

Research Paper

## Social Appearance Anxiety and Self-Esteem in Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety (SAA) among young adults. The research was grounded in the theoretical premise that self-esteem, as a foundation of psychological well-being, is inversely associated with anxiety experienced in the context of social evaluations of one's physical appearance (Muris, 2023). The study involved a total sample of 118 participants (86 females and 32 males) between the ages of 18 and 30. Data collection was done using psychometric instruments: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS). Pearson's correlation coefficient and independent sample t-tests were employed to analyse the data. Statistically significant negative correlation between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety ( $r = -0.38, p < 0.001$ ), supporting the hypothesis that individuals with higher self-esteem are less likely to experience distress. Female participants reported lower self-esteem scores ( $M = 26.54$ ) and higher levels of social appearance anxiety ( $M = 31.56$ ) compared to males (self-esteem:  $M = 28.31$ ; social appearance anxiety:  $M = 27.50$ ). The study seeks future research utilizing longitudinal designs and a culturally diverse population to explore causality and cross-contextual variation in these associations. Such insights may guide educators and clinicians in developing holistic strategies to promote mental health and body positivity among young adults.

**Keywords:** *Self-Esteem, Social Appearance Anxiety, Social Anxiety*

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), adulthood is “the period of human development in which full physical growth and maturity have been achieved, and certain biological, cognitive, social, personality, and other changes associated with the aging process occur. Beginning after adolescence, adulthood is sometimes divided into young adulthood (roughly ages 20 to 35).” [<https://dictionary.apa.org/adulthood>]

Self-esteem is one's subjective sense of overall personal worth or value. Self-esteem is a person's positive or negative attitude towards a particular object, namely the self (Rosenberg, 1965). According to Coppersmith (1967), self-esteem is an expression of a person's acceptance or rejection attitude and the person's perception of himself as talented, important, precious, and successful. Furthermore, Guindon (2002) highlighted self-esteem as a feeling of acceptance and worthiness. Not so long after Guindon, in 2004, Adler and

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Received: July 07, 2026; Revision Received: September 10, 2026; Accepted: September 16, 2026

Stewart outlined how much a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes, or likes himself or herself.

Self-esteem usually follows an inverted U-shaped curve across a person's life: it climbs through adolescence and adulthood, peaks around age 60, and then it gradually drops (Orth & Robins, 2018). Moreover, this pattern is not uniform for everyone. During childhood, boys and girls share similar levels of self-esteem, though a disparity develops during adolescence as boys begin to report higher self-esteem than girls (Kling et al., 1999; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). The reason for the fall in self-esteem of girls during adolescence is minute forms of sexism that occur in their classrooms. In early 90s, Sadker & Sadker (1994) pointed out that teachers treat boys and girls differently. Another prominent reason is their appearance; boys tend to have a relatively positive attitude towards their appearance (Harter, 1993).

Social Appearance Anxiety (SAA) is the fear of negative evaluation of one's appearance and perfectionism (Morrison & Heimberg, 2013). Anxiety is an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. A severe and ongoing fear of social or performance settings where embarrassment or humiliation could happen leads to Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). Some people with social anxiety disorder suffer from severe anguish, self-consciousness, and fear of being judged in their usual social encounters, called Social Appearance Anxiety. It solely focuses on the unpleasant assessment of one's physical attributes. Factors responsible for SAA are: Personal, Cognitive, Emotional, Social (Putri et al., 2025).

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The intricate relationship between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety in adolescents has drawn growing attention in psychological research. Seminal theorists like Rosenberg (1965) and Coppersmith (1967) defined self-esteem.

It is consistently reported that social appearance anxiety has a strong negative correlation with self-esteem (Sahin, E., Barut, et al., 2014). A very predominant factor is the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). It is the cognitive anticipation of being judged unfavourably by others that exhibits a strong positive correlation with social appearance anxiety. Since physical appearances are one of the reasons for anxiety, the probability of getting rejected by the opposite or same gender due to lack of physical attractiveness further leads to the feelings of loneliness (Papapanou, 2023).

