Rejection Sensitivity Mediating the Influence of Social Anxiety on Body Dysmorphic Concerns: A Comparison of Indian Students and Employees

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Abstract

This study focuses upon social anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and body image concerns, investigating whether rejection sensitivity mediates this relationship and explores the moderating effects of employment status and state anxiety. Following a quantitative research design, data was gathered from 111 participants. The sample was balanced between academic and professional settings. Pearson's correlations showed strong associations among social anxiety (SIAS & SPS) and body dysmorphic concerns (BICI). Rejection Sensitivity portrayed low reliability so its dimensions, Rejection Concern (RejConc) and Rejection expectancy (Rejexp) were used. Mediation analysis revealed that rejection concern (RejConc) partially mediated this relationship, while rejection expectancy (RejExp) was not a significant mediator. Moderated mediation analysis indicated that the mediating role of RejConc was significant only for employed individuals, suggesting occupational status influences the of social anxiety on body dysmorphic concerns. No moderating effect of state anxiety was observed attributed to multicollinearity issues. This study opens avenues for future researchers towards studying additional moderating factors, like personality traits and self-esteem, and to employ longitudinal designs clarifying the directional relationships among social anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and body dysmorphic concerns.

Keywords: Rejection, Rejection Concern, Social Anxiety, Body Dysmorphia, State Anxiety

1. Introduction

Have you ever experienced the overwhelming anxiety that comes with the fear of rejection or felt consumed by intense concern over how others perceive you? In many cultures, particularly those that emphasize communal values, family ties, and social harmony, these fears extend beyond individual experiences to reflect broader societal pressures.

The expectation to maintain social approval and uphold familial pride can significantly heighten social anxiety, particularly among young adults navigating these cultural landscapes (Nakamura et al., 2020). In such settings, appearance often becomes a central focus of self-evaluation, as individuals strive to align with societal and familial expectations (Agbu & Ibida, 2014). The pressure to follow idealized body standards, amplified by sociocultural influences from family and media (Granero-Gallegos et al., 2023), can contribute to heightened anxiety and self-doubt, creating an internal conflict between personal identity

and external validation.

Additionally, the growing influence of social media and cultural expectations has been observed to negatively impact self-esteem and body satisfaction (Merino et al., 2024). Fear of appearance-based rejection can further exacerbate self-image concerns and intimacy fears, reinforcing cycles of anxiety and self-perception struggles (Choudhary & Hai, 2020). At the core of these struggles lies rejection sensitivity, a tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and strongly respond to rejection (Zimmer-Gembeck & Nesdale, 2013), further perpetuating feelings of social anxiety and the need for external validation.

This heightened sensitivity often stems from prior experiences of rejection, fostering insecurity and self-doubt. Individuals with rejection sensitivity may interpret neutral or ambiguous social cues as rejection, resulting in defensive or avoidant behaviors. This pattern can create a self-fulfilling cycle where anxious behavior reinforces social distance and heightens insecurity. In collectivistic cultures, where social acceptance and familial obligations are crucial, rejection sensitivity may be intensified due to greater social pressures to conform (Fang et al., 2011).

Social anxiety is defined by the overwhelming fear of negative interpretation in social interactions, often leads to manifesting avoidance behaviors. In collectivistic cultures, where social harmony and acceptance are emphasized, the pressure to adhere to social norms may heighten social anxiety. Body image concerns have been identified as significant contributors to social anxiety in such contexts (Coles et al., 2006; Fang & Hofmann, 2010; Kelly et al., 2010). Researches highlight that both state anxiety (situational anxiety) and trait anxiety (enduring anxiety) play roles in social anxiety, particularly in university students facing academic and social pressures (Pedro et al., 2024). Moreover, social anxiety levels may vary based on factors such as employment status, which can shape students' social experiences (Mounsey et al., 2013).

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is marked by obsessive preoccupation with perceived flaws in one's appearance, often resulting in repetitive behaviors such as mirror checking or reassurance seeking. Individuals with BDD often experience distress linked to social anxiety, fearing negative judgment based on their appearance. This anxiety can lead to social withdrawal and emotional distress. Rejection sensitivity further amplifies this cycle, as individuals may misinterpret neutral social cues as rejection, reinforcing their insecurities (Fang et al., 2011). This cycle deepens the preoccupation with perceived flaws, driving avoidance behaviors and worsening social anxiety.

