

Self-esteem and Social Appearance Anxiety: An Investigation of Secondary School Students

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Received: December 5 2013

Accepted: January 13 2014

ABSTRACT

In a previous study published in *Elementary Education Online*, Doğan(2011) examined the psychometric properties of the social appearance anxiety scale in an adolescent sample after his first adaptation study on undergraduate students in Turkey (Doğan, 2010). He recommended that researchers do further research to investigate the relationships between social appearance anxiety, communication skills, depression, anxiety, and self-esteem, but researchers generally disregarded his advice. Following Doğan's (2011) recommendation, this study reports on the association between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety in secondary school students. A total of 2222 (1133 female and 1089 male) adolescents aged 11-15 years were selected from Merzifon City, in the central Black Sea region of Turkey. Participants' mean age was 12.76, with a standard deviation of .96. Self-reporting measures consisting of a Personal Information Form, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale were administered to students under the supervision of teachers. Data were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Analyses. Results indicated that there was a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety for each gender. These findings suggest that adolescents with low-self-esteem may exhibit higher levels of social appearance anxiety or vice versa. The implications of these findings, especially for guidance and counseling services in Turkey, and potential applications for guidance counselors and researchers are also discussed.

KEY WORDS: Self-Esteem, Social Appearance Anxiety, Secondary School Students, Adolescents, Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

Secondary school is an important level of education in which adolescents continue to learn the minimum knowledge and skills that every citizen must possess. At this educational level, adolescents gain problem solving skills, develop accordance with societal values, and basic abilities for functioning in society (Çubukcu & Gültekin, 2006). In addition, this educational process plays a crucial role in the development of self-esteem in adolescents.

As an important notion in psychology from the very beginning, self-esteem was defined differently by separate researchers based on different theories and research. For instance, Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as a person's positive or negative attitude towards a particular object namely the self. But Coopersmith (1967) describes self-esteem as one's continuous evaluation of him/herself. According to Coopersmith, self-esteem is an expression of a person's acceptance or rejection attitude, and the perception level of the person of him/herself as talented, important, precious, and successful (Coopersmith, 1967). On the other hand, Guindon (2002) outlines self-esteem in the widest sense as the feeling of acceptance and worthiness. These are attitudinal evaluation components of the emotional side of the notion of self, which is developed and maintained with feedback from the environment, the feeling of success, and realizing one's own abilities. Even though there is no agreement between researchers on the definition of self-esteem, it is clear that it has an important role in people's lives.

Previous research revealed that self-esteem has a negative association with some unfavorable components that have negative effects on people's lives, such as depression (Erözkan, 2009b), loneliness (Erözkan, 2009a), anti-social, violent and criminal behaviors (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005), stress (Yaacob, Juhari, Talib, & Uba, 2009), and anxiety (Fathi-Ashtiani, Ejei, Khodapanahi, & Tarkhorani, 2007). Conversely, there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and some notions that can affect mental health positively like hope (Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008), happiness (Cheng & Furnham, 2003), life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995), optimism (Makikangas, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2004), effective coping strategies (Ni et al., 2012), more social support from family, friends and important others (Tajbakhsh & Roustaei, 2012), and some positive personality traits like emotional stability, and extrovertedness (Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001). Besides these

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variables, previous studies also demonstrated that some demographics, such as parental education (Şahin, Barut, & Ersanlı, 2013a) and gender (Tamini & Valibeygi, 2011) may positively affect self-esteem. For a comprehensive review for Turkish sociodemographics including age, gender, parental education, and grade level related to the self-esteem of adolescents, readers may refer to Şahin *et al.* (2013a). In addition to these variables and demographics, another important variable that can be related to self-esteem is body image.

Like self-esteem, body image also lacks an agreed upon definition. Grogan (2008) defines body image as people's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of their bodies, while Smolak and Thompson (2009) explain it as a personal evaluation of one's own body. Several definitions state that body image has a multidimensional structure with emotional, thought, and behavioral elements. It is possible to separate people into two groups, ones who have a positive body image and those who have a negative body image. The former have no clear difference between their body image and their desired body image. These people have positive attitudes towards their body, body parts, body functions, and overall body image. However, the latter, who have a negative body image, have a distinct difference between their body image and their desired body image. Previous research revealed that dissatisfaction with body image is very common among adolescents. A study by Dixit, Agarwal, Singh, Kant, & Singh (2011) discovered that, among the girls who perceive their ideal body image as very thin, 20.5% want to be slim; 73.4% of adolescent girls are happy about their body image while 26.6% are not. Similar to Dixit *et al.* (2011) study, Canpolat, Orsel, Akdemir, & Ozbay (2005) observed among adolescents in Turkey that 43% of girls and 18.3% of boys want to be slimmer.

