of the population.

Implications

It can be clearly seen in the results of the study that the touch deprivation levels clearly affect the anxiety levels in college students. I personally think that more seminars should be designed and held so as to help students channelize and thus cope with the resulting anxiety. I also think that awareness of mental health issues can help normalizing this anxiety and make it easier for people to talk about it and seek help if they need it. An awareness campaign to familiarizing parents about this as well as recognizing its signs can also be held.

Suggestions

The researcher thinks that the area of touch deprivation is poorly researched and that it should be explored more in all phases and aspects of life.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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