

Research Paper

## Fear of Negative Evaluation Leading to Body Image Avoidance and Social Anxiety Thoughts Among College Students

C U Anagha Uday<sup>1\*</sup>, Nimy P.G.<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The current discourse widely revolves around mental health, with a particular emphasis on the susceptibility of emerging adults to various mental health issues. This study aimed to investigate the connection between the fear of negative evaluation, resulting in body image avoidance and the emergence of social anxiety thoughts among college students. The study sample comprised 105 college students (50 males and 55 females) hailing from different regions in Kerala, specifically Ernakulam, Thrissur, Palakkad, and Malappuram districts. The participants fell within the age range of 18-25. To conduct this research, three main instruments were employed: the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale, the Body Image Avoidance Questionnaire (BIAQ), and the Social Anxiety Thoughts (SAT) scale. The gathered data underwent analysis using pertinent statistical techniques, including ANOVA and the Pearson correlation coefficient. The results indicated a substantial correlation among fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts among young adults. Furthermore, the findings suggested that a robust positive correlation exists, implying no significant divergence in fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts among college students based on gender differences.

**Keywords:** *Fear of negative evaluation, Body image avoidance, Social anxiety thoughts*

In recent times, mental health has emerged as a crucial topic, especially concerning the vulnerability of emerging adults. This study, encompassing 105 college students from various districts in Kerala, sought to investigate the relationship between fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts. Utilizing tools like the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale, Body Image Avoidance Questionnaire (BIAQ), and Social Anxiety Thoughts (SAT) scale, the data underwent analysis through ANOVA and Pearson correlation coefficient. Results unveiled a significant correlation among fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts in young adults. Moreover, the study indicated a strong positive correlation, revealing no substantial gender-based differences in these aspects among college students. This underscores the critical role of physical education in fostering a healthy learning environment, promoting self-confidence, and contributing to academic performance. The study aligns with the World Health Organization's definition of mental health and addresses challenges faced by college

<sup>1</sup>Student, Christ College Autonomous Irinjalakuda

<sup>2</sup>Student, Christ College Autonomous Irinjalakuda

\*Corresponding Author

Received: January 16, 2024; Revision Received: March 28, 2024; Accepted: March 31, 2024

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students, such as mood disorders and the reluctance to seek help. Financial burdens, social comparisons, and challenges in interpersonal relationships were also identified as stressors for college students. The importance of developing self-acceptance and promoting mental health, particularly in the context of body image and social comparison, was emphasized.

The study delved deeper into the multidimensional construct of body image, highlighting its psychological and social dimensions. Body dissatisfaction, a prevalent concern, was linked to negative outcomes, including eating disorders and exercise dependence. Social comparison tendencies, particularly prevalent among individuals aged 18-25, were associated with emotional difficulties and mental health issues. Further, the study addressed social anxiety, distinguishing it from shyness and emphasizing its impact on daily activities, work, and personal relationships. Factors contributing to social anxiety included fear of negative evaluation and fear of positive evaluation, with implications for one's perceived rank within social hierarchies. Shyness, conceptualized as a tendency to avoid social situations, was linked to lower self-efficacy beliefs.

In conclusion, the study underscored the complex interplay of physical and mental well-being among college students. It highlighted the need for holistic approaches in education, incorporating physical education to promote overall health and address the mental health challenges faced by emerging adults. Understanding the intricate connections between fear of evaluation, body image, and social anxiety is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems for college students.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Aim***

The aim of this research study is to investigate the relationship between fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts among college students. The researchers seek to understand how the fear of negative evaluation influences the development of body image avoidance behaviors and social anxiety thoughts in the context of a college environment. The study aims to explore the correlations and interactions among these variables, shedding light on the psychological dynamics that may contribute to mental health challenges among college students. Additionally, the research may provide insights into potential intervention strategies or support systems to address these issues and promote the well-being of college students.

#### ***Objectives***

- To find out the level of fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts among college students.
- To find out the difference between the fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts among college students.
- To find out the relationship between the fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts among college students.

#### ***Hypotheses***

- There will be a significant relationship between fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts among college students.

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- There will be a significant difference in the fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts among college students on the basis of gender differences.

### *Variables*

- **Independent Variable:** fear of negative evaluation
- **Dependent Variable:** body image avoidance and social anxiety

### *Sample*

The study sample consisted of 105 individuals i.e., 50 males and 55 females from Ernakulam, Thrissur, Palakkad and Malappuram districts between the ages of 18 to 25 years. The sample was recruited by the method of purposive sampling that is selected based on the purpose of the research study being conducted, and on the judgement of the researcher. The subjects must fulfil certain requirements or criteria, or must possess specific characteristics, in order to be selected to participate in the study.

### *Tools Used for the Study*

Three questionnaire measures were used in the present study. The measures used are: The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, Body Image Avoidance Scale and Social Anxiety Thoughts Scale. In addition to the measure described above, a personal data sheet was used to collect information on relevant socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, place of residence, education and family type.

