

The Mediating Role of Social Anxiety between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Online Self-Presentation in Young Adults: A Collectivist Cultural Perspective

Saira Majeed, Waqar-un-Nisa Faizi, Urooj Niaz, and Muhammad Kamran

Abstract

Background: The increasing immersion in digital environments has heightened concerns about psychological factors influencing online self-presentation (OSP), especially among young adults. This study examines the relationship between fear of negative evaluation (FNE) and OSP, with Social Anxiety (SA) as a potential mediator, within a collectivist cultural context.

Method: A cross-sectional design with convenience sampling was employed, involving 200 participants (131 men, 69 women) with age ranged of 16 to 32 years ($M = 24.25$, $SD = 2.85$), recruited from educational institutions and social media platforms across Pakistan. Four standardized measures were used, including the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE-S), the Social Anxiety Interaction Scale (SAIS), and the Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS).

Results: The results indicated a significant positive association between FNE and OSP. Further the results demonstrated that SA significantly and partially mediated this relationship ($\beta = -0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.33, -0.07]$). These findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of FNE tend to experience greater social anxiety, which in turn contributes to more controlled, deliberate, and strategic online self-presentation behaviors.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of FNE are more likely to experience social anxiety, which subsequently contributes to more strategic and controlled online self-presentation. The study highlights the cognitive-affective pathways involved in digital identity construction in collectivist cultures. Interventions targeting FNE and SA may promote healthier online behaviors among young adults.

Keywords: Fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, online self-presentation, digital identity construction, impression management strategies, emerging adulthood.

1. Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Pakistan.
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Islamia College Peshawar, Pakistan.
3. Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Pakistan.
4. Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Loralai, Balochistan, Pakistan.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Saira Majeed, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Pakistan. Email: sairamajeed068@gmail.com.

This scholarly work, made accessible through an Open Access framework, operates under the auspices of a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. This license facilitates broad utilization, provided that due credit is accorded to the original authors and the source is duly acknowledged. Moreover, adherence to the guidelines set forth by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) ensures the integrity of the publication process. For further details regarding the licensing terms, please refer to the following link: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Background

In recent years, the proliferation of digital platforms and social networking sites has significantly transformed interpersonal communication, self-expression, and identity formation, particularly among young adults. Online self-presentation the deliberate and strategic portrayal of the self in digital contexts—has emerged as a central mechanism of contemporary social interaction (Muyidi, 2025). These digital spaces offer individuals increased control over how they are perceived by others, allowing for the selective disclosure of information, curated imagery, and crafted status updates aimed at enhancing social desirability and perceived competence (Quach et al., 2022). Unlike traditional face-to-face interactions, online environments facilitate impression management practices that often obscure perceived personal shortcomings and emphasize idealized aspects of the self. However, this elevated control over self-image is not without psychological costs. Research suggests that maintaining an idealized online persona may contribute to emotional fatigue, identity confusion, and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2023).

Drawing upon Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, online behavior can be conceptualized as a form of "front stage" performance, wherein individuals manage impressions to align with desired social identities. In digital settings, this theatricality is intensified, with users engaging in selective self-presentation to appear attractive, competent, or socially connected. The persistent pursuit of external validation and avoidance of rejection fosters discrepancies between online and offline identities, potentially resulting in impaired self-concept clarity and increased psychological distress (Simunovic & Zezelj, 2023; Hu et al., 2022).

One key cognitive-affective factor implicated in online self-presentation is fear of negative evaluation (FNE), defined as an enduring apprehension about being judged unfavorably by others (Watson & Friend, 1969). FNE is a core component of social sensitivity and has been shown to influence various aspects of interpersonal behavior, both offline and online. Individuals high in FNE often exhibit heightened vigilance to social feedback, avoid potential scrutiny, and engage in self-censorship to evade criticism (Zhang et al., 2022). Within digital contexts, this may manifest as excessive editing of photos, refraining from sharing personal opinions, or complete withdrawal from online expression (Day, 2021). From a cognitive-behavioral framework (Beck, 1976), such individuals are predisposed to maladaptive thought patterns, including catastrophizing negative feedback, overgeneralizing social cues, and engaging in hypervigilant monitoring of others' reactions. These tendencies may reinforce anxiety-driven patterns of digital engagement and foster emotional reliance on social media approval (Voggenreiter et al., 2023).

