Rejection Sensitivity and Social Anxiety during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

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The present study was aimed at determining the relationship in rejection sensitivity and social anxiety in young adults of Pakistan, considering the present situation of the pandemic. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a positive correlation in rejection sensitivity and social anxiety. And that sensitivity towards rejection would significantly positively predict social anxiety. Through the purposive sampling technique, the data was collected by 222 individuals (*N*=222), 161 women and 61 men (*M_{age}*=21.81, *SD*=2.03) through online Google forms. The measures included adult rejection sensitivity questionnaire and social interaction anxiety scale. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed that rejection sensitivity had a significant positive correlation with social anxiety (α=.05). The linear regression analysis revealed that sensitivity to rejection was a positive predictor of anxiousness in social situations (α=.05). Conclusively, both the hypotheses were supported by the findings and futuristically it was suggested to incorporate extraneous variables and devise management plans based on rejection sensitivity's effect on anxiousness in social settings.

Keywords: *rejection sensitivity, social anxiety, COVID 19, Pandemic*

Introduction and Literature Review

In the wake of pandemic, public health SOPs can make individuals feel isolated, distanced and increase distress. Not only does it affect our mental health but also our central nervous system, cause cardiovascular malfunctions, excretive, digestive system disorders and affect immune and respiratory systems. The term anxiety neurosis was first coined by Freud, describing it as a condition with four major clinical ailments: common agitation, generalized anxiety disorder, fearfulness towards occurrences and irrational phobia (Haag, 2006). Whereas, social anxiety refers to distress when meeting and talking with people. Specifically, the central concerns include fears of being inarticulate, boring, not knowing what to say or how to respond within social interactions (Mattick &Clarke, 1998). Social anxiety disorder has been declared the third most prevalent mental health-related disorder in the world. Social anxieties' one month, one year, and throughout the life prevalence proportions and percentages are 1.3%,

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2.4%, and 4.0% globally (Stein, et al., 2017).

Preliminarily it can be established that due to the fear of getting disapproved the probability of feeling anxious in social situations increases. This is called rejection sensitivity. It is a cognitive-affective processing disposition to anxiously expect rejection, shaped by cognitive-social learning history and triggered in situations when either rejection or acceptance is possible (Berenson, et al., 2009). The rejection sensitivity framework showed that highly sensitive people would expect rejection more often. Their low interpersonal self-efficacy can be a further contributing element in their compromised psychological adjustment. Almost all youngsters who are rejected show either, low appraisal of prosocial conduct and high probabilities of disruptive or impulsive behavior (Bierman, 2004; Cillessen, Bukowski, & Haselager, 2000). One cause for this is that peer organizations establish reputational biases that act as stereotypes and have an impact on subsequent social interaction (Bierman, 2004).

In numerous social psychology experiments, humans chosen at random to receive messages of social exclusion grow to be aggressive, deceitful, less inclined to assist others, and much likely to pursue short-time over long-term goals. Rejection appears to steer rapidly self-defeating and antisocial behaviors (Hymel, Wagner, Butler, & L. J, 1990). With predisposing characteristics, it's probable that there is a genetic predisposition for rejection (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002).

Others have theorized that rejection sensitivity stems from early attachment relationships and parental rejection (Butler, Doherty, Potter &R. M, 2007)., but little direct empirical facts had been offered. Individuals with insecure attachment or rejection sensitivity experience higher levels of victimization and vulnerability in their romantic relationships (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

The level of social connectedness also determines the level of sensitivity towards rejection. Poor social connection stimulates psychological conditions which, in turn, can strengthen vulnerability to rejection. For many psychological conditions, such consequences can be particularly devastating for young people removed from social support networks during a crucial timeframe that correlates with high emergence levels (Drouin, Tobin, 2014).

