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OPENNESS TO EXPERIENCE AND APPEARANCE ANXIETY IN YOUNG ADULTS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF REASSURANCE-SEEKING

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<p>Openness to Experience Personality, Reassurance Seeking, Appearance Anxiety, Young Adults</p>	<p>The university students increasingly face mental health challenges that may affect their academic functioning, emotional well-being & social adjustment. The current study examined the role of openness to experience in relation to reassurance seeking and appearance anxiety among young adults. A total of 220 university students with the age range of 16 to 31 years (M= 20.85, SD= 2.25) participated using a correlational research design. Pearson Correlation analysis results showed that openness to experience was negatively associated with reassurance seeking and showed a nonsignificant relationship with the appearance anxiety. However, moderation analysis revealed that reassurance seeking significantly moderated relationship between openness to experience and appearance anxiety indicating that individuals high in the openness may experience increased appearance towards anxiety when reassurance-seeking tendencies are elevated. The results from theoretical and empirical outcomes offered significant information. The results provide significant information through the statistical procedures for analysing the data towards the desired conclusion and making suitable decisions about research issues under study. These results highlight the nuanced role of openness to experience in shaping the appearance-related concerns, particularly in the context of reassurance-driven behavior.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

The university shift is one of the most significant developmental milestones of young adults, as it is associated with greater independence, exposure to variety of social environments, and sense of self-awareness (Rani, Saleem & Zahra, 2023; Karamat, Hafeez, Zahra & Saleem, 2023). College life supports intellectual development and identity, but it also brings with it increased academic pressure, social adaptation needs, and performance-based assessment, which is why

this stage is psychologically stressful to most students (Yang & Koo, 2022; Lim, 2018; Elias & Mansouri, 2023). Studies are also showing that the stresses involved in this change can be the cause of high rates of psychological distress, such as anxiety related to academic achievement, social acceptance, and body self-image in shaping the psychological outcomes (Abdelrahman, Qadire, Ballout, Rababa, Kwaning & Zehry, 2025; Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2019). The issues of physical appearance are particularly acute at emerging adulthood, in the context of more sensitivity to external assessment, as well as parallel mechanisms of identity formation (Anto, Asif, Basu, Kanapathipillai, Salam, Selim, Zaman & Eisingerich, 2023; Suresh & Sivakumar, 2024).

The literature revealed, constructed as a consistent concern or fear of being negatively judged due to physical appearance, appearance anxiety has been proven to have a negative effect on emotional wellbeing, social functioning, and self-esteem in university students (Subasree & Simon, 2025). Another behavioral expression commonly met with such situation reassurance-seeking where people continually request others to reassure them in an attempt to alleviate insecurity. Nevertheless, empirical studies show that this behavior, on contrary, increases, but does not reduce anxiety over time (Levinson, Rodebaugh, White, Menatti, Weeks, Iacovino & Warren, 2013; Liu, Zhang, Gao & Cao, 2023; Nowacka, Barker & Miles, 2024). The significance of personality traits in vulnerability and adaptive response to appearance-related stressors is emphasized in recent research, Young adults high in openness to experience may exhibit both protective and risk-enhancing tendencies regarding appearance anxiety. In Five-Factor Model of personality, construct of openness to experience become possibly valued one in the setting of the appearance-based self-judgment and control behaviours (Zhao, Chapman & Houghton, 2025).

The high open people, are imagined, intellectually curious, sensitive to aesthetics, and flexibly think (Yang, Guo, Zhu, Liu & Guo, 2023). The existing data suggests that openness can impact the appearance anxiety and reassurance-seeking in both directions and complexly (Kong, Cao, Luo & He, 2020). On the one hand, an augmented aesthetic consciousness and attention to the cultural standards of beauty can make one more susceptible to appearance-related issues (Jin, Xu, Chen, Wilson, Gao, Ji, Sun & Wang, 2022; Ruan, Yu, Zhao, Xie & Mei, 2025). Conversely, the adaptive coping, lack of conformity to societal expectations, and decreased dependence on external validation that are related to cognitive and emotional malleability of openness can be beneficial (Aguirre, Michelini, Bravo, Pautassi & Pilatti, 2024; Wang, Jiang, Liu, Xing, Yuan, Cui, Wu & Ren, 2025). Although processes of personality in context of mental health research experience increased interdisciplinary interest, empirical studies that investigate interactions between openness to experience and appearance anxiety and reassurance-seeking behaviour in case of university students are still scarce (El-Etreby, AbdElhay, Kamel, Hamed & Hamed, 2025).

