



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Effect of Self-Differentiation on Trait Anxiety and Authenticity of University Students

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the effect of self-differentiation on trait anxiety and authenticity in university students. The sample consists of a total of 333 university students (244 female and 89 male) studying in various departments of a state university who volunteered to participate in the study. Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form (DSI-SF) was used to measure self-differentiation levels; “Trait Anxiety Scale” was used to measure trait anxiety levels; and “Authenticity Scale” was used to measure the authenticity levels of university students. The results obtained were analyzed both with SPSS and AMOS programs. The correlation between variables was observed with SPSS analysis. The analyses were tested at .05 and .01 significance levels using SPSS 25.0 package programme. The PROCESS (Model 4) Macro was used in SPSS to examine the mediating effect of anxiety in the relationship between self-differentiation and authenticity. The findings of the research indicated that the relationship between self-differentiation and authenticity in university students was partially mediated. The study also demonstrated the positive predictive value of self-differentiation at the level of authenticity in university students. The findings were then discussed in relation to the existing literature, with some suggestions for future research made.

## Keywords

Self, Self-Differentiation, Anxiety, Trait Anxiety, Authenticity

## INTRODUCTION

Individuals with low self differentiation cannot differentiate between emotions and real life; they act more dominantly based on their emotions, prioritize their emotions in their decisions, spend most of their energy in search of love, and become vulnerable since they cannot differentiate cognitive activities from emotions. These individuals spend their lives trying to receive approval, experience a negative struggle against people they cannot receive approval from, and have to deal with many physical and emotional problems throughout their lives (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). On the other hand, individuals with high self differentiation recognize other individuals' emotions, empathize with their emotions in sync, and have an emotional

intellect that includes appreciating their own emotions (Goleman, 1995). It was found that individuals with high self differentiation are distinctive in understanding that human behavior consists of a complex structure and that these behaviors are caused by many variables, not a single variable (Hill, Hasty, & Moore, 2011), that they have low depression and trait anxiety levels (Solomon, Dekel, Zerach, & Horesh, 2009), and that, at the same time, they have high levels of self-regulation and forgiveness (Jankowski, Sandage, & Hill, 2013). On the other hand, it was found that individuals with low self differentiation also have weak socialization, emotional intelligence, and communication skills (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Studies showed that there is a significant relationship between high self differentiation and peer attachment styles of university students (Vick, 2005), that sensitive and accepting parenting styles

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and support in romantic relationships are important factors that positively affect individuals' self differentiation (Freeman & Almond, 2009), and that individuals with high self differentiation have good physical health and social relationships (Gharehbaghy, 2011), while Daiman (2018) examined that interpersonal functions have a significant impact on holistic self-development and self differentiation in a research with university students.

Tiryaki-Güven (2020) determined that there is a positive relationship between university students and family functioning, self differentiation, social problem solving, and solving relationships between psychological symptoms. Individuals with high self differentiation also tend to behave authentically. Authenticity is the tendency to behave by taking the individual's feelings, thoughts, and attitudes into account (Goldman & Kernis, 2006). An individual with a true self both connects in a mature way and feels continuity, stability, and reciprocity by practicing comfortable self-regulation (Akbat, 2015). When the opposite characteristics of authentic individuals with self differentiation are considered, the behavior of the depressed individual emerges. Authenticity, which is known as being oneself or the true self (Yalom, 2000; Lacoste, Leimgruber, & Breyer, 2014), has been identified as a feature of identity achievement and an element of mental health and psychological acceptance (Lopez & Rice, 2006). On the other hand, Kernis & Goldman (2005) defined authenticity as self-actualization, the state of the individual being open to new experiences, living in the moment, trusting his or her own inner experiences, being free and creative with all his or her functions, and being fully consistent with his or her beliefs, discourses, and behaviors (Bowens, 1999). While ideal authenticity emphasizes avoiding the effects of weak willpower, not assimilating other individuals' standards, being devoted to intimate life projects, and determining psychological, social, and material rewards in this direction (Feldman, 2014), phenomenological existentialism emphasizes that the focus should be on authentic experiences instead of past experiences (Corey, 2008).

When we do not live authentically, we may alienate ourselves or our surroundings (Orange, 2002). On the other hand, it was determined that ontological well-being has a mediating role in the relationship between authenticity, mental health,

and life satisfaction and that the mediating effect between autonomous and autonomous-relational self-construal and subjective well-being is significant (Jane et al., 2016). In another study, it was found that authentic tendency has a relationship with psychological well-being (Lenton et al., 2016). It was found that individuals with a high authentic tendency have improved skills in coping with problems and stress, have positive personality traits of creativity and self-differentiation (Jani et al., 2016; Orange, 2002; Thomaes et al., 2017), and show fewer symptoms of depression (Impett et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2008). A low authentic tendency may indicate fear of life, a weak character pattern, and a lack of self-awareness, as well as psychosocial personality disorders. It was determined that individuals with a high authentic tendency have significantly low anxiety levels (Hall & Theriot, 2016).