A contemporary meta-analysis done on the relationship between social anxiety and suicide in youth showed higher levels of social anxiety related to suicidal ideation (Leigh, 2023). Moreover, a study by Veale (2016) indicated that college students are a high-risk group for appearance anxiety and self-reported appearance anxiety in students studying abroad ranges from 1.20% to 13.00%.

In today's time, social media are a core component in propagating body dissatisfaction and its contents are deeply influenced by cultural contexts. As in some cultures, certain body goals are glorified and considered the epitome of beauty. In some societies, illustrations of thinness are highly promoted via widespread circulation of images showcasing slim figures on social platforms, which can worsen body dissatisfaction, leading to unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders.

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Likewise, celebration of fuller body types navigates the narrative of a sense of inadequacy among those who cannot reach the set standards of beauty (Merino, 2024). Furthermore, gender has been found in the role of manifesting social appearance anxiety.

### **Objective:**

- To study the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem in young adults.

### **Hypotheses:**

- **H1-** Young adults with higher levels of social appearance anxiety (SAA) will exhibit significantly lower levels of self-esteem.
- **H2-**Females will report higher social appearance anxiety (SAA) and lower self-esteem than males.

**Variables:** Criterion Variable: Self-Esteem Predictor Variable: Social Appearance Anxiety

**Sampling Technique:** Convenient sampling

### **Research Design:**

- A correlation design was used to explore the relation between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem.
- Sample: A total of 118 participants (86 females and 32 males), aged between 18 to 30 years of age.

### **Materials used:**

Personal Information Form (PIF) was used to record the personal information of participants.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) with 10 items on four-point likert scale as the options were “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree”. The RSE exhibits excellent internal consistency (Guttman reproducibility coefficient = .92) and strong stability, with two-week test-retest correlations ranging from .85 to .88.

Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) developed by Hart (1999), a 16 item self-report scale to assess anxiety when an individual’s appearance may be evaluated by others. The measure proves highly reliable, yielding excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha between .90 and .96) and strong retest reliability ( $r \geq .91$ ). [[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5592960\\_Development\\_and\\_Examination\\_of\\_the\\_Social\\_Appearance\\_Anxiety\\_Scale](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5592960_Development_and_Examination_of_the_Social_Appearance_Anxiety_Scale)]

### **Scoring**

In the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the scoring of items-first, second, fourth, sixth and seventh were positively marked for the options “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” as 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively. While scoring of the rest of the items were reversed “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” as 1, 2, 3, 4. And the total score ranges from 10 to 40. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem.

Meanwhile, the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) with all sixteen items were rated at five-point likert scale that ranges from “Not at all”, “A Little”, “Often”, “A Lot” and “All

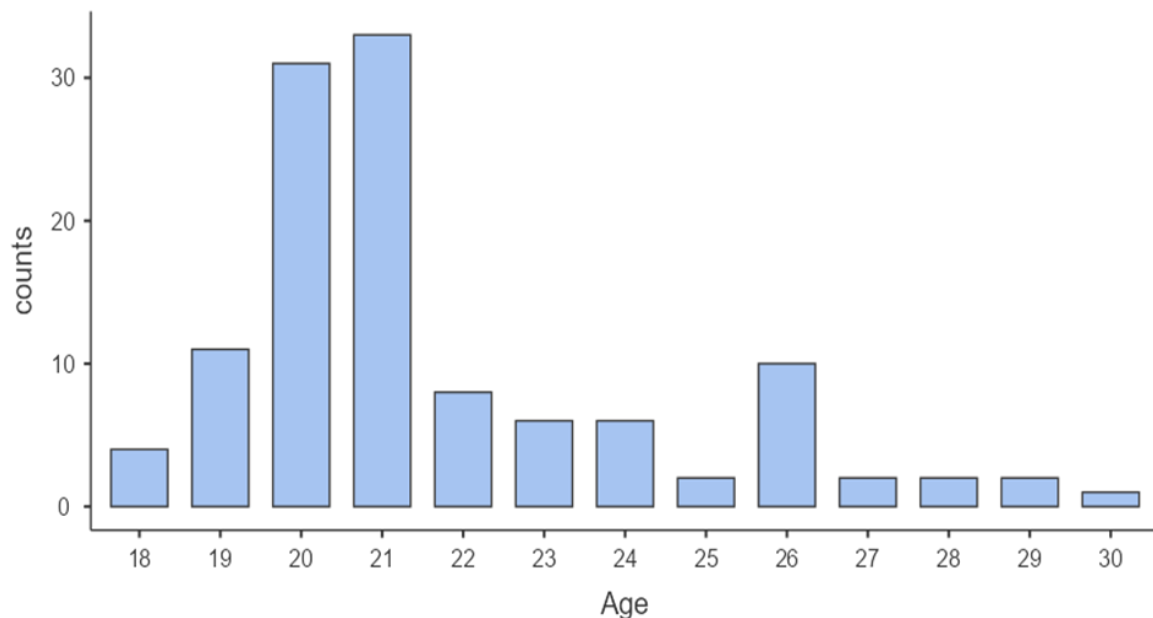
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the time” as scored 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 respectively. Thus, the total score extends from 16 to 80 and higher scores indicate greater levels of social anxiety.