While research has extensively explored the interplay of social anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and body dysmorphic concerns among individualistic cultures, fewer studies have examined these factors in collectivistic contexts like India. Individualistic societies emphasize autonomy and self-reliance, where social anxiety and body image concerns are often tied to personal achievement (Fang et al., 2011; Yetsenga et al., 2020). Conversely, collectivistic cultures prioritize social cohesion, family obligations, and group approval, which may exacerbate rejection sensitivity and anxiety about social judgment.

In India, societal expectations regarding physical appearance, social conduct, and familial duties contribute to heightened social anxiety alongside body dysmorphic concerns. Young adults may feel pressure in meeting cultural ideals of beauty and social conformity, making them particularly vulnerable to social anxiety and rejection sensitivity. Fear of disappointing one's family or damaging social reputation may intensify these concerns, adding a layer of social pressure unique to collectivistic settings (Anand & Sinha, 2024; Choudhary & Hai, 2023; Hasana, 2024; Verma & Verma, 2023; Vidyanidhi & Sudhir, 2009). Research exploring the intersection of social anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and body dysmorphic concerns on the Indian population is missing. While individual studies have examined each construct separately, few have integrated these variables within a cohesive framework that considers cultural norms and social

expectations. Understanding this interaction is essential for developing effective mental health interventions tailored to Indian young adults, who may experience anxiety and insecurity differently from individuals in Western contexts.

Studies have demonstrated that students with heightened anxiety are often more susceptible to social anxiety, especially in culturally pressured environments that emphasize physical appearance and social conduct (Pedro et al., 2024; Mounsey et al., 2013). Additionally, employment status may shape social anxiety experiences, as working students may face heightened pressures to balance academic and social demands. These factors underscore the need for culturally relevant research that addresses how rejection sensitivity, social anxiety, and body dysmorphic concerns interact in Indian cultural contexts.

By examining these psychological variables within Indian culture, researchers can better understand how societal expectations influence young adults' mental well-being. Such insights may guide the formulation of targeted interventions designed to handle social anxiety, improve body image perceptions, and manage rejection sensitivity. Integrating these constructs into a collectivistic framework can foster mental health strategies that acknowledge the unique social pressures faced by Indian young adults, ultimately promoting improved psychological well-being (Anand & Sinha, 2024; Choudhary & Hai, 2023; Hasana, 2024; Verma & Verma, 2023; Vidyanidhi & Sudhir, 2009).

1.1 The Present Study

This study aims to focus upon the associations among rejection sensitivity, social anxiety, and body dysmorphic concerns. Specifically, it investigates whether rejection sensitivity acts as a mediator in the relation between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns, while also assessing whether social anxiety remains significantly associated with body dysmorphic concerns even after controlling for rejection sensitivity. Additionally, the study explores the potential moderating roles of employment status (university student vs. employed) and state anxiety in these relationships.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationships among rejection sensitivity, social anxiety, and body dysmorphic concerns.
2. To investigate whether rejection sensitivity acts as a mediator between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns and whether social anxiety significantly predicts body dysmorphic concerns even after controlling for rejection sensitivity.
3. To explore whether employment status (university student vs. employed) and state anxiety moderate the mediation effect of rejection sensitivity between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns.

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

H1: Social anxiety will be positively associated with body dysmorphic concerns.

H2: Rejection sensitivity will be positively associated with body dysmorphic concerns.

H3: Rejection sensitivity will be positively associated with social anxiety.

H4: Rejection sensitivity will mediate the relationship between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns, such that higher social anxiety will predict greater body dysmorphic concerns through higher rejection sensitivity.

H5: Social anxiety will remain significantly associated with body dysmorphic concerns, even after controlling for rejection sensitivity.

H6: To explore whether employment status (university student vs. employed) moderates the mediation of rejection sensitivity on the association between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns.

