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Rejection Sensitivity and Experiential Avoidance: Upcoming Psychosocial Correlates among Emerging Adults with Social Anxiety

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Abstract

Recent trends have consistently highlighted the associations among rejection sensitivity, experiential avoidance, and social anxiety among emerging adults, however, there is a paucity of literature that highlights the combined role of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance on social anxiety. The present study aims to bridge this gap by determining the predictive value of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance towards social anxiety among emerging adults. Hence, an ex-post facto research design was chosen wherein 195 university students were selected for the assessment of the study variables using the Social Phobia Inventory, Adult-Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, and Acceptance and Action Questionnaire. The results indicated that rejection sensitivity was found to predict 12%, experiential avoidance predicted 16%, and taken together they predicted 28% of variance in social anxiety among the emerging adults. Moreover, the correlation statistics found rejection sensitivity ($r=0.29$, $p<.001$) and experiential avoidance ($r=0.47$, $p<.001$) to be significantly associated with social anxiety. These findings have utility for mental health professionals during the intervention in clinical and counselling setups.

Keywords: rejection sensitivity, experiential avoidance, social anxiety, mental health, multiple regression analysis

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INTRODUCTION

“I have strong people-pleasing tendencies....” Social anxiety has been described as an intense surge of fear or anxiety about interpersonal interactions with others that is out of proportion to real threats that cause paramount personal distress to individuals who experience it, such that they engage in avoidance strategies to prevent any unfavourable negative judgments (Wells, 1997). A vast body of research has shown its strong presence among university students in today’s competitive era (Jaiswal et al., 2020; Manjunatha et al., 2022), especially the most commonly reported is fear of public speaking (Menezes, 2011). Research has consistently focused on the possible debilitating effects of social anxiety among emerging adults such as poor personal, social, and academic life (Ahmad, 2017) leading to dropouts and other comorbid conditions like depression, substance dependence, and even suicide (Menezes, 2011). These emerging adults are generally perceived as the backbone of a nation. Since they play a pivotal role in building a nation and the world at large, it

becomes imperative to focus on their positive mental health.

Contemporary research in the area of social anxiety is now playing with the idea of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance as its potential precipitants. Rejection in every sense is a highly undesirable consequence for all human beings in general. Maslow, (1974) was the first psychologist to highlight the need for interpersonal relationships as one of the core deficiency needs of human beings. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why human beings are termed social animals. Thus, if humans receive rejection from others, it could be seen as foiling their basic needs. This has been consistently seen as a breeding ground for psychopathology.

Rejection Sensitivity is the socio-cognitive vulnerability of an individual to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and display a heightened reaction to rejection in a social situation (Downey & Feldman, 1996). A longitudinal study discovered how individuals with rejection sensitivity eventually grew to develop social

anxiety (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2021). anxiety possibly mediated the effect of rejection sensitivity on depression among Japanese outpatients (Noda et al., 2022). Additionally, rejection sensitivity was further extended to the concept of a defense motivation system, that entailed avoidance or angry outburst in situations involving interpersonal interactions where rejection was a possibility (Downey et al., 2004; &Kross et al., 2007). In the context of experiential avoidance, the present body of literature emphasizes its prominent role in the development of social anxiety (Kashdan et al., 2014; Epkins, 2016; Shimoda et al., 2018; Cheng et al., 2021). Experiential avoidance, the unwillingness of an individual to stay in touch with aversive private experiences, could be in the form of physiological sensations, thoughts, emotions, memories, or even behavioural predispositions (Hayes et al., 1996). To deal with these unwanted events, individuals generally resort to actions that could modify such unpleasant experiences such as avoidance coping, and emotional and thought suppression, to name a few. This inhibits the healthy processing of emotions that resultantly lead to various forms of psychopathology (Penley et al., 2002; Gross & John, 2003). Furthermore, Asher et al., (2021)