Together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives underscore the importance of examining how fear-based cognitive biases, such as FNE, shape digital identity construction (Voggenreiter et al., 2023). Understanding these processes is particularly relevant in collectivistic cultures, where social harmony and external validation hold heightened cultural salience. The present study aims to explore the relationship between fear of

negative evaluation and online self-presentation, while examining the mediating role of social anxiety within a Pakistani cultural context.

Fear of negative evaluation (FNE) has also been found to be empirically correlated with a number of mental health outcomes. Research indicates that FNE results in decreased self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, and stress and depressive vulnerability (Ummer, 2024; Pang et al., 2024). On digital platforms, where appreciation is frequently measured by the amounts of likes, comments and shares, people with high levels of FNE are specifically susceptible to the potential of social rejection. Self-evaluative concerns can be exacerbated by perpetual comparison to idealized images posted by others and result in a loop of digital impression management and psychological suffering (Szasz, 2025).

Individuals with social anxiety experience intense discomfort in social settings, often fearing that they will say or do something humiliating. These concerns are not limited to the offline interactions but often extend to the digital environment (Lai et al., 2023). To a socially anxious person, social networking sites (SNSs) are both an opportunity and threat: they provide connection and exposure yet amplifying the fears of being judged or rejected. Hence, socially anxious people become more likely to over-monitor online communication, develop preoccupation with the perception of others, and adhere to avoidance or perfectionistic presentation of the self (Shaughnessy et al., 2017; Shabahang et al., 2021).

Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) posits that psychological discomfort arises when there is a mismatch between an individual's actual self, ideal self, and ought self. For socially anxious individuals, this discrepancy is often amplified in digital spaces where the standards for acceptance are rigid and performative. In efforts to fill this gap, they can end up over-curating their online personas, thus further perpetuating feelings of inadequacy and maintaining the cycle of anxiety (Zahra & Muhammad, 2024). Individuals might even go to extreme measures just to control their image-taking several hours to edit photographs, crafting updates, or avoiding social media altogether, to reduce possible criticism (Kim & Kim, 2023). The studies also indicate that social anxiety (SI) can act significant factors in relationship between fear of evaluation and digital profile maintenance as most of the time fear of judgment transfers to anxiety and subsequently affects behaviors of self-presentation (Lai et al., 2023; Kruchten, 2021).

The interplay between fear of negative evaluation, SA and OSP is particularly salient among young adults, a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, heightened sensitivity to peer feedback, and an increased desire for social belonging (Backes & Bonnie, 2021). In online settings, these demands are fueled by the constant exposure to social norms and idealized portrayals of other people (Aqeel et al., 2024). Youth who fail to conform to these norms can feel rejected inferior and socially isolated. SNSs are psychologically draining to individuals who already feel socially anxious, as trying to connect with others may only lead to further withdrawal and increased inner conflict (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021).

Drawing upon established theoretical frameworks

and empirical evidence, the present study aims to examine the mediating role of social anxiety in the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation among young adults. While prior research has explored the bivariate associations among these constructs, there remains a paucity of studies that empirically test an integrated mediation model within non-Western sociocultural contexts. Given the surge in digital engagement and the parallel increase in mental health challenges among youth in Pakistan, this investigation addresses a critical gap in the existing literature by providing culturally nuanced insights.

Specifically, the study seeks to delineate the underlying psychological mechanisms through which fear of negative evaluation contributes to online self-presentation behaviors, with social anxiety hypothesized as a key mediating variable. By situating this research within a collectivist cultural framework, the findings are anticipated to offer greater ecological validity and applicability for populations where interpersonal sensitivity and social conformity significantly shape digital interactions. Ultimately, the study endeavors to inform the development of contextually relevant mental health interventions aimed at reducing digital stress, mitigating maladaptive online impression management, and fostering healthy identity construction among young adults in collectivist societies.

