Investigation of the relationship between dating anxiety, self-esteem and social connectedness in emerging adults

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between dating anxiety (DA), self-esteem (SE) and social connectedness (SC), particularly the degree in which self-esteem and social connectedness can be considered predictors of dating anxiety, as well as the differences and similarities between participants regarding the three concepts (dating anxiety, self-esteem and social connectedness) based on their age, gender and the relational status. The sample consisted in 200 participants young adults (from several counties in Romania), aged 18-30 years old. Data were collected online by three instruments regarding DA, SE, and SC. The quantitative analysis of the results indicates positive and statistically significant correlations between SE and SC, negative correlations between DA and SE and between DA and SC. The results are discussed by referring to previous data in the literature and from the perspective of their applied values in relation to the wellbeing of young adults involved (or trying to be involved) in romantic relationships.

Keywords: dating anxiety; social connectedness; young adults; self-esteem

1. Introduction

The perceived quality of interpersonal relationships, especially of the romantic ones, has an important role on the ways they will develop in the future (Downey et al., 2000; Farooqi, 2014). Relationships described by a high quality are characterised by high levels of affection, intimacy, and care, while relationships perceived as having a lower quality are characterised by high levels of conflict, irritation and antagonism (Dush & Amato 2005 apud Farooqi, 2014). Other elements that are commonly associated with high-quality relationships are: trust, security, satisfaction, understanding, validation, forgiveness and the ability to express and decode emotions (Clark, Mills & Powell, 1986; Feeey, 1995, 1999; Farooqi, 2014).

Among various factors that have the potential to impact the quality of interpersonal relationships, anxiety is an affection that can be associated with a lower quality of life as a result of the symptoms that can resurface and that can have unwanted effects on self-esteem and mental functioning (DSM V, 2016). Some of these negative impacts are: an increase chance of depression, consumption of different substances, difficulties in human interactions and in other social accomplishments (Glickman & La Greca, 2004).

In this paper we aim to investigate a specific category of anxiety, i.e. the dating anxiety, since this category of anxiety, which differs from the social anxiety, is very common in young adults in the context of mate search and couple formation (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). DA is defined as representing the concern, distress and inhibition felt during interaction with romantic partners or members of the opposite sex, which are potential dating partners (Glickman & La Greca, 2004, apud Boyle &

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O'Sullivan, 2013). The installation of anxiety in the presence of a potential partner presents the risk to suppress the development of the first dating events that occur normally during adolescence. Although at first, in a certain amount, DA can be a normal response in the context of interpersonal romantic interactions, given the fact that, for adolescents, this experience is a new one, it is expected that the level of anxiety diminishes in time as they regain experience (Neider & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001 apud Glickman & La Greca, 2004). High and persistent levels of DA were associated in young people with depression, substance abuse and loneliness (Arkowitz, Hinton, Perl & Himadi, 1978; Pilkonis & Zimbardo, 1979 apud Glickman & La Greca, 2004).

Dating anxiety (DA) resurfaces as following the negative thoughts/anxiogenic that a person might show in different situations regarding the interaction with a possible romantic partner during a romantic date or not (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). DA can have a powerful impact on self-esteem in both partners involved in romantic interactions. The romantic partner of the person with symptoms of DA can be affected by the negative thoughts formed as a result of his/hers own difficulties (e.g., thinking patterns regarding the self in relation with the events that a person took part in the past and her/his expectations), and especially on the relationship that both wanted to develop and in consequence on their own personal future. Moreover, failing in developing a wanted relationship can have a powerful impact on social connectedness, thus on the general well-being of a person.

Social connectedness (SC) is an important aspect to every human being and can have many benefits personally, professionally and socially (for the community). Social connectedness is defined as representing the interpersonal and interdependent closeness between human beings that has as a result a belonging feeling (Chuter, 2019). As social beings, humans benefit from a multitude of positive effects from different interactions between them. The feeling of being connected socially can have positive effects on general wellbeing, optimism, the desire to evolve professionally, self-esteem, anxiety, empathy, depression, immunity, recovery from a disease and longevity and many others (Seppala, 2014). A lower feeling of SC can lead to social isolation and hence losing opportunities, development of anxiety, depression, antisocial behaviors, suicidal behaviors etc. (Capanna et al., 2013; Seppala, 2014). Hence, SC is an important component of human quality of life, by being associated to the individual mental and physical well-being in several contexts (families, organizations, schools, groups of friends etc.), but also with the feeling of life satisfaction (Blau et al., 2016; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). Buunk (1996) identifies three main factors for which people wish to be in the presence of one another, as they follow: social comparison, reduction of anxiety and learning new information (apud Dwyer, 2000). Albu (2013) mentions six reasons that represent the base for which people express the need to affiliate: positive stimulation, the proper evaluation of a situation, emotional support, self-evaluation, attention solicited to the others and reduction of anxiety. Another motivational factor behind the social connectedness is that people tend to avoid loneliness and the feeling of isolation (Dwyer, 2000).

