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Relationship Between Body Image and Dating Anxiety in Emerging Adults

Beliren Yetişkinlerde Beden İmgesi ve Flört Kaygısı Arasındaki İlişki

Soumya Gupta, Cobi S. Michael, Marissa A. Harrison*

Authors Information

Soumya Gupta
Psychology Programs
Penn State Harrisburg
Middletown, PA, 17057 USA
soumya.gupta13@gmail.com

Cobi S. Michael
Psychology Programs
Penn State Harrisburg
Middletown, PA, 17057 USA
cmk292@psu.edu

Marissa A. Harrison
*** Corresponding Author**
Psychology Programs
Penn State Harrisburg
Middletown, PA, 17057 USA
mah52@psu.edu

ABSTRACT

Both poor body image and dating anxiety are associated with psychological problems. The relationship between body image and dating anxiety is especially important to study within emerging adults, as individuals in this unique developmental phase are already prone to anxiety as they encounter new challenges related to education, career, and autonomy. We predicted that lower body image, as measured by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2015) Body Appreciation Scales-2, would be related to higher dating anxiety, as measured by Glickman and La Greca's (2004) Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents. Data from 231 emerging adults (mean age = 23.35; *SD* = 1.76) recruited from MTurk supported our prediction. *Post hoc* analysis showed gender did not affect this relationship. Moreover, although individuals with previous long-term relationship experience had higher body image scores than those with no experience, there was no difference in dating anxiety between these groups. Clinical mental health implications, limitations, and future directions for research are discussed.

Article Information

Keywords
Dating anxiety
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ÖZET

Alan yazında birçok çalışmada hem düşük beden imajı algısı hem de flört kaygısının birçok psikolojik problemlerle ilişkili olduğu bilinmektedir. Beden imajı ve flört kaygısı arasındaki ilişki, beliren yetişkenlerde özellikle önemlidir. Çünkü bu gelişim aşamasındaki bireyler eğitim, kariyer ve özerklikle ilgili yeni zorluklarla karşılaştıkları için kaygıya eğilimli bir yapıya sahiptirler. Bu araştırmada Tylka ve Wood-Barcalow'un (2015) Beden Değeri Ölçekleri-2 ile ölçülen düşük beden imajı algısının, Glickman ve La Greca'nın (2004) Flört Kaygısı Envanteri-Ergen Formu ile ölçülen yüksek flört kaygısı ile ilişkili olacağı düşünülmüştür. MTurk üzerinden 231 beliren yetişkinden (ortalama yaş = 23.35; SD = 1.76) elde edilen veriler bu hipotezimizi desteklemiştir. Post hoc analizi cinsiyetin bu ilişkiyi etkilemediğini göstermiştir. Ayrıca daha önce uzun süreli ilişki deneyimi olan bireylerin beden imajı puanları hiç deneyimi olmayanlara göre daha yüksek olmasına rağmen, bu gruplar arasında flört kaygısı açısından bir farkın olmadığı bulunmuştur. Araştırma sonucunun klinik ruh sağlığına etkileri, sınırlılıkları tartışılmış, gelecekteki araştırmalar için önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

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Ethical Statement: The study was carried out within the framework of the Helsinki Declaration and all participants whose informed consents were obtained took part in this study as volunteers. The ethics committee of Penn State University was consulted for ethical approval of this study.

INTRODUCTION

Body image has consistently been linked to well-being (Swami et al., 2017). Most studies conducted about body image examine its connection to relationship quality or sexual functioning (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Kogure et al., 2019; Markey & Markey, 2006; Pujols et al., 2010; Weller & Dziegielewski, 2008). There are arguably no recent studies that have considered the relationship of body image to dating anxiety. In fact, there have been arguably few investigations of dating anxiety overall, with some endeavors, although providing valuable insight to the field, being more than a decade old (Chorney & Morris, 2008; Glickman & La Greca, 2004; Davies & Windle, 2000; Collins, 2003). With body image and success in dating relationships both being related to healthy psychological functioning in contemporary emerging adults (Swami et al., 2017; Shagar et al., 2017; Weisskirch, 2016), we aimed to explore the relationship between perceived body image and dating anxiety.

Body image is a complex concept that considers self-perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors about one's physical appearance (Brink et al., 2018; Shagar et al., 2017). It is a multi-faceted construct incorporating an individual's perception and attitude about their own body, especially their physical appearance and body shape (Cash et al., 2004; Smolak, 2006).