Method

Research design

The present study adopted a correlational, cross-sectional research design to explore the associations among fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, and online self-presentation. This design is suitable for identifying patterns and relationships between psychological constructs within a naturally occurring context, without manipulation of variables. A convenience sampling strategy was employed to facilitate participant recruitment and ensure access to a broad range of individuals. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the interplay between cognitive-affective processes and digital behavior in real-world settings.

Objectives

The present study is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the association among fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, and online self-presentation in young adults.
2. To investigate the mediating role of social anxiety in the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation in young adults.
3. To explore potential differences in fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, and online self-presentation between college and university students.

Hypotheses

Based on existing theoretical frameworks and empirical

findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

1. Fear of negative evaluation will be positively associated with online self-presentation and social anxiety in young adults.
2. Social anxiety will be positively associated with online self-presentation in young adults.
3. Social anxiety will mediate the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation in young adults.
4. There will be differences in fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, and online self-presentation between college and university students.

Participants

The present study employed a cross-sectional research design and utilized a convenience sampling strategy to recruit participants from academic institutions and online platforms in the urban areas of South Punjab, Pakistan, specifically Multan, Jhang, and Bahawalpur. Following the exclusion of seven incomplete responses, the final sample consisted of 200 individuals, including 131 males (65.5%) and 69 females (34.5%), with an age range of 16 to 32 years ($M = 24.25$, $SD = 2.85$). Inclusion criteria required participants to be within the specified age range, actively enrolled in or having completed a college or university-level academic program, possess regular internet access, and demonstrate daily engagement with social media platforms. Exclusion criteria included incomplete responses, lack of access to social media, limited digital literacy, or enrollment in non-comparable academic programs. All participants reported active use of social media, meeting the requirement for digital presence assessment. Educational qualifications varied, with 60.5% ($n = 121$) holding a bachelor's degree, 19.5% ($n = 39$) having completed intermediate education, and 20% ($n = 40$) possessing a master's degree. Socioeconomic status was self-identified, with the majority (71.5%, $n = 143$) belonging to the middle class, followed by 19.5% ($n = 39$) from the lower class and 9% ($n = 17$) from the upper class. Regarding employment, 45% ($n = 90$) were employed, while 55% ($n = 110$) were unemployed at the time of data collection. This diverse sample provided an adequate representation of digitally active young adults from urban academic settings in South Punjab.

Measures

The study utilized three standardized self-report instruments to assess fear of negative evaluation, social interaction anxiety, and online self-presentation behaviors.

Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale Straightforward Items (BFNE-S)

The BFNE-S (Rodebaugh et al., 2004) is a psychometrically improved version of Leary's (1983) original Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. Designed to measure individuals' apprehension regarding negative evaluation by others, the scale consists of 8 straightforward items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Not at all characteristic of me) to 4 (Extremely characteristic of me). A sample item includes: "I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings." Higher scores reflect a greater fear of negative evaluation. In the current study, the BFNE-S demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$).

Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS)

The SIAS (Mattick & Clarke, 1998) assesses anxiety associated with social interactions and interpersonal communication. The scale comprises 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (Not at all characteristic of me) to 4 (Extremely characteristic of me). Items such as “When mixing socially, I am uncomfortable” reflect core dimensions of interaction-based social anxiety. To mitigate response bias, items 5, 9, and 11 are reverse scored. Higher scores indicate elevated levels of social anxiety. The SIAS showed strong internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .83$).

Presentation of Online Self Scale (POSS)

The POSS (Fullwood et al., 2016) evaluates individuals' strategies and preferences for digital self-presentation. The instrument comprises 21 items distributed across four subscales: Ideal Self (Items 1–9), Multiple Selves (Items 10–14), Consistent Self (Items 15–18), and Online Presentation Preference (Items 19–21). Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting a greater propensity for strategic online self-presentation. For the purposes of this study, a total score was computed to represent general tendencies in online self-presentation. The scale exhibited adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$) in the current sample.

Procedure

This study received ethical approval from the relevant review board and conformed to the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). A total of 200 participants from South Punjab, Pakistan (Multan, Jhang, and Bahawalpur), were recruited between October and December 2024 using a mixed-mode approach to enhance sample accessibility and diversity. Recruitment was conducted through in-person methods (e.g., classroom announcements) and online platforms (e.g., university email lists, WhatsApp, and social media).