Previous research on body image also revealed that girls are more likely to have a negative body image than boys (Chen, Fox, Haase, & Ku, 2010; Delfabbro, Winefield, Anderson, Hammarstrom, & Winefield, 2011; Makikangas, Kinnunen, & Feldt, 2004b); body-mass index (underweight, normal, overweight) (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001), socio-cultural factors (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005), and age (Sim & Zeman, 2006) can affect body image.

Besides individuals' own body perceptions, others' perception of their body image is also important. People are motivated to make a good impression on others; nevertheless, some are overly concerned about people's perceptions of their physical shape. In literature, an individual's anxiety about how his/her physical image is evaluated by others is defined as social physical anxiety (Yaman ve diğerleri, 2008). According to Hart *et al.* (2008), social appearance anxiety includes social physical anxiety, and is a consequence of a negative image of one's own body and appearance.

In the literature, there is a limited amount of research on social appearance anxiety. Existing research is generally about the reliability and validity of studies of the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale in different samples, such as university students (Doğan, 2010; Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2011), adolescents (Doğan, 2011), and female patients with eating disorders (Claes *et al.*, 2012). However, there are a few key studies. For example, Şahin, Barut, and Ersanlı (2013b) revealed that adolescents with high parental educational levels had significantly lower social appearance anxiety than adolescents with low parental educational levels. This study implies that parental educational level may be a protective factor in the development of social appearance anxiety. Kang, Johnson, and Kim (2013) determined that individuals with a high level of perfectionism experience high levels of social appearance anxiety and that social appearance anxiety is related to neuroticism. Koskina, Van Den Eynde, Meisel, Campbell, and Schmidt (2011) also noted in their study, in which they compared 30 women who had eating disorders with 40 healthy women, that the social appearance anxiety of the female patients was significantly higher than for healthy women. Similarly, Levinson and Rodebaugh (2012) observed that social appearance anxiety predicts bulimic symptoms, body image dissatisfaction, and body shape and eating anxiety.

As seen in the aforementioned research, there is a limited number of studies related to social appearance anxiety, and little is known about the relationship between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety in adolescents. For this reason, there are two motivational sources in this study. First of all, secondary school is a transition to a new educational level and can be stressful for adolescents since they encounter a new curriculum, possibly new and different friends, new teachers, preparation for an important and life-changing exam, and entering into puberty. During this process, adolescents face some challenging tasks, such as establishing personality, accepting physical changes, separation from family, building moral rules and values, becoming contributing members of society, and choosing a profession (Anderson & Olmhausen, 1999). These serious developmental tasks and possible stress sources can be harmful to the development of healthy self-esteem and positive body image. For healthy generations, experiencing a healthy adolescence is very important. High self-esteem and positive body image positively affect an individual's quality of life, achievements, and personal relationships. Adolescents who fail to develop a positive body image and self-esteem are at risk of depression, eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, and social phobia.

The second motivation for this study is that there is little research on body image and social appearance anxiety in Turkey. To date, we have not found any study about the relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem in adolescents in Turkey as well as in the world. This research analysis can provide clues on the

relationship between social appearance anxiety and self-esteem in adolescents.

METHOD

Participants

This is a school based cross-sectional study in which simple random sampling was used. Cross-sectional research, which aims to identify the properties of the universe that are worked in or the differences between two or more different universes in a defined time limit, is the most popular research method in the social sciences (Shaughnessey, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2012). The simple random sample method is the most widely used in cross-sectional studies, and every member of the universe has the equal chance to be drafted (L. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In the determination of the required sample size, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula was used. By using this method, it was determined that, within a 99% confidence interval and with 2.5% margin of error, for a population size of 3201, it is enough to include 1451 people.

This research was conducted in 22 secondary schools, one of which was a private secondary school. Using the simple random sampling method, 2886 students were chosen from grades 6, 7, and 8; however, 644 of them were excluded because of their missing responses. Of the 2222 participants, 1133 were female and 1089 were male. Student ages ranged from 11 to 15, and the average age was 12.76 with a standard deviation of .96. Detailed information about the students' gender, age, class level, and education level of their parents was given in Table 1.

