



Research Article

## Predictive Influence on Rejection Sensitivity and Self-Esteem on Social Anxiety Among Young Adults

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### Abstract

With a focus on how rejection sensitivity bumps up or drops, self-esteem, and where that connects into gender differences in social anxiety, this study took a look at what affects young adults emotional health. The researchers went with a one-shot, non-experimental, cross-sectional type of design, using theories on being sensitive to others and how we think of ourselves. They took 111 people within the age group 18 to 30 by convenience sampling. Data was collected using common self-report instruments such as the Social Interaction.

Anxiety Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the adult version of the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. The impact of rejection sensitivity on self-esteem was tested using linear regression, and the impact of gender on social anxiety was tested using the independent samples t-test. The results showed that there was a tangled relationship among these variables: high levels of rejection sensitivity were a strong predictor of self-esteem, and the relationship was quite positive. Plus, women said they experienced much higher social anxiety than men. The study emphasises the significance of being sensitive to context and gender-inclusive mental health therapies and shows how interpersonal awareness and gender shape emotional experiences during early adulthood.

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**KEYWORDS:** Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Esteem, Social Anxiety, Young Adults, Gender Differences, Interpersonal Sensitivity Psychological Adjustment, Emotional Well-being

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity refers to a dispositional tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and strongly react to perceived or actual rejection in interpersonal situations. Individuals with high rejection sensitivity are often highly alert to social cues and may interpret neutral or ambiguous interactions as signs of rejection. This heightened sensitivity can lead to strong emotional responses such as anxiety, sadness, anger, or embarrassment. Behaviourally, rejection sensitivity may result in defensive reactions, withdrawal from relationships, or avoidance of social situations.

Persistent rejection sensitivity can negatively influence emotional well-being and interpersonal functioning. Individuals who constantly anticipate rejection may find it difficult to develop secure relationships and may experience repeated misunderstandings in social interactions. In many cases, the fear of rejection leads individuals to behave in ways that unintentionally create distance in relationships, reinforcing their expectations of rejection.

### Theories of Rejection Sensitivity

Several psychological theories explain the development of rejection sensitivity by focusing on early experiences, cognitive patterns, emotional responses, and interpersonal interactions.

#### Attachment Theory Perspective

Attachment theory suggests that rejection sensitivity may develop from early relationships with caregivers. When caregivers are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, or rejecting, children may develop insecure attachment patterns. These experiences shape expectations about relationships and influence how individuals interpret social interactions later in life. Individuals with insecure attachment often anticipate rejection or abandonment and remain highly sensitive to cues that might signal disapproval.

#### Cognitive-Affective Processing Theory

Cognitive-affective processing theory explains rejection sensitivity as a pattern of thoughts and emotions activated in situations involving social evaluation. Individuals high in rejection sensitivity often interpret ambiguous social cues as negative. These interpretations trigger emotional reactions such as anxiety or anger, which then influence behaviour. As a result, individuals may become defensive, withdraw from relationships, or seek constant reassurance.

#### Social Learning Theory

From a social learning perspective, rejection sensitivity develops through repeated experiences of criticism, rejection, or social exclusion. Individuals gradually learn to associate social interactions with negative outcomes. These learned expectations influence how individuals respond to future social situations and may encourage avoidance or defensive behaviours.

### Interpersonal Theory

Interpersonal theory emphasises the reciprocal nature of rejection sensitivity in relationships. Individuals who fear rejection may display behaviours such as excessive reassurance seeking, hostility, or emotional withdrawal. These behaviours can sometimes lead others to respond negatively, reinforcing the individual's expectation of rejection and maintaining the cycle.

### Critical Analysis of Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity provides an important framework for understanding emotional vulnerability in interpersonal relationships. It explains why some individuals react strongly to situations involving evaluation or criticism. However, the concept has limitations. It often focuses on vulnerability while giving less attention to protective factors such as resilience, emotional regulation, and supportive relationships.