Hence the vulnerability to the rejection is associated with low self-esteem. As it increases, both self-efficacy and potential in social interactions decreases (Smith, et al., 2020). Extreme sensitivity to rejection causes morbidities which include borderline personality disorder, somatic disorder and anxiety whereas its' extreme predicts social phobia and avoidant personality disorder (Jarcho, et al., 2015). Individuals with rejection sensitivity experience higher levels of victimization and vulnerability in their romantic relationships and are likely to believe that their partner is dissatisfied (Butler, Doherty, Potter & R. M, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Both variables are of clinical significance and prevalent occurrences. The aim of this research is to primarily focus on the relationship of rejection sensitivity and social anxiety in young adults during COVID-19 Pandemic. This study is helpful to fill the gaps of previous literature as this study mainly focus on rejection sensitivity and social anxiety that people experience in covid pandemic in Pakistan. The previous literature did not mainly study these variables and the population of Pakistan. This study will be helpful to provide the awareness to the people of Pakistan that how the rejection perception created emotional problems and increase the social anxiety in adults, also a sense of falling short, and failing to meet their own

high standards or others' expectations. It will also provide insight to the parents and teachers to deal with their children and students polity and to help them in the building of their confidence and do not realize them rejection in order to avoid the emotional distress and social anxiety.
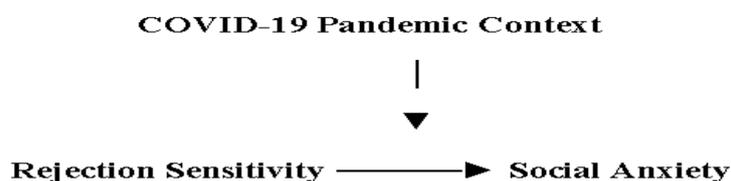
Conceptual Framework of Study

COVID-19 Pandemic Context

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Rejection Sensitivity ———————► Social Anxiety

Fig 1: Conceptual Diagram

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social anxiety among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To determine whether rejection sensitivity significantly predicts levels of social anxiety in young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypotheses of the Study

The following hypotheses were proposed:

1. Rejection sensitivity is likely to be positively correlated with social anxiety in young adults during COVID-19 Pandemic.
2. Rejection sensitivity is likely to be a significant positive predictor of social anxiety in young adults during COVID-19 Pandemic.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

A correlational research design was used for the present study.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

Purposive sample included young adults from both private as well as government institutions. The sample size was determined through G power analysis with medium effect size, alpha coefficient (α err prob.) as 0.05, power (1-β err prob.) as 0.085 and number of predictors as 21. The total sample size calculated to be 175 (N=175). Individuals above the age of 17 years and below 40 years, were included in the sample. The individuals suffering from any mental and physical illnesses were excluded from the sample by the self-report personal information sheet

Measures

Demographic Information Sheet. The demographic information sheet was also utilized comprising of questions eliciting information regarding the participant's age, gender, marital status and level of education.

Adult-Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ; Berenson, 2009). The self-report 18 item Adult-Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Berenson, et al., 2009) was used for this study. The ARSQ comprises of nine hypothetical scenarios. The responses are recorded over a 6 point-Likert scale with scores ranging from 1- 36. This questionnaire is used to measure the magnitude of rejection sensitivity in adults. The alpha level as reported by the original authors

of was α=0.70 (Norona, Salvatore, Welsh & Darling, 2014) whereas internal consistency of this questionnaire for the present study was α = 0.85.

Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick, 1999). To measure the social anxiety the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick, and Clarke, 1998) was used. It is 20 items scale with responses to be recorded on a 5 point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 0 to 4. The tool assesses a general construct of fear when involved in social interactions. Internal consistency for this scale was found to be α = 0.70 whereas internal consistency was α = 0.78 for the current study.

Procedure

Initially, approval for conducting research was sought from Research Committee at the Center for Clinical Psychology, Lahore, Pakistan. After the provision of permission, while meeting all the ethical considerations, a pilot study was conducted to determine the reliability of the measures, time taken for completion, the ability of the measures and understanding of the participants. A total of ten individuals (*N* = 10; six women and four men) were approached. The feedback obtained from the pilot study was positive and it was observed that the measures were reliable and they actually fulfill the purpose required by them. The main study was conducted after the positive feedback from pilot study.

Each participant was provided with an information sheet containing essential knowledge regarding the research. Written informed consent was sought from the participants. The adult-rejection sensitivity questionnaire (ARSQ), social interaction anxiety scale (SIAS) and personal information sheet were used to collect data. The data collection was completed in a month's span, online (via Google forms) and each participant took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to respond to the questionnaire. A total of 300 forms were sent out and 260 responses received. Thus, the response rate was 86.7%. After the screening of data 222 participants formulated the sample of the present study. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained, only the authors had access to the collected data.

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Frequency (%) Age, Gender, Marital Status, Family System, Number of Siblings, Birth Order and Education Level.