H7: To examine whether state anxiety moderates the mediation of rejection sensitivity on the association

between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study focuses upon understanding the interplay among social anxiety, body dysmorphic concerns, and rejection sensitivity within a collectivistic cultural framework. While these psychological constructs have been extensively studied in individualistic societies, there is limited research on how cultural norms emphasizing social harmony, familial expectations, and group approval shape these experiences in collectivistic contexts. Indian young adults face distinct societal pressures related to appearance, social conduct, and achievement, making it essential to explore these relationships within this cultural setting.

By investigating whether rejection sensitivity acts as a mediator the between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns, this study seeks to understand the psychological mechanisms that contribute to distress in young adults. Additionally, this research examines the moderating effects of state anxiety and occupational status (university students vs. employed individuals) on these associations. Since employed individuals may face unique stressors related to workplace expectations, while university students navigate academic and peer pressures, understanding these distinctions can provide in-depth insights upon how different life circumstances influence social anxiety and body image concerns. Findings from this study can inform culturally tailored mental health interventions, helping Indian young adults manage social anxiety, improve body image perceptions, and mitigate rejection sensitivity based on their specific life contexts.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants and Procedure

Random sampling technique was utilised and a total of 413 Indian participants initially responded to the survey. However, 117 participants who reported being unemployed were excluded to maintain a sample representative of students and working professionals. Additionally, 22 participants with a clinical diagnosis of psychiatric disorders were excluded to ensure that the study focused on non-clinical populations. After further screening for incomplete responses, the final sample comprised 111 participants. Among the 111 participants (74 = Female, 37 = Male). The sample included 55 university students and 56 employed individuals, ensuring a balance between academic and professional settings. The age of participants was from 20 to 35 years (M = 24.12, SD = 3.05).

2.2 Measures:

Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, Adult version (A-RSQ; Berenson et al., 2009): This questionnaire is a modification of the RSQ (Downey & Feldman, 1996) made to evaluate Rejection Sensitivity in adults. This measure consists of nine situational items, each is formulated to capture an individual's expectancy of rejection and concern about rejection. Responses are recorded on a Likert scale, from 1 (Very unconcerned) to 6 (Very concerned). The scale's reliability in the present study was found to be 0.536, which is weak (Kılıç, 2016). However, since rejection sensitivity is conceptualized as an interaction between rejection expectancy and rejection concern, these two subcomponents were analyzed separately. The Cronbach's alpha for Rejection Concern was 0.757, while for Rejection Expectancy, it was 0.797, portraying acceptable internal consistency of the two dimensions.

Body Image Concern Inventory (BICI; Littleton et al., 2005): This is a 19-item inventory measuring body dysmorphic appearance concerns. For every item, participants indicate how often do they have the explained feeling or exhibited the described behavior on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The internal consistency reliability (α) for this measure came out to be 0.946.

Social Anxiety (SPS-6, SIAS-6; Peters et al., 2012): A combination of the Social Phobia Scale (SPS-6) and the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS-6), both being brief self-report questionnaires, was used for the study. The SPS-6 evaluates social anxiety during performance-related, routine situations like eating, writing etcetera in front of others, while the SIAS-6 comprehends social anxiety during interactional settings, such as daily conversations among strangers or friends. Each scale contains six items, with response options ranging from 0 = "Not at all" to 4 = "Extremely", resulting in a total scores ranging from 0 to 24 for each measure. Both scales had great internal consistency(α), of 0.860 for SPS-6 and 0.866 for SIAS-6.

State Anxiety (STAI-6; Marteau & Bekker, 1992): The study employed a modified version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory-6 (STAI-6), a brief self-report questionnaire adapted from the original inventory. Due to experimenter error, one item was omitted, resulting in a five-item version used in this study. The STAI-6 assesses temporary feelings of anxiety experienced at that instant. Participants respond to a Likert scale, from 1 = "Not at all" to 4 = "Very much so", with total scores ranging from 4 to 20. High scores show greater levels of state anxiety. The modified STAI-6 demonstrated the internal consistency(α) of 0.703.

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 27), and mediation and moderated mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Version 4) by Hayes (2018). Descriptive statistics were calculated, and skewness and kurtosis were used to test normality. The associations between these variables were used to further support mediation and then moderated mediation analyses.