Participants were invited to complete a self-administered survey, available in both printed and digital formats. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, ensuring respondents were aware of the study's purpose, their voluntary involvement, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality of their responses. The survey consisted of two parts: demographic information and standardized self-report instruments, including the BFNE-S, SIAS, and POSS. All responses were collected anonymously and stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the principal investigator, ensuring full compliance with ethical guidelines for data protection, anonymity, and participant well-being.

Analysis strategy

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Missing values for the key variables fear of negative evaluation, social interaction anxiety, and online self-presentation were addressed using imputation procedures, and seven incomplete responses were excluded to ensure data quality. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and ranges) and reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) were computed. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine bivariate relationships among study variables. Independent samples t-tests assessed group differences between university and college students. To test the

hypothesized mediation model, Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) was used, with fear of negative evaluation as the predictor, social interaction anxiety as the mediator, and total POSS score as the outcome variable.

Results

This section reports the descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, group comparisons, and mediation analysis examining the associations among fear of negative evaluation, social interaction anxiety, and online self-presentation in young adults.

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations for the primary study variables. The internal consistency estimates were satisfactory for all measures: fear of negative evaluation ($\alpha = .79$), Social Interaction Anxiety ($\alpha = .83$), and online self-presentation ($\alpha = .78$), indicating good reliability. Pearson correlation analyses revealed that fear of negative evaluation was significantly positively correlated with both social interaction anxiety and online self-presentation. Similarly, social interaction anxiety was significantly positively correlated with online self-presentation. These findings suggest that individuals reporting higher levels of fear of negative evaluation are more likely to experience heightened social anxiety and increased engagement in online self-presentational behaviors.

Table 2 presents independent samples t-test results comparing college and university students on Fear of Negative Evaluation, Social Interaction Anxiety, and Online Self-Presentation. Non-significant differences were observed between the groups on any of the variables (all $p > .05$), and effect sizes were found small, indicating non-significant differences. Specifically, college students reported slightly higher mean scores on fear of negative evaluation ($M = 14.61$, $SD = 4.60$) than university students ($M = 14.16$, $SD = 4.39$), though the difference was non-significant (Cohen's $d = 0.10$). Similar patterns emerged for Social Interaction Anxiety ($M = 32.22$, $SD = 9.98$ vs. $M = 31.93$, $SD = 10.22$; $d = 0.06$) and Online Self-Presentation ($M = 60.12$, $SD = 9.55$ vs. $M = 59.05$, $SD = 10.55$; $d = 0.10$). These findings suggest comparable levels of social and evaluative concerns across both educational groups, with minimal variation in online self-presentational behavior.

Mediation Analysis

Table 3 presents the results of the mediation analysis examining the indirect effect of fear of negative evaluation, on online self-presentation through social anxiety interaction. The direct effect of FNE on OSP was significant ($\beta = 0.38$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.67]), indicating that individuals with higher levels of FNE tend to engage more in online self-presentation. The indirect effect via SAI was also

Table 1

Mean, standard deviation, correlation matrix and alpha coefficient among fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety interaction and online self-presentation in young adults (N=200).

Variable	M	SD	Range	α	1	2	3
1.FNE	14.27	4.43	3 – 26	.78	-	.18**	.24***
2.SAI	31.74	10.63	11– 60	.83		-	.44***
3.OSP	59.31	10.29	37 – 82	.78			-

Note. FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; SAI = Social Anxiety Interaction; OSP = Online Self-Presentation. α = Cronbach's alpha. Significant correlations are reported ** $p < .01$, * $p < .001$.

Table 2

Mean difference between college and university students on fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety and online self-presentation in young adults (N=200)

Variable	College Students (n = 100)	University Students (n = 100)	95% CI						Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD	t(df)	p	LL, UL		
Fear of Negative Evaluation	14.61	4.60	14.16	4.39	0.62 (198)	.53	[-0.99, 1.89]		-
Social Anxiety	32.22	9.98	31.58	10.87	0.37 (198)	.71	[-2.81, 4.10]		-
Online Self-Presentation	60.12	9.55	59.05	10.55	0.64 (198)	.52	[-2.27, 4.42]		-

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; d = Cohen's d effect size.