Not everyone who experiences rejection develops high rejection sensitivity, suggesting that personal coping abilities and social support play a significant role. In addition, rejection sensitivity relies heavily on subjective interpretations of social cues, making it difficult to distinguish between actual rejection and perceived rejection. Despite these limitations, the concept remains useful for understanding interpersonal difficulties.

### 1.2 Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their own worth and value. It reflects how people perceive their abilities, characteristics, and social significance. Individuals with healthy self-esteem generally demonstrate emotional stability, confidence, and the ability to cope effectively with criticism or setbacks. In contrast, low self-esteem is often associated with negative self-perception, self-doubt, and heightened sensitivity to failure or criticism.

Self-esteem plays an important role in psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships. It influences how individuals interpret feedback, approach challenges, and interact with others. A stable sense of self-worth can promote resilience, while low self-esteem may contribute to emotional distress and social difficulties.

### Theories of Self-Esteem

Several psychological perspectives explain the development and functioning of self-esteem.

#### Humanistic Theory

Humanistic psychology emphasises the importance of acceptance and unconditional positive regard in the development of self-esteem. When individuals receive empathy, understanding, and support from significant others, they are more likely to develop a positive sense of self. However, when acceptance is conditional, individuals may experience self-doubt and reduced self-worth.

### Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theory explains self-esteem through self-schemas and core beliefs about oneself. These beliefs develop from personal experiences and influence how individuals interpret successes, failures, and feedback from others. Negative thinking patterns, such as overgeneralization or excessive self-criticism, can weaken self-esteem.

### Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities and achievements with those of others. Upward comparisons may lower self-esteem, while downward comparisons may increase feelings of competence. Social and cultural environments, therefore play a significant role in shaping self-esteem.

### Sociometer Theory

According to sociometer theory, self-esteem functions as an internal indicator of social acceptance and belonging. When individuals feel valued and included, self-esteem tends to increase. Conversely, feelings of rejection or exclusion may lead to a decrease in self-esteem.

### Critical Evaluation of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is widely considered an important concept in psychology because of its strong association with mental health and resilience. Individuals with healthy self-esteem often display greater confidence, motivation, and emotional stability. However, excessively high or unstable self-esteem may lead to defensiveness or difficulty accepting criticism.

Researchers have also noted conceptual overlap between self-esteem and related constructs such as self-concept and self-efficacy. Additionally, self-esteem may vary across different social contexts and cultural backgrounds. Despite these limitations, self-esteem remains a valuable construct for understanding psychological adjustment.

### 1.3 Social Interaction Anxiety

Social interaction anxiety refers to the fear of being negatively evaluated, criticised, or embarrassed during social interactions. Individuals experiencing this form of anxiety often become highly self-conscious and worry about appearing awkward or incompetent in front of others. These feelings may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, and rapid heartbeat.

Social interaction anxiety can significantly affect daily functioning. Individuals may avoid initiating conversations, hesitate to participate in group activities, or feel uncomfortable when meeting new people. As a result, social anxiety may interfere with academic performance, relationships, and overall well-being.

### Theories of Social Interaction Anxiety

Several theoretical perspectives explain the development of social interaction anxiety.

### Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theory suggests that social anxiety arises from negative beliefs about oneself and distorted interpretations of social situations. Individuals with social anxiety often assume that others are judging them harshly, which increases self-consciousness and fear.

### Cognitive-Behavioural Theory

The cognitive-behavioural perspective emphasises the interaction between negative thoughts and avoidance behaviours. Avoiding social situations may temporarily reduce anxiety, but prevents individuals from learning that social interactions are often less threatening than they expect.

### Learning Theory

Learning theory proposes that social anxiety may develop through past experiences of criticism, rejection, or embarrassment. These experiences create associations between social situations and fear, which may persist over time.

### Social Skills Deficit Theory

According to this theory, anxiety may occur when individuals believe they lack adequate social skills. Fear of appearing awkward or incompetent can increase anxiety and encourage avoidance of social situations.