Body image has a strong affective component, and therefore, there are consequences to having a poor body image. One can view their body as displeasing if one's ideal body type is rare, unachievable, and nonconforming to popular appearance preferences, thereby causing emotional discomfort (Cash et al., 2004; Dione, 2012). Negative feelings about one's body can lead to development of many cognitions and behaviors that can have a significant impact on one's emotional and physical health (Mitchison et al., 2016; O'Dea, 2012; Rudd & Lennon, 2000). A person can feel stress, worry, and discontent when their current body does not meet the standards of their ideal body (Dione, 2012; Murray et al., 2011; O'Dea, 2012). Having a negative attitude towards one's appearance can lead to lower self-esteem, increased depression, and decreased expectations for success in life (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2009). It can also manifest in unhealthy and risky appearance management behaviors, such as disordered eating, drug use, cosmetic surgery, and illegal use of appearance-enhancing anabolic steroids (Brewster et al., 2017; Carey & Preston, 2019; Junne et al., 2018; O'Dea, 2012; Rudd & Lennon, 2000; Shagar et al., 2017; Turner et al., 1997).

The definition of *dating* has evolved over time. What is considered dating can vary from casually "hanging out" to spending time with one or more prospective partners to having fun without expectation of long-term investment (Owens, 2007). *Dating anxiety* involves distress and inhibition while interacting with actual or potential dating partners (Chorney & Morris, 2008; Glickman & La Greca, 2004). Researchers have suggested that dating anxiety involves a marked fear of negative evaluation (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). There is a surprising paucity of psychological research on this construct. Studies that have examined dating anxiety have found it frequently ties to social anxiety. Lesure-Lester (2001) found that college students who were more socially anxious had decreased dating competence. However, literature in recent years has addressed how concepts of dating anxiety and social anxiety differ across groups and throughout the lifespan (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2013; Grover et al., 2005; Weisskirch et al., 2016). Thus, it is prudent to consider dating anxiety as a separate construct.

Anxiety about dating can attenuate the ability to form and continue romantic relationships (Chorney & Morris, 2008). This affective state can lead to distressing avoidance of dating situations, despite desires

to date (Stevens & Morris, 2007). Although distress may decrease as someone gains more dating experience, for some, dating anxiety can increase with dating status and number of recent dates, even after accounting for social anxiety (Calvert et al., 1987; Glickman & La Greca, 2004).

Anxiety in general features apprehensive expectations (Stevens & Morris, 2007). The physical manifestation of elevated distress involves shaking, sweating, increased respiration, and blushing, all of which may be observable by others. These signs are present particularly when one is physically attracted to another (Hughes et al., 2020). In a dating situation, if one is apprehensive and distressed, it can mar the experience for the self, and it may lead to negative appraisal by the dating partner.

Dating anxiety involves fear of negative evaluation and social distress (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). It is prohibitive since it can play in the decision to use or avoid the use of online dating apps (e.g., *Tinder*, *Grindr*), which is immensely popular among emerging adults (Sumter & Vandenbosch, 2018). Anxiety about interacting with potential partners can also eventuate into sexual aggression when necessary social skills are not present (Allen et al., 1998). When those with dating anxiety do establish relationships, they are often found to be less emotionally expressive, exhibit fewer positive relationship behaviors, and experience less happiness (Weisskirch, 2016). Dating anxiety is also associated with the development of social and mental problems, such as depression and substance abuse (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). It is thus important to understand its correlates.

Existing literature is sparse with respect to finding a direct relation between dating anxiety and perceived body image. Fawkner (2012) reviewed literature and synthesized that men's body image may be deleteriously impacted by specific interpersonal factors such as being in poor relationship, being rejected, and feeling others find them unattractive. Brink et al. (2018) showed that romantic couples with negative body image reported less sexual satisfaction and had a lower perceived relationship quality. With such potential to create negative affect, it is important to understand this phenomenon in a contemporary cohort.

