

## Impact of Social Appearance Anxiety on Interpersonal Communication Skills among Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

*Social appearance anxiety is a psychological phenomenon that can negatively impact an individual's social interactions and communication skills. The present study investigated the impact of social appearance anxiety on interpersonal communication skills in young adults from India. This research aimed to investigate gender differences in social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills, in addition to assessing if social appearance anxiety is a significant predictor of these skills. The study involved 202 young adults, with an equal distribution of males and females. The results showed a moderate level of social appearance anxiety within the group, marked by a significant range in scores. Similarly, interpersonal communication skills showed a moderate average level with noticeable variation. No significant gender differences were observed in social appearance anxiety or interpersonal communication skills. Furthermore, the study identified a notable, moderately negative correlation between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills. This suggests that participants with higher social appearance anxiety generally exhibited lower proficiency in interpersonal communication. The study acknowledges limitations, including the inability to establish causal relationships due to the correlational design and potential biases in self-report measures. The findings may have limited generalizability beyond the specific cultural context and sample size. To enhance knowledge in this area, future research should explore underlying mechanisms, employ diverse research designs, incorporate multiple assessment methods, include larger and more diverse samples, and consider other relevant factors that may influence the relationship between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills.*

**Keywords:** social appearance anxiety, interpersonal communication skills, young adults

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### INTRODUCTION

Social appearance anxiety (SAA) refers to the anxiety individuals experience when they believe they cannot make a positive impression on others (Leary & Kowalski, 1997). It encompasses the emotional distress related to their physical image and arises during evaluations of their physical appearance by others (Çinar & Keskin, 2015). This form of anxiety has detrimental effects on social interactions, academic performance, and professional endeavors (Dindar & Akbulut, 2015). It goes beyond physical attributes alone and includes individuals' thoughts and perceptions about their bodies, such as skin color, face shape,

blushing, and embarrassment (Hart et al., 2008; Kara, 2016). Social appearance anxiety is associated with negative body image, social anxiety, and emotional problems like depression and anxiety (Claes et al., 2012). It can be outwardly apparent as visible anxiety and tension, perceptible to others (Hart, 1989).

### Social Appearance Anxiety and Young Adults

Social appearance anxiety can have detrimental effects on young adults' psychological well-being, social functioning, and academic/occupational performance. Studies have found a link between social appearance anxiety and decreased

psychological well-being (Hrabosky et al., 2017), including higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress, as well as impaired social functioning (Brown et al., 2018) and social withdrawal (Claes et al., 2012). It is often accompanied by body dissatisfaction (Weingarden et al., 2016), which can lead to unhealthy behaviors. Social appearance anxiety can also impact academic and occupational functioning, including decreased performance and difficulties in professional settings.

### **Interpersonal Communication Skills and Social Appearance Anxiety**

Studies indicate that the way young adults communicate interpersonally significantly influences their self-perception and behavior regarding appearance in social contexts. Negative interpersonal interactions, such as teasing or criticism, can contribute to body dissatisfaction and negative self-perceptions of appearance (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Conversely, young adults with high levels of interpersonal competence, including effective communication skills, are less likely to experience body image concerns and dissatisfaction (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1993). However, social appearance anxiety can hinder interpersonal communication skills, leading to difficulties in social interactions and relationships (Brown & Dittmar, 2005). Addressing social appearance anxiety is crucial for promoting healthy communication and social interactions among young adults. Moreover, positive feedback about appearance can influence interpersonal behaviors positively. Young adults who receive positive feedback about their appearance are more likely to engage in positive interpersonal communication behaviors, such as being friendly and sociable (Fardouly et al., 2019).

### **Rationale of the Present Study**

This research examines how social appearance anxiety impacts interpersonal communication skills in young adults, filling an important gap in the existing body of knowledge on this subject. It focuses on how concerns about physical appearance impact

young adults' communication abilities. The significance of this topic lies in understanding how social appearance anxiety affects individuals' ability to communicate effectively with others. Considering the prevalence of body image issues in this age group, the study delves into the specific influence of social appearance anxiety on these skills, also examining potential gender differences. This research, thus aims to provide new insights into the challenges posed by social appearance anxiety during a vital phase of social and personal development.