### Critical Analysis of Social Interaction Anxiety

Social interaction anxiety provides a useful framework for understanding fear and discomfort in interpersonal situations. It explains behaviours such as avoidance, heightened self-consciousness, and emotional distress during social encounters. However, critics argue that the concept may emphasise fear responses while paying less attention to coping strategies and resilience. Additionally, much of the research relies on self-report measures, which can make it difficult to distinguish between clinical anxiety and normal situational nervousness. Cultural differences may also influence how social anxiety is expressed. Nevertheless, social interaction anxiety remains an important concept for understanding interpersonal difficulties.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**Guo et al. (2025)** addresses the question of the juggling by young folks of the conflicting self-challenges: social anxiety, fear of a bad rating, and self-esteem. They found that those with low self-esteem are more likely to freak out about judgment, that they will be judged harshly, which then bumps up their social anxiety. The study suggests that bad thought patterns that keep social anxiety alive are the result of negative self-beliefs. Basically, a big piece of getting social anxiety is low self-esteem. The authors say what we need are treatments that help people with social anxiety figure out a clearer sense of themselves.

**Zhu et al. (2025)** investigated the role of social anxiety as a mediator between maladaptive behavioural patterns and self-esteem. The results showed that people with low self-esteem had more social anxiety, which increased their vulnerability to

unhealthy coping mechanisms. This study provides empirical support for the idea that poor self-esteem influences general functioning through the psychological pathway of social anxiety. The findings highlight the intimate connection between social anxiety and self-esteem and suggest that improving self-esteem may lessen maladaptive behaviours brought on by anxiety.

**Ayed et al. (2024)** investigated the relationship between undergraduate students' social anxiety and sense of self. The findings showed a strong inverse connection, suggesting that social anxiety was positively correlated with poor self-esteem. Disparities by gender were noted, with female students expressing somewhat higher levels of social anxiety. According to the authors, low self-esteem increases sensitivity to social criticism, which in turn causes social avoidance and dread. These results support the notion that self-esteem is a cross-culturally significant safeguard against social anxiety.

**Liu et al. (2024)** conducted a long-term study to look at self-esteem trends and how they affect mental health outcomes. Their results demonstrated that a rise in internalising issues, such as social anxiety, was linked to a gradual reduction in self-esteem. The study also found that there were reciprocal effects, meaning that increased anxiety led to even lower levels of self-esteem. These results show a reciprocal association between social anxiety and self-esteem, which is consistent with susceptibility and scar theories. The case for esteem for oneself as a predicted risk factor is strengthened by the longitudinal approach.

**Minihan et al. (2023)** examined the body of research on social rejection hypersensitivity and how it contributes to adolescent mental problems. According to the review, social anxiety and rejection sensitivity are strongly correlated, especially when it comes to heightened threat perception and skewed social information interpretation. Teens who're extra sensitive to rejection tend to expect a lot of rejection, which suggests they pull back and become anxious about it. The researchers say this rejection sensitivity could be a genetic flaw that comes before the appearance of social anxiety.

**Lal (2023)** checked out the way avoidance and rejection sensitivity provide indicators of anxiety in adults, nonetheless who're nonetheless maturing. They found, a lot more common about avoidance situations, making Which Social Anxiety was worse, in people who're super sensitive on the rejection. The study shows that avoidance and being sensitive to others go hand in hand to keep social anxiety going. Therapies that focus on relationships and acceptance are not really suitable for us, we wonder.

**Tan et al. (2023)** conducted a long-term study of teens in terms of social anxiety, rejectionsensitivity, and empathy. They discovered that a lack of empathy allows a short leap to a state of being anxious based on rejection sensitivity. The unreliable question for teens was: "Teens who were rejected a lot were more likely to treat social situations as risky." These results highlight the importance of rejection sensitivity being the social-half glue that holds anxiety's beginning.

**Zaid (2023)** inquired about the social anxiety that is associated with rejection sensitivity in college students. The study found a strong positive association - the people who anticipate rejection are more likely to be socially anxious. This provides support for the proposal that rejection sensitivity is a red flag for diverse disorders. Plus, it adds to our map for crossing the peninsula cultures of anxiety, and how people feel towards themselves around other people.