Anxiety causes many negative situations in individuals, such as panic, fear, a low sense of self, and despair (Richardson, 2002; Yohannes & Alexopoulos, 2014). The intensity of anxiety depends on the balance between the primary process where an individual evaluates the threat situation and the ability to cope with the potential threat (Benard, 2004) and the secondary process in which he or she evaluates the security situation (Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 2011). Anxiety was found to have a negative relationship with psychological survival (Min et al., 2013), a positive relationship with stress (Williams, Domanico, Marques, Leblanc, & Turkheimer, 2012), a significantly positive relationship (Hill, Hasty, & Moore, 2011) with uncertainty about the future (Dugas, Gosselin, & Ladouceur, 2001), a positive relationship with depression, and a negative relationship with self differentiation (Solomon, Dekel, Zerach, & Horesh, 2009). Certain symptoms appear when the anxiety state occurs. Cognitive symptoms include an excessive focus of the individual's attention on internal and external stimuli. Emotional symptoms include states of restlessness, concern, anger, and agitation. Behavioral symptoms consist of escape, avoidance, and freezing reactions. Trait anxiety is the tendency to perceive the events a person experiences and his or her situation within these events as generally stressful (Min et al., 2013; Williams, Domanico, Marques, Leblanc, & Turkheimer, 2012). It was observed that individuals with high trait anxiety levels are hurt more easily and are more pessimistic.

The trait anxiety level determines the frequency and severity of state anxiety that an individual will experience in dangerous situations. Accordingly, individuals who are under pressure and have high trait anxiety levels are expected to show faster and more frequent state anxiety symptoms when compared to individuals with low trait anxiety levels (Vasey & Ollendick, 2000). This process will negatively affect the self differentiation and authenticity processes of individuals. Based on this, the current research aims to examine the effect of university students' self differentiation on trait anxiety and authenticity.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Research Model*

In accordance with the purpose of this study, a relational survey model based on quantitative research methods and general scanning models is used. The scanning model describes past and present situations as they are and is applied to ensure that individuals learn and develop desired behaviors. A general scanning model involves conducting research on the entire population or sample group in order to make a general judgment about the population. The relational scanning method aims to determine the common variance between two or more variables. The relational scanning model aims to determine whether or not variables change together and if so, how this happens (Karasar, 2011).

### *Participants*

The study group for the research consists of a total of 333 university students (224 females-73.3% – 89 males-26.7%) who are studying in various departments of one state university in the 2022–2023 academic year and agreed to participate in the research voluntarily. The participants, distributed according to classes, consist of 333 students; 299 of whom are 1st graders (89.8%), 25 of whom are 2nd graders (7.5%), 8 of whom are 3rd graders (2.4%), and 1 of whom is a 4th grader (0.3%). Approval was granted by the Uşak University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board (approval number: 2023-67, date: 16.03.2023). Written permission was obtained from the owners of the scales, and informed consent was obtained from the families of the children participating in the study.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

Data collection was transmitted electronically to the participants so that the students could fill out the form created via Google Form. Students who agreed to volunteer were included in the study. In line with the study, “Differentiation of Self Inventory—Short Form (DSI-SF) is used to determine the self differentiation of university students; “Authenticity Scale” is used to determine the authenticity level of the students; and “Trait Anxiety Scale” is used to determine their trait anxiety levels.

### *Differentiation of Self-Inventory—Short Form (DSI-SF):*

While “Differentiation of Self Inventory”, which was developed by Skowron & Freidlander (1998) and later revised by Skowron & Schmit (2003), consisted of 4 subscales and a total of 46 items, it was reduced to 20 items by Drake, Murdock, Marszalek, & Barber (2015) via a short-form study to provide convenience to researchers. 4 subscale structures were preserved in the new form. The items are six-point Likert-type and are scored between 1 (does not reflect me at all) and 6 (reflects me strongly). While the emotional reactivity, emotional detachment, and telescoping dimensions consist of reverse-scored items, only one item in the taking I position is reverse-scored. Items of emotional reactivity, emotional detachment, and telescoping subscales represent low vertical differentiation, and therefore they are scored in reverse. High scores obtained from the scale represent a high level of differentiation. Subscale points are calculated by taking the averages depending on the number of items in that subscale. Similarly, the average of the four subscale scores gives the total score of the scale (Drake et al., 2015). While Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency coefficients related to taking I position, emotional detachment, telescoping, and emotional reactivity dimensions of the original scale and the total score of the scale were found to be .88, .79, .68, .70 and .80, respectively, five-week apart test-retest reliability coefficients were found to be .85, .81, .72, .74 and .82 (Drake et al., 2015). The adaptation of the Differentiation of Self Inventory Short Form (DSI-SF) into Turkish was made by Sarıkaya et al. (2018). Internal consistency and test-retest reliability analyses were conducted regarding the DSI-SF Turkish form total score and subscale scores. In the study, the test was repeated two weeks apart, and the reliability coefficients were found to be .86 for the DSI-SF total score, .80 for emotional

reactivity, .73 for emotional detachment, .70 for telescoping, .73 for taking I position. The findings show that the Differentiation of Self Inventory Short Form is a valid and reliable measurement tool (Sarikaya et al., 2018).