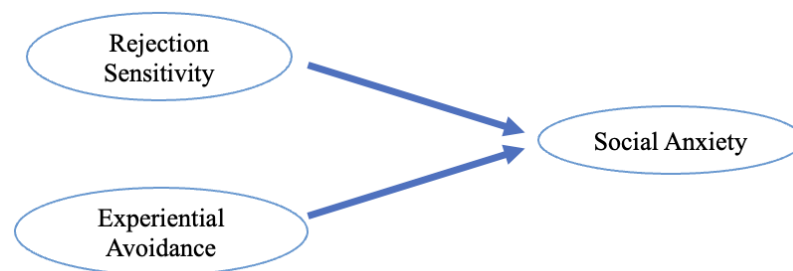
Moreover, findings showed how social have found an interdependent link between experiential avoidance and social anxiety with change in the former having a stronger effect on the latter. Nevertheless, the lack of understanding regarding the joint contribution of rejection and experiential avoidance on social anxiety among emerging adults still remains untapped.

Aim and hypothesis of the study

More than a decade of research has pointed to the uncontrollable and pathological anxiety that students encounter in a social space. Reflecting on the contemporary trends in the research and the alarming prevalence of social anxiety in the university population, it was deemed important to understand the cohesive effects of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance on the development of social anxiety among emerging adults, since this aspect was lacking in the literature. Hence the current research is an attempt to address the gap by proposing a conceptual framework of social anxiety that aims to understand the joint role of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance in augmenting social anxiety among emerging youth as it would hamper their well-being (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The figure illustrates a conceptual framework of social anxiety in which rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance can be considered joint contributors to augmenting social anxiety.



Objectives

1. To measure the levels of rejection sensitivity, experiential avoidance, and social anxiety among emerging adults.
2. To form an association of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance with social anxiety among emerging adults.
3. To determine the predictive value of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance towards social anxiety among emerging adults.

Hypotheses

1. Rejection Sensitivity and Experiential avoidance would be positively associated with social anxiety among emerging adults.
2. Rejection Sensitivity and Experiential avoidance would surface as predictors of social anxiety among emerging adults.

METHOD

Participants

The target population of the current study was emerging adults (university students) who are in the age range of 17 to 25 years. The participants came from joint and nuclear families and belonged to three private universities in the urban area of the Delhi NCR region. A sample size of 195 students was taken using a purposive sampling technique as the study intended to examine the said variables specifically in students with social anxiety.

Measures

Social Phobia Inventory (Connor et al., 2000)

This 17-item, self-rated, 5-point (0= not at all, 1= a little bit, 2= somewhat, 3= very much, 4= extremely) scale was developed for screening and assessing the severity of social anxiety in the non-clinical population. It takes into account the core features of social anxiety such as fear, avoidance, and physiological arousal making it apt for clinical and research purposes. The scale was found to be psychometrically sound with internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) at 0.9 (0.87-0.94).

Rejection Sensitivity Adult Questionnaire (Berenson et al., 2009)

This 18-item, situation-based, self-reported scale purports to measure the anticipatory anxiety of the individual along with concern for rejection in a social situation. The 6-pointer likert scale (1= very unconcerned/very unlikely to 6= very concerned/very likely) assesses the individual's perception regarding the concern and likelihood towards different situations involving the possibility of rejection. This scale has reasonable psychometric properties with internal consistency (alpha) at 0.81.

To analyze the responses from the data collection phase, descriptive statistics were used, wherein mean and standard deviation for every study variable were computed. This was followed by linear correlation using Pearson's correlation method. Once the correlation was found to be significant

Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (Bond et al., 2011)

AAQ-II intends to measure the experiential avoidance in an individual which is mainly the extent to which an individual would engage in avoidance-based strategies to disengage themselves from the internal and unwanted thoughts and emotions that are related to the social situation. It is 7 items, self-report, 7-point likert scale (1=never true, 2=very seldom true, 3=seldom true, 4=sometimes true, 5=frequently true, 6=almost always true, 7=always true). This scale reflects sound psychometric properties with an internal consistency (alpha) of 0.84.

Procedure

The present study received its approval from the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee of CHRIST (Deemed to be University) as it was a part of the doctoral research. University students from different specializations were contacted and only those who consented were part of the present research. The students were randomly divided into a group of 15-20 students and the standardized tools that were selected for the present study were administered to them. Moreover, on the basis of requirements, assistance related to mental health care was also provided to participants. In this manner, 200 participants were screened for social anxiety. Amongst them, only 195 were considered for the main analysis as the rest had response biases.