### **The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale**

Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale was developed by David Watson and Ronald Friend. The purpose of the scale was to measure the fear of the loss of social approval and signs of anxiety. The scale consists of 30 items that was designed to measure one aspect of the fear of receiving negative evaluation from others. Internal consistency of the scale, fear of negative evaluation was first determined by correlating each item with the total FNE score. The average item to total score correlation was .72. The Brief FNE was evaluated for validity first by correlating scores with the full length FNE; this correlation was .96.

### **Body Image Avoidance Questionnaire (BIAQ)**

Body Image Avoidance Questionnaire (BIAQ) was developed by James C. Rosen, Debra Srebnik, Elaine Saltzberg, and Sally Wendt. The purpose of the scale was to measure behavioural tendencies that automatically leads to one's body image disturbance or dissatisfaction. The questionnaire consists of 19 items that deals with avoidance of situation often leading to concern about physical appearance. Such situations may include avoidance of physical intimacy, social outings and tight-fitting clothes. The body image avoidance questionnaire (BIAQ) has internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. The body image avoidance questionnaire (BAIQ) has fair to good concurrent validity, with a low but significant correlation of .22 with body size estimation, a correlation of .78 with the Body Shape Questionnaire, and correlation of .68 and .63 with the Shape Concern and Weight Concern scales respectively.

### **Social Anxiety Thoughts Questionnaire (SAT)**

Social anxiety thoughts questionnaire was developed by Lorne M. Hartman. The purpose of the scale was to measure cognitive component of social anxiety. The questionnaire consists of 21 items which is designed to measure the frequency of cognitions that accompany social

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distress. The social anxiety thoughts questionnaire has got internal consistency, with an alpha of .95. The validity of social anxiety thoughts questionnaire has fairly good concurrent validity, showing significant correlations with the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale and the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale.

### *Procedure*

The research focused on the theme 'The Influence of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Body Image Avoidance and Social Anxiety Thoughts Among College Students.' The primary methodology involved approaching young adults who were administered a questionnaire encompassing socio-demographic details and 70 inquiries related to fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts. Participants were instructed to personally complete the questionnaire, which comprised 30 true or false questions addressing general life events, followed by 19 questions with six options, requiring them to circle the number indicating the frequency of specific behaviors. The final section comprised 21 questions assessing various thoughts occurring in social situations over the past week. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The filled questionnaires were then collected from the participants, who were given the assurance that their provided.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Results of Analysis of Socio demographic details of the respondents*

Through the present study, the investigator has attempted to examine, if there is a significant relationship between fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts among college students. On the basis of gender difference was also examined in the relationship among these three variables. The data obtained from the participants were scored approximately and was analysed using ANOVA and Pearson Correlation test.

The results obtained are discussed in the following sections

**Table 4.1:** *The table shows the mean value, degrees of freedom, f value and significant difference obtained for the dimensions of fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts.*

		Sum of Squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean Square	f value	Sig.
FNE	Between Groups	5.587	1	5.587	.133	.716
	Within Groups	4237.286	101	41.953		
	Total	4242.874	102			
BIAQ	Between Groups	18.083	1	18.083	.116	.734
	Within Groups	15762.150	101	156.061		
	Total	15780.233	102			
SAT	Between Groups	69.144	1	69.144	.456	.501
	Within Groups	15300.507	101	151.490		
	Total	15369.650	102			

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Table 4.1 presents the findings of the study, indicating that there is no significant gender difference in fear of negative evaluation (FNE), body image avoidance (BIAQ), and social anxiety thoughts (SAT) among college students. The *f* values for FNE, BIAQ, and SAT are 0.133, 0.116, and 0.456, respectively, with corresponding significant differences of 0.716, 0.734, and 0.501, all exceeding the threshold of 0.05. Consequently, the hypothesis positing a significant gender difference is rejected, while the null hypothesis suggesting no such difference is accepted.

Research indicates that gender differences do play a role in fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts. Fear of negative evaluation is often associated with concerns about failure and heightened self-awareness, with higher levels observed in females, possibly due to increased self-focused attention. Body image, shaped by personal experiences and external feedback, can lead to negative perceptions, and studies show a higher prevalence of avoidance behaviors, particularly among adolescent girls. Social anxiety, characterized by discomfort in social situations, has been associated with a higher incidence in females, although some studies contest this finding. Notably, societal changes, educational equality, and evolving gender roles in recent times have contributed to a more level playing field for both genders. In the past, gender-specific expectations and behavioral norms in schools created disparities in treatment. Girls were expected to be quiet, while boys were encouraged to be energetic and assertive. However, evolving environments and societal norms have led to a more equalized experience for both genders in educational settings, potentially diminishing traditional gender differences in emotional responses and perceptions.

In conclusion, the study highlights the absence of significant gender differences in fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts among college students. It acknowledges the evolving nature of gender roles and societal expectations that may contribute to a more uniform emotional experience for individuals, irrespective of gender, in contemporary educational environments.