When looking at the reliability of the scale within the scope of this research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be .56 for taking I position subscale, .70 for the telescoping with others subscale, .74 for the emotional detachment subscale, .73 for the emotional reactivity subscale, and .81 for the self differentiation subscale.

#### **Authenticity Scale (AS):**

The scale was developed by Wood et al. (2008) to verify the three-component structure they conceptualized based on a humanistic approach. The Scale is a 12-item, 7-point Likert-type tool consisting of the dimensions of self-alienation, authentic life, and acceptance of external influence, each with four items. The researchers confirmed that the three dimensions they obtained in both explanatory and confirmatory factor analyses merged into a higher dimension in the second-level analysis. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients were found to be .78 for self-alienation, .78 for acceptance of external influence, and .69 for authentic life. In addition, the scale was retested twice, with an interval of two and four weeks, and the reliability coefficients were found to vary between .85 and .91. Wood and his friends examined the relationship of the scale with some mental health symptoms and found that the authentic life dimension has a positive relationship with happiness, and that self-alienation and acceptance of external influence have a positive relationship with stress and anxiety and a negative relationship with happiness. In addition, the same study found that all three dimensions of authenticity showed strong relationships with subjective and psychological well-being. The total authenticity score of the scale can also be obtained by subtracting the scores of the self-alienation and acceptance of external influence sub-dimensions from the authenticity sub-dimension score.

#### **Trait Anxiety Scale (TAS):**

The State and Trait Anxiety Inventory, which was adapted to Turkish culture by Öner & Le Compte (1983) and includes norm studies along with validity and reliability studies, consists of a total of 40 items, including the State Anxiety Scale consisting of 20 items and the Trait Anxiety Scale consisting of 20 items. The Trait Anxiety Scale,

which consists of 20 items, was used in this study. The Trait Anxiety Scale indicates how the individual should generally feel. Reliability coefficients determined by alpha correlations, which is a generalized form of the Kuder-Richardson 20 formula, were found to be between 0.83 and 0.87 for the "Trait Anxiety Scale". These findings indicate that Turkish scales have high item homogeneity and internal consistency. According to the "Item Remainder" correlation technique, which provides detailed information about the reliability and validity of the items that make up the scale, the item reliability correlation of the Turkish form for the Trait Anxiety Scale is between 0.34 and 0.72. Reliability coefficients obtained from the test-retest method of the scale show that it changes between 0.71 and 0.86 for the Trait Anxiety Scale. The Turkish translation of Trait Anxiety Scale was carried out using two different techniques: experimental concept validity and criterion validity (Öner & Le Compte, 1983).

#### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the study and how to use the data collection tools were explained to the participants before the application, and the application was carried out by a researcher in a classroom environment. Before the data was included in the analysis, the measurement tools were checked, and incorrect forms were not included in the analysis. The analysis was conducted through the SPSS 16. program at .05 and .01 significance levels. In the study, Pearson-correlation analysis was used for statistics of the relationship between dependent and independent variables; PROCESS (Model 4) Macro in SPSS was used to examine the mediating effect of anxiety in the relationship between self-differentiation and authenticity.

## **RESULTS**

### **Findings of the Correlation Analysis**

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to see the relationship between self differentiation levels (taking I position, emotional detachment, telescoping, emotional reactivity), and trait anxiety levels with authenticity levels (self-alienation, authentic life, acceptance of external influence) of university students, and the findings are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and correlation values

	1	2	3	Avg.	SD.	Kurt.	Skew.
1	1	.476**	.379**	74.0751	12.22716	0.84	0.555
2		1	.365**	53.1562	7.94595	1.602	0.276
3			1	48.8889	9.40695	0.346	1.108

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

(1. Total Score for Self-Differentiation, 2. Total Score for Trait Anxiety, 3. Total Score for Authenticity)

When the analysis findings in Table 1 are considered, it was found that there was a moderately positive significant relationship between the total self differentiation level, the total trait anxiety level ( $r = .476$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the total authentic level ( $r = .379$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a moderately significant

relationship between the total trait anxiety level ( $r = .365$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the total authenticity level. The results of the analysis conducted to examine the mediating effect of trait anxiety in the relationship between self differentiation and authenticity are given in Table 2 below:

