



Fear of Negative Evaluation and Social Appearance Anxiety Among University Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

June 01, 2026

Revision Received:

June, 2026

Accepted:

July 03, 2026

Available Online:

July 18, 2026

Keywords:

Fear of Negative Evaluation,
Social Appearance Anxiety,
Social Media Self-
Presentation, University
Students, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Fear of negative evaluation and social appearance anxiety are increasingly relevant psychological constructs in the digital age, particularly among university students who actively engage in online self-presentation. The present study examined the relationship among fear of negative evaluation, social appearance anxiety among university students. A cross-sectional correlational design was used and a sample of 605 university students (175 males, 430 females) age ranging from 16–33 years, recruited from public and private sector universities in Pakistan. The results indicated that heightened fear of negative evaluation is associated with greater social media self-presentation anxiety among university students in Pakistani cultural context. No significant gender differences were found in relation to study variables. The findings highlight the need to develop psychological interventions and awareness programs for university students aimed to promote positive self-image. Future researches should explore some additional psychological and contextual factors that may contribute to social appearance anxiety.

1. Introduction

Social media has become an essential aspect of university students' everyday lives, opening up new spaces for self-presentation and social assessment. Two psychological concepts that are especially pertinent to comprehending how students manage their online identities in this digital environment are fear of negative evaluation (FNE) and social media self-presentation anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation was defined by Watson and Friend (1969) as the fear and anxiety brought on by the possibility of being negatively judged by others, including the deliberate avoidance of social situations that require evaluation. It particularly

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captures the cognitive and affective reaction to expected criticism, rejection, or disapproval, whereas social anxiety generally covers a variety of interpersonal issues (Leary, 1983).

Students at universities particularly susceptible to anxiety related to assessments and is also quite active on social media. The evidences suggested that peer relationships, academic evaluations, and the pressure to uphold a positive online image all combine to create circumstances where FNE may have a significant impact on how students present themselves online (Watson & Friend, 1969; Leary, 1983).

According to the researches social appearance anxiety is the discomfort and anguish people feel when they think others are judging their appearance (Hart et al., 2008). This anxiety serves as a crucial marker of self-presentation anxiety in the social media setting, where visual self-presentation is crucial. It was found through empirical findings that higher levels of fear of negative evaluation have been repeatedly associated with more controlled online self-presentation and increased social anxiety (Majeed et al., 2025; Hernawati & Putri, 2025; Riya, 2024). This relationship is especially important in the Pakistani cultural setting, where collectivist norms emphasize community reputation and family honor, and the fear of being negatively assessed may be exacerbated (Hofstede, 2001).

Few studies have examined the connection between FNE and social appearance concern in Pakistani university contexts, despite an increasing amount of research on FNE and online behaviour. In order to close this gap, the current study investigates possible gender variations in these dimensions as well as the relationship between FNE and SAAS scores in a sample of University of Gujrat students.

The current study aimed to: (1) investigate fear of negative evaluation among university students (2) determine social appearance anxiety among university students; and (3) evaluate relationship of fear of negative evaluation and social appearance anxiety. It was hypothesized that higher the fear of negative evaluation was predicted to higher levels of social appearance anxiety.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational research design was used to examine the relationship of fear of negative evaluation and social appearance anxiety.

2.2. Participants

There were 605 students from Pakistani public and private universities were selected through purposive sampling. The age range of the participants was 16–33 years old ($M = 21.14$, $SD = 1.89$). There were 430 females (71.1%) and 175 males (28.9%) in the sample. The postgraduate students ($n = 87$, 14.4%), while ($n = 518$, 85.6%) were enrolled at the undergraduate level. Two participants (0.3%) reported using social media for less than an hour a day, 91 (15.0%) reported using it for one to two hours, 251 (41.5%) reported using it for two to four hours, 149 (24.6%) reported using it for four to six hours, and 112 (18.5%) reported using it for more than six hours.

2.3. Measures

Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE; Watson & Friend, 1969). A 30-item True/False scale was used to measure how much people fear rejection, criticism, and negative social evaluation. Greater anxiety of a bad evaluation is indicated by higher overall scores. With Cronbach's alpha values ranging from roughly .90 to .94, the scale has shown good psychometric qualities in earlier studies (Watson & Friend, 1969). Internal consistency in the current sample was ($\alpha = .91$).

The Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS; Hart et al., 2008). The SAAS is a 16-item self-report tool that measures anxiety over how others perceive one's physical appearance. A total score between 16 and 80 is obtained by asking participants to rate their level of social appearance anxiety on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "not at all" and 5 representing "extremely." Strong internal consistency has been shown by the scale ($\alpha \approx .90$; Hart et al., 2008). Reliability was likewise high in the current sample ($\alpha = .90$).

2.4. Procedure

Prior to data collection, departmental permission and ethical approval were acquired. Google Forms were used to gather data online. Class communication channels and university social media groups were used to attract participants. The goal of the study was briefly explained to each participant, along with the information that participation was completely voluntary and that answers would be kept private and anonymous. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, informed consent was

electronically collected. Together with a quick demographic form, the FNE Scale and SAAS were administered. It took about fifteen to twenty minutes to administer the battery of questionnaires. The American Psychological Association's (APA) ethical guidelines were followed when conducting the study. Participants were free to stop taking part at any time without facing any repercussions. No personally identifiable information was gathered. The SAAS (Hart et al., 2008) and the FNE Scale (Watson & Friend, 1969) are both freely accessible tools for use in academic research.

2.5. Analytical Strategy

IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24) was used for data entry and analysis. For every demographic and research variable, descriptive statistics were calculated. To evaluate the internal consistency of both scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed. The bivariate link between FNE and SAAS total scores was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlations. Gender differences in FNE and SAAS scores were examined using independent-samples t-tests. The degree to which FNE predicted variance in social appearance anxiety levels was evaluated using simple linear regression analysis.

3. Results

The descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficient for the two primary research variables are shown in Table 1. The average SAAS score was 44.65 (SD = 13.37), and the average FNE score was 15.09 (SD = 2.91). FNE and SAAS scores showed a statistically significant positive connection ($r = .281$, $n = 605$, $p < .001$, two-tailed), suggesting that college students who were more afraid of being negatively evaluated also had higher levels of social appearance anxiety. By traditional standards, this effect was minor to moderate (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Social Appearance Anxiety (N = 605)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	α	n
FNE	15.09	2.91	7	24	—		.91	605
SAAS	44.65	13.37	16	80	.281**	—	.90	605

Note. FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale; SAAS = Social Appearance Anxiety Scale; α = Cronbach's alpha. ** $p < .001$.

Predictive Validity of FNE for Social Appearance Anxiety

The degree to which FNE scores predicted social appearance anxiety was evaluated using a straightforward linear regression (Table 2). The model explained 7.9% of the variance in SAAS scores ($R^2 = .079$, Adjusted $R^2 = .077$) and was statistically significant $F(1, 603) = 51.774$, $p < .001$. SAAS scores increased by 1.292 points for every unit rise in FNE score, according to the unstandardized regression coefficient ($B = 1.292$, $SE = .179$, $\beta = .281$, $p < .001$). These findings support the notion that, in this university group, social appearance anxiety is significantly, albeit modestly, predicted by fear of negative judgment.

Table 2: Simple Linear Regression: Fear of Negative Evaluation Predicting Social Appearance Anxiety

Variable	B	β	SE B	R^2 (Adjusted R^2)
Constant	25.16***	—	2.759	.079 (.077)
Fear of Negative Evaluation	1.292***	.281	.179	

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient; SE B = standard error of B. $F(1, 603) = 51.774$, $p < .001$. *** $p < .001$.