2.4 Research Ethics

An information sheet and Informed consent form were provided and obtained before data collection. Participation was completely voluntary. Further, a Research Debrief was provided after the completion of the survey. Their privacy was protected by maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics alongside skewedness and kurtosis were calculated. Since skewness (range = −0.36 and +0.47) and kurtosis (range =-0.96 and +0.74) values were in the "very good" range of ±1 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), we observed no normality issues in the data.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Measure	M	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
RejConc	3.7838	0.8777	1.00	5.67	-0.361	-0.129
Rejexp	4.1051	0.9178	1.89	6.00	-0.391	-0.281
BICI	2.4490	0.9437	1.05	4.74	0.473	-0.712
SIAS	1.8754	1.0280	0.00	4.00	0.091	-0.955
SPS	1.5676	1.0765	0.00	4.00	0.159	-0.959
STAI	1.4757	0.6416	0.00	3.00	0.025	-0.516

Notes: RejConc, Rejection Concern; Rejexp, Rejection Expectancy; BICI, Body Image Concern Inventory; STAI, State Trait Anxiety Inventory; SIAS, Social Interaction Anxiety Scale; SPS, Social Phobia Scale.

3.2 Inferential Statistics

Since no normality issues were observed, Pearson's correlation analysis followed by simple linear regression, mediation and moderated mediation models (Models 4,5,7,14; Hayes 2018) were conducted.

3.2.1 Correlational Analysis

Social anxiety, as measured by SIAS and SPS, were strongly correlated to BICI (r = .660, p < .001 and r = .697, p < .001, respectively), indicating that individuals with greater body dysmorphic concerns tend to experience higher social anxiety. Additionally, SIAS and SPS were highly correlated (r = .821, p < .001), reinforcing their conceptual overlap.

Rejection concern (RejConc) was positively associated with BICI (r = .383, p < .001), showing that individuals having heightened concerns about rejection further report greater body dysmorphic concerns. However, rejection expectancy (RejExp) portrayed a non-significant correlation with BICI (r = -.152, p = .111), implying that expecting rejection alone does not contribute to body image distress.

Rejection concern correlated positively with SIAS and SPS (r = .359, p < .001 and r = .404, p < .001, respectively), indicating that people with higher rejection concern experience greater social anxiety. In contrast, rejection expectancy portrayed a negative correlation with SIAS and SPS (r = -.193, p = .042 and r = -.209, p = .028, respectively), suggesting that expecting rejection is associated with lower social anxiety.

The STAI was correlated moderately with BICI (r = .267, p = .005), SIAS (r = .260, p = .006), and SPS (r = .338, p < .001), indicating that general anxiety's relation to social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns, though less strongly than rejection concern.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RejConc	—					
2. RejExp	-.52**	—				
3. BICI	.38**	-.15	—			
4. SIAS	.36**	-.19*	.66**	—		
5. SPS	.40**	-.21*	.70**	.82**	—	
6. STAI	.16	.06	.27**	.26**	.34**	—

Note. RejConc = Rejection Concern, RejExp = Rejection Expectancy, BICI = Body Image Concern Inventory, SPS = Social Phobia Scale, STAI = State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, SIAS = Social Interaction Anxiety Scale; * p < .05., ** p < .01 (two-tailed).

3.2.2 Mediation Analysis

Following this, four mediation models (see Fig. 1) were formulated using PROCESS macro (Model 4) to analyse the influence of rejection sensitivity (RejConc and Rejexp) as a mediator in the relation between social anxiety (SIAS and SPS) and body dysmorphic concerns. Among these four models tested, only one model having SIAS as the predictor and RejConc as the mediator demonstrated a significant partial mediation effect.

The mediator model indicated that SIAS significantly predicted RejConc (β = .3067, SE = .0763, p = .0001, 95% CI [.1555, .4580]), explaining 12.91% variation in RejConc (R² = .1291, F(1,109) = 16.15, p = .0001). The outcome regression model showed that both SIAS (β = .5503, SE = .0696, p < .001, 95% CI [.4124, .6883]) and RejConc (β = .1801, SE = .0815, p = .0292, 95% CI [.0185, .3416]) were significant predictors of BICI, explaining 45.96% of the variance (R² = .4596, F(2,108) = 45.93, p < .001).

The direct effect of SIAS on BICI remained significant (β = .5503, SE = .0696, p < .001, 95% CI [.4124, .6883]). The indirect effect via RejConc was small but significant (Effect = .0552, Boot SE = .0279, Boot CI [.0077, .1187]), indicating partial mediation.

