

Relationship between Sociotropy, Autonomy and Appearance Anxiety among Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary society where external validation is on what self-worth is based on, the concepts of sociotropy, autonomy and appearance anxiety are increasingly relevant in understanding mental health concerns among emerging adults. Sociotropy is an excessive investment in social and interpersonal relations while autonomy is excessive concern regarding personal achievement and control (Sato & McCann, 2006). Appearance anxiety is preoccupation with one's appearance and a fear that one's appearance may be negatively evaluated by others (Hart, 2008). The present study aimed to explore the relationship between sociotropy autonomy and appearance anxiety among emerging adults. A sample of 200 was selected using purposive sampling. Sociotropy autonomy scale (SAS) (Beck, 1983) and Appearance anxiety scale (AAI) (Veale et. al, 2014) were used. Pearson's correlation and linear regression were for the analysis of the obtained data. Aligning with the existing literature, the findings revealed that sociotropy is highly correlated and predicts self-esteem and appearance regarded issues by indicating a significant positive relationship between sociotropy and appearance anxiety ($r=0.418$, $p<0.01$) and by indicating that sociotropy was a significant predictor of appearance anxiety ($R^2=0.175$, $p<0.01$). The findings suggest development of interventions to cultivate intrinsic validation and self-acceptance for people with appearance anxiety and development of early interventions to reduce the incidence of the issue.

Keywords: Sociotropy, Autonomy, Appearance Anxiety, Emerging adults

Carl Rogers (1961) once remarked “When I accept myself as I am, then I can change”. This idea holds a focal point in the field of psychology as it shows how accepting ourselves can help one grow and change. This is especially relevant when we study topics like sociotropic and autonomic personalities and appearance anxiety.

Sociotropy and Autonomy

Beck (1983) described two-dimensional personality “modes,” which he called sociotropy and autonomy.

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Sociotropy

Sociotropy or social dependency is described as “the person’s investment in positive interchange with others” (Beck et al., 1996) and its associated dysfunctional depiction being “If someone disapproves of me, I am unlovable.” This personality type is defined by a reliance on social validation for fulfillment and emotional support. Sociotropic individuals are thought to be vulnerable to depression when they suffer a perceived loss within the interpersonal realm (Robins, 1990). Sociotropic individuals have heightened needs for support, guidance, understanding, and acceptance, so they try to ease their negative experiences that could impact their self-esteem by establishing secure interpersonal relationships. In other words, individuals with the sociotropy personality trait have a strong desire for a positive relationship with others, and their behaviors are aimed at gaining the support and approval of others (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992). Sociotropic individuals are excessively invested in having positive exchanges with others; however, when these relationships fail, it is thought that sociotropic individuals will experience symptoms of depression (Beck, 1983).

Karasar (2021) found about 49% of codependency can be explained by variables like depression, a need for social approval, self-love and self efficacy. Codependency is a variable very similar to sociotropy. Depression emerged as the most influential variable in the model, whereas self-efficacy did not show any significant contribution. Additionally, gender did not lead to significant differences, but the analysis based on birth order indicated that firstborns had higher self-efficacy compared to others. Perkovic & Pechenkov (2023) saw that while neuroticism and conscientiousness were found to be unique predictors of general depression symptoms, Anhedonia symptoms were predicted by extraversion, agreeableness and sociotropy.

Similar study findings by Alvi (2024) indicated a significant positive relation of sociotropy and interpersonal sensitivity with depression. It was also indicated that gender, sociotropy and interpersonal sensitivity predicts depression, another indication was that sociotropic women are more prone to depression. Lastly, findings also indicated that interpersonal sensitivity directly and indirectly mediates the relationship between sociotropy and depression.

Autonomy

Autonomy is described as “the person’s investment in preserving and increasing his independence, mobility, and personal rights” (Beck et al., 1996) and its associated dysfunctional depiction being “I must be good at everything I do, or I am a failure”. Autonomous individuals are excessively focused on attaining personal goals and upholding their own, often unrealistically high, standards. When these goals are not met, they tend to experience symptoms of depression (Gandhi, 2023). An individual high on this trait receives fulfillment through guiding their own actions and reaching purposeful goals. Individuals with the autonomy personality trait have a strong desire for independence, and they are highly sensitive to failure and frustration in attempting to achieve the goal they have set for themselves (Blatt & Zuroff, 1992).