Table 3

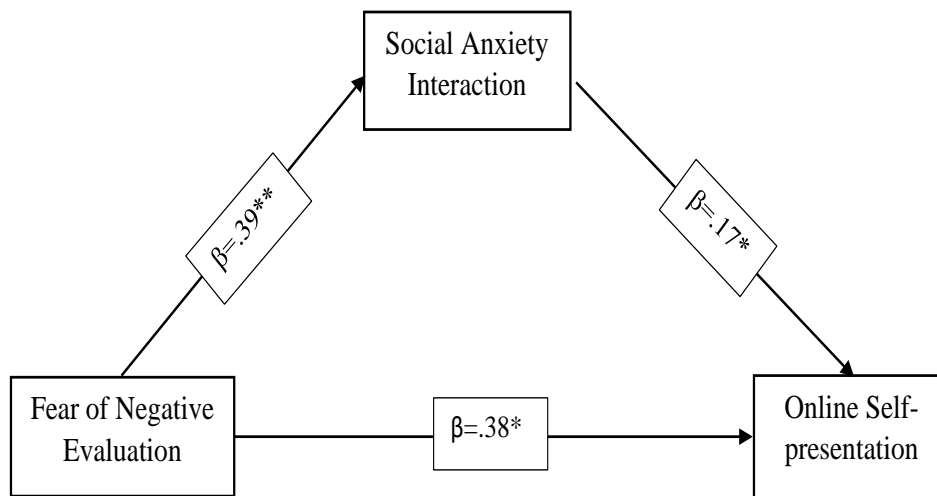
The mediation analysis of social anxiety in the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation in young adults (N=200)

Measures	Social Anxiety Interaction				<i>p</i>
	<i>β</i>	SE	95% CI		
			LL	UL	
Mediation Analysis	Online Self Presentation				
FNE → OSP (Direct Effect)	.38	0.08	.09	.67	.009
FNE → SIAS	.39	.14	.27	.51	.001
SIAS → OSP	.38	.06	.09	.67	.011
FNE → SIAS → OSP (Indirect)	.17	.08	.03	.35	-

Note. N = 200. FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; SIAS = Social Interaction Anxiety Scale; OSP = Online Self-Presentation. β = Standardized beta coefficient; SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval. The indirect effect is significant as the 95% CI does not include zero.

Figure 1

The mediation analysis of social anxiety in the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation in young adults (N=200).



significant ($\beta = 0.17$, $SE = 0.08$), supported by Sobel's $Z = 2.53$, suggesting a meaningful mediation effect. However, as the direct effect remained significant after including the mediator, the results indicate partial mediation. These findings suggest that while SAI contributes to explaining the relationship between FNE and OSP, FNE independently remains a significant predictor of OSP (see figure 1).

Discussion

This study examined the interrelations between fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety interaction, and online self-presentation, while also assessing differences between college and university students. Contrary to expectations, no significant group differences were observed, suggesting that academic level does not significantly influence experiences of social-evaluative fear, anxiety in interpersonal contexts, or patterns of digital self-presentation. These findings reflect the ubiquity of online social pressures across educational settings and support the notion that online platforms exert uniform psychological effects regardless of institutional context.

Correlation analyses revealed significant positive associations between FNE, SAI, and OSP, supporting the hypothesis that individuals with elevated fear of negative evaluation experience greater social anxiety and are more likely to engage in curated self-presentation online. These results are consistent with cognitive models of social anxiety, which posit that individuals fearing negative judgment engage in safety behaviors including strategic impression management in digital environments to mitigate perceived social threat.

Mediation analysis further confirmed that SAI partially mediates the relationship between FNE and OSP. The presence of a significant indirect effect suggests that social anxiety serves as a psychological mechanism linking fear of evaluation to increased online self-monitoring and control. However, the retention of a significant direct effect indicates that FNE independently contributes to OSP beyond the mediating role of anxiety. This partial mediation supports theoretical models such as the compensatory internet use hypothesis, wherein individuals manage psychological distress through controlled virtual expression.