3.2.3 Moderated Mediation Analysis

To explore potential moderation effects, six moderated mediation models (see Fig 1) were conducted using the PROCESS macro (2 each of Model 5,7,14) to investigate whether employment status (university student vs. employed) and state anxiety (STAI) moderated the mediating effect of rejection sensitivity. Due to multicollinearity issues (VIF>10) between predictors, only one moderated mediation model having occupation as a moderator in model 7 was accepted, while the remaining models did not meet statistical assumptions.
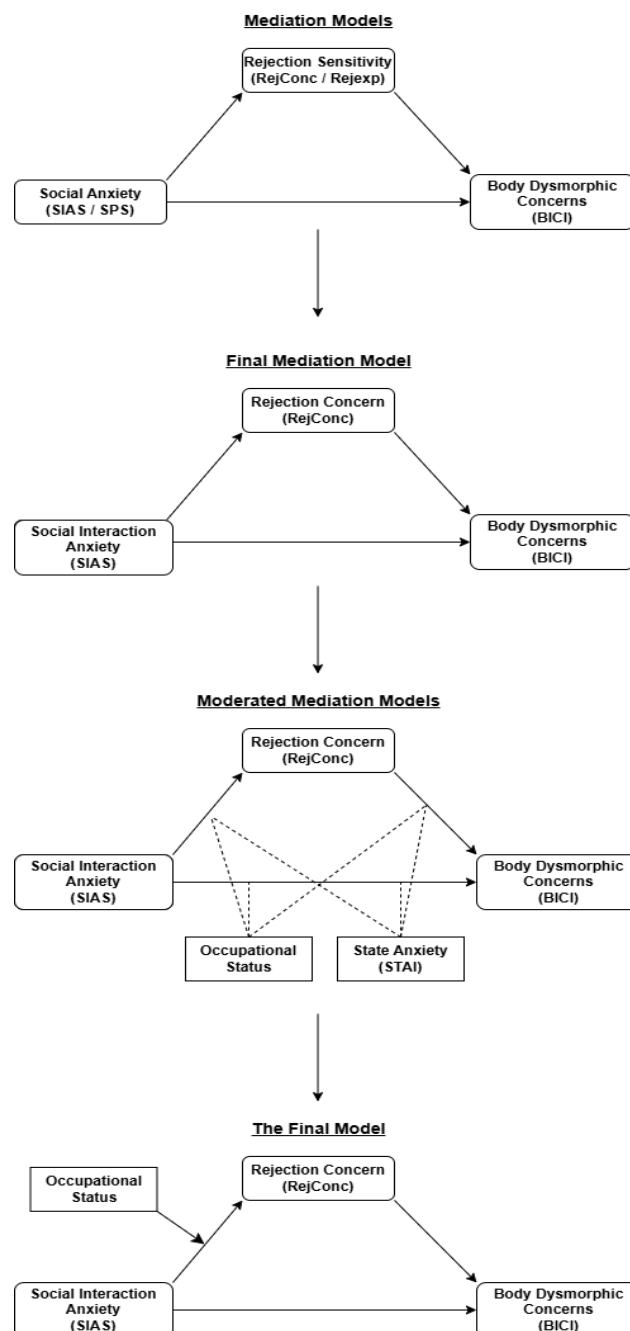

Figure. 1 The Study Design

Mediation Path (SIAS → RejConc → BICI)

The direct effect of SIAS on BICI was significant, $\beta = .550$, SE $= .070$, t $= 7.91$, p $< .001$, showing high social interaction anxiety directly associating with greater body dysmorphic concerns. Additionally, RejConc significantly predicted BICI ($\beta = .180$, SE $= .082$, t $= 2.21$, p $= .029$), supporting a mediation effect. Furthermore, the indirect effect of SIAS on BICI via RejConc was conditional on occupational status.