### RESULTS

The data of 118 participants were analysed using a statistical software called Jamovi. The sample size was categorized into two subgroups: male and female. The age distribution was between 18 to 30 years, however it was noted that the majority of participants were in their early adulthood as they were between 20 and 21 years of age.

**Figure 1: Bar graph showing the distribution of participant ages (N = 118). The majority of respondents were aged 20-21, indicating a predominantly young-adult sample.**



To study the data, descriptive statistics were applied intensively, the mean scores were computed for variables - self-esteem and social appearance anxiety, gender wise to explore group differences. The variables along with their corresponding mean score were calculated (refer Table 1)

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for variables genderwise**

|       | Age  | self-esteem | social appearance anxiety | self-esteem in females | self-esteem in males | social appearance anxiety in females | social appearance anxiety in males |
|-------|------|-------------|---------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| N     | 118  | 118         | 118                       | 86                     | 32                   | 86                                   | 32                                 |
| Total | 2566 | 3246        | 3428                      | 2346                   | 900                  | 2525                                 | 903                                |
| Mean  | 21.7 | 27.5        | 29.1                      | 27.3                   | 28.1                 | 29.4                                 | 28.2                               |

To comprehensively investigate the association between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety Pearson's correlation coefficient was applied. It is a statistical technique designed to measure the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables. The correlation coefficient (r) determines whether higher levels of one variable tend to be associated with other variable of higher or lower levels, producing a coefficient between -1 and +1 with values closer to either -1 or +1 indicating a stronger relationship.