Being as characteristic linked with cognitive flexibility, creativity and adaptive self-regulation, openness is especially pertinent to way students assess and address the appearance-related issues (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Appearance anxiety in young adults is strongly influenced by sociocultural factors, including peer comparisons, media exposure as well as perceived social

standards o frequently seek validation and approval from others regarding one's appearance, significant worth, social acceptability (Kurmanova, Shaikhymuratova, Aubakirova, Lawrence, Baizhumanova & Yermentayeva, 2024). In university transition, the open persons might see identity development as an exploratory task as opposed to an evaluative comparison, which make the persons less vulnerable to distress related towards appearances (Goldberg, 1990). The developmental stage of the young adulthood further intensifies these concerns, as identity formation, social acceptance, and romantic relationships become central psychological tasks. Nevertheless, the aesthetic sensitivity of openness can also raise awareness of social standards of beauty, hence making it a possible protective or risk factor and highlighting its moderating impact.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the association between openness to experience, reassurance seeking, and appearance anxiety in young adults.
2. To identify moderating role of reassurance seeking in linking openness to experience & appearance anxiety in young adults.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding appearance-related concerns in young adults requires an integration of both intrapersonal traits and interpersonal processes that shape self-perception. The contemporary research increasingly emphasizes interplay between personality dimensions, such as openness to experience, and context-driven factors in influencing psychological outcomes. Within this context, Appearance Anxiety can be better understood over dynamic regulatory mechanisms, including reassurance-seeking, operate across social and cognitive domains. The connection between personality and seeking reassurance tendency can be better explained in the frames of attachment theory cognitive-behavioral theoretical frameworks. Unsafe attachment, which is characterized by an excessive degree of dependency and strong responsiveness to criticism, is predisposing factor to frequent reassurance-seeking, especially it comes to appearance as coping strategy to dealing with self-doubt (Çiftçi & Çakir, 2023). Cognitively-behaviorally, such behaviour acts as negative reinforcer: it may temporarily relieve distress, but on other hand, it maintains maladaptive appearance-related thoughts & anxiety (Kong, Cao, Luo & He, 2020).

More importantly, the people who display lesser degrees of openness, in terms of cognitive rigidity and discomfort with new self-concepts, seem to depend on such maladaptive coping methods, so interdependence of personality constructs and behavioral reactions to appearance concerns (Behera & Khuntia, 2025). The appearance anxiety is a construct that is supported by self-discrepancy, objectification and social comparison paradigm. The negative self-judgments come into play when one feels difference between the real and idealized physical appearance (Higgins, 1987). Further, objectification in the society creates an observer-centric position that enhances shame and self-observation (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As a moderating variable, reassurance-seeking influences strength and direction of the relationship between openness to experience and appearance anxiety. Thus, these individuals are more likely to rely on internal standards and exhibit resilience against external pressures. According to social comparison

theory, inconsistently comparing themselves to others, especially when in the competitive or socially evaluated environment, is habitual practice of university students that diverse leading fosters the anxiety intensification (Festinger, 1954; Duriez, Vansteenkiste, Soenens & Witte, 2007).

The implication of these theoretical frameworks suggests that, people with high degrees of openness might either tune appearance related appraisals in a more adaptive manner or turn out to be highly concerned due to increased aesthetic sensitivity. These studies collectively provide the insights into role played by openness as a critical moderator in the relationship between appearance anxiety reassurance-seeking, thus, contributing to further comprehension of the relationship between personality traits, cognitive appraisals and coping strategies with substantial ramifications in the design of student mental-health interventions. This study aims to establish inter-relationships between dimensions of the personality, appearance anxiety and reassurance-seeking behaviors in university students in young adult age group. In particular, impact of openness to experience on degree of appearance-related distress is investigated with examination of moderating effect it has on reassurance-seeking behaviors. The findings are expected to enhance understanding of personality-based vulnerability, resilience, and guide the development of culturally responsive policies that can be used to address mental health of students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used different tools for conducting research and sample size of this study was 220 participants (men = 57% and women = 44%) having the age range of 16 to 31 years ($M = 20.85$; $SD = 2.25$). Only bachelors and master students participated in this study, while PhD students were excluded in study. The study uses correlational research design and stratified sampling technique.