Emerging adulthood is a time that is filled with challenges and presents many opportunities and risks (Arnett, 2000, 2007; O'Rourke et al., 2020). Emerging adulthood may pose challenges as individuals begin a new life away from home and experience increased responsibility for their own basic needs and wellbeing (Stevens & Morris, 2007). Those in this important developmental period tend to experience frequent changes in the arenas of living arrangements, work, and worldviews (Arnett, 2000). At the same time, they are exploring identity and focusing on the self (Tanner, 2016). This includes exploring love relationships that are usually more serious and intimate than those during adolescence. Literature has consistently shown that emerging adult college students face increased dating anxiety that may even interfere with their academic performance (Arkowitz et al., 1978; Stevens & Morris, 2007). Due to the potential enormity and number of the stressors they are facing, emerging adults may develop or experience exacerbated psychiatric disorders, including anxiety disorders (Arnett, 2007) O'Rourke et al., 2020).

The Present Study

Previous studies have demonstrated the relationship between body image and romantic/sexual relationships, self-esteem, and mental and physical health and wellbeing. However, the relationship between dating anxiety and body image within emerging adults has been heretofore underexplored. We

thus sought to test the hypothesis that lower body image was related to increased dating anxiety in emerging adults, as they are at a critical time in development for healthy voluntary relationship closeness (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). A better understanding of this relation can inform psychoeducation in a clinical mental health setting.

METHOD

Research Model

This was a survey study analyzing the relation between body image and dating anxiety.

Study Group

We recruited participants through Amazon MTurk crowdsourcing. Participants received compensation in the amount of $.30 (USD) for taking part in the study. Participation was limited to individuals from ages 18 to 25 years. We initially collected 370 total responses, but 139 individuals did not pass our quality check questions. The final sample was composed of 231 emerging adults with a mean age 23.35 (*SD* = 1.76).

With respect to sex, 50.2% of participants reported they identified as male, 49.4% identified as female, and .4% identified as intersex. Further, 96.4% of the sample was cisgender. With respect to ethnicity, 54.5% of the participants were Caucasian, 17.7% Asian or Pacific Islander, 17.7% Hispanic, 9.5% African American, and 0.4% as multiracial/biracial. In addition, almost all participants (87%) were born in the United States.

Most participants (81%) indicated that they had been in a long-term relationship. Furthermore, concerning the present relationship status of participants, 35% reported being single, 32.5% as in a relationship, 23.4% as dating, 8.2% as married, and 0.9% as separated.

Ethical Statement

All procedures were approved by local Institutional Review Board (e.g., ethics committee approval), STUDY00016463, approval date 10 December 2020. Participants gave informed consent before taking the survey.

Data Collection Tools

Demographic Questions. As reported above, we asked participants to indicate their sex and gender (male, female, transgender, nonbinary, or other). We also asked them to report their age, ethnicity, birth country, and relationship status.

Body Appreciation Scales-2 (BAS-2; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). This scale assesses state-level body appreciation and is considered to measure positive body image. It has been shown to have good construct validity (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Participants are asked to focus on how on how they are feeling about their body "right now." There are 10 items on the scale, with response options on a 5-point Likert scale from "never" = 1 to "always" = 5. Example items are, "I respect my body," and "I feel good about my body." Thus, scores can range from 10 to 50. The mean scores were calculated across the 10 BAS-2 items, such that higher scores indicated more body appreciation. Our participants' responses to the BAS showed excellent internal reliability consistency (α = .94).

Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS-A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004). With explicit permission of the authors (Glickman & La Greca, 2004), we used the DAS-A to assess anxiety in heterosocial and dating situations. It contains 26 items, but five items are not scored, for a total of 21 test items. Participants rate how characteristic each item is of them on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not at all characteristic of me") to 5 ("extremely characteristic of me"). Scores thus can range from 21 to 105, with a higher score indicative of a higher dating anxiety. Our participants' responses to the DAS-A showed excellence internal reliability consistency (α = .95). Researchers have previously used this scale as an effective measure of dating anxiety in young adults (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2008).

The DAS-A is comprised of three subscales. The first is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE-Dating), consisting of 10 items measuring the worry that a date may judge a person in a negative manner. An example item is, "I am often afraid that I may look silly or foolish while on a date." The second is Social Distress-Dating (SD-Date), consisting of seven items measuring the distress while on a date and interactions with someone who could be perceived as a prospective dating partner. An example item is, "I am usually nervous going on a date with someone for the first time." The third is Social Distress-Group (SD-Group), consisting of four items measuring inhibitions and concerns that are faced during a heterosocial group situation. An example item is, "I often feel nervous or tense in casual get-togethers in which both guys and girls are present" (Glickman & La Greca, 2004).