Measures

Personal Information Form (PIF): This is a form developed by the researchers to collect information about the school, class level, gender, age, and parental educational level of the participants.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES): The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which is easy to conduct, score, and explain, is the most popular measure among self-esteem scales (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Demo, 1985). It consists of ten items with a four point likert scale including options of "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Disagree," "Strongly Disagree." There is no time limit in conducting the scale, and it can be conducted individually or in a group. The first, second, fourth, sixth, and seventh items were scored as "Strongly Agree:4," "Agree:3," "Disagree:2," "Strongly Disagree:1" while the third, fifth, eighth, ninth, and tenth items were scored as "Strongly Agree:1," "Agree:2," "Disagree:3," and "Strongly Disagree:4." The total score that can be taken from the scale ranges from 10 to 40. Higher scores mean higher self-esteem.

The scale was developed by Rosenberg (1965), and different researchers have investigated its reliability and validity. The scale demonstrated high reliability in previous studies. Reported Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients ranged from .77 to .88, and test-retest reliabilities ranged from .82 to .85 (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). A Turkish adaptation study was conducted by Çuhadaroğlu (1986) in a sample of 205 high school students. Test-retest reliability was conducted with a one month interval, and the reliability score was found to be .75. To test the validity of the scale, psychiatric interviews were conducted. After these interviews students' self-esteem was classified with high, moderate, and low scores based on their opinions of themselves. The scores from the interviews and self-esteem scale were calculated and a validity ratio of .71 was found (Çecen, 2008; Çuhadaroğlu, 1986). Previous cross-sectional studies using RSES in secondary school students reported Cronbach's alpha consistency coefficients acceptable to good and ranged from .65 to .78 (Atik & Kemer, 2009; Bektaş, 2007; Kaya, 2007; Keskin, 2010; Yıldız, 2010). For this research, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient is .78.

Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS): Adolescents' social appearance anxiety was evaluated with the help of the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale which was developed by Hart et al. (2008). The scale consists of 16 items with a five point likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The first item is reversely coded. The other fifteen items are straightforward. The scale has no time limit and can be conducted individually and in groups. The scores can be taken from the test ranges between 16 and 80. An increase in the SAAS scores indicates an increase in the adolescents' social appearance anxiety. Hart et al. (2008) noted that the SAAS has a one factor structure, and a correlation of .82 with the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, and .52 with the Beck Depression Inventory. The scale has .94, .95, and .94 Cronbach's alpha scores in three different samples, and .84 test-retest consistency which was conducted with a month spacing in a sample of 100 participants. The Turkish adaptation, reliability, and validity studies of the scale were first conducted by Doğan (2010) in a sample of 340 university students, and psychometric properties of the scale were investigated again by Doğan (2011) on secondary school students. Doğan (2011) stated that the scale has a single factor structure and has a correlation of .76 with the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents. The Cronbach's alpha was .91, and the one month test-retest reliability of the scale is .80. The SAAS's Cronbach's alpha for this research was .91.

Data Collection

The required permission was obtained from the Merzifon Provincial Directorate of National Education to conduct the evaluation instruments. Statistical data for the 2011-2012 academic year were also received. Afterwards, schools that offered education at the appropriate grade levels were determined. All these schools were called and informed about the study, and student numbers were obtained by the first researcher. On the appointed date, a 15 minute informational meeting was held with teachers. With the observation of the attendant teachers, the application took place. Students were informed with a line above the PIF that this was not a test and there was no right or wrong answer, participation should be voluntary, every answer would be kept confidential, and the purpose of the research. No student refused to take part in the research. The PIF, RSES, SAAS were given the participants at once. The research took approximately 30 minutes. Data collection, statistical analysis, and evaluation processes took place between December 2011 and March 2012. During the evaluation of the gathered data, 644 papers were subtracted from the total due to missing data.