Research Measures

The Neo Five Factor Personality Inventory (NEW-FFI). The culturally modified and translated Urdu version of NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), which was initially formulated by Costa and McCrae (1992), is devised to measure the Big Five dimension of personality. This 5-personality-factor (5PF) test consists of 44 items spread around Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience domains. In this study openness to experience was used to assess the level of openness to experience. The response options are asked in five-point Likert scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. Items include positively and negatively keyed statements and total scores on each domain increase, this is interpreted as greater expression of the respective trait. Empirical analyses of the instrument have shown internal consistency (Cronbach 0.70 to 0.83) construct validity are satisfactory, and instrument has significant correlations with other related personality measures in study (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Reassurance Seeking Scale

Reassurance-Seeking Behavior Scale (RSBS; Hafeez & Saleem, 2020) was 27-item self-report measure that is developed to assess reassurance-seeking behaviors. It was a depiction of an

external validation tendency that comes interpersonal problems, low self-esteem, and anxiety in collectivistic cultures. Each of the items is rated using a five-point Likert scale (0 (not at all) to 4 (always), sum total of 0-108 with higher score representing greater reassurance-seeking profile. There are no reverse-scored items in scale, it measures factors as self-exaggeration and low confidence. The psychometric analysis reveals that it has a high reliability (split-half reliability $r = .83$, $p = .01$) and construct validity, as indicated by correlations with interpersonal difficulties ($r = .45$) and low self-esteem ($r = .57$). Thus, RSBS can be applied appropriately to measure maladaptive interpersonal patterns in adolescents and new adults (Hafeez & Saleem, 2020).

Appearance Anxiety Scale

Dion et al. (1990) have developed the Appearance Anxiety Scale Brief Version (AAS BV) as a self-report scale composed of 14 items that is meant to measure anxiety relating to physical appearance and social judgment. The tool focuses on issues about body shape, weight, facial beauty, and perceived evaluation. Using the five-point Likert response scale (1=Never to 5= Almost Always), scale contains positively oriented (reverse-scored) and negatively oriented items. The total scores are between 14 and 70 with higher scores reflecting higher appearance anxiety. Psychometric testing of the AASBV has shown a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach 0.85-0.90) convergent validity with other known scales of social anxiety and body dissatisfaction, thus demonstrating the applicability of the scale both in research and clinical settings.

Research Procedure

Initially, the research was approved by higher authorities with regard to data collection. After approval, data collection was conducted among undergraduate and graduate students who were in the course of study at time. Before the data collection process, informed consent was secured verbally and in writing among all 220 participants. All the participants were provided with all details about purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of study. participants were promised of data confidentiality and ability to pull out of the study at any time without any negative repercussions. The time spent on average to complete protocol was around 25 minutes.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Table 1
Inter-Correlations among Variables (N = 220)

Variables	OE	RS	AA
PF_O	-	-.38**	-.08
RS		-	.26**
AA			-
M	31.20	65.14	38.63
SD	4.58	15.10	5.48

Note. OE= openness to experience; RS= reassurance seeking; AA= appearance anxiety. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The Pearson product-moment correlation results indicated that openness to experience was significantly negatively associated with reassurance-seeking behavior. Moreover, openness to experience showed a non-significant relationship with appearance anxiety. The results further demonstrated positive & significant correlation between reassurance-seeking and appearance anxiety.

Moderation Analysis

The moderating role of reassurance seeking in the association of openness to experience and appearance anxiety was explored by using Hayes (2018) bootstrapping approach to reach the conclusion.