Data Collection

The online study was hosted on Qualtrics and linked to MTurk. Qualtrics allowed the user to complete the questionnaire at their own pace on their computer. Participants could exit the survey at any time and were able to skip any question.

Data Analysis

To analyze data, we used Pearson product moment correlation. For *post hoc* analysis, we used hierarchical linear regression and *t*-test of independent means.

RESULTS

In Table 1, we present mean scores with standard deviations and correlations between variables. Pearson's *r* correlational analysis revealed that self-perceived body appreciation was significantly negatively related to dating anxiety, $r(229) = -0.40$, $p < .001$. Our primary hypothesis was therefore supported. Further, each of the DAS-A Subscales showed a negative relation with body appreciation scores.

Table 1. ***Correlations between Body Image, Dating Anxiety, FNE-Dating, SD-Group, SD-Distress, and Age***

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	*Body Image*
1.Body Appreciation (BAS-2)	37.64	8.99	-
2.Dating Anxiety (DAS-A)	66.03	18.20	-0.40*
3.Subscale: Fear of negative evaluation	31.83	9.13	-0.37*
4.Subscale: Social Distress-Dating	22.41	6.81	-0.38*
5.Social Distress-Group	11.78	3.81	-0.35*

*n = 231; * p < .001; SD: Standart Deviation*

Although not an *a priori* consideration in our study, as shown in Table 2, we conducted a hierarchical linear regression analysis to examine whether body appreciation would predict dating anxiety when

controlling for gender. Examination of tolerance and VIF showed no multicollinearity issues. We entered gender at Step 1, explaining only .1% of the variance in dating anxiety. Entering body image at Step 2, the overall regression model was significant, $R^2 = .160$, $F(2, 228) = 21.70$, $p < .001$, predicting 16% of the variance in dating anxiety, similar to the correlation analysis. Body image ($\beta = -.399$, $p < .001$) remained a significant predictor, but gender ($\beta = -.022$, $p = .720$) was not.

Table 1. ***Hierarchical Linear Regression of body image and gender as predictors of dating anxiety***

Step	*t*	*ß*	R^2	ΔR^2	*F*	*p*
1.Constant	18.637		.001		.299	<.001
Gender	-.546	-0.36				.585
2.Constant	17.351		0.160	0.159	21.702	<.001
Gender	-.359	-.022				.720
Body Image	-6.561	-.399				<.001

In addition, although not an *a priori* consideration in our study, participants who reported they had ever been in a long-term romantic relationship had higher body image scores ($M = 38.30$, $SD = 8.85$) than participants reporting they had never been in a long-term relationship ($M = 34.84$, $SD = 9.16$), $t(229) = 2.316$, $p = .021$. However, participants reporting they had ever been in a long-term romantic relationship did not have dating anxiety scores ($M = 65.09$, $SD = 18.48$) that were statistically significantly different than participants who had not been in a long-term relationship ($M = 70.05$, $SD = 16.62$), $t(229) = 1.632$, $p = .104$.

DISCUSSION

The present study evaluated whether there was an association between self-perceived negative body image and total dating anxiety in emerging adults. Supporting our hypothesis, responses indicated that when emerging adults have lower self-perceived body image, they also reported higher dating anxiety. This remained true when controlling for gender. In a clinical setting, these results can inform therapeutic avenues used with clients presenting with body image concerns or those who have inhibitions initiating and maintaining romantic relationships. Some clients may not know the varied consequences of suffering from a negative body image and how it impacts their social functioning. Discussing this association can help them better understand what they are experiencing, particularly in emerging adulthood where one is in a transitional stage, learning to resolve many components of identity while attempting to understand the dynamics of a long-term committed relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Furthermore, mental health counselors can help individuals with dating anxiety understand with better clarity how their fear is preventing them from forming meaningful connections. A therapist can help emerging adults explore how negative self-image and irrational beliefs contribute to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Riggs & Han, 2009). Our *post hoc* analysis showed that people who had never been in a relationship had poorer body image than those who had been involved in a romantic relationship. Thus, body image should be explored with the client as a potential barrier to the pursuit of dating involvement. In addition, since research has linked self-agency with positive body image (Gattario & Frisén, 2019), focusing on empowerment and self-worth strategies may additionally help the client with both body image and dating anxiety issues.