Data Analysis

All data analysis was performed with the help of the SPSS software. First, the analysis outliers were checked. For this purpose, RSES and SAAS scores of the adolescents were transformed into z-values. Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010) stated that in large samples values can be change between +4 and -4. Field (2009) claimed that Pearson correlation coefficient analysis has three assumptions: that data should be collected with an equally spaced instrument; data should show a normal distribution; and there should be a linear relation between two factors. Normality assumption was controlled by checking the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, skewness and kurtosis values, Histogram, normal Q-Q plot, and Box-plot graphs. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test compares scores of the participants in the sample with the artificial data which have the same mean and standard deviation (Mooi & Sarstedt, 2011). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was meaningful for RSES and SAAS scores which shows that the normality assumption was not met. However, Pallant (2010) states that this situation in Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests is common in large samples. RSES and SAAS skewness and kurtosis values emerged between +1 and -1. Garson (2012) and Tabachnick & Fidell (2007) recommend using graphical approaches in looking at distribution graphics while checking normality assumption.

Histogram, normal Q-Q plot, and Box-plot graphics revealed that RSES and SAAS scores show a close normal distribution. Whether RSES and SAAS scores show a linear relationship was checked with a Scatter-Plot graph, and it was seen that the variables show a linear relationship. Pearson Correlation coefficients can take values between +1 and -1. A positive relation between variables means that there is an inclination that a participant with a high score in a variable will take a high score in another variable, whereas a negative relation means that there is an inclination that a participant with a high score in a variable will take low score from another variable.

Levine (2013) suggests that statistical results should be given with effect size estimates. Effect size simply gives information about the meaningfulness of the relationship between two variables in practice for correlation analysis. Different effect size estimates were used in the literature. While Cohen's *d* is suitable for evaluating effect size between two mean differences, eta-square (η^2) is used when more than two groups' mean differences are compared. The effect size estimate used in correlation analysis is *r*. In the social sciences, Cohen (1992) classification is the most widely used classification in the evaluation of effect size estimates. According to Cohen (1992), correlation near .10 is small, .30 is moderate, and .50 and above is a high effect size. Also, in the literature, by taking the square of the correlation value (r^2) the determination coefficient is calculated. The determination coefficient shows the quantity of common variance that is explained by two variables. In Pearson, the coefficient analysis results of this value are reported. In the evaluation of the data .01 meaningfulness levels are considered.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics about the findings of the study are given in Table 1. When we look at Table 1, it can be seen that 51% of the study sample consists of girls and 49% were boys. Among the students in the sample, 33.8% were 6th grade, 33.3% were 7th grade, 33% were 8th grade students. Among those students, 8.2% were 11 years-old, 33.9% were 12 years-old, 33.1% were 13 years-old, 23% were 14 years-old, 1.8% were 15 years-old. Among the mothers of the adolescents in the sample, 2.3% were illiterate, 2.7% were only able to read and write, 51.4% were primary school graduates, 14.2% graduated from secondary school, 21% were high school graduates, 2.4% were academy graduates, and 5.9% had bachelor degrees or above. Among the fathers of the participants, 0.8% were illiterate, 2% were only able to read and write, 29.5% were primary school graduates, 16.5% graduated from secondary school, 27.2% were high school graduates, 6.9% were academy graduates, and 17.1% had bachelor degrees or above. It can be seen that our sample's parental education level is low. 56.9% of the mothers and 32.3%

of the fathers have a primary school education or lower. These findings also reflect the educational level in Turkey as well. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute Address Based Population Registration System's (ABPRS) 2012 results, 47.24% of the population in Turkey has a primary school education or lower (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2013).

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics, mean, and standard deviation of variables.*

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	RSES	SAAS
Gender				
Girls	1133	51.0	32.85(4.75)	35.71(14.46)
Boys	1089	49.0	32.06(4.41)	35.41(13.27)
Total	2222	100.0		
Grade Level				
6 th Grade	750	33.8	32.74(4.55)	34.52(13.73)
7 th Grade	739	33.3	32.32(4.76)	36.04(14.17)
8 th Grade	733	33.0	32.33(4.49)	36.14(13.72)
Total	2222	100.0		
Age				
11	183	8.2	32.75(4.46)	34.53(12.90)
12	753	33.9	32.50(4.67)	35.21(14.36)
13	735	33.1	32.57(4.62)	35.51(13.44)
14	511	23.0	32.27(4.51)	36.28(14.22)
15	40	1.8	31.28(4.69)	38.45(12.72)
Total	2222	100.0		
Mother Education Level				
Illiterate	52	2.3	30.67(5.03)	40.56(14.88)
Only read and write	60	2.7	31.00(3.98)	38.03(13.25)
Primary School Graduates	1142	51.4	32.26(4.49)	36.19(13.98)
Secondary School Graduates	316	14.2	32.97(4.40)	34.84(13.68)
High school Graduates	467	21.0	32.61(4.80)	34.44(13.74)
Academy Graduates	54	2.4	33.28(4.78)	33.56(13.64)
College Graduates or above (Bachelors)	131	5.9	33.53(4.87)	33.48(13.34)
Total	2222	100.0		
Father Education Level				
Illiterate	18	0.8	30.67(4.00)	40.78(12.06)
Only read and write	45	2.0	31.11(3.90)	34.64(9.95)
Primary School Graduates	655	29.5	31.88(4.51)	37.56(14.60)
Secondary School Graduates	367	16.5	32.32(4.47)	35.53(13.37)
High school Graduates	604	27.2	32.68(4.54)	35.28(13.88)
Academy Graduates	154	6.9	32.59(4.99)	31.87(12.71)
College Graduates or above (Bachelors)	379	17.1	33.48(4.74)	33.94(13.57)
Total	2222	100.0		