**Table 2.** Mediation test between variables: direct and indirect relationships

Model Paths	Average Effects with 95% Confidence Interval		
	Effect Value	Lower Limit	Higher Limit
<b>Total Effect</b>			
Self differentiation → Authenticity	.29	.21	.37
<b>Direct Effect</b>			
Self differentiation → Anxiety	.31	.25	.37
Anxiety → Authenticity	.28	.15	.41
Self differentiation → Authenticity	.20	.12	.29
<b>Indirect Effect</b>			
Self differentiation → Anxiety → Authenticity	.09	.04	.13

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

SPSS PROCESS (Model 4) was used to examine the mediating effect of trait anxiety in the relationship between self differentiation and authenticity in university students. The findings of the analysis are given in Table 2. It was determined that the total effect of self differentiation in university students on authenticity is significant ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% GA = [.21, .37]). When anxiety was included in the analysis as a mediating variable, the findings showed that self differentiation significantly predicted anxiety ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% GA = [.25, .37]), and that anxiety significantly predicted authenticity ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% GA = [.15, .41]). In addition, it was seen that the predictive effect of self differentiation on authenticity is decreasing, that it is still significant ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% GA = [.12, .29]), and that the indirect effect is also significant ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As a result, the findings showed that anxiety partially mediated the relationship between self differentiation and authenticity.

## DISCUSSION

When the results of the study are analyzed, it was found that self differentiation in individuals has a significant effect on authenticity. This finding is similar to many studies in the literature. It was found that young adults with low self-esteem are not accepted socially, while young adults with high self-esteem have high levels of socialization and self-differentiation (Schouten, 2007). While Kwon & Lee (2014) determined that self differentiation mediates the relationship between perceived parenting attitudes and the career decision-making of university students and the caring attitudes of parents and their level of career decision-making, Daiman (2018) determined that interpersonal functions have a significant impact on holistic self-development and self differentiation in the study they conducted with university students. On the other hand, it was determined that there is a positive and significant relationship between life satisfaction and true self-presentation and that social networks play an important role in helping young adults recognize different aspects of themselves and create a coherent identity

(Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). This finding is similar to the fact that individuals who achieved self differentiation show a significant relationship with their authenticity (Gil-Or et al., 2015); authentic individuals also maintain the balance between autonomy and relationality in their lives and close relationships (Harter et al., 1997; Schmid, 2005). It was shown in the research that self differentiation is an important predictor of the level of depression in adolescent individuals (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992) and that differentiation is a predictive feature of adolescent individuals' anxiety, fear, and anxiety levels (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

When trait anxiety is included in the analysis as a mediating variable, the findings show that self differentiation significantly predicts anxiety. The findings from the research are seen to be supported by the studies in the literature. It was concluded that individuals with low self differentiation levels experience depression (Hooper & DePuy, 2010), social, state, and trait anxiety (Peleg-Popko, 2002; Sarıkaya, Boyacı, İlhan, & Aldemir, 2018; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), and self-alienation frequently. On the other hand, it was concluded that individuals with high self differentiation develop low anxiety (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), high levels of relationship satisfaction and authenticity (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2015), high psychological well-being (Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009), more sustainable attitudes towards life (Clarken, 2011), and healthy interpersonal relationships (Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009). In another finding of the study, it was determined that trait anxiety in individuals significantly predicts authenticity. In the study, it was concluded that there is a significant relationship between individuals' authenticity levels and subjective well-being (Me'nard & Brunet, 2010) and that authenticity has a mediating role in the relationship between conscious awareness and finding meaning in life (Allan, Bott, & Suh, 2015). The results of this research support the findings of the research. As a result of the research, it was concluded that trait anxiety partially mediates the relationship between self differentiation and authenticity. It was found that when trait anxiety levels increase, both psychological endurance level and authenticity decrease (Wolfadt, Hempel, & Miles, 2003). It was observed that individuals with high levels of trait anxiety hurt more easily and are more pessimistic. It was determined that the trait anxiety level

determines the frequency and severity of state anxieties that the individual will experience in dangerous situations and reduces self-distinctiveness (Vasey & Ollendick, 2000). In another study, it was concluded that individuals with high authentic tendencies take responsibility for their own lives, experience less anxiety, and create a system of values independent of society's and other people's expectations (Tou, Baker, Hadden, & Lin, 2015). These results show a parallel with research findings. The study is limited to the data received from students studying at one state university. This study can be conducted with other variables and a more widespread sample. It is recommended that field researchers conduct studies that include the variables of psychological well-being, authenticity, and self-esteem, as this will contribute positively to the literature.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors have stated that they have no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Ethical Aspects of The Study

Approval was granted by the Uşak University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board (approval number: 2023-67, date: 16.03.2023).

### Authors' Contributions

Each author contributed equally to the manuscript in terms of data collection, statistical analyses, and conceptual framework. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

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