Statistical Analysis

between all the study variables, a step-wise multiple regression analysis was used to assess the predictors as hypothesized. The above-mentioned analyses were done with SPSS version 25.

RESULTS

The present study has three objectives pertinent to answering the research questions of the current study. The *initial* objective was to measure the levels of rejection sensitivity, experiential avoidance, and social anxiety among emerging adults. To satisfy this objective,

descriptive statistics like mean and standard deviation were used. The levels of each variable in the sample were further categorized as high, moderate, and low. This demarcation was done based on the mean and standard deviation of each study variable (Table 1).

Table 1

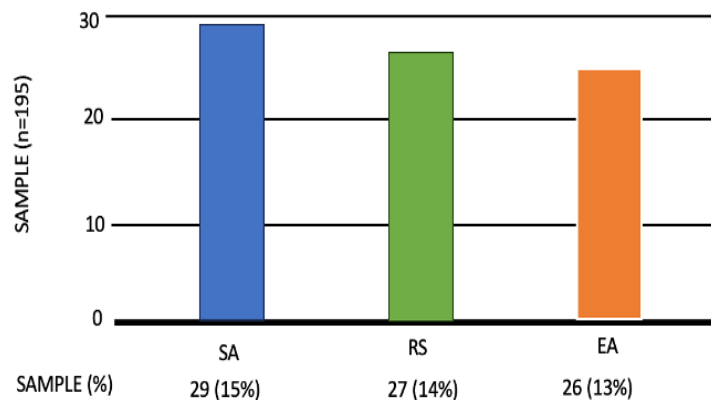
A comprehensive summary of descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and correlations between the study variables rejection sensitivity-social anxiety and experiential avoidance-social anxiety among the emerging adults (N= 195)

Variable	Mean (SD)	SA
Rejection Sensitivity (RS)	10.70 (3.80)	0.29***
Experiential Avoidance (EA)	30.20 (9.50)	0.47***
Social Anxiety (SA)	34.60 (10.40)	1.00

Note. Rejection Sensitivity (RS), Experiential Avoidance (EA), and Social Anxiety (SA) are significant at *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed)

Figure 2 (a)

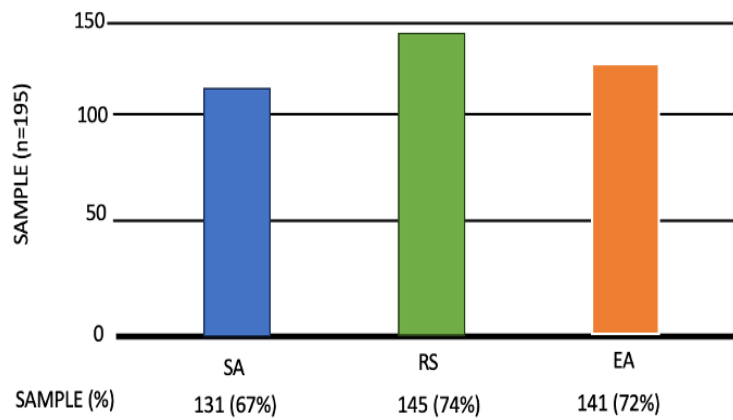
Bar graph depicting sample distribution of high levels of Social Anxiety, Rejection Sensitivity, and Experiential Avoidance among emerging adults



Note. SA= Social Anxiety, RS=Rejection Sensitivity, and EA= Experiential Avoidance

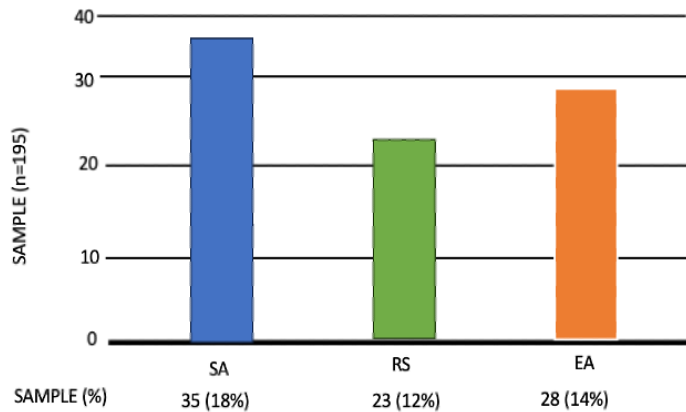
Figure 2 (b)