Note: Values in parenthesis show standard deviation.

Pearson Correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety scores of the students. According to the Pearson Correlation results, as seen in Table 2, in the whole group (Pearson's $r = -0.464$, $p = .01$), in the girls' group (Pearson's $r = -0.49$, $p = .01$), and in the boys' group (Pearson's $r = -0.434$, $p = .01$) self-esteem and social appearance anxiety have a moderate significant negative correlation. The determination coefficient (r^2) explains approximately 21.53% of the total variance, 24% in girls, and 18.84% in boys.

Table 2 *Self-esteem and social appearance anxiety correlation values in total and in boys and girls.*

	Social Appearance Anxiety(SAAS)		
	Total	Girls	Boys
Self-Esteem(RSES)	-.464*	-.490*	-.437*
N	2222	1133	1089

Note: * $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

In this study, the association between self-esteem and the social appearance anxiety of secondary school students is analysed. Statistical results showed that there is a mediocre negative correlation between self-esteem and

social appearance anxiety. In our sample, changes in the self-esteem scores of every 24 out of 100 girls, every 19 out of 100 boys, and 22% of the total group can be explained by social appearance anxiety scores. In other words, results show that adolescents with low self-esteem can have high social appearance anxiety or adolescents with high social appearance anxiety can have low self-esteem. Since there was no research on the relation between self-esteem and social appearance anxiety in the available literature, in the discussion and evaluation of these findings and social appearance anxiety, we include body image as another topic related to social appearance anxiety.

Oktan and Şahin(2010), Shroff and Thompson(2006), Frost and McKelvie(2004), and Kostanski and Gullone(1998) found a significant negative correlation between negative body image and self-esteem. As can be seen, our findings correspond with the literature. With their increased cognitive capability, adolescents can evaluate their physical attractiveness and academic ability more clearly, and they become aware of society's ideal body image messages. The slim women and v-shaped men shown on TV and in magazines occupy the minds of adolescent girls and boys with their increased interest in their bodies. As a result, adolescents who do not have that type of ideal body image face high anxiety about their appearance and, consequently, a decrease in their self-esteem.

This research took place in a large sample, and reliable and valid measurement tools were used in the process; however, some limitations need to be noted. Self-esteem and social appearance anxiety of the students were measured with the self-report technique. Hence, views of the self-esteem and social appearance anxiety of the students are not based on teacher, parent, and friend observations; they are limited to their own perceptions. This study took place in Amasya, so the findings cannot be generalized to all adolescents who are 11-15 years old in Turkey. Despite these limits, this research has many practical benefits for guidance and psychological counseling services. This study reveals important information about one of the factors that affects low self-esteem in adolescents, namely social appearance anxiety. School counselors who want to determine adolescents with low self-esteem must keep in mind that social appearance anxiety can be a risk factor. These school counselors can implement periodic individual counseling sessions with adolescents who have high social appearance anxiety to increase their self-esteem. Psychological counseling experts, who want to design effective intervention and prevention programs to increase self-esteem, can design their programs by considering social appearance anxiety as a risk factor. As Şahin *et al.*(2013b)noted, further research can study the effects of being mocked about weight, body-mass index, adolescent period (early, middle, and late) on self-esteem and social appearance anxiety.

Acknowledgement

The research reported here derives data, in part, from Ertuğrul ŞAHİN's Master's dissertation, which was conducted under the supervision of Yaşar BARUT. All authors contributed equally to the preparation of this article.

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