Although not examined in the present study, it is worth noting that this anxiety can be exacerbated if the individual is critical of their physical appearance such as, height, weight, personality, speech, or self-presentation (Steven & Morris, 2008). It is prudent in a clinical setting for the mental health counselor to help the client reframe negative conceptions to promote healthy change (Barnett et al., 2014).

Analysis of DAS-A subscales provided in-depth information. As expected, we found a negative relation between body appreciation and fear of negative evaluation. That is, as one's appreciation for their own body decreases, fear of being negatively evaluated increases. The results from this study contrast with at least one previous study, conducted by Levinson and Rodebaugh (2012). Their null results may be a product of convenience sampling. Although their study was well designed, our sample was roughly twice the size, and we recruited from the general population. Moreover, Levinson and Rodebough's sample had a mean age of about 19 years whereas the present sample has similar distribution for both genders and the mean age was about 23 years. Future research is needed to clarify this phenomenon.

There was a negative relation between group social distress and body image, consistent with previous literature. Davinson (2012) examined the social aspects of body image and found that women who suffer from body image concerns are more likely to have negative expectations regarding social interactions and further expect their future interactions to go poorly.

There was also negative association between distress experienced in a dating situation and body image. This is in line with previous results in studies of both men and women. Davinson (2012) examined the impact of body image on forming romantic relationships and observed that young men with poor body image often find it difficult to take part in social activities. Within traditional gender roles, men are expected to be active in initiating and establishing romantic affiliations. Men with poor body image may feel anxious and incompetent while interacting with a date. Similarly, Cash et al. (2004) highlighted that young woman often believe their level of physical attractiveness will impact the success of relationships with men. Poor body image thus can cause distress and inhibit both women and men from forming meaningful romantic attachments.

Although not a planned analysis, our data showed that gender did not affect the relationship between body image and dating anxiety. Previous literature suggests that women are often more dissatisfied with their bodies than men (Esnaolo et al., 2010; Quittkat et al., 2019; Tiggemann, 2004), but contemporary research has largely overlooked men and their perceptions about their body (Brink, et al., 2018). A negative body image is a concern both in men and women, as evidenced by our data. To wit, a *post hoc* analysis showed no gender difference in body appreciation between men (M = 37.28, SD = 8.91) and women (M = 38.03, SD = 9.14) in our sample, $t(228) = .630$, $p = .529$.

Some evidence does suggest body image concerns might not differ in *magnitude*, but may differ in *kind* for men and women, beginning early in life. Kostanski et al. (2004) showed that, for child and adolescent girls, body image dissatisfaction is high for those in the normal to overweight range, indicating a desire to be thinner, whereas for child and adolescent boys, those who were underweight wanted to gain weight, and those who were overweight wanted to lose weight. Additionally, in older adults, women have more concern about body image appearance and display, and men place more importance on body image with respect to functioning (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). Body image concern seems to grow more pronounced in adolescence (Kostanski et al., 2004). Furthermore, some evidence suggests that body image satisfaction is similar between young and older women (Pruis & Jankowsky, 2010) and is stable across older age for both women and men (Quittkatt et al., 2019),

although younger women have a stronger drive for thinness and are more prone to societal influences (Pruis & Jankowsky, 2010). It seems, then, that the mental health counselor must explore individual nuances of body images with those of various genders and ages.

We did not examine body image influences in the present study, but it is worth underscoring the role that contemporary media plays in shaping body image perceptions (Mills et al., 2018; Turner et al., 1997). Specific types of media, such as social and mass media, have been consistently found to impact body image preferences and judgments. Davis et al. (2019) argued that this seems particularly true for teens and emerging adults who are immersed in technology. Mills et al. (2018) discussed how social media use, such as engagement in appearance-enhancement "selfie" photo activities, may lead to may lead to a preoccupation with and focus on physical appearance, generating lowered body image and low self-esteem. For both men and women, frequent exposure to social and other media is linked to increased weight dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, and body surveillance, and decreased self-confidence and self-esteem (Fawkner, 2012; Kim & Lennon, 2007; Mills et al., 2018, Turner et al., 1997). The therapist could help clients filter out negative messages and allow in beneficial media (Gattario & Frisén, 2018).