Bar graph depicting sample distribution of moderate levels of Social Anxiety, Rejection Sensitivity, and Experiential Avoidance among emerging adults



Note. SA= Social Anxiety, RS=Rejection Sensitivity, and EA= Experiential Avoidance
Figure 2(c)

Bar graph depicting sample distribution of moderate levels of Social Anxiety, Rejection Sensitivity, and Experiential Avoidance among emerging adults



Note. SA= Social Anxiety, RS=Rejection Sensitivity, and EA= Experiential Avoidance

Accordingly, (see Table 1), the mean score obtained in the present sample on rejection sensitivity is 10.70 (SD = 3.80), the score on experiential avoidance is 30.20 (SD = 9.50), and on social anxiety, it is 34.60 (SD = 10.40). Thus, the descriptive data outline that the major portion of the participants has moderate levels of rejection sensitivity (74%), experiential avoidance (72%), and social anxiety (67%) in the present sample of emerging adults (Figure, 2b). This share is then followed by similar portions of high (Figure, 2a) and low (Figure 2c) levels of rejection sensitivity (14% and 12% respectively), experiential avoidance (13% and 14% respectively), and social anxiety (15% and 18% respectively) in the sample.

The *second* objective was to form an association between rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance with social anxiety among

emerging adults. As shown in table 1, rejection sensitivity and social anxiety exhibit a weak, yet significant positive correlation between them which is .293 ($p < .001$). Moreover, it can be noticed that experiential avoidance and social anxiety share a stronger positive correlation between them which is significant at .466 ($p < .001$). Thus, it can be established that higher levels of rejection sensitivity among students would also lead to a high intensity of social anxiety within them and vice versa. Further, a higher degree of avoidance would more firmly establish an increased severity of social anxiety within them and vice versa. Hence, based on the results from table 1, our *first hypothesis is accepted that rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance would be positively correlated with social anxiety.*

Inferential analysis

Moving on, the *last* objective of the current study was to establish a more accurate conclusion that could answer the second research question regarding the predictability of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance on social

anxiety among emerging adults. To answer this query, the final objective was formed which was to determine the predictive value of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance of social anxiety among emerging adults.

Table 2

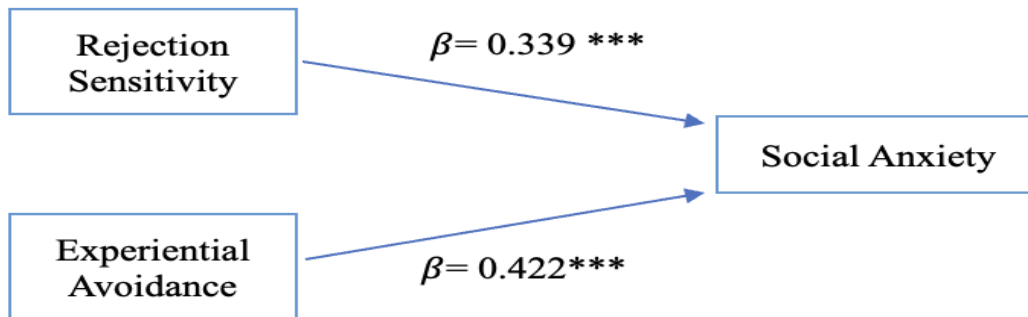
A comprehensive summary of step-wise multiple regression analysis for emerging adults, wherein rejection sensitivity is the first predictor in model 1 and experiential avoidance is entered as the second predictor in model 2 for criterion social anxiety (N = 195)

Variable	a constant	RS		EA		R ²	F for R ²	R ² Δ	F for R ² Δ
		b	β	b	β				
Rejection Sensitivity	24.7	0.924	0.339	-	-	0.12	25	-	-
Experiential Avoidance	13.58	0.661	0.242	0.461	0.422	0.28	38	0.16	45.2

