

Fear of Negative Evaluation, Social Connectedness and Experiential Avoidance among Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the relationship between fear of negative evaluation, social connectedness, and experiential avoidance among emerging adults. Spearman's correlation and multiple linear regression analyses were employed due to the non-normal distribution of the data. The findings indicated a significant positive association between fear of negative evaluation and experiential avoidance, suggesting that individuals who are more concerned about negative evaluation are more likely to engage in experiential avoidance. In contrast, social connectedness was not significantly associated with either fear of negative evaluation or experiential avoidance. Overall, the findings highlight fear of negative evaluation as a significant factor related to experiential avoidance among emerging adults.

Keywords: Fear of negative evaluation, Social connectedness, Experiential avoidance, Emerging adults

1. INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood (EA) is a distinct developmental period, generally occurring between the ages of 18 and 25, during which individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood. Arnett (2000) describes this stage as a period of exploration in which young people gradually establish more stable commitments in areas such as love, work, and worldviews. It is characterized by five major features: identity exploration, a sense of being in-between adolescence and adulthood, increased self-focus, a sense of possibilities, and instability. During this period, individuals develop greater independence, form mature relationships, take on adult responsibilities, and acquire education and skills that shape their future careers. Continued brain development into the late twenties further supports the importance of considering emerging adulthood as a distinct stage of development.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) refers to apprehension about being negatively judged by others, distress regarding negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectations of receiving unfavourable judgments (Watson & Friend, 1969). It is considered a central feature of social anxiety. Cognitive theories suggest that individuals experiencing FNE may show biased information processing, including excessive attention to negative social information and negative interpretations of their own behaviour (Clark & McManus, 2002; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Individuals with high FNE may become particularly sensitive to social feedback and may focus excessively on perceived flaws in their appearance, behaviour, or social performance. These cognitive patterns can intensify anxiety and contribute to a cycle in which fear, self-focused attention, and avoidance reinforce one another (Clark & Wells, 1995). Research also suggests that girls may experience greater social anxiety than boys, partly because of the importance placed on interpersonal relationships and social competence (Nolan & Walters, 2000). Furthermore, socially anxious individuals may experience fear not only of negative evaluation but also, in some circumstances, of positive evaluation, as favourable attention can itself increase feelings of anxiety (Alden, Mellings, & Laposa, 2004).

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness refers to an individual's perceived sense of belonging and meaningful connection with others and with social networks (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Family, friends, educational institutions, and communities provide important sources of support that influence an individual's ability to cope with challenges and maintain psychological well-being (Sippel et al., 2015). According to the belongingness theory of Baumeister and Leary (1995), individuals have a fundamental need to develop and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Social connectedness is therefore more than simply having social contacts; the quality and meaningfulness of relationships are also important. High social connectedness has been associated with greater belongingness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, personal meaning, health, cognitive functioning, and overall well-being. In contrast, poor social connectedness is associated with loneliness, depression, suicidal ideation, lower self-esteem, anxiety, and social mistrust. Individuals who feel socially connected are more likely to experience acceptance and support, develop meaningful relationships, and maintain a stronger sense of self-worth and purpose.

Experiential Avoidance

Experiential avoidance refers to attempts to control, suppress, escape, or avoid unpleasant internal experiences such as thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations (Hayes et al., 1996). Avoidance is not necessarily harmful; in certain situations, temporarily managing uncomfortable emotions can be adaptive. However, it becomes problematic when it is used rigidly and persistently, regardless of the situation.

Excessive experiential avoidance can restrict an individual's behavioural choices and prevent engagement in personally meaningful activities and relationships. For example, repeatedly avoiding difficult conversations, suppressing emotions, or using maladaptive behaviours to escape distress may provide short-term relief but produce negative long-term consequences. Such avoidance can create a cycle in which unpleasant experiences increase, leading to further avoidance. Therefore, experiential avoidance is particularly important in understanding how individuals respond to anxiety, social discomfort, and other challenging internal experiences.

2. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Fear of negative evaluation is particularly important during emerging adulthood, when individuals experience increased self-consciousness and social, academic, and interpersonal demands. Fear of being judged or rejected may lead to anxiety, social withdrawal, and difficulties in forming meaningful relationships. In contrast, social connectedness provides a sense of belonging, acceptance, and interpersonal support. Experiential avoidance may further influence how individuals cope with these social and emotional challenges, as persistent avoidance of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings can increase distress and limit social engagement.

Studying these relationships is especially relevant in the Indian context, where academic pressures and social expectations may influence sensitivity to evaluation and emotional regulation. Understanding how fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness contribute to experiential avoidance can provide valuable insights for counselling and social psychology. The findings may also help in developing interventions to reduce maladaptive avoidance, strengthen social connectedness, and improve the psychological well-being of emerging adults.

3. METHOD

Research Question

To what extent do fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness predict experiential avoidance among emerging adults?

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness among emerging adults.
- To examine the relationship between social connectedness and experiential avoidance among emerging adults.
- To examine the relationship between experiential avoidance and fear of negative evaluation among emerging adults.
- To examine the predictive influence of fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness on experiential avoidance among emerging adults.

Design of the study

The present study adopts a quantitative, predictive correlational research design to examine the relationships among fear of negative evaluation, social connectedness, and experiential avoidance in emerging adults. Numerical data are systematically collected and analysed using statistical methods to identify patterns and relationships objectively. The correlational approach examines the association between variables without manipulating them, while the predictive component determines whether fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness can predict experiential avoidance. As a non-experimental design, the study relies on observation and measurement of naturally occurring variables.

Sample

The sample for the present study consists of 200 emerging adults in the age range of 18 to 25 years. The participants were selected from various regions of Kerala using a convenience sampling technique. The sample included both male and female participants.