Sociotropy and autonomy have a significant positive relationship with self-criticism and a significant negative relationship with self-esteem (Jhangir and Jameel, 2023). Also, Lester & Dadfar (2022) in a research found that, both Sociotropy and autonomy scores were positively associated with depression scores, however only defensive separation, that is a component of autonomy, predicted past suicide attempts. And in a romantic relationship the

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variables sociotropy and autonomy were associated positively with positive dyadic coping by self and negatively with negative dyadic coping by partner while relationship commitment partially moderate between these associations (Gandhi, 2023).

Appearance Anxiety

According to Davis (1993), appearance anxiety can be defined as a subclinical sign of body dysmorphic disorder, typically characterized by heightened concern over perceived physical flaws that are generally regarded as normal by others. Hart et al. (2008) defined appearance anxiety as an excessive focus on one's physical appearance and a fear that aspects such as body shape, facial features, height, and weight may be judged negatively by others. A poor body image triggered due to appearance anxiety can damage self-esteem, causing feelings of being inadequate, self-doubt and a mistaken sense of self-worth.

Appearance anxiety is an intrusive psychological state characterized by preoccupation with actual or perceived deficits in appearance and repetitive behaviors such as checking, grooming, and comparing oneself to others to cope with these concerns (William 2023).

College students appear to be a high prevalence group for appearance anxiety, and Appearance anxiety has been identified as a key factor contributing to social difficulties and can result in significant interpersonal and psychological distress. (Liao et al. 2023)

The increased level of appearance anxiety with the decreased level of self-esteem similarly the heightened level of appearance anxiety increased the level suicidal ideation among university students (Shakeel et al. 2024). Studies have found that appearance anxiety is significantly associated with many psychological problems and self-evaluation disorders, and it is a significant predictor of social anxiety (Webb, 2016). Also, body dysmorphic disorder is a significant positive predictor of suicidal ideation Nwufu et. al. (2020) and there is a negative correlation between the body image and social anxiety in adolescent girls. Also, Body image shows a contribution to the emergence of social anxiety (Ratnasari et al., 2021) Antonietti, Camerini & Marciano (2023) found that lower levels of self-esteem led to higher levels of SAA over time both directly and indirectly through increased use of maladaptive coping strategies. However adaptive coping does not significantly predict social appearance anxiety. According to a research Body image dissatisfaction was almost as common among males as females and BMI was not a significant predictor of dissatisfaction. Among participants who reported dissatisfaction with their bodies, eating disorder risk was higher among females than males. Also, Social Appearance Anxiety and Depression were significant predictors of eating disorder risk among females, but not males (Turel et al. 2018).

Festinger (1954) gave the Social Comparison Theory according to which individuals evaluate their own appearance by comparing themselves to others, particularly those they perceive as superior in terms of attractiveness. This constant comparison can exacerbate appearance anxiety, as individuals may feel inadequate or inferior when they perceive themselves as falling short of societal beauty standards or compared to others.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) gave another theory which explains Appearance Anxiety and it is called the Self Objectification Theory. The theory proposes that the cause of appearance anxiety is due to the internalization of external standards onto their own evaluation standards, leading to decreased self-esteem and mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. Self-objectification leads to frequent indulgence in social

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comparison, feelings of body shame, heightened consciousness about one's appearance, etc. which ultimately becomes a cause of appearance anxiety and Body dysmorphic disorder.

Emerging Adulthood

Since the 1960s, demographic shifts in trends such as extended period of time for education and entering into marriage and parenthood at a late age have contributed to development of a new life stage between 18-29 called as Emerging adulthood (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014). Arnett (2000) suggests that emerging adulthood is distinct from both adolescence and young adulthood. At this stage, individuals have left behind the dependence of childhood and adolescence but have not yet assumed the responsibilities that are typical of adulthood. During this period, emerging adults often experiment with different paths in areas such as relationships, careers, and personal beliefs. It is a phase marked by numerous possibilities, where much of the future is still undecided, and the freedom to independently explore life's options is broader than at any other point in the life cycle.