The findings elucidate the cognitive-affective processes driving online self-presentation and emphasize the role of social-evaluative concerns in shaping digital identity construction. These insights may inform the development of interventions aimed at reducing maladaptive self-presentation and promoting healthier digital engagement, particularly among socially anxious populations.

Novel Contribution

This study provides novel practical insights by identifying social anxiety as a partial mediator between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation, suggesting that individuals with heightened social evaluative concerns may engage more in curated digital self-expression as a coping strategy. This finding has direct implications for clinical and educational interventions, highlighting the need for integrated programs that address anxiety-related behaviors in online settings through cognitive-behavioral approaches and digital literacy training. Moreover, the absence of significant differences between college and university students indicates the widespread impact of social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation across educational

levels, reinforcing the importance of broad-based psychoeducational initiatives to foster emotional resilience and promote healthy online engagement among students.

Implications

The study provides meaningful contributions to the both applied and practical domain by analyzing the mediating role of social anxiety interaction in relation between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation. From theoretical perspective, research affirms by Goffman in digital environment. By confirming that fear of negative evaluation predicts digital presentation through social anxiety identify that how cognitive-affective vulnerabilities shape digital sense of self. This broadens classical impression management theories into the modern technologically supported domain.

Clinically, these findings highlight the need for mental health professionals to consider the influence of online environments on socially anxious individuals, especially those relying heavily on social media. Therapeutic interventions targeting social anxiety such as CBT, may be enriched with psychoeducation about online impression management and its psychological impacts.

Regarding digital behavior and intervention design, the study urges the development of prevention strategies and psychoeducational initiatives allowing young users to cope with online evaluation pressure and reduce reliance on maladaptive digital self-presentation behaviors. Platforms could also adopt the inclusion of mental health literacy that encourages safer and more genuine online expression.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

First, the sampling technique was based on convenience sampling from a student population, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population like working adults or non-urban youth. Future research should implement the random or stratified sampling method of varying age groups and geographical areas to develop a high external validity.

Second, self-administered questionnaires introduce potential for response bias, especially when assessing a socially sensitive construct such as fear of evaluation or self-presentation strategies. Future research studies could be more thorough and objective by incorporating qualitative interviews or online behavior tractors to gain a more detailed perspective on the participant's online behavior.

Even though mediation was statistically tested, longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to determine whether FNE leads to the heightened social anxiety which subsequently alters the presentation behavior over time.

Fourth, demographic characteristics like gender, socio-economic background, and platforms specific behaviors (e.g., Instagram, Facebook) were not properly controlled or studied. Considering the cultural norms in Pakistan, both FNE and OSP can be affected by gendered expectations of maintaining a particular image in the public. Future research ought to examine the moderating variables on a multivariate or a subgroup analysis.

Factors like frequency, time spent specific platform-use or psychological influences of feedback mechanism were not measure limiting the understanding how digital engagement can influence the observed relationship. Future research should consider these factors to

better capture the impact of online behavior on digital sense of self.

Conclusion

The present study explored the association between fear of negative evaluation and online self-presentation, with a focus on the mediating role of social anxiety. Results supported the mediation model, revealing that individuals with higher fear of negative evaluation experience greater social anxiety, which in turn shapes their behavior in online self-presentation. These findings highlight the importance of psychological factors in understanding digital identity expression. Future research should replicate and expand this model across diverse age groups, cultural settings, and social media platforms, while also examining potential moderators such as self-esteem, personality traits, and platform-specific norms. Longitudinal and experimental designs are recommended to better understand causal pathways and inform targeted interventions aimed at promoting healthier and more authentic online engagement among individuals with elevated social anxiety.

Ethical Consideration

Received: June 02, 2025 Accepted: 31 July 2025:
31 July 2025, published online

The study was approved by Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, and Pakistan. Consent Form was taken before taking data and participants were asked to take voluntary participation.

Acknowledgement

The author thanks to Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, and Pakistan.