Variables	Mean (S.D)	*f* (%)
Age	21.81 (2.028)	
Gender		
Male		61 (27.5%)
Female		161 (72.5%)
Marital-Status		
Single		216 (97.3%)
Married		6 (2.7%)
Family System		
Joint		55 (24.8%)
Nuclear		167 (75.2%)
Number of Siblings		
0-4 siblings		181 (81.5%)
5-8 siblings		41 (18.5%)

Birth Order	
First Born	72 (32.4%)
Middle Born	89 (40.1%)
Last Born	58 (26.1%)
Only Child	3 (1.4%)
Education Level	
Intermediate	44 (19.8%)
Bachelors	159 (71.6%)
Post Grad	19 (8.6%)

The sample comprised young adults with a mean age of 21.81 years (SD = 2.03). A majority of participants were female (72.5%) and single (97.3%). Most belonged to nuclear families (75.2%) and reported having 0–4 siblings (81.5%). In terms of birth order, middle-born individuals were most common (40.1%), followed by first-born (32.4%) and last-born (26.1%). Regarding education, the majority were pursuing or had completed a bachelor's degree (71.6%).

Table 2

Correlation Analysis of Rejection Sensitivity and Social Anxiety

Variables	**1**	**2**	**M**	**SD**
1 Rejection Sensitivity	-	0.15*	10.33	3.37
2 Social Anxiety		-	39.83	10.66

*Note. *p<.05*

Pearson product moment correlation analysis was run to determine the relationship in study variables. The results revealed that, rejection sensitivity was positively significantly correlated with social anxiety which implies that higher levels of rejection sensitivity would lead to higher experiences of anxiousness in social situations.

Table 3

Rejection Sensitivity as Predictor of Social Anxiety

Predictors	**Social Anxiety**	
	ΔR^2	B
Rejection Sensitivity	.02*	.15*
Total R^2	.06*	

*Note. *p<.05*

Furthermore, the results of linear regression (as shown in Table 2) depicted that rejection sensitivity explained 2% of variance in social anxiety as $F(1, 220) = 4.91$, $p<.05$ indicated that rejection sensitivity was significantly positively predicting social anxiety in young adults.

Discussion

The research was aimed at studying the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social anxiety in young adults. Through the findings it has been established that rejection sensitivity is indeed related to social anxiety and also positively predicts social anxiety whereas it has also been established that education has an adverse relationship with the level of anxiety in social settings.

Hypothesis 1 stated that there was likely to be a significant positive relationship among rejection sensitivity and social anxiety variables, which (as already discussed in the literature review as well) has ascertained that higher levels of sensitivity towards rejection are associated with higher levels of feelings of anxiousness in social situations. This also implies that for higher levels of rejection sensitivity, in order to minimize disapproval, there would be more social anxiety and lower self-esteem. Hence the individuals who tend to be more social have to lower their rejection sensitivity in order to feel blended and more present in the community or interactions.

Naturalistically, self-doubting and misinterpretation of one's own abilities merely on the basis of other individual's judgment or facing embarrassment leads towards a sense of personal inadequacy and misunderstanding among interpersonal relationships (Harb, et al., 2002). As cliché as it may sound but when individuals draw back from a certain stimulus, they do it on the basis of feeling insecure due to that stimulus and avoidance then reinforces their ideology thus, retaining the distorted pattern of thoughts. Therefore, in order to feel less hostile towards others, it must be noted that isolation is not the solution because it nurtures the negative patterns and lessens the susceptibility towards rejection. Individuals need to realize that they do not serve the purpose of pleasing others, if they are kind, humane and are being ethical then this for them is enough to extend out to other individuals, once they start perceiving themselves as the center of all discrimination then negative self-view generates, which diminishes one's own abilities in one's view.

Furthermore, the second hypothesis stated that rejection sensitivity would be a positive predictor of social anxiety. The results supported this hypothesis ($\beta=0.14*$). It was revealed that 15% of variance caused in social anxiety (outcome) could be explained by rejection sensitivity (predictor). This supports the idea of avoiding or having problems in social relationships due to the sensitivity towards being rejected. The correlation also supports the idea that since sensitivity towards rejection is present therefore the individual feels anxiousness and adapts avoidant and isolation behaviors, this supports rather nurtures the individual's susceptibility towards rejection. As, there is a hierarchy to through which habits form: *cues*, leading towards *routine* and then *rewards* (Duhigg, 2012).

