

## **Connecting the Dots: Uncovering the Link between Social Anxiety and Eating Disorders among University Students**

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### **Abstract**

There is an increasing incidences of eating disorders and social anxieties among student population. The present study investigated the relationship between social anxiety and eating disorders among undergraduate students (N = 150) aged 19-30 using the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS; Liebowitz, 1987) and Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q; Fairburn & Beglin, 2008). Results indicated a positive and significant relationship between overall and subscale scores. This suggests that social anxiety may be a risk factor for eating disorders. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Social Anxiety, Eating disorder, University, Graduates

### **Introduction**

Social anxiety and eating disorders are prevalent among university graduates (American Psychological Association, 2020) and received a significant amount of attention. Social anxiety among university graduates tends to persist into adulthood and can have a significant impact on daily functioning and quality of life (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2021; Lavender & Anderson, 2016). Social anxiety is a highly debilitating disorder that can lead to significant functional impairment, including difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships, difficulties in academic and occupational functioning, and reduced quality of life (Stein & Kean, 2000). The literature suggests that university graduates are at a higher risk of developing social anxiety and eating disorders, compared to the general population (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2021)

Kjaer & Kjaer (2019) found that individuals with social anxiety tend to experience more body dissatisfaction and a negative body image, which are significant risk factors for the development of eating disorders. The study also found that social anxiety was associated with increased stress levels, which can exacerbate symptoms of both conditions.

Individuals with high levels of social anxiety tend to have a lower quality of life, compared to those with lower levels of social anxiety, highlighting the importance of addressing social anxiety in individuals with eating disorders, as it can have a significant impact on their overall well-being ( Kim & Park,2020)

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The relationship between social anxiety and eating disorders has been demonstrated in clinical studies (Fairburn & Beglin, 2008). For instance, research by Zhang et al. (2021) suggests that individuals with social anxiety are more likely to engage in disordered eating behaviours, such as binge eating and purging. Furthermore, findings from a recent study conducted by Fairburn and Beglin (2008) indicated that individuals with higher levels of social anxiety were significantly more likely to experience binge eating, compared to individuals with lower levels of social anxiety. These results suggest that there is a strong link between social anxiety and eating disorders, which is significant for understanding and treating these conditions. Thus, it is essential to recognize the complex relationship between social anxiety and disordered eating behaviours and to address the issue in order to ensure effective treatment.

Graduate students who experience high levels of stress and anxiety are more susceptible to disordered eating behaviours (Brosschot, Verkuil, & Verburt, 2006), struggles with social anxiety and body dissatisfaction are more prone to engage in binge and restrictive eating behaviours (Fulkerson et al. 2007), graduate students who are experiencing high levels of social anxiety and body dissatisfaction are at a greater risk of engaging in disordered eating behaviours (Felzien et al. 2011; Haedt-Matt et al. 2011).

University students experience a variety of stressors, like academic pressure, financial stress, and social pressures, which may put them at risk of developing social anxiety and eating disorders (Henderson & Murnen, 2009). If left unaddressed, these conditions can have serious physical and mental health effects and can impair university students' academic and personal lives (American Psychological Association, 2006; Pettersson & Roen, 2017). Exploring the connection between social anxiety and eating disorders among university students can provide valuable information on the links between the two and aid in the creation of intervention programs to help students (Haynos et al., 2009; Brouwer et al., 2015), potentially leading to an enhanced overall wellbeing.

The present study aims to investigate the relationship between social anxiety and eating disorder among university students. Following assumptions were made:

There would be a significant relationship between overall scores for LSAS and EDE-Q.

There would be a significant relationship between subscale scores for LSAS and EDE-Q.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The sample comprises 150 university students (75 men; 75 women) recruited from different departments (Arts, Science, Business Management) University of Karachi, Pakistan. Their age ranged from 19-30 years.

### ***Material***

The consent form explained the purpose of the research, specifying that the information collected would only be used for research purposes. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they would not receive any compensation. They were also given the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Basic demographic information about age, sex, and faculty was also collected.

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS, Liebowitz, 1987) contains 24- items with two

subscales for anxiety and performance fear and avoidance of social interactions with fear of social interaction (11 items) and the performance of various actions(13 items). LSAS demonstrates good indices of alpha reliabilities for overall and subscales and test-retest reliability and construct validity (Karami, Zakiei., & Rostami, 2012; Mahbobi, Etemadi, Khorasani, & Ghiasi,2012).

The Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire(EDE-Q, [Fairburn & Beglin, 2008](#)) comprises of 28-items with four subscales of Restraint (5-items), Eating Concern (5- items), Shape Concern (8 items), and Weight Concern (5- items). Scale demonstrates sound psychometric properties concerning internal consistency, test-retest reliability and validities (Peterson et al.,2007; Mond et al. 2004; Luce& Crowther,1999).

### **Procedure**

Students from different faculties at the University of Karachi-Pakistan were approached and described the details of the study and asked to complete questionnaires. The responses were gathered and simultaneously entered in SPSS-23 for scorings for analysis.

## **Results**

**Table 1** *Demographics (N=150)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Frequency(f)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Age (years)		
19-24	85	56.6
25-30	65	43.3
Gender		
Men	77	51.3
Women	73	48.6
Faculty		
Arts and Humanities	51	34
Science	63	42
Business Administration	36	24

**Table 1** shows the demographic profile of the participants

**Table 2** *Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of LSAS and EDE-Q*

Measures	LSAS(T)	FE	AD
EDE-Q (T)	.30**	.26**	.21**
RS	.24**	.24**	.23**
EC	.30**	.25**	.27**
SC	.35**	.45**	.29*
WC	.29**	.24**	.26**

**Note:** *EDE-Q (T)*= Eating Disorder Examination -Questionnaire(total), *RS*=Restraint, *EC*=Eating Concern, *SC*=Shape Concern, *WC*=Weight Concern, *LSA(T)*=Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Total), *FE*=Fear, *AD*= Avoidance  $p > .01^{**}$ ,  $p > 0.05$

## Discussion

This study explores the association between social anxiety and eating disorders among university students. Results confirm previous assumptions and demonstrate positive correlations between the two variables, as reported in previous studies (Hayes et al., 2006; Calogero et al., 2009; Saravane et al., 2018; Linardon et al., 2015). The outcomes are suggestive of the notion that individuals with social anxiety may use eating disorders as a coping strategy for their anxieties, in order to gain a sense of control and stability (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987; Latner & Wilson, 2001).

The findings of Braun and Sunday (1998) and Waller et al. (2000) that higher levels of social anxiety among university students are associated with increased positive significance for overall and subscale values of social anxiety and eating disorders were confirmed. Moreover, Crowther et al. (1998) found that social anxiety was associated with higher scores on the restraint and eating concern subscales of the EDE-Q.

Socially anxious young adults indulge in faulty comparisons about appearances, and compare themselves to socially perfect images, this exacerbates negative perceptions of appearance (Webb, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Donovan, 2014) possess vague self-concept, negative cognitions about self-appearance, easily endorses the belief that others are more attractive (Rapee et al., 2020; Ranta, Tuomisto, Kaltiala-Heino, Rantanen, & Marttunen, 2014).

Peer relationships are a major aspect of the development of social anxieties, difficulties in establishing and maintaining positive peer relationships can exacerbate negative appearance perceptions in individuals with social apprehensions (Rapee et al., 2019; Wong & Rapee, 2016), appearance concerns are linked factor for social anxiety and eating disorders (Levinson et al., 2018) among university students. It is also worthwhile to mention that students face academic and financial burdens which lead to the development of eating disorders (Henderson & Murnen, 2009); academic demands and the stress associated with grades resulting adverse impact on dietary habits (Trigueros et al., 2020) such stressors impact on eating disorders (Pettersson & Roen, 2017) Also cultural and family factors (Amianto et al., 2011; Smolak & Murnen, 2011), parental attitudes towards food and weight, contributes towards an increasing the risk of eating disorders among student population (Nigg & Goldschmidt, 1999).

This study has shed light on the relationship between eating disorders and social anxiety. However, the results must be interpreted with caution due to the cross-sectional design, small sample size, and self-reported measures. To further investigate the cultural and psychological factors that influence eating disturbances and social anxieties, future studies should employ a larger sample size and a mixed-methods approach. This information can then be used to develop early detection, diagnosis, and intervention strategies, as well as awareness initiatives, to improve the academic performance and overall well-being of students.

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