In their transition to adulthood, young people go through many different changes, among them being the process of leaving home to go to a university or to join other programs of professional development, which reflect important decisions regarding their future career and their future life, including here the involvement in romantic relationships. For adolescents and emerging adults, the relationships with parents and with their peers can influence future decision regarding the formation and management of romantic relationships for adolescents (Adams & Berzonsky, 2009). For example, if parents manifest positive feelings like affection towards children, they tend to develop high self-esteem and, in the future, they manifest more confidence when they engage in romantic relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999, Adams & Berzonsky, 2009). Bowlby (1973) states that if children are given a model based on interest and preoccupation from their significant others, i.e. parents, they manifest more confidence and aspire in gaining intimacy in future relationships, having secure representations on themselves, in comparison to those that are not accepted and receive a lower level of attention from their parents.

As indicated by several authors, self-esteem (SE) can play major role in maintaining a positive opinion about self and therefore, it can be a protective factor against anxiety symptoms that can resurface in different moments of life, by reducing their intensity or by preventing their installation (Greenberg et al., 1992). SE is also an important factor in relation to the ability to develop interpersonal relationships and maintaining them. In a study that investigated the connection relationship between self-esteem, the ability to initiate relationships, loneliness and excessive use of internet, it was shown that lower levels of self-esteem were associated with excessive use of the internet and lower levels of self-esteem and excessive use of internet were mediated by the low ability to initiate relationships (Dembinska, Klosowska, & Ocknik, 2020).

In a study investigating loneliness, SE and affect, it was showed that people who reported having moments of loneliness had more memories that they were socially excluded in the past and they also expected to be socially excluded in the future (Teneva & Lemay Jr., 2020). Researchers found that loneliness can have negative effects on the psychological well-being leading to a low level of self-esteem and fewer positive affects, most probably because people have the tendency to project and expect the same level of loneliness in the future (Teneva & Lemay Jr., 2020). As noticed in the studies presented above, social connectedness is discussed and analyzed in the context of affiliation, which is an important component of the human needs pyramid represented by Maslow. Affiliation is an action that describes association at different degrees between a person or a group of persons with a person or a group (Dwyer, 2000).

This paper investigates the ways the variables dating anxiety, self-esteem and social connectedness relate, taking into account that all have the potential to impact the interpersonal functioning and the individual well-being of young adults, particularly whether SE and SC represent predictors of dating anxiety. Another aim of the study is to compare the three variables depending on the gender, age and the relational status of the participants.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objective

The specific objectives of this study are to investigate the ways in which dating anxiety (DA) is associated with the level of self-esteem (SE) and the level of social connectedness (SC) and SE in young adults (predominantly college students). The following hypotheses were formulated: (1). There will be a positive correlation between the levels of SE and SC, (2). There will be a negative correlation between the levels of DA and SE (a higher level of DA will correlate with a lower level of SE), (3). There will be a negative correlation between the levels of DA and SC (a higher level of DA will correlate with a lower level of SC), (4). Low SE will predict a higher level of dating anxiety, (5). A low level of social connectedness will predict a higher level DA, (6). There will be differences depending on gender, relational status and age of the participants regarding the levels of dating anxiety, self-esteem and social connectedness.

2.2. Participants

The participants were young adults with the ages between 18 and 30 years (with an average of 21.78 and a standard deviation of 2.966), from urban areas of seven counties in Romania (Cluj, Iași, Argeș, Ilfov, Vrancea, Galați and Maramureș). From the 200 participants, 157 were females and 43 participants were males. Figure 1 presents the participants repartition according to their age. The analysis of the distribution of data indicated a normal one ($p=.186$).