Gender Differences

The results of the independent-samples t-tests looking at gender variations in FNE and SAAS scores are shown in Table 3. FNE scores did not significantly differ between males ($M = 14.98$, $SD = 2.75$) and females ($M = 15.13$, $SD = 2.97$), $t(603) = -0.58$, $p = .56$. Similarly, there was no discernible difference in SAAS scores between males ($M = 45.59$, $SD = 12.92$) and females ($M = 44.27$, $SD = 13.53$), $t(603) = 1.10$, $p = .27$. These results imply that the levels of social appearance anxiety and fear of unfavorable judgment in this population are not significantly moderated by gender.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Fear of Negative Evaluation and Social Appearance Anxiety

Variable	Males (n = 175) M(SD)	Females (n = 430) M (SD)	t	df	p
FNE	14.98 (2.75)	15.13 (2.97)	-0.58	603	.56
SAAS	45.59 (12.92)	44.27 (13.53)	1.10	603	.27

Note. FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale; SAAS = Social Appearance Anxiety Scale. No significant gender differences were found on either variable (all $p > .05$).

4. Discussion

The current study looked at the connection between social appearance anxiety, a measure of social media self-presentation anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation among Pakistani university students who were recruited from both public and private institutions. The study found a substantial positive association between fear of negative evaluation and social appearance anxiety. These findings lend support to the idea that students who are more afraid of being negatively evaluated by others also have higher levels of anxiety regarding how their appearance is perceived in social and digital settings.

These findings are consistent with previous studies as Riya (2024) found a positive association between fear of negative evaluation and social appearance anxiety among young adults in India, whereas Majeed et al. (2025) found that fear of negative evaluation predicted online self-presentation behavior in young adults in Pakistan. The current findings broaden the evidence base to include a larger Pakistani university sample and provide quantitative support for Leary's (1983) Self-Presentation Theory and Clark and Wells' (1995) Cognitive Model of Social Anxiety. Moreover, finding of the current study suggested that FNE is a statistically significant predictor, other psychological characteristics such as self-esteem, social comparison tendencies, and social media use intensity are likely to have a considerable impact on appearance anxiety in digital environments. Hernawati and Putri (2025) discovered that FNE accounted for 12.2% of the variance in self-disclosure behavior on social media, while Chen et al. (2023) underlined the mediating function of social comparison in the link between social media use and anxiety, demonstrating the complexities of these associations.

The absence of significant gender differences in FNE or SAAS scores is an important discovery. While some previous studies suggested that females' express higher levels of social anxiety and appearance-related concerns (Ali et al., 2021; Aftab et al., 2025), the current results did not replicate this pattern. This could reflect the common social media pressures felt in both public and private sector university environments in Pakistan, where institutional and peer standards for online self-presentation are broadly identical regardless of gender. Religious boundaries may significantly impact the cultural landscape of Pakistan. Research indicates that strong religious beliefs can help individuals avoid adopting societal beauty standards by fostering self-worth based on virtues other than physical appearance (Homan and Boyatzis, 2010). Additionally, cultural and religious traditions have been found to influence attitudes towards body image and concerns related to appearance across various societies (Swami et al., 2010). These factors may create cultural protection against severe appearance-related anxiety, even in the presence of high levels of fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Future studies should explore this cultural moderating effect, as well as the potential effects of specific social media platforms and usage practices on the relationship between FNE and appearance anxiety.

5. Limitations And Future Directions

The main drawback of the current study is its cross-sectional design, which makes it impossible to draw conclusions about the direction of the link between FNE and appearance anxiety. It is impossible to determine whether FNE precedes the emergence of self-presentation anxiety or vice versa using data gathered at a single moment in time. Causal claims would be strengthened by future studies using experimental or longitudinal approaches. Convenience sampling limits the implications of the results outside of the sampled university students in the public and private sectors. To improve external validity, future research should enlist more varied samples from more universities and larger geographic areas of Pakistan. In a cultural setting where appearance-related issues may entail social stigma, the use of self-report measures raises the risk of social desirability bias.

Additionally, the current study did not distinguish between different social media platform types or usage patterns. According to research, distinct anxiety outcomes are linked to passive versus active social media use (House & Brennan, 2023), and the association between FNE and appearance anxiety may be moderated by platform-specific norms about visual self-presentation. Future research should evaluate the function of social comparison, self-esteem, and social media addiction as potential mediators or moderators and include platform-specific metrics. It would be very beneficial to do intervention-based study to

see if FNE-focused cognitive-behavioral or psychoeducational programs can lessen university students' social appearance anxiety.

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