Figure 1

Predictive Model of Appearance Anxiety

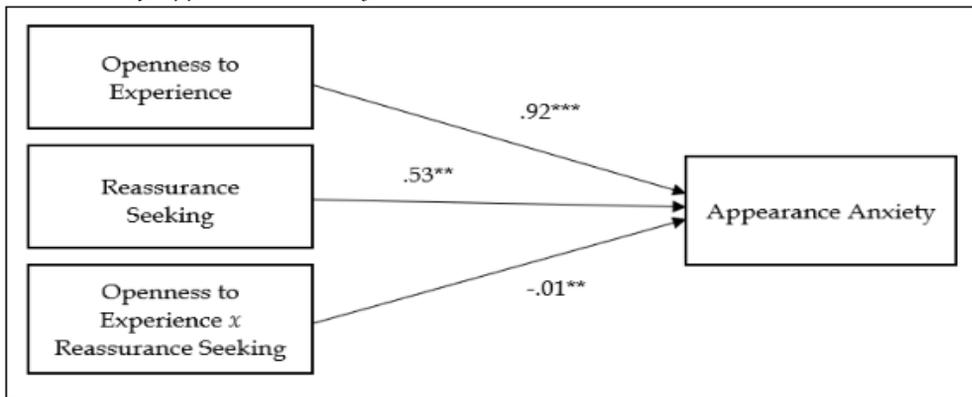


Table 2

Regression Analysis Examining Appearance Anxiety (N = 220)

Variables	Appearance Anxiety		
	B	SE	95% CI
Openness to experience	-.92**	.32	[.24, 1.60]
Reassurance seeking	.53**	.16	[.21, .86]
Openness to experience x Reassurance seeking	-.01**	.01	[-.02, -.01]
Low level of reassurance seeking	.20	.10	[-.01, .41]
Moderate level of reassurance seeking	.03	.08	[-.13, .20]
High level of reassurance seeking	-.25*	.15	[-.52, .01]
R2	.10		
F	8.12***		

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

The table 2 indicates that openness to experience is found to be significant negative predictor of appearance anxiety. Furthermore, reassurance seeking also emerged as significant positive predictor of appearance anxiety. Moreover, findings also depicted that the interaction effect of openness to experience and reassurance seeking was also significant. Hence, the conditional

effects of openness to experience on the appearance anxiety at different levels of reassurance seeking were analysed, where at low and moderate level of reassurance seeking behaviour the association of openness to experience and appearance anxiety was non-significant. However, at high level of the reassurance seeking behaviour there is significant negative association of openness to the experience and appearance anxiety. Hence, we can conclude that reassurance seeking is significantly moderating the association of openness to experience and appearance anxiety.

DISCUSSION

The current study has investigated relationship between openness to experience, reassurance-seeking behaviour, and appearance anxiety in young adults and also tested possibility that openness mediated the relationship between reassurance-seeking and appearance anxiety. The results provide a fine-tuned insight into the functionality of this parameter of personality in appearance-related psychological mechanisms among college students. The findings have shown openness to experience had significant negative relationship with reassurance-seeking behaviour, indicating that the highly open people would not depend on external reassurance to cope with uncertainty, self-assessment issues (Audet et al., 2021; Abdelrahman et al., 2025). This is consistent with body of literature supporting that openness is connected with cognitive flexibility, intrinsic motivation and the exploratory coping, decreasing use of such maladaptive interpersonal behaviour as reassurance-seeking (Vigo, 2016; Gatzka, 2020). The open-minded adults can use reflective self-evaluation having their peers affirm them continually (Stolovy, 2021), act as a buffer in socially evaluative settings like college (Fuente et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2025).