Note. RS = Rejection Sensitivity, EA = Experiential Avoidance, b = unstandardized beta which represents the slope between the predictor and criterion, β = standardized beta, R² = indicates the percentage of variance on the criterion variable, R²Δ = adjusted R² value of the predictor

Figure 3

Statistical model depicting the amount of variance of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance on social anxiety among emerging adults



Note.

is the standardized regression coefficient which is significant at ***p<.001 (one-tailed)

As we can see from Table 2, rejection sensitivity has emerged as a significant predictor (β = 0.339) as it influences 12% of change towards the development of social anxiety among emerging adults. Similarly, experiential avoidance significantly (β = 0.422) contributes 16% of change toward the development of social anxiety

in the present sample. Moreover, rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance taken together surface as more significant and stronger predictors that contribute 28% towards the development of social anxiety (table 2). The trend suggests that both rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance taken together would serve as a stronger ground for developing social anxiety than taken individually among emerging adults

(figure 3). Thus, the regression analysis provide support for accepting the second hypothesis of the sensitivity and experiential avoidance would

surface as predictors of social anxiety among emerging adults. present study stating that rejection

DISCUSSION

“Nobody realizes that some people spend tremendous energy merely to be normal”

-Albert Camus

The above-mentioned quote by Albert Camus depicts the sad reality of the young generation today. Social anxiety has spread its roots in young minds to such an extent that it is drawing away their true potential and capabilities. Emerging adults with social anxiety spend most of their time and energy meeting their thwarted need for belongingness, however, their efforts remain in vain. This causes hindrance in their personal, social, and academic growth as it converges their focus in an unproductive direction.

The present study was initiated with an attempt to explore the levels of social anxiety in the selected sample of emerging adults. The descriptive analyses revealed moderate levels of social anxiety in the majority of the sample which conflicted with a study conducted on undergraduate students in India that found a prevalence of mild levels of social anxiety among the students (Mascarenhas et al., 2019). However, the data of the present study finds its support in recent research conducted by Dsouza et. al. (2022), where they had similar findings of moderate levels of social anxiety among undergraduate students. This could be attributed to a sudden surge of deterioration in mental health, especially social anxiety during the post-pandemic period (Kindred, & Bates, 2023).

Furthermore, the present research strived to confirm the links between rejection sensitivity, experiential avoidance, and social anxiety among emerging adults as consistently reported in the literature, as a part of its second objective. The findings of the current study provide confirmation of these associations. These findings provide support for recent studies done on Australian and Chinese undergraduate students wherein rejection sensitivity among students was found to be associated with social anxiety in them (Zimmer-

Gembeck et al., 2021; Lin and Fan 2023). The data of the present research is also aligned with the findings of another study in which experiential avoidance was found as a risk factor that propelled the development and maintenance of social anxiety among students (Kashdan et al., 2014; Shimoda et. al., 2018). Additionally, it also highlights the fact that the impact of rejection sensitivity on social anxiety among emerging adults is consistent across different cultures.

Through its last objective, the conceptual framework addressed the understanding of the combined contribution of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance on social anxiety among emerging adults (see figure 1). Based on the step-wise multiple regression analysis of the current research, rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance taken together were found to have a significantly greater role in predicting the development of social anxiety among emerging adults than considered separately. This could also be due to the fact that the concerns or expectations regarding the rejection by others may be diluted if the element of intentionally disengaging from the unwanted aversive experiences are absent. Thus, apart from automatically expecting rejection from others, the habitual attempt to willingly avoid the anxiety-provoking situation (whether in terms of thought suppression or behavioural avoidance) is an important contributing factor towards the development and maintenance of social anxiety. Hence, this strengthens the proposed conceptual framework that rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance indeed play a very significant role in the development of social anxiety in emerging adults.

Conclusion

The current study was an attempt to address the existing gap in the literature regarding the combined impacts of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance on the development of social

anxiety in emerging adults. The findings of the present study reveal that social anxiety is augmented by combined influences of rejection sensitivity and experiential avoidance among emerging adults. These

findings can be utilized in clinical and counselling setups as it gives mental health professionals more crucial areas to intervene in during their training programs, especially for youth with social anxiety. Apart from treating the active cases, these findings can be utilized in preventive care as well.

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