The characteristics that matter most to emerging adults in their sense of attaining adulthood are individual characteristics, especially the criteria of accepting responsibility for oneself and making independent decisions (Arnett, 1997, 1998, 2000; Greene et al., 1992; Scheer et al., 1994). There are five features that distinguish emerging adulthood from adolescence and young adulthood and these are that it is the age of instability, the age of identity exploration, a self-focused age, a feeling of in-between and lastly a sense of possibilities (Arnett 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample of this study constituted of 200 participants falling within the age range of 18-29 years selected through purposive sampling.

Tools Used

- **Appearance Anxiety Inventory:** The appearance anxiety inventory developed by Veale et al. (2014) was used to measure the appearance anxiety on the domains of threat monitoring, camouflaging and avoidance. The scale has a good convergent validity, with correlations of 0.55 with YBOCS-BDD and 0.58 with PHQ9, as well as a high internal validity with Cronbach's alpha score of 0.86.
- **Sociotropy Autonomy Scale (SAS):** The SAS was used to measure the personality traits of sociotropy and autonomy developed by Beck. The scale has a high internal consistency of 0.90 and 0.83. Each scale consists of 30 items each and a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Procedure

This study was conducted using the method of snowball sampling. The participants were informed regarding the purpose of the study and were given basic instructions regarding the questionnaires like, there is no correct or incorrect answer, the AAI is to measure appearance anxiety whereas the SAS is used to measure sociotropy and autonomy personality traits, etc. After obtaining informed consent from the participants, the questionnaires were provided. After collection of data correlation and regression analysis were performed to obtain the results using SPSS-29.

RESULT

Table 1 Depicts correlation among sociotropy autonomy and appearance anxiety

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2
Sociotropy	70.70	20.151		
Autonomy	75.66	15.602		
TM	7.51	4.545	0.407*	0.107
C	2.51	2.389	0.377*	0.086
Av	3.42	3.216	0.344*	0.058
TAA	13.43	9.215	0.418*	0.095

* $p = 0.01$

{TM- Threat Monitoring, C- Camouflaging, Av- Avoidance, TAA- Total appearance anxiety}

Table 1, correlation analysis revealed that there exists a significant positive relationship of the variables threat monitoring ($r = .407^*$), camouflaging ($r = .377^*$), avoidance ($r = .344^*$) and total appearance anxiety ($r = .418^*$) with Sociotropy at $p = 0.01$. Whereas, there is no significant relationship of threat monitoring ($r = .107$), camouflaging ($r = .086$), avoidance ($r = .058$) and total appearance anxiety ($r = .095$) with Autonomy.

Table 2 Depicting Linear Regression values among the correlated variables

Model	R	R ²	Adj R ²	F	Sig
1	.407*	.165	.161	39.197	000 ^a
2	.377*	.142	.138	32.842	000 ^b
3	.344*	.118	.114	26.572	000 ^c
4	.418*	.175	.171	41.998	000 ^d

{Independent variable (constant) - Sociotropy; a – predictors Threat monitoring; b predictors camouflaging; c - predictors Avoidance; d - predictors total appearance anxiety}

Table 2 depicts the values obtained for linear regression among the variables correlated previously in table 1. Model 1 displays an association between independent variable, sociotropy and dependent variable, threat monitoring. The correlation coefficient was found to be 0.407 ($p < 0.01$). R² came out to be 0.165. Hence, we see a 16.5% effect of sociotropy on Threat monitoring among emerging adults. Model 2 displays an association between independent variable, sociotropy and dependent variable, Camouflaging. The correlation coefficient was found to be 0.377 ($p < 0.01$). R² was found to be 0.142. Hence, we see a 14.2% effect of sociotropy on camouflaging. Model 3 displays an association between independent variable, Sociotropy and dependent variable, Avoidance. The correlation coefficient was found to be 0.344 ($p < 0.01$). R² was found to be 0.118. Hence, we see a 11.8% effect of sociotropy on avoidance. Model 4 displays an association between independent variable i.e. sociotropy and dependent variable, total appearance anxiety. The correlation coefficient was found to be 0.418 ($p < 0.01$). R² was found to be 0.175. Hence, we see a 17.5% effect of sociotropy on total appearance anxiety among emerging adults.

DISCUSSION

The research was conducted to explore the relationship between sociotropy, autonomy and appearance anxiety among emerging adults. The sample of the study consisted of 200 participants falling under the age bracket of 18-29. Sociotropy and Autonomy are two personality modes given by Beck (1983). Both of these personality dimensions are significantly associated with both depressive and anxiety symptoms (Martinez et al., 2020).