The current research discovered that the openness had no significant direct relationship with apprehension of appearances. The observation is consistent with the conceptual models that assume openness is multidimensional construct that contains the protective and vulnerability-related aspects they meet socially prescribed ideals (Allen & Robson, 2020). Most people who score high upon the openness tend to have increased cognitive flexibility, ambiguity tolerance, expanded self-concept, and may be insulated against the internalization of the strict ideals of appearance (Stolovy, 2021; Tan et al., 2024). In its turn, the characteristic of openness is linked to increased aesthetic sensitivity, curiosity, enhanced sensitivity to cultural and artistic norms that, in certain conditions, may stimulate sensitivity to appearance-related standards (Swami et al., 2012; Gong et al., 2023). The insignificance of the direct relationship implies that, in its own right, openness does not have a major determinant effect on the presence of appearance anxiety, but rather its effects seem to be conditional upon the interaction between the variable & certain factors in behavior or surrounding environment (Kaplan et al., 2015; Allen & Walter, 2016).

The conditional status of openness was explained by moderation analysis. The predictability of appearance anxiety was strongly influenced by openness only when reassurance-seeking was high, which is result of strong interaction effect (Gong et al., 2023). In those who reported low to moderate reassurance-seeking, openness was found to have no correlation with the

appearance-related concerns, so trait was identified as a protective factor in such situations (Macovei et al., 2023; Karamat et al., 2023). Conversely, in people with the high reassurance-seeking, it was found that appearance anxiety was significantly greater with openness (Allen & Celestino, 2017; Gatzka, 2020). This pattern of interaction consistent with self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) that have indicated the influence of sustained self-surveillance, comparison with idealized appearance ideals, and reliance on external validation in increasing body-related distress (Tan et al., 2024). In chronic reassurance-seeking, individuals with high openness also were found to be more likely to put in deeper processing and internalizing of the external evaluative feedback (Zhao et al., 2025), which exacerbated self-evaluation scrutiny & vulnerability to appearance worry (Hockey et al., 2021).

These findings corresponded with the recent findings indicating that reassurance-seeking was one of the core processes that linked the personality dispositions with the appearance-related psychological consequences (Merino et al., 2024). The results were a follow-up of the earlier studies that demonstrated that openness was not resilience-related variable, but rather context-specific and affected by the behavioral coping styles of individuals (Elias & Mansouri, 2023; Stolovy, 2021). Combined, the findings suggested that openness to experience conditionally influenced the psychological functioning of appearance (Macovei et al., 2023). The adaptive benefits of openness were established to be diminished by the influence of external validation in the certain circumstances, and the adaptive benefit of openness has been discovered to be compromised in the higher reassurance-seeking, that preconditioned openness to appearance anxiety (Yang et al., 2023). Thus, these outcomes emphasized the importance of interventions that would promote autonomy, internal self-regulation, and cognitive flexibility as well as the need to respond toward the maladaptive patterns of validation seeking among young adults simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed how role of openness to experience can be connected to reassurance-seeking behaviors and appearance anxiety in young adults. Results showed that appearance-related concerns had a significant meaningful relationship with openness to experience and could be evidence of an enhanced level of the self-awareness and sensitivity to evaluative information. Moreover, the positive correlation between reassurance-seeking and appearance anxiety indicated that the need to use exterior validation served as a reinforcing loop which added to the increase in preoccupation with appearance, especially in those who were more open. In this linking, taken together, the findings emphasized the utility of the openness to experience as the psychological predictor of appearance anxiety and the role of reassurance-seeking as possible intervention variable in minimizing the exposure to appearance-related distress.

Limitations & Future Research

Though this study was methodologically rigorous, there are some limitations that were worth considering. The study sample and rather limited demographic focus might have restricted

the applicability of the results, which means that in the future, the studies with more extensive populations and more heterogeneous samples should be used. The longitudinal designs were suggested as measurements that would better reflect the interaction between the openness to experience and the reassurance-seeking behaviors as well as appearance anxiety over time. Moreover, inclusion of cultural and social variables would have given more insight into the environmental aspects influencing the expression as well as interaction of these psychological constructs.

Implication

The results of this research were added to growing body of knowledge concerning openness to experience by clarifying its contribution to reassurance-seeking behaviors and appearance anxiety in young adults. Explaining links might have helped to detect maladaptive thinking patterns that back to appearance-related fears at an early stage. These insights were pertinent to mental health professionals, university support services in identifying those at increased risk of reassurance-based anxiety and in educating about the creation of solutions to mitigate the dependence upon external validation and developing more adaptive emotional regulation skills.

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