



Relationship between Loneliness, Emotional Eating and Body Image in Females

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Abstract

Loneliness can be understood as a distressing feeling stemming from unmet social needs and has become increasingly prevalent in the 21st century. Emotional eating is characterized by overeating as a coping mechanism in response to negative emotions. Body image perceptions are basically view of own body which is largely influenced by societal norms and personal factors. It plays a vital role in mental well-being. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationships between loneliness, emotional eating and body image in young females. The study was carefully conducted on 80 young females aged 18 to 25. The following tests were applied to measure the variables, including the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, Emotional Eater Questionnaire (EEQ), and Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16B). Statistical analysis, such as correlation matrices, was utilised to examine the relationships among these variables. Results indicate several noteworthy findings. Firstly, emotional loneliness exhibited a positive correlation with body image. Secondly, disinhibition displayed a positive correlation with body image. Thirdly, guilt demonstrated a positive correlation with body image. Additionally, a positive correlation emerged between guilt and emotional loneliness.

Evidently, the results show that these variables are correlated with each other. This correlation can be the building block towards addressing these issues on a much deeper level and developing interdependent coping methods of the mentioned variables. Further research is needed in order to ascertain the existence of any extraneous variables and their effects on each other so that effective methods of coping can be ascertained.

Keywords – Loneliness, Emotional Eating, Body Image, Young Females

Introduction

Increasing number of young females who have been suffering from loneliness, emotional eating and body image issues demand the proper study of these variables. In order to closely understand how these variables work together, it is important to understand them individually. Loneliness is a subjective feeling of self-isolation and the inability to interact and build meaningful relationships with others. Humans are social animals and to be lonely is essentially against their survival instinct. In such a case, the person might need a coping mechanism which can be emotional eating. Emotional eating is a negative coping mechanism that stems from underlying mental health issues. Emotional eating leads to an unhealthy diet which can further lead to health problems and a bad physique, creating a probability of body image issues. Body image issues are another factor that can make a person's personal and social life difficult through low confidence, low self-esteem, and inability to interact with new people and even, loneliness. Studies have shown that females are more lonely as compared to men (Creemers et al., 2012; Romero & Epkins, 2008; Vanhalst et al., 2012) and people with high loneliness respond to negative emotions by expressive suppression of their emotions and avoiding social support (Preece et al., 2021). As per Evers et al. (2010), people

who suppress the expression of their negative emotions eat more comfort food as compared to people who reappraise their negative emotions or are allowed to express their emotions. Notably, emotional eating has also been associated with negative body image (Annesi & Marenco, 2015). According to research loneliness, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating influence each other reciprocally. One's dissatisfaction with the quality of social relationships is believed to lead to low self-esteem and emotional eating (Fox, 2020). Individuals who experience loneliness consume more food than those who do not. Emotional hunger leads to body dissatisfaction and a risk of developing eating disorders (Rotenberg et al., 1998). All these studies show the need for more elaborative studies on the correlation between variables - loneliness, emotional eating and body image that appear to be connected. Such studies will deepen the understanding of coping strategies of these variables individually, as well as in a group. The variables in themselves are distressful enough to hamper daily positive life. Correlation between them translates to even more misery in the lives of females going through them.

Loneliness

Loneliness is defined as a “distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one’s social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one’s social relationships” (Wheeler et al., 1982). Loneliness has also been defined as an “emotional state in which an individual is aware of the feeling of being apart from another or others, along with the experience of a vague need for individuals” (Copel, 1988).

Loneliness is experienced when we have fewer social relationships or fewer relationships of sufficient quality than we wish to have (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Human beings are social creatures; we are biologically wired to crave social connections. According to a research conducted on high school sophomore students, it was found that loneliness is not

synonymous with being alone. High school students who are lonely do not necessarily report having fewer close friendships (Russel et al., 2012). Research shows a positive association between feelings of loneliness and the occurrence of food addiction (Tatsi et al., 2019). Young adults have a higher level of loneliness and lower level of body satisfaction as compared to older adults (Barnett et al., 2020).

Emotional Eating

Emotional eating is defined as the “tendency to overeat in response to negative emotions, such as anxiety or irritability” (Van Strien et al., 2007). Emotional eating can also be defined as “the use of food as a coping mechanism when faced with stress or negative feelings” (Devonport et al., 2017; Thayer, 2003; Macht, 2008). In specific emotional situations, those with obesity tend to eat more as compared to normal-weight individuals, particularly to alleviate negative emotions like anger, loneliness, boredom, and depression (Ganley, 1989).

According to the study by Van Strien (2018) emotional eating is associated with depression and poor emotion regulation skills and thus its treatment should not be focused on calorie-restricted diets but on emotion regulation skills. According to a study, emotional eating is very high among the adult population in India, and those who engage in it are more likely to become obese. The majority of those who struggled with emotional eating showed greater levels of anxiety, stress and depression (Shahrokhisahneh & Begum, 2018).

Body Image

“Body image is the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say the way in which our body appears to ourselves” (Schilder, 1935). Body image can also be defined as one’s subjective assessment of his/her own appearance (Thompson et al., 1999).

A study conducted by Kelly and Stephen (2016) on 92 female college students showed that self-compassion influences day-to-day variations in body image and eating habits. Females who are generally more self-compassionate tend to have better body image and healthier eating habits. Females are at a higher risk of experiencing body image problems compared to males, as they report a greater investment in their appearance (Crerand et al., 2017). According to a study conducted on the Indian population, the desire to become thin is higher in adolescent girls even in the girls who perceived their body image as too thin (Dixit et al., 2011).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate and understand the complex relationships among the variables of loneliness, emotional eating, and body image in females.