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Similarly, sociotropy and autonomy were found to have a significant positive relationship with self-criticism and a significant negative relationship with self-esteem (Jhangir and Jameel, 2023). Sociotropy is related to interpersonal sensitivity, guilt and self-blame, and symptoms suggesting anxious depression whereas Autonomy is related to interpersonal distance and hostility, hopelessness/suicidality, feelings of failure, and anhedonia (Robins et al., 1997).

The correlation study of this research indicated a significant positive relationship of appearance anxiety and its components i.e. threat monitoring, camouflaging and avoidance with sociotropy whereas no relationship of any variable under appearance anxiety with autonomy. Threat monitoring is the degree to which an individual is vigilant about potential threats related to their appearances. Camouflaging is the tendency to use strategies to hide or disguise perceived flaws in appearance. Avoidance is the extent to which individuals avoid situations or activities due to appearance related concern (Veale et al., 2014). The regression analysis also indicated sociotropy to be a predictor of appearance anxiety and its components including threat monitoring, camouflaging and avoidance. These results are in line with previous similar research conducted. Sociotropy and Autonomy were found to be highly significant predictors of self-criticism and self-esteem (Jhangir & Jameel, 2023). People experiencing social anxiety symptoms and those who have a need to be liked and accepted by others are more likely to camouflage any characteristic perceived as undesirable. Sociotropic individuals may do everything then can to hide those characteristics that they consider are not socially acceptable or desirable (Beck, 1983; Porricelli et al., 2024). Taslim (2012) found that women who were more sociotropic often developed body image dissatisfaction based on their close friend's dissatisfaction (Borović & Marković, 2022). The more sociotropic an individual is, the less they tend to focus on self-esteem increasing situations (Galfi-Pechenkov, 2024). In another study it was found that traits associated with histrionic and dependent personality disorders, such as attention-seeking, excessive emotionality, and submissive or clingy behaviors linked to a strong need for care, were related to sociotropy. In contrast, traits from borderline, narcissistic, avoidant, and self-defeating personality disorders were significantly related to both sociotropy and autonomy. It was also concluded that sociotropy and autonomy may be useful constructs for understanding personality disorders. (Morse et al., 2002).

The study aimed to explore the relationship between sociotropy, autonomy and appearance anxiety among emerging adults and the results highlighted the role of sociotropy which is characterised by people pleasing tendencies or behaviour in amplifying concerns related to social appearance and physical acceptance, confirming that sociotropic individuals may experience heightened anxiety regarding their appearance due to a reliance on external validation. To the contrary, no relationship was found between autonomy and any of the components of appearance anxiety suggesting that individuals with higher autonomy are less concerned about external evaluation regarding their appearances making them less susceptible to going through appearance anxiety.

The study has certain limitations which should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample could have been larger and it was selected through purposive snowball sampling and its results are not as generalizable as that of a sample selected through random sampling. Secondly, both the measures chosen were self-report questionnaires which had its own limitations like introduction of bias, time pressure, consistency motivation, socially desirable responses, etc (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). Additionally, the study solely focused on emerging adults and

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neglected other age groups. Furthermore, there is limited empirical evidence of the chosen variables in the Indian context which limits the cultural relevance of the findings.

This study is foundational to future research on connection between the personality traits sociotropy and autonomy with appearance anxiety especially in the Indian context, hence future studies can explore more regarding this connection in the Indian context as well as for other age groups like adolescents, young adults, adults, etc. Furthermore, Random sampling and increased sample can also be used in future research for better findings.

The findings of this study can be used to address appearance anxiety in individuals with sociotropic personality traits as therapeutic interventions can be developed to work on the dependency and social validation factors. Early intervention programs can be developed in school and university settings to address appearance anxiety and the need to reduce reliance on external approval to reduce the chances of occurrence of a severe mental disorder. Furthermore, these findings can also be used in developing interventions for individuals with appearance anxiety who are probably undergoing therapy or counselling, in order to work on their autonomic aspect of personality making them feel self-sufficient and confident and to increase their will to be more independent. Perhaps, individuals suffering through appearance related issues can indulge in social support groups aimed at enhancing self-acceptance and reducing reliance on peer acceptance in non-judgmental settings.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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