If this hierarchy is kept in mind and the patterns of behavior of an individual facing social anxiety is studied then it would reveal that their behaviors modulate and keep affirm their negative perception of the cues. The study revealed a significant positive relationship between rejection sensitivity and social anxiety, consistent with prior findings that higher sensitivity towards rejection is associated with greater anxiousness in social situations.

This implies that individuals with elevated rejection sensitivity may experience heightened social anxiety and diminished self-esteem, particularly in efforts to avoid disapproval. Recent Pakistani research supports this pattern, showing that rejection sensitivity negatively impacts psychological well-being, with self-esteem acting as a moderator in this

relationship (Zulfiqar, et al., 2024). Similarly, evidence from young adults with visible physical disabilities in Punjab demonstrated that rejection sensitivity was positively associated with social anxiety, and cognitive fusion further intensified this link (Ameen, et al., 2025). Moreover, trauma-informed perspectives in Pakistan suggest that childhood trauma increases rejection sensitivity, which in turn fosters interpersonal cognitive distortions and social withdrawal (Rehman & Quddos, 2025).

International studies echo these findings. For example, research in the United States has shown that rejection sensitivity predicts social anxiety and depressive symptoms, particularly when individuals engage in maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (Berenson et al., 2009). More recent European evidence highlights that rejection sensitivity contributes to interpersonal avoidance and reinforces negative self-perceptions, thereby sustaining social anxiety (Staebler et al., 2011). These global findings complement the Pakistani context, suggesting that while cultural differences may shape the expression of rejection sensitivity, the underlying mechanisms—such as cognitive biases, low self-esteem, and avoidance—remain consistent across populations.

Together, these findings emphasize that while rejection sensitivity predicts social anxiety, moderators such as self-esteem and cognitive fusion, as well as early trauma experiences, deepen the susceptibility. This underscores the importance of culturally relevant interventions in Pakistan that target cognitive biases, strengthen self-esteem, and address trauma-related schemas to reduce social anxiety.

Conclusion of the Study

The present study examined the relationship between rejection sensitivity and social anxiety among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings confirmed that rejection sensitivity was positively correlated with social anxiety and significantly predicted it, explaining a notable proportion of variance. This suggests that individuals who are highly sensitive to rejection tend to experience greater anxiousness in social situations, often reinforcing avoidance behaviors and negative self-perceptions. The results highlight how rejection concerns can undermine self-esteem and contribute to cycles of withdrawal and insecurity, particularly during periods of social disruption such as the pandemic. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing rejection sensitivity as a key factor in understanding and managing social anxiety. Interventions that focus on building self-confidence, reducing maladaptive thought patterns, and encouraging healthier interpersonal engagement may help young adults break free from avoidance cycles and foster more positive social relationships.

Strengths of the Study

A major strength of this study lies in its timeliness and relevance, as it explored rejection sensitivity and social anxiety among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic—a period marked by heightened isolation and interpersonal challenges. The study contributes to psychological research in the Pakistani context, offering culturally specific insights into how rejection concerns shape social anxiety. The quantitative design allowed for clear identification of predictive relationships, with rejection sensitivity explaining a notable proportion of variance in social anxiety. These findings not only advance theoretical understanding but also provide practical implications for devising management and treatment plans for individuals experiencing anxiety-related morbidities.

Limitations and Suggestions of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. Data collection was conducted online due to pandemic restrictions, which limited researcher control over participant engagement and may have introduced fatigue or inattentive responses. The reliance on self-report measures also raises the possibility of response biases. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, as associations were captured at a single point in time. Future research should employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to better understand the developmental trajectory of rejection sensitivity and social anxiety. Expanding samples to diverse age groups and clinical populations would enhance generalizability, while incorporating qualitative insights could provide richer understanding of cultural and contextual influences.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study highlight the importance of creating awareness among the general public about rejection sensitivity, which often remains unnoticed yet contributes to long-term mental health problems such as social anxiety. By recognizing how easily rejection is expressed within communities, interventions can be designed to promote empathy, reduce avoidant behaviors, and encourage healthier social interactions. Awareness campaigns and educational programs may help individuals understand the detrimental effects of rejection sensitivity, thereby fostering resilience and self-esteem. Moreover, these results provide a foundation for future research with diverse samples to develop culturally relevant treatment strategies.

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