**Brekalo et al. (2022)** examined the effect of experiencing rejection on appearance on the association between body image problems and social anxiety. They discovered that when people who are highly rejection-sensitive and socially anxious have been thinking poorly of themselves, those thoughts have stuck. It hurts their self-esteem and body image. The research reveals the connection between social anxiety and general self-concept issues and rejection sensitivity.

**Noda et al (2022)** looked at the avoidance habits of socially anxious folks - think anxious-depression; shaped by rejection sensitivity. They found that the hotter their anxiety is, and the more they avoid stuff, the higher their rejection sensitivity is. Whether way straight up or through other routes, rejection sensitivity pumps up bad coping tactics. This points to how important it is that social anxiety helps address the sensing of interpersonal threats in people.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Aim:

The current study aims to evaluate distinctions between genders in social anxiety among young adults and investigate whether rejection sensitivity is a major predictor of self-esteem.

#### 3.2 Objectives:

1. To investigate how rejection sensitivity predicts young adults' self-esteem.
2. To evaluate how young people's social anxiety varies by gender.
3. To evaluate a sample of young people's general levels of social anxiety, self-esteem, and rejection sensitivity.

#### 3.3Hypotheses:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Young adults' self-esteem will be substantially predicted by their rejection sensitivity.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Young adults' levels of social anxiety will range significantly by gender.

#### 3.4Variables:

##### Independent variables

- Rejection sensitivity
- Gender

##### Dependent variables

- Self-esteem
- Social anxiety

### 3.5 Research design:

The current study used a cross-sectional, quantitative, non-experimental research approach with two parts:

#### 1. The use of predictive research design

To find out if rejection sensitivity predicts young adults' self-esteem, a predictive study method was employed.

1. The estimator (independent variable) was rejection sensitivity.
2. The result (dependent variable) was self-esteem.
3. To investigate the degree to which rejection sensitivity accounts for variance in self-esteem, this hypothesis was evaluated using linear regression analysis.

#### 2. Design of comparative study

Gender variations in social anxiety were examined using a comparative study approach.

- The grouping variable was gender. Additionally, the dependent variable was social anxiety.
- An autonomous measures t-test, which compares the mean levels of social anxiety among male and female participants, was used to test this hypothesis.

### 3.6 Nature:

- Non-experimental: there was no variable adjustment.
- Cross-sectional: information was gathered all at once.
- Quantitative: All factors were measured using validated self-report questionnaires.

### 3.7 Rationale:

Since the goal of the study was to determine if the sensitivity to rejection predicts self-esteem as opposed to only finding a connection, the forecasting design was suitable for hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2, which examined gender disparities in social anxiety, required a comparative design. The goals of the study and the statistical techniques used—regression analysis and the independent samples t-test—are in line with this mixed design approach.

### 3.8 Sample and Sample Selection:

#### The size of the sample

In quantitative psychology research, the final sample size of 111 young people is sufficient for performing a regression plus an independent samples t-test analysis.

#### Population

Young people living in India, especially those engaged in or seeking higher education, were part of the target audience.

#### Age range

The participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, which corresponds to the young adult developmental period.

#### Gender

Due to the inclusion of both male and female individuals in the sample, gender distinctions in social anxiousness could be compared.

### Method of sampling

Because convenience sampling is feasible, accessible, and appropriate for questionnaire-based research, it was employed to find participants. Online resources and educational institutions were used to contact participants.

### 3.9 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

**The following criteria were used to determine who was eligible to participate in the study:**

- Were in the 18–25 age range.
- Capable of reading and comprehending English
- Given their informed agreement to take part

**Participants were disqualified based on the following criteria:**

- Said to have a serious mental illness that was diagnosed
- Filled out surveys that were either invalid or incomplete.