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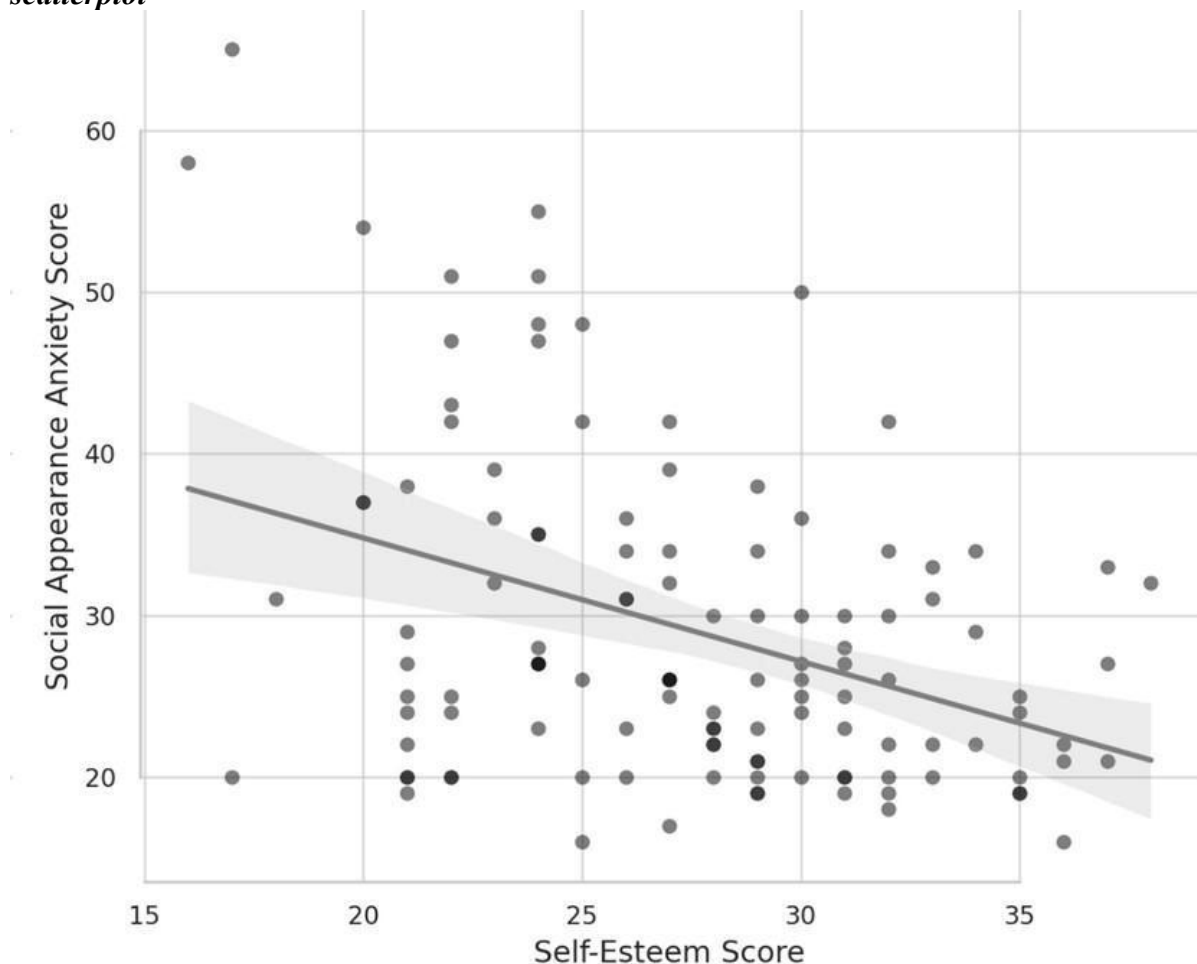
The relationship between both the variables was depicted visually in a scatterplot with a fitted regression line in the downward slope. Independent sample t-tests were applied to observe the gender differences in self-esteem and social appearance anxiety.

**Table 2: Pearson's correlation coefficient to find the relation between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem**

|                                  |             | Sum of self-esteem | Sum of social appearance anxiety |
|----------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sum of self-esteem               | Pearson's r | —                  | —                                |
|                                  | df          | —                  | —                                |
|                                  | p-value     | —                  | —                                |
|                                  | N           | —                  | —                                |
| Sum of social appearance anxiety | Pearson's r | -0.383***          | —                                |
|                                  | df          | 116                | —                                |
|                                  | p-value     | <0.001             | —                                |
|                                  | N           | 118                | —                                |

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 2: Correlation Between Self-Esteem and Social Appearance Anxiety on a scatterplot**



**Table 3: Showing the gender-wise difference between self-esteem & SAA**

| Variable                  | t     | df | p     | Mean (female) | Mean (male) | SD (female) | SD (male) |
|---------------------------|-------|----|-------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Self-esteem               | -1.21 | 65 | 0.232 | 26.54         | 28.31       | 5.24        | 6.18      |
| Social appearance anxiety | 1.58  | 65 | 0.120 | 31.56         | 31.56       | 10.67       | 10.0      |

## DISCUSSION

The presented study aimed to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety among young adults that ranged between the age 18 to 30 years with the aim to explore the calibre of gender difference. Quantitative methods and statistical analysis which included Pearson's Correlation coefficient and independent sample t-tests were applied along with supporting literature evidence and new insights.