### **Objectives**

1. To evaluate the extent of social appearance anxiety and the level of interpersonal communication in young adults.
2. To explore the differences between genders in terms of social appearance anxiety and communication skills in young adults.
3. To understand how social appearance anxiety influences interpersonal communication abilities among young adults.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

The study was focused on young adults residing in India, and non-random sampling techniques such as purposive and convenience sampling were employed to collect the necessary data. The sample consisted of 202 young adults, all falling in the age group of 18-26 years (Table 1). Out of the total sample, 101 participants were females, 100 were males, and one participant opted not to disclose their gender.

**Table 1***Demographics and sample characteristics (N=202)*

Description		N	%
Gender	Male	100	49.50%
	Female	101	50.00%
	Prefer not to say	1	0.50%
Age (in years)	18-20	34	16.83%
	21-23	88	43.56%
	24-26	80	39.60%

**Design**

In this quantitative study, a correlational design was utilized to explore how social appearance anxiety relates to interpersonal communication skills. This approach enabled the investigation of the degree to which concerns about physical appearance and the fear of being negatively judged by others impact effective communication in social settings. Participants were asked to complete measures related to their level of social appearance anxiety, as well as their interpersonal communication skills. This information was then analyzed using statistical methods to determine whether significant relationships existed between these two constructs. The correlational research design allowed the researchers to identify patterns of association between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills without manipulating any variables. Instead, the focus was on examining the relationships that already exist between these constructs.

Overall, the study aimed to shed light on the ways in which social appearance anxiety may impact individuals' ability to communicate with others, and to identify potential areas for intervention or support. By using a correlational research design, the study was able to provide valuable insights into these important issues.

**Tools Used**

The two scales used in this research to measure our variables of interest are

discussed below –

**Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS)**

Created by Hart et al. (2008), this scale includes 16 questions on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." It's designed to measure social appearance anxiety in adolescents, with scores ranging from 16 to 80, where higher scores indicate greater anxiety. This scale has demonstrated reliability and validity, shown through its correlation with the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (.82) and the Beck Depression Inventory (.52). It also shows strong Cronbach's Alpha scores (.94, .95, .94) across different samples, and test-retest reliability of .84.

**Interpersonal Communication Inventory (ICI)**

Developed by Millard J. Bienvenu, the ICI is a versatile 40-item tool designed to evaluate general communication tendencies in various social interactions. It's not just for measuring communication content, but rather for identifying communication patterns, characteristics, and styles. The ICI finds utility in multiple contexts, such as counseling, teaching, interviewing, management, and research. Aimed at high school-aged individuals and older, it can be adapted for any gender or marital status, covering areas like self-concept, listening skills, expression clarity, handling anger, and self-disclosure.

### **Ethical Guidelines**

The study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of the information provided and its use solely for research purposes, both through the questionnaire introduction and direct phone calls. Individual data reports were not to be shared, except for the final results based on the entire set of data collected for the study. It was also emphasized that the collected data would remain anonymous and participants would have complete freedom to withdraw from the study at any time before submitting the report, without giving any reason. Prior to answering the questionnaire, participants were required to provide their consent by checking the compulsory checkboxes in the Google form. By doing so, they acknowledged having read all the information about the study and being notified that the information provided would be confidential and anonymous, and might be used for publications or reports in an anonymized form. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw voluntarily at any time before submitting the survey form, and that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

### **Procedure**

To better comprehend the influence of social appearance anxiety on the interpersonal communication abilities of young adults, a range of articles focusing on these two topics was thoroughly reviewed. Another round of literature review was done related to these variables and a list of possible tools and scales was created. A number of scales were compiled for each of the variables. The psychometric properties and norms of these scales along with their suitability for the present study were gauged.

The data collection process for the study utilized Google Forms, a popular online platform that allows users to create custom forms and surveys. In order to ensure that participants were fully informed about the study objectives and ethical considerations, a brief explanation was included at the

beginning of the Google Form. This provided participants with an overview of what the study aimed to accomplish and assured them that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected. The questionnaire, consent and ethical guidelines, and demographic sheet were all designed using Google Forms as well. The questionnaire was crafted to obtain information on specific variables relevant to the study objectives, while the consent and ethical guidelines were developed to ensure that participants were aware of their rights and responsibilities as study participants. The demographic sheet included basic information such as name, gender, age, and contact details, but it was made clear that participants could choose to withhold their name if they preferred.