Although not examined empirically here, it is important to address cultural concerns with respect to dating anxiety and body image. Cultural expectations impact body image, as different cultures have different standards of what is acceptable and desirable. Our subsample of persons born outside the U. S. was too small for meaningful comparison. Our sample was also relatively homogenous, consisting primarily of Caucasian people from the U.S. Notably, Demir (2020) showed that, in Turkish adolescents, body concerns and mothers' attitudes towards dating predicted dating behavior. Similarly, Adamczyk et al. (2018) documented that Polish participant had more dating anxiety than U. S. participants. Evidence suggests that society influences individuals to monitor and manage their appearances in an attempt to fit into the cultural ideal, which typically includes regulating weight and grooming to conform to normative expectations. Such cultural expectations strongly affect how we feel about our bodies, as well as the degree to which we practice appearance-management (Rudd & Lennon, 2000). Since culture makes a large part of people's personalities and ideologies, future studies may incorporate recruitment of multinational or multiethnic participants to determine their relationship to body image and dating anxiety. This will aid clinicians in better understanding and validating the distinct experiences of their multiethnic clients.

Although not explored in this study, it is worth pointing out to the mental health counselor that personality appears to be related to body image. Dione (2012) argued that personality may influence body image by focusing attention on the body in a way that distorts reality, so the individual's unique view of the world and their personality determines their body image. Moreover, personality has long been linked to anxiety (Gershuny & Sher, 1998) and anxiety can motivate avoidance (Wilt et al., 2011); these factors can be extended to dating anxiety. It is prudent for future researchers to decipher the relationship of personality to body image and dating anxiety to inform best clinical practice.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. The correlational nature of the study does not allow causal inferences to be drawn. For example, it is plausible to assume that anxiety related to dating triggers emerging adults to become more conscious about their bodies and subsequently worsens their body image. At the same time, it is entirely possible to assume that

individuals with negative body image become more critical of themselves in social situations, especially dating scenarios, and subsequently develop strong inhibitions regarding it.

The demographics of our sample may not allow for generalization. The young age of our emerging adult sample may not reflect perceptions of those in their middle and late adulthood. It is possible that as adults grow older, and gather more experiences and insight, they become more comfortable in their own skin and in romantic relationships. Mental health counselors may prompt exploration of this concept with all age groups, since body image concerns may continue into adulthood (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003). In addition, our sample was primarily cisgender, and we did not ask about sexual orientation. Most research cited above focused on heterosexual experience. In fact, even research on contemporary best practices is therapy typically lacks focus on the LGBTQ+ community (Balsam et al., 2006). Future researchers should endeavor to gain insight into LGBTQ+ to improve cultural knowledge and sensitivity for best therapy practices.

Furthermore, our sample was primarily Caucasian and from the United States. Culture may play an important role in mediating the relationship between dating anxiety and self-perceived body image. Body ideals can differ across cultures, as can expectations for romantic relationships. To inform best practice, future research would benefit from including a more diverse sample, particularly more gender, sexual, and ethnic minorities, and participants non-WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) cultures (Rad et al., 2018). Data consistently show that clinical mental health treatment outcomes are more effective when multicultural dynamics are understood by the therapist (Soto et al., 2018).

Scholars have underscored the lack of evidenced based, developmentally appropriate interventions for emerging adults with respect to anxiety in general (Kranzler et al., 2019). Nevertheless, by considering the multidimensionality of both body image and dating anxiety, the mental health counselor can promote positive change.

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About Authors

Soumya Gupta. Ms. Gupta earned her Master of Arts degree in Applied Clinical Psychology from Penn State Harrisburg in 2021. Her clinical experience includes neuropsychological assessments with children and adolescents. She aims to pursue a Ph. D. in Clinical Psychology.

Cobi S. Michael. Dr. Michael earned her Ph. D. in Clinical Psychology from Fielding Graduate University. Her clinical work includes psychological and neuropsychological assessment and psychotherapy with adults, adolescents, and children. She is the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Science in Psychology program at Penn State Harrisburg and has been teaching at Penn State for two decades.

Marissa A. Harrison. Dr. Harrison earned her Ph. D. in Biopsychology from the University at Albany, State University of New York, and has conducted research and taught various psychology courses for over 20 years. She teaches various gradaute and undergraduate psychology courses at Penn State and has supervised many Master of Arts students conducting their graduate research.

Author Contributions

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