Moderation of SIAS → RejConc by Occupational Status

The interaction between SIAS and Occ predicting RejConc was significant at 0.1 level ($\beta = .284$, SE $= .159$, t $= 1.79$, p $= .076$), suggesting that occupational status influenced the extent to which social anxiety relates to rejection concern. The conditional effects indicate that for employed individuals (Occ $= 1$), SIAS significantly predicted RejConc ($\beta = .437$, SE $= .115$, t $= 3.82$, p $< .001$), whereas in students (Occ $= 0$), this effect was nonsignificant ($\beta = .153$, SE $= .110$, t $= 1.40$, p $= .166$).

Conditional Indirect Effects & Moderated Mediation Index

The indirect effect of SIAS on BICI via RejConc was significant for employees (Occ $= 1$, $\beta = .0787$, Boot SE $= .0404$, 95% CI [.0084, .1637]), but not for students (Occ $= 0$, $\beta = .0276$, Boot SE $= .0266$, 95% CI [-.0204, .0845]). The moderated mediation index was $\beta = .0511$, Boot SE $= .0418$, 95% CI [-.0071, .1501], indicating that the mediation effect of RejConc is dependent on occupational status.

4. Discussion

This study focused upon the relationships between rejection sensitivity, body dysmorphic concerns, and social anxiety, along with the potential moderating role of state anxiety and occupational status. The findings provide valuable insights into how social anxiety and rejection concerns contribute to body image distress in non-clinical populations.

4.1 Interpretation of Findings

On the first objective, findings confirm a significant positive relation among body dysmorphic concerns and social anxiety. Specifically, individuals with higher social anxiety, measured by SIAS and SPS, also reported greater body image concerns. Additionally, the strong correlation between SIAS and SPS supports prior studies that emphasize the conceptual overlap between different dimensions of social anxiety (Heimberg et al., 2014).

Rejection sensitivity came out to be unreliable in our study, but its dimensions were found reliable and were analysed. Rejection concern was positively correlated with social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns, suggesting people who are more preoccupied with the fear of rejection have a higher chance of experiencing anxiety in social situations and greater concerns about their appearance. Interestingly, rejection expectancy was negatively correlated with social anxiety, which may indicate that individuals who anticipate rejection with certainty may have already adapted to such expectations, thereby reducing their anxiety in social interactions (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

For the second objective, the mediation analysis further demonstrated that out of the 2 dimensions of rejection sensitivity, only rejection concern partially mediated the association between social anxiety and body dysmorphic concerns. This finding suggests that individuals with higher social anxiety may develop heightened rejection concerns, which in turn exacerbate body image distress. These results align with previous literature that highlights rejection sensitivity as a key factor linking social anxiety to appearance-related concerns (Park et al., 2009). The presence of partial mediation suggests that other factors, such as

self-esteem or perfectionism, may also play a key role in explaining this relationship (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003).

Finally discussing the final objective, the moderated mediation analysis revealed that occupational status moderated the influence of social anxiety and rejection concern. Specifically, among employed individuals, the relation among rejection concern and social anxiety was stronger compared to students. This finding suggests that workplace environments may exacerbate the fear of social rejection, possibly due to professional expectations and social pressures unique to employed adults (Leary et al., 2003). Conversely, students may have more social support or flexible social structures that buffer the impact of social anxiety on rejection concern (Deniz, 2010).

4.2 Implications and Future Directions

These findings have significant implications for interventions targeting body image concerns and social anxiety. Given the influence rejection sensitivity has, therapeutic approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy can incorporate strategies focusing on rejection fears alongside social anxiety treatment (Hoffart et al., 2009). Furthermore, workplace mental health initiatives should consider how social anxiety influences the employees' self-perceptions and rejection concerns, potentially offering support programs to mitigate these effects.

Future research should explore the deep-embedded factors concerning the reliability of rejection sensitivity and study this construct with state anxiety alongside other variables in collectivistic cultures. Further, additional moderating factors like personality traits, self-esteem, or cultural influences to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships. Longitudinal studies could also clarify the directionality of these associations, determining whether social anxiety leads to heightened rejection sensitivity or vice versa.

5. Conclusion

The study provides evidence for social anxiety being a significant predictor of body dysmorphic concerns, with rejection concern a subset of rejection sensitivity serving as a partial mediator. Additionally, occupational status moderated the influence of social anxiety on rejection concern, elaborating the contextual influences on these psychological processes. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions that address both social anxiety and rejection sensitivity to improve body image concerns in diverse populations.

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