The most notable result of the analysis for the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem was  $r = -0.38$  at p-value ( $<0.001$ ), indicating people with higher levels of social appearance anxiety will experience lower levels of self-esteem. A statistically significant negative correlation was noted down. Thus, confirming the hypothesis as well as consistent previous search (Sahin, et.al., 2014). Rosenberg (1965) refers to when individuals who possess a stable and positive self-image are less likely to feel intimidated by potential negative evaluations of their outer appearance by others. However, it is likely to be the opposite in cases of individuals with lower levels of self-esteem who are often highly conscious of themselves and have a tendency for negative self-appraisal making them prone to appearance-based anxiety. Adults with higher levels of appearance anxiety are prone to face struggles in their academics, work environment and as well as in their personal lives along with their mental and emotional well-being (Esponja, J.C.P., Tulud, D.M., et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the significant p-value ( $<0.001$ ) guarantees that the obtained result is unlikely to have occurred by chance providing robust support for Hypothesis 1.

To study the gender differences in self-esteem and social appearance anxiety, two independent t-tests were applied. These tests compared mean scores for both variables across genders. It was observed in the self-esteem, there was no significant difference between the mean scores of both male and female participants (females: mean = 26.54, SD = 5.24, males: mean = 28.31, SD = 6.18) along with  $t(65) = |1.21|$  at critical value 0.232.

Although the data showed that males score marginally higher in self-esteem, the difference did not show a statistical significance. This may reflect shifting cultural norms and increasing awareness around gender equality and self-acceptance among youth. Likewise in social appearance anxiety, female participants reported (mean = 31.56, SD = 10.67) a bit higher levels of anxiety at social occasions than male participants which was reported (mean = 27.50, SD= 10.0). Yet this difference failed to reach statistical significance with  $t(65) = 1.58$ , p-value at 0.120. However, this study aligns with previous literature (e.g, Charania and Krishnaveti, 2021) often found that women are more affected by the pressure of outer appearance due to society and cultural expectations as well as beauty and femininity standards. The study done by Zoe Brown & Marika Tiggemann (2016), proposed that celebrity images and peer images encourage negative mood and body dissatisfaction among females. The absence of a statistically significant difference in their study suggests that gender-based disparities exist in appearance anxiety may be less noticeable in contemporary contexts, due to evolving gender norms and increased scrutiny on male appearance in social and media landscapes.

While the correlation between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety was both statistically and theoretically significant, the lack of gender disparity requires further reflection. A possible explanation for non-significant gender differences could be the homogeneity of the sample in regard to educational background and socio-cultural exposure as most participants were undergraduate students. Moreover, the observations raise concerns for mental health practices and preventive interventions as negative correlation between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety was noted. This is evident that strategies aimed at enhancing self-esteem could be effective in mitigating distress associated with physical self-presentation. Though gender differences were not statistically significant the trends observed till now suggest, females may remain slightly more vulnerable to social appearance anxiety. Consequently, gender-sensitive approaches should not be disregarded as they face idealized beauty standards even in digital spaces as, individual starts to make and manage their best online self-version causing them a serious social media addiction as a side-effect (Boursier, V., Gioia, F., & Griffiths, M. D., 2020). Schools and colleges could benefit youth from their mental health programs by incorporating body acceptance workshops, self-compassion training and cognitive restructuring techniques to cope up with negative appearance-related beliefs. These efforts are highly impactful in preventing the development of any severe psychological outcomes (e.g, body dysmorphic disorder, depression, or social phobia).

### CONCLUSION AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the present study contributes valuable insights into the interplay between self-esteem and appearance anxiety, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the cross-sectional design of the study limits causal inferences as it remains unclear whether low self-esteem leads to heightened social appearance anxiety or vice versa. Longitudinal studies could offer a clearer picture of how these variables influence each other over time. Secondly, the sample size, though sufficient to detect moderate effects, may have limited power to detect subtle gender differences. Expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of participants in terms of socio-economic background, cultural identity, and geographic location would enhance generalizability.

Moreover, future studies could incorporate additional psychological variables such as media consumption, peer influence, and emotion regulation strategies, which have been shown to mediate or moderate the relationship between self-esteem and appearance anxiety. Qualitative approaches could also provide richer insight into the lived experiences behind the numerical data.

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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:** Upadhyay, S. & Sinha, S. (2026). Social Appearance Anxiety and Self-Esteem in Young Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(3), 1876-1883. DIP:18.01.170.20261403, DOI:10.25215/1403.170