### 3.10 Description of tools used:

#### 1. Adult rejection sensitivity questionnaire (a-rsq):

To measure rejection sensitivity in adults, the adult version of the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (a-rsq), was developed. It is a standardized self-report measure that includes nine hypothetical interpersonal situations with potential acceptance or rejection, followed by two items measuring rejection concern as well as acceptance expectancy, each rated on a scale of six. Rejection sensitivity scores are computed by multiplying rejection concern by reverse-scored favorable reaction expectancy and averaging for every situations; higher values indicate higher levels of rejection sensitivity. The a-rsq has shown good reliability and validity and is frequently used in psychological research.

#### 2. Rosenberg self-esteem scale (rses):

One popular self-report indicator of overall self-worth is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Ten items total, each having a four-point scale of Likert rating. Reverse scoring applies to entries 2,, 5, 6, 8, and 9. Greater self-esteem is indicated by higher overall scores. The scale has proven to be highly valid and reliable in a variety of demographics.

#### 3. Social interaction anxiety scale (sias):

A self-report tool called the Social Interaction, Anxiety Scale (SIAS) is used to quantify social anxiety. On a scale of five points, which goes from "not at all characteristic" to "extremely characteristic," twenty things are scored. Anxiety over social interactions is reflected in higher scores. The sias has shown strong concept validity and great internal consistency.

### 3.11 Procedure:

Participants were contacted via educational institutions and internet channels. Informed permission was acquired following an explanation of the study's objectives. Participants received guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. The following sequence was used to administer the questionnaires:

1. Demographic information
2. The A-RSQ, or the adult., Rejection Sensitivity, Questionnaire
3. Self-esteem scale by Rosenberg
4. Anxiety scale for social interactions

There are no correct or incorrect responses, and participants were told to answer honestly. It took around twenty to twenty-five minutes in total to finish the questions.

### 3.12 Ethical Considerations:

1. All participants gave their informed consent;

2. All participants were free to withdraw at any time;
3. All data were used only for academic reasons;
4. All participants' participation was voluntary.

## 4. RESULT

### 4.1 Regression Analysis for Hypothesis 1:

To test Hypothesis 1, a linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether rejection sensitivity significantly predicts self-esteem among young adults.

## Multiple Linear Regression Predicting *Self-Esteem* from *Rejection Sensitivity*

Predictor	Estimate ( $\beta$ )	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Intercept	11.478	2.4202	4.743	<.001
<b>Rejection Sensitivity</b>	0.168	0.0688	<b>2.443</b>	<b>0.017</b>
Model Summary	<i>R</i> = .786	<i>R</i> .618	<i>N</i> = 111	
	<i>R</i> = 0.786, <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> = 0.618			
	<i>N</i> = 111			
<b>Note.</b> Rejection sensitivity significantly predicted self-esteem, $\beta = .168$ , $t(97) = 2.44$ , $p = .017$ .				

Fig 4.1: Multiple linear regression predicting self-esteem from rejection sensitivity

Regression analysis findings showed that self-esteem was strongly predicted by rejection sensitivity ( $\beta = 0.168$ ,  $t = 2.44$ ,  $p = .017$ ). This result implies that rejection sensitivity had a major role in the current sample's self-esteem prediction. The relationship's positive direction suggests that among young people, a greater degree of rejection sensitivity are related to higher levels of self-esteem. As a result, even if the relationship's direction deviated from the theoretically

anticipated one, Hypothesis 1 received statistical support.

### 4.2 Independent Samples t-Test evaluating Gender Differences for Social Anxiety (Hypothesis 2):

To investigate whether there were significant differences in social anxiety levels between male and female young people, a t-test for independent samples (Welch's t-test) was used.

**Table 2**  
*Independent Samples t-Test Comparing  
Social Anxiety Between Genders*

Variable	<i>t</i> (Welch's)	df	<i>p</i>
Social Anxiety	-2.313	65.1	0.024

Note. A significant gender difference was found in social anxiety,  $t(65.1) = -2.31, p = .024$ .