Once the forms were ready, they were shared with the participants via email or WhatsApp, with clear instructions on how to fill them out. Adequate time was provided for participants to fill out the forms, and any queries they had were promptly addressed, ensuring they were well-informed and comfortable throughout the process.

All the collected data, including demographic information, was coded appropriately to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The data was then imported into a statistical software package, SPSS version 25, for further analysis. Using appropriate statistical techniques, the data was analyzed to test the research objectives and draw conclusions from the findings. Overall, the use of Google Forms proved to be an effective and convenient tool for data collection in this study.

### **Statistical Analysis**

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the potential impact of social appearance anxiety on interpersonal communication skills. To achieve this goal, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to provide a summary of the data, while mean and standard deviations were calculated from the raw scores (Table

2). Independent t-tests were performed to determine whether significant mean differences existed between the two groups (Table 3 and Table 4). Finally, the Pearson product-moment correlation method was utilized to explore the relationship between the variables of social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills (Table 5). These analyses were conducted to gain insight into the potential impact of social appearance anxiety on interpersonal communication skills and to identify possible areas for future research in this domain.

## RESULTS

This study is focused on exploring the association between social appearance anxiety (SAA) and interpersonal communication skills (ICS) in a group of 202 participants. Descriptive analyses provide insights into the mean scores and variability of SAA and ICS within the sample (see table 2). Group comparisons explore potential gender differences in SAA and ICS, while correlation analysis assesses the nature and strength of their relationship (see table 5).

**Table 2**

*Summary of Descriptive Statistics (N=202)*

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Social Appearance Anxiety (SAA)	33.55	14.34
Interpersonal Communication Skills	75.72	15.78

Table 2 represents the mean and standard deviation scores of social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills of 202 samples. Social appearance anxiety (SAA) has a mean score of 33.55 indicating the average level of anxiety related to social appearance among the sample. The standard deviation of 14.34 suggests that the scores for SAA vary significantly within the sample, with individual scores deviating from the

mean by approximately 14.34 units on average. Interpersonal Skills (ICS) has a mean score 75.72, representing the average level of interpersonal communication skills within the sample. The standard deviation of 15.78 indicates that there is notable variability in the ICS scores within the sample, with individual scores deviating from the mean by approximately 15.78 units on average.

**Table 3**

*Showing mean, standard deviation (SD,) t-significant value for two groups on the measure of social appearance anxiety (SAA)*

Group Statistics						
Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Male	100	32.24	12.89	-1.3	199	0.18
Female	101	34.92	15.65	2		

Table 3 represents the t-test conducted to compare the means of females and males on the measure of social appearance anxiety (SAA). The findings revealed no significant statistical differences between male and female participants. The t-value was -1.32, and the degrees of freedom (df) were 199.

The p-value associated with the t-test was 0.18, which was greater than the predetermined significance level of 0.05. Therefore, no significant difference was found between males and females in terms of social appearance anxiety ( $P > 0.05$ ).

#### Table 4

Showing mean, standard deviation (SD), t-significant value for two groups on the measure of interpersonal communication skills (ICS)

Group Statistics						
Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)
Male	100	74.71	15.23	-0.91	199	0.35
Female	101	76.76	16.40			

Table 4 represents the t-test conducted to compare the means of females and males on the measure of interpersonal communication skills (ICS). The findings revealed no significant statistical differences between

male and female participants ( $p > 0.05$ ). The t-value was -0.91, and the degrees of freedom (df) were 199. The p-value associated with the t-test was 0.35, which was greater than the predetermined significance level of 0.05.

#### Table 5

Correlation between social appearance anxiety (SAA) and interpersonal communication skills

(ICS) (N=202)

	SAA	ICS
Social Appearance Anxiety (SAA)	1	-0.454**
Interpersonal Communication Skills (ICS)	-0.454**	1

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

Table 5 displays a correlation matrix depicting the relationship between Social

Appearance Anxiety (SAA) and Interpersonal Communication Skills (ICS). The correlation coefficient between SAA and ICS was calculated to be -0.454, indicating a moderate negative correlation. The negative sign suggests that as SAA increases, ICS tends to decrease. The significance level of this correlation was determined to be 0.01, denoted by the double asterisks (\*\*), indicating statistical significance. This finding implies that the observed correlation is unlikely to be a result of chance and

represents a meaningful relationship between SAA and ICS. Thus, the correlation matrix provides evidence of a significant, moderate negative correlation between SAA and ICS.

#### DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the potential influence of social appearance anxiety on the interpersonal communication skills exhibited by young adults. Social appearance anxiety, characterized by apprehension and distress regarding how one's physical appearance is perceived and judged by others in social settings, involves an excessive preoccupation with one's own appearance, self-evaluation

that leans toward negativity based on physical attributes, and a belief that others are inclined to evaluate and criticize one's appearance unfavorably. Previous literature provides evidence for the negative association between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills. For example, Fardouly et al. (2017) found that individuals with elevated levels of appearance-related social anxiety reported poorer interpersonal communication skills, including difficulties in initiating conversations, maintaining eye contact, and expressing opinions. Similarly, Pickett et al. (2013) found that social anxiety, including social appearance anxiety, was negatively related to social skills and communication abilities. Kim and Lee (2018) found that social anxiety was negatively correlated with communication competence among Korean college students. Other studies have also linked social anxiety to decreased communication skills (Gable et al., 2012; Spokas et al., 2009).

The study's outcomes aligned with the hypothesis, showing a negative correlation between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills in young adults. Essentially, elevated levels of social appearance anxiety were linked to reduced communication skills, a finding that is consistent with prior research. Additionally, the study investigated if there were any differences in social appearance anxiety and communication skills between genders. Contrary to prior research indicating that females tend to experience elevated levels of social anxiety compared to males (Hofmann & Bitran, 2007; McLean & Anderson, 2009), the current study did not find significant gender differences in social appearance anxiety. While the study provided insights into the correlation between social appearance anxiety and communication skills, it did not delve into the specific factors causing this anxiety in both males and females. Consequently, there may be additional gender-related differences related to social

appearance anxiety that this study did not address.

Regarding gender differences in interpersonal communication skills, the current study did not provide a clear analysis. However, previous research has suggested that women tend to have more effective communication skills than men (Wood, 2015). Additional research is required to thoroughly investigate how gender influences social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills.

In conclusion, this study reinforces existing research that highlights a negative correlation between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills in young adults. It contributes to the body of knowledge by focusing specifically on how social appearance anxiety impacts these communication skills. Additionally, the research underscores the necessity for further exploration into how these dynamics vary between genders and other influencing factors.

### **Limitations**

Overall, while this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills, there are certain limitations that need to be considered. These include the lack of a comprehensive analysis of gender differences in interpersonal communication skills, the absence of a detailed exploration of the factors contributing to social appearance anxiety in males and females, and the potential influence of other variables on interpersonal communication skills. Additionally, the study did not address the bi-directional nature of the relationship and had a relatively small sample size consisting primarily of college students. The reliance on self-report measures may also introduce response biases. These limitations highlight the need for further research to expand our understanding of this topic.

### Future Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for research, practice, and policy, providing opportunities for interventions and strategies to address social appearance anxiety and improve interpersonal communication skills. Future research should focus on exploring the underlying mechanisms and mediators of the relationship, such as self-esteem and social support, to develop more targeted interventions. Interventions should incorporate evidence-based strategies like cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) to challenge negative thoughts and enhance communication skills. Educational institutions can implement social-emotional learning programs to foster healthy communication practices among students. Employers can create inclusive work environments and provide training to enhance employees' communication abilities. Policymakers should integrate social-emotional learning into curricula and support initiatives promoting body positivity and media literacy. Additional research is needed to understand gender differences and develop tailored interventions. By addressing these areas, we can improve communication outcomes, support individuals with social appearance anxiety, and foster a more inclusive society.

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, this study revealed a negative link between social appearance anxiety and interpersonal communication skills in young adults, finding that higher social appearance anxiety is linked to weaker communication skills. It suggests that issues like heightened self-awareness, negative self-assessment, and the fear of others' judgments might drive this association. The research did not, however, delve into potential gender differences in these aspects.

The correlational design and self-report measures used in the study limit the ability to establish causality. Future research should investigate gender differences and consider other factors like self-esteem and cultural

influences. These findings underscore the need to address social appearance anxiety as a barrier to effective communication. By developing interventions and strategies that target this issue, people with social appearance anxiety can improve their communication skills and overall well-being.

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