Availability of data and materials

The data sets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Authors' contributions/Author details

This study was conducted by Saira Majeed in collaboration with Dr. Waqar-un-Nisa Faizi, Urooj Niaz, and Dr. Muhammad Kamran, who contributed to the study's design, data analysis, and report writing.

Corresponding author

Correspondence to *Majeed, S.*
ssairamajeed068@gmail.com

References

- Ali, F., Ali, A., Iqbal, A., & Ullah Zafar, A. (2021). How socially anxious people become compulsive social media users: The role of fear of negative evaluation and rejection. *Telematics and Informatics*, 63, 101658. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101658>
- Aqeel, M., Rehna, T., Akhtar, R., & Abbas, J. (2024). Evaluating the psychometric properties of the Multidimensional Externalising Behaviour Disorders Inventory in Pakistani truant students. *Psychological and Personality Research*, 14(2), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.33989/2226-4078.2024.2.09>

- Backes, E., & Bonnie, R. (2021). *Adolescent development*. National Library of Medicine. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK545476/>
- Bates, G. W., Apputhurai, P., & Knowles, S. R. (2024). Bivalent fears of evaluation in social anxiety: Evaluation of an extended psychoevolutionary model. *European Journal of Investigation in Health Psychology and Education*, 14(11), 2918–2931. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe14110191>
- Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. International Universities Press.
- Chukwuere, G. C. J., & Chukwuere, J. E. (2023). The difficulties posed by digital technology: Understanding the psychological consequences of social media use on young adults' body image and self-esteem. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 12(6), 379. <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis.2023.0176>
- Day, J. (2021, June 10). What is self-censorship? How does it kill media freedom? *Liberties.eu*. <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/self-censorship/43569>
- Field, A. P. (2017). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS Statistics* (5th ed.). Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1103640>
- Fullwood, C., James, B. M., & Chen-Wilson, C.-H. (2016). Self-concept clarity and online self-presentation in adolescents. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(12), 716–720. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2015.0623>
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94(3), 319–340. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319>
- Hjetland, G. J., Finserås, T. R., Sivertsen, B., Colman, I., Hella, R. T., Andersen, A. I. O., & Skogen, J. C. (2024). Digital self-presentation and adolescent mental health: Cross-sectional and longitudinal insights from the “LifeOnSoMe” study. *BMC Public Health*, 24(1), Article 20052. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-20052-4>
- Hu, C., Cao, R., Huang, J., & Wei, Y. (2022). The effect of self-discrepancy on online behavior: A literature review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 883736. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.883736>
- Iqbal, A., & Ajmal, A. (2019). Fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety in young adults. *Peshawar Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences (PJPBS)*, 4(1), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.32879/picp.2018.4.1.45>
- Kim, D., & Kim, S. (2023). Social media affordances of ephemerality and permanence: Social comparison, self-esteem, and body image concerns. *Social Sciences*, 12(2), 87. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12020087>
- Kruchten, E. (2021). Examining the relationship between social anxiety and social media engagement. *ResearchGate*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357552022>
- Lai, F., Wang, L., Zhang, J., Shan, S., Chen, J., & Tian, L. (2023). Relationship between social media use and social anxiety in college students: Mediation effect of communication capacity. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(4), Article 3657. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20043657>
- Leary, M. R. (1983). A brief version of the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 9(3), 371–375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167283093007>
- Leary, M. R., Nezelek, J. B., Downs, D., Radford-Davenport, J., Martin, J. N., & McMullen, A. K. (1994). Self-presentation in everyday interactions: Effects of target familiarity and gender composition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 664–673. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.4.664>
- Li, J., Jia, S., Wang, L., Zhang, M., & Chen, S. (2023). Relationships among inferiority feelings, fear of negative evaluation, and social anxiety in Chinese junior high school students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1015477. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1015477>
- Lo Destro, C. (2024). Unraveling the impact of self-esteem on the utilization of Instagram filters: The mediating role of fear of negative evaluation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1302662. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1302662>
- Lopez, R. B., & Polletta, I. (2021). Regulating self-image on Instagram: Links between social anxiety, Instagram contingent self-worth, and content control behaviors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 711447. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.711447>
- Mattick, R. P., & Clarke, J. C. (1998). Development and validation of measures of social phobia scrutiny fear and social interaction anxiety. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 36(4), 455–470. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967\(97\)10031-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967(97)10031-6)
- Michikyan, M., Subrahmanyam, K., & Dennis, J. (2014). Can you tell who I am? Neuroticism, extraversion, and online self-presentation among young adults. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 179–183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.010>
- Mun, I. B., & Kim, H. (2021). Influence of false self-presentation on mental health and deleting behavior on Instagram: The mediating role of perceived popularity. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, Article 660484. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.660484>
- Muyidi, A. (2025). Exploring how social media usage shapes self-presentation strategies among Saudi young adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1562917. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1562917>
- National Institute of Mental Health. (2022). *Social anxiety disorder: What you need to know*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/social-anxiety-disorder-more-than-just-shyness>
- Nor, I., Iqbal, N., & Shaari, A. H. (2025). The role of false self-presentation and social comparison in excessive social media use. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(5), 675. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15050675>
- O'Day, E. B., & Heimberg, R. G. (2021). Social media use, social anxiety, and loneliness: A systematic review. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, 3, 100070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100070>
- Quach, S., Thaichon, P., Martin, K. D., Weaven, S., & Palmatier, R. W. (2022). Digital technologies: Tensions in privacy and data. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 50(6), 1299–1323. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-022-00845-y>
- Rodebaugh, T. L., Woods, C. M., Thissen, D. M., Heimberg, R. G., Chambless, D. L., & Rapee, R. M. (2004). More information from fewer questions: The factor structure and item properties of the original and brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. *Psychological Assessment*, 16(2), 169–183. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.16.2.169>
- Shabahang, R., Aruguete, M. S., & Shim, H. (2021). Social media posting anxiety: Interpersonal trust, fear of negative evaluation, and hurt feeling proneness as predictors. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*,