Source: Independent Samples t-test output

Fig 4.2: Independent samples t-test comparing social anxiety between genders

A substantially significant gender disparity in social anxiety was found in the data ( $t(65.1) = -2.31, p = .024$ ). Compared to male participants, female individuals reported far greater levels of social anxiety.

Hypothesis 2 was therefore validated.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The present study examined psychological functioning among young adults by testing two primary hypotheses: (a) whether rejection sensitivity significantly predicts self-esteem, and (b) whether social anxiety differs across gender. Linear regression analysis was used to test the first hypothesis, while an independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in social anxiety. The findings provide insight into how interpersonal sensitivity and gender-related factors influence emotional experiences in young adulthood.

The results supported Hypothesis 1, showing that rejection sensitivity significantly predicted self-esteem ( $\beta = .168, t = 2.44, p = .017$ ). Interestingly, the relationship between the two variables was positive, indicating that individuals with higher rejection sensitivity also reported higher levels of self-esteem in the present sample. This finding differs from traditional theoretical expectations, which generally suggest that rejection sensitivity is associated with lower self-esteem because individuals who strongly fear rejection often develop negative self-perceptions. However, the current results suggest that the relationship may be more complex than previously assumed.

The overall regression model explained a substantial proportion of variance in self-esteem ( $R^2 = .618$ ), indicating that the model effectively captured factors influencing participants' self-evaluations. It is important to note that this explained variance reflects the combined influence of variables within the model rather than the effect of rejection sensitivity alone. Thus, self-esteem may be shaped by multiple interacting psychological and social factors.

One possible explanation for the positive association is the presence of compensatory mechanisms. Individuals who are highly sensitive to rejection may engage in behaviours that help protect or reinforce their self-image, such as striving to meet social expectations or presenting themselves positively in social contexts. In environments where social approval and achievement are emphasized, this heightened awareness of interpersonal evaluation may motivate individuals to maintain a strong self-concept. Cultural and developmental factors may also play a role, particularly during young adulthood, a period characterized by identity formation and increased concern about social acceptance. These findings highlight the importance of examining psychological constructs within specific social and cultural contexts rather than relying solely on theoretical assumptions.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported, as the t-test revealed a significant gender difference in social anxiety ( $t = 2.31, p = .024$ ). Female participants reported higher levels of social anxiety than male participants. This finding is consistent with existing literature suggesting that women tend to report greater levels of interpersonal sensitivity and anxiety in social situations. Socialization processes and cultural expectations may contribute to this pattern. Women are often encouraged to maintain harmonious relationships and may experience greater pressure related to social evaluation and judgment. Additionally, women may be more likely to recognize and report internal emotional experiences such as anxiety.

Overall, the findings suggest that both rejection sensitivity and gender play meaningful roles in understanding emotional functioning during young adulthood. While rejection sensitivity significantly predicted self-esteem in an unexpected positive direction, the clear gender differences observed in social anxiety highlight the importance of considering gender-related experiences when studying psychological well-being. These results emphasize that emotional outcomes in young adults are

shaped by a combination of cognitive, interpersonal, and social influences.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Basically, this study examined two important psych interactions in young adults, i.e. the relative flip between gender and social anxiety as well as between the sensitivity to rejection and self-esteem. The takeaway is that the dance between social sensitivity, mental functioning and cultural cues is complicated and is what we had sort of guessed.

The regression data indicated rejection sensitivity is a good statistical predictor of self esteem. Crazy enough, the relationship was positive - which meant that folks with higher self-esteem also had more rejection sensitivity. That reverses the typical theory, which tends to associate rejection sensitivity with reduced self-worth.

So it's possible that the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem is messier, maybe showing that super sensitive people have extra self-awareness, self-monitoring, or drive to have a good self-image instead of just hurting their self-worth.

The t-test also revealed a large gender gap in social anxiety: women experienced more anxiety about social interactions than men. That aligns with other research showing that women are more likely to experience social anxiety due to social pressures, concerns with approval and an emphasis on maintaining the peace in relationships. It highlights the continuing important role of gender in young people's responses to anxiety.

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