Hypothesis

1. There is a positive correlation between feelings of loneliness and engagement in emotional eating behaviours among females.
2. Emotional eating behaviours in females are positively correlated with negative body image perceptions.
3. Feelings of loneliness among females are positively correlated with negative body image perceptions.

Method Sample

In this study, 80 females from Chandigarh participated, with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years.

Measures

1. **The De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale** was developed by Gierveld and Tilburg (2006). The 6-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, a shortened version of the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, was utilized to evaluate emotional and social loneliness in individuals. This scale employs a Likert scale for collecting responses, with participants indicating the degree to which they “agree” or “disagree” with statements regarding their experiences of loneliness.
2. **Emotional Eater Questionnaire (EEQ)**, developed by Garaulet et al. (2012), is a tool designed to assess emotional eating tendencies. This questionnaire comprises three subdimensions: disinhibition, type of food, and guilt. Respondents rate their responses on a Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "always."
3. **Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16B)** is a modified version of the original self-report questionnaire developed by Evans et al. (1993) to assess concerns related to body shape. This questionnaire records response on a Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "always," with individuals indicating the degree of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding their body shape concerns.

Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google Forms, each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized Psychological Tests were administered to the participants.

Analysis of Data

Results

The research used t-test analysis to understand the relationship between loneliness, body image, and emotional eating. Table 1 presents mean and standard deviation data, Meanwhile, Table 2 illustrates correlations among body image, emotional loneliness, social loneliness, disinhibition, food choices, and guilt.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation scores of 80 young females with variables body image, loneliness and emotional eating with their respective sub dimensions

	Body image	Emotional loneliness	Social loneliness	Disinhibition	Type of food	Guilt
N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Mean	38.2	1.48	2.71	6.21	2.90	1.77
Standard deviation	14.6	1.10	0.640	4.19	1.58	1.46

Table 2

Correlation matrix of Body image, Emotional loneliness, Social loneliness, Disinhibition, Type of food and Guilt

	Body image	Emotional loneliness	Social loneliness	Disinhibition	Type of food	Guilt
Body image	—					
Emotional loneliness	0.324 **	—				
Social loneliness	-0.029	-0.109	—			
Disinhibition	0.407 ***	0.216	-0.142	—		
Type of food	0.182	0.195	0.009	0.456 ***	—	
Guilt	0.460 ***	0.256 *	-0.111	0.619 ***	0.210	—

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

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the relationships between loneliness, emotional eating and body image. The results found several positive correlations. Firstly, a significant positive correlation was observed between emotional loneliness and body image ($r=0.324$, $p<.01$) which is similar to a study conducted by Sabik (2017), which showed that reduced body satisfaction may lead to lower social engagement in women. Another similar study by Zinovyeva et al. (2016) showed that adolescents with body dissatisfaction viewed themselves as weak and inactive, had an intense conflict between the actual and desired self, and often experienced a feeling of loneliness. Secondly, the study revealed a significant positive correlation between disinhibition and body image ($r=0.407$, $p<.001$). Thirdly, the results

revealed a significant positive correlation between guilt and body image ($r=0.460$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, the results revealed a significant positive correlation between guilt and emotional loneliness ($r=0.256$, $p<.05$). These results align with prior research that has similarly indicated a strong correlation between body shape concern and the presence of eating disorder and that body shape concern can be a strong predictor of disordered eating behaviour (Roy et al., 2019). A significant positive correlation was also found between the sub-dimensions of emotional eating, where the type of food showed a significant positive correlation with disinhibition ($r=0.456$, $p<.001$), and guilt showed a significant positive correlation with disinhibition ($r=0.619$, $p<.001$). These findings are consistent with the findings that if there is a lack of social support it can lead to the onset of eating disorders (Stice et al., 2002) whereas social support can lower sociocultural pressures of being thin which can protect the development of body dissatisfaction (Stice et al., 2001). In summary, this study revealed significant positive correlations among loneliness, emotional eating, and body image. These findings indicate strong relationships between these variables, highlighting their interconnected nature and potential impacts on individual's well-being.

Conclusion

The study found a strong positive correlation between loneliness, emotional eating, and body image in young women aged 18 to 25. Loneliness is associated with emotional eating, highlighting the importance of addressing emotional well-being in this demographic. Emotional eating is linked to body image concerns, emphasizing the need for interventions that promote a positive body image and healthier eating habits. Body image is associated with loneliness underscores the significance of recognizing how negative body image can contribute to social isolation and loneliness, emphasizing the need for interventions that

address both emotional well-being and body image concerns in individuals at risk of experiencing loneliness. To address the complex relationship between loneliness, emotional eating, and body image, healthcare practitioners and counsellors should adopt a multifaceted approach. It's essential to focus on reducing loneliness and enhancing emotional coping strategies, which can be achieved through social programs and support groups that foster emotional well-being. Additionally, programs should be employed to boost self-esteem and enhance body image resilience, providing individuals with the tools to improve their self-perception and self-acceptance. Encouraging healthier ways to cope with emotions, such as exercise and mindfulness, is crucial to breaking the cycle of emotional eating. Further research is needed to understand the long-term effects of these correlations and the role of other factors which influence body image and emotional eating habits, providing a more comprehensive view of these interconnected issues.

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