- 34(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000300>
- Shaughnessy, K., Rocheleau, J. N., Kamalou, S., & Moscovitch, D. A. (2017). The effects of social anxiety and online privacy concern on individual differences in internet-based interaction anxiety and communication preferences. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20(4), 212–217. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0329>
- Simunović, V., & Žeželj, I. (2023). Managing self-presentation: How social cues shape different forms of socially desirable responding. *Studia Psychologica*, 65(2), 103–119. <https://doi.org/10.31577/sp.2023.02.869>
- Szasz, I. (2025, May 20). The greatest dangers of social media to human beings. *Zenodo*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15474856>
- Voggenreiter, A., Brandt, S., Putterer, F., Frings, A., & Pfeffer, J. (2023). The role of likes: How online feedback impacts users' mental health (No. arXiv:2312.11914). *arXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2312.11914>
- Wang, Y., Wang, X., Liu, H., Xie, X., Wang, P., & Lei, L. (2018). Selfie posting and self-esteem among young adult women: A mediation model of positive feedback and body satisfaction. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 25(2), 135910531878762. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105318787624>
- Weidman, A. C., & Levinson, C. A. (2015). I'm still socially anxious online: Offline relationship impairment characterizing social anxiety manifests and is accurately perceived in online social networking profiles. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 49, 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.045>
- Yin, X.-Q., Scherr, S., Jin, L., Gaskin, J., & Wang, J.-L. (2022). Impressions matter more than privacy: The moderating roles of affordances in the relation between social anxiety and online safety-seeking behaviors. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 16(3). <https://doi.org/10.5817/cp2022-3-1>
- Zahra, N. N., & Muhammad, H. (2024). The effect of social anxiety on inauthentic self-presentation in Instagram users. *Journal of Social and Industrial Psychology*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.15294/sip.v12i1.10172>
- Zeng, R., & Zhu, D. (2021). Fear of evaluation and online self-disclosure on WeChat: Moderating effects of protective face orientation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 530722. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.530722>
- Zhang, Y., Li, Y., & Mai, X. (2022). Fear of negative evaluation modulates the processing of social evaluative feedback with different valence and contexts. *Cerebral Cortex*, 33(8), 4927–4938. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cercor/bhac390>

Publisher's Note

The Nature-Nurture publishing group remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.