**Table 4.2: Shows correlation between the variables fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance and social anxiety thoughts.**

		FNE	BIAQ	SAT
<b>FNE</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	1	0.787**	0.841**
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>		0.000	0.000
	<b>N</b>	103	103	103
<b>BIAQ</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	0.787**	1	0.807**
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	0.000		0.000
	<b>N</b>	103	103	103
<b>SAT</b>	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	0.841**	0.807**	1
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	0.000	0.000	
	<b>N</b>	103	103	103

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The correlation analysis in Table reveals strong and positive associations among fear of negative evaluation (FNE), body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts (SAT) among college students. The correlation values for FNE and body image avoidance, FNE and SAT, and body image avoidance and SAT are 0.787, 0.841, and 0.807, respectively. The corresponding p values for all correlations are less than 0.01, indicating statistical significance. Therefore, the hypothesis suggesting a significant relationship between these variables is accepted, while the null hypothesis is rejected. In essence, higher levels of fear of negative evaluation correspond to increased body image avoidance behaviors and social anxiety thoughts, and vice versa. This interconnectedness suggests that changes in one variable can influence the other two variables positively. Drawing from the self-enhancement theory, individuals tend to present themselves in a more positive light than they truly are, anticipating positive self-evaluation over negative self-evaluation. This aligns with the social belongingness theory, emphasizing the human need for acceptance and positive social relationships. Fear of negative evaluation reflects an evolutionary-rooted urge to form and maintain social bonds, where excessive apprehension about others' evaluations can impact social relationships.

As college students transition into young adulthood, they encounter numerous challenges, including new social environments and heavy academic workloads. These changes can be overwhelming, leading to anxiety or depression. Challenges such as loneliness and difficulty forming friendships may contribute to anxiety, disrupting social lives. The fear of negative evaluation becomes pronounced, affecting actions, conversations, and body image as individuals fear judgment by others. To establish social connections, college students may engage in behaviors aimed at gaining attention or approval. However, those with a high fear of negative evaluation may withdraw from public activities or social groups due to the fear of rejection. Additionally, societal influences, especially from social media and peer pressure, contribute to an idealized body concept, leading to body image dissatisfaction. This fear of judgment intensifies anxiety and submissive thoughts.

Research by Yada Pawijit et al. (2017) examined the role of fear of negative evaluation in the relationship between body image dissatisfaction and social anxiety among emerging adults. The study found positive associations among body image dissatisfaction, fear of negative evaluation, and social anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation mediated the association between body image dissatisfaction and social anxiety. Another study by Ganesh Kumar J et al. (2015) explored the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and anxiety, particularly in the context of public speaking. The study revealed a significant positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and anxiety, indicating the negative impact of these factors on students' performance.

In summary, the strong correlations observed among fear of negative evaluation, body image avoidance, and social anxiety thoughts in college students support the hypothesis of a significant relationship. The interconnectedness of these variables suggests that addressing one aspect may influence the others, emphasizing the complex interplay between fear of negative evaluation, body image, and social anxiety in the college population.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

#### *Implications of the study*

The primary goal of this study is to contribute to the enhancement of mental well-being. It aims to identify strategies for supporting individuals with social anxiety disorder, offering

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interventions to improve their social skills and overall social performance. The research underscores the importance of early interventions targeting body image dissatisfaction. Additionally, it emphasizes the influential role of media in negatively impacting body satisfaction, suggesting the need for effective programs addressing this aspect.

By addressing the excessive fear of rejection or evaluation by others, interventions can foster body image acceptance, ultimately improving individuals' social relationships. The study's findings carry implications for educators, administrators, parent-child relationships, and peer groups. It highlights the potential for implementing measures that contribute to the overall mental well-being of individuals dealing with social anxiety and body image concerns.

### *Limitations of the Study*

While the study effectively met its intended objectives and validated the formulated hypotheses, it is imperative to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in its time-constrained nature:

- The research was conducted within a limited timeframe.
- The sample size utilized in the study was relatively small; a larger sample could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.
- The study exclusively focused on young adults.
- The extensive number of items in the questionnaire may introduce fatigue as a potential factor influencing the study's outcomes.

### *Scope for Further Research*

The study could be enhanced by incorporating a more diverse set of samples from various geographic areas. Allocating ample time for research would contribute to increased accuracy and yield more robust findings. With an extended timeframe, participants could be provided with a conducive environment, reducing the likelihood of manipulation or fatigue-related response issues. Additionally, future research endeavors should consider investigating extraneous factors like family structure, physical health, and emotional maturity for a more comprehensive analysis.

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### ***Acknowledgment***

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** Uday, C.U.A. & Nimy, P.G. (2024). Fear of Negative Evaluation Leading to Body Image Avoidance and Social Anxiety Thoughts Among College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(1), 2615-2623. DIP:18.01.239.20241201, DOI:10.25215/1201.239