Tools Used

The **Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale-II (BFNE-II)**, developed by Carleton, Collimore, and Asmundson (2007), is a 12-item scale measuring fear of negative evaluation. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 to 4. The scale demonstrates excellent internal consistency, good test-retest reliability, and strong construct, convergent, and divergent validity.

The **Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ)**, developed by Gámez et al. (2014), is a shortened measure of experiential avoidance covering dimensions such as behavioral avoidance, distress aversion, procrastination, and suppression. It demonstrates good internal consistency and strong convergent and discriminant validity. Higher scores indicate greater experiential avoidance.

The **Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R)**, developed by Lee, Draper, and Lee (2001), measures an individual's sense of belonging, closeness, and connection with others. The revised scale consists of 8

items rated on a 6-point Likert scale. It has demonstrated high reliability and good validity, with higher scores indicating greater social connectedness.

Data Collection

Data were collected from emerging adults across different regions of Kerala using convenience sampling. After obtaining permission from relevant institutions, participants were approached both offline and online. The purpose of the study was explained, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured. Participants completed the questionnaires either through printed forms in a quiet setting or through Google Forms, with clear instructions provided.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS to examine the relationships between fear of negative evaluation, social connectedness, and experiential avoidance. After testing the data for normality, homogeneity, and linearity, violations of normality led to the use of Spearman's rank-order correlation to assess relationships among the variables. Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) was then used to determine whether fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness significantly predict experiential avoidance and to assess their individual contributions and the variance explained by the model.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected were scored, tabulated and also descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to arrive at the result of the study. The results obtained are discussed as follows:

Table 1: Showing relationship between Fear of negative evaluation and Social connectedness among emerging adults

Variables	N	r value	p value
Fear of negative evaluation	200	0.03	0.59
Social Connectedness			

The Spearman's correlation analysis presented in Table 1 found no significant relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness among emerging adults. This indicates that fear of negative evaluation was not significantly associated with individuals' sense of connection and belonging with others. Social connectedness may instead be influenced by other factors, such as personality, perceived social support, and relationship quality.

Table 2: Showing relationship between social connectedness and experiential avoidance among emerging adults

Variables	N	r value	p value
Social Connectedness	200	0.01	0.86
Experiential Avoidance			

The Spearman's correlation analysis presented in Table 2 revealed no significant relationship between social connectedness and experiential avoidance among emerging adults. This indicates that the tendency to avoid unpleasant thoughts, emotions, or internal experiences is not significantly associated with individuals' feelings of belonging, interpersonal closeness, or connection with others. Other factors, such

as emotional regulation, coping strategies, and situational stressors, may play a greater role in influencing these experiences.

Table 3: Showing relationship between experiential avoidance and fear of negative evaluation among emerging adults

Variables	N	r value	p value
Experiential Avoidance	200	0.31**	0.00
Fear of negative evaluation			

Significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed)

The Spearman's correlation analysis presented in Table 3 revealed a significant positive relationship between experiential avoidance and fear of negative evaluation. This indicates that individuals who experience greater fear of being negatively judged are more likely to engage in experiential avoidance. The findings suggest that concerns about negative evaluation may be associated with a greater tendency to avoid uncomfortable thoughts, emotions, or situations. Overall, the results indicate a close relationship between fear of negative evaluation and experiential avoidance among emerging adults.

Table 4: Model Summary of Multiple Regression predicting experiential avoidance.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R square	Standard error of the estimate
1	.28	.08	.07	11.63

The multiple regression analysis in Table 4 indicates that social connectedness and fear of negative evaluation have a moderate association with experiential avoidance but explain only a small proportion of its variance. The findings suggest that other psychological and situational factors may also contribute to experiential avoidance among emerging adults.

Table 5 : ANOVA for the Regression Model predicting experiential avoidance from fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness.

Model	Predictors	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
1	Regression	2407.68	2	1203.84	8.89	.00
	Residual	27063.92	200	135.32		
	Total	29471.61	202			

The significant ANOVA results in Table 5 indicate that social connectedness and fear of negative evaluation, when considered together, significantly predict experiential avoidance among emerging adults. Although some unexplained variance remains, the findings support the overall predictive ability of the regression model.

Table 6 : Multiple Regression Coefficients for fear of negative evaluation and social connectedness as predictors of experiential avoidance

Model	Predictor	B	Std. Error	β	t	sig
1	(Constant)	38.91	4.69	-	8.28	.00
	Fear of negative evaluation	.50	.11	.28	4.21	.00
	Social Connectedness	-.03	.12	-.02	-.29	.76

The multiple regression analysis in Table 6 indicates that fear of negative evaluation significantly predicts experiential avoidance, with greater fear associated with higher avoidance. In contrast, social connectedness has a minimal predictive effect. Overall, fear of negative evaluation appears to be a stronger predictor of experiential avoidance than social connectedness.

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that fear of negative evaluation is significantly related to and predicts experiential avoidance among emerging adults, while social connectedness shows no significant relationship and has limited predictive influence. These findings highlight the importance of addressing fear of negative judgment through counselling and interventions that promote self-acceptance, emotional regulation, and healthy coping strategies. Further research should explore other psychological and contextual factors that may contribute to experiential avoidance.

6. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should examine additional psychological and interpersonal factors, such as self-esteem, emotional regulation, and coping strategies, to better understand social and emotional functioning among emerging adults. Studies may also explore the influence of social media use, family support, and peer interactions on social connectedness and experiential avoidance. Longitudinal research could examine changes in fear of negative evaluation over time, while intervention studies may assess the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural and acceptance-based approaches. Further research across different educational, professional, and cultural settings is also recommended to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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