Figure 1. Distribution of the participants according to their age

A number of 97 participants declared that they were part of a romantic relationship with a duration of minimum 6 months at the moment of the study, while a number of 103 people declared that they were not involved in a relationship. Among the persons that declared that they were not part of a romantic relationship, a number of 28 were never involved in a relationship in the past, while a number of 75 declared that they did have a relationship before.

2.3. Instruments

Dating anxiety scale for adolescents / DAS-A (La Greca & Lopez, 1998)

DAS-A has 26 items that aim to identify the degree of anxiety that is or it was felt during romantic dates. For example, “I worry that I may not be attractive to people of the opposite sex”, “I think I am too concerned with what members of the opposite sex think of me” etc. Five items (5, 11, 15, 18, 25) were added as an assurance that the respondents read the questions and to offer them a “break” from the anxiety related items. Respondents had to choose from five options on a Likert-scale, from 1- not at all characteristic to me, to 5- extremely characteristic to me, to indicate the degree in which the affirmation was true for them. High scores indicate a high level of dating anxiety and lower scores indicate a lower level of anxiety. The questionnaire was developed by La Greca and Lopez in 1998. It has a good internal consistency, with an Alpha of 0.98 (Glickman, La Greca, 2004). The questionnaire is accessible for free for researchers. For this study, the instrument was translated by the first author and verified for comprehensibility by a second author, which is also the scientific coordinator of the first author.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965)

The questionnaire is comprised of 10 items (five of them are positively formulated and five of them are negatively formulate). For example: “Sometimes i think i don’t worth anything”, “I feel i don’t have much to be proud of”. The respondents have to choose from four options starting with 1- totally agree and 4-totally disagree. High scores indicate a high self-esteem and low scored indicate a low self-esteem. The questionnaire was developed by Rosenberg in 1965. In a study that had as participants 247 students (Greenberger, Chen, Dmitrieva, & Farruggia, 2003), Alpha Cronbach value indicated a number of 0.88. The questionnaire was available in Romanian language (Stamate & Colomeischi, 2014).

Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995)

The scale has 10 items aiming to evaluate the feeling of connectedness (4 items), affiliation (3 items) and companionship (1 item). The respondents have to choose

from 5 options to express their agreement or disagreement. The items are formulated in such way that the respondents have to express the degree in which they feel connected or disconnected, have or don't have the feeling of belongingness to different communities and the degree of closeness to the people around them. For example, "Even around people i know, i don't feel i really belong", "I surprise myself losing any feeling of connection to society". High scores express a high feeling of connection and lower scores indicate a lower feeling of connection. The scale has a good internal consistency indicated by a Cronbach Alpha of 0.91 (Lee & Robbins, 1995). The scale is available for use in research and it was translated in Romanian language by Lupaș & Rusu (2020).

2.4. Procedure

Information was collected online via Google Forms platform. The questionnaires were distributed from the 19th to 30th of November 2020 and were completed by students (majority) and by a small number of young adults that were not students at the moment of data collection. The participants were informed in the first section regarding the confidentiality of their personal data and how the data will be used and also the subject of the study. After the presentation of the informal consent, they had to respond to three questionnaires, each one addressing one of the investigated variables (levels of SE, SC and DA). The duration of completion was around 10 minutes. Besides the three questionnaires, several items for the collection of demographic data were included (age, education, relationship status, i.e. if they are currently involved in a romantic relationship of minimum 6 months and if they had or did not have a relationship in the past).

2.5. Data analysis

In this research we used a correlational non-experimental design. Pearson correlations were used in order to determine what type of correlations that can be identified between DA, SE, SC. Then we attempted to determine if SE and SC can be considered predictors of DA - in this regard we used a linear regression analysis; and lastly we analysed the data, using T tests, obtained from the participants in order to compare the results based on gender, age and relational status.

3. Results

First step consisted of a descriptive analysis of the data (Table 1). The average value for the SC was 28.57, which indicates a medium to high feeling of social connectedness. A similar direction of results was obtained for the variable self-esteem, where the average value was 29.02. For dating anxiety, the average value was 80.72, indicating a high anxiety regarding dating (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the data

Variable/ Questionnaire	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Social connectedness	28.57	7.555	11	40
Self esteem	29.02	6.336	11	40
Dating anxiety	80.72	21.029	33	127

The software SPSS version 26 was used for the inferential statistical analysis. The first three hypotheses were tested by using Pearson correlation analysis. A medium positive correlation between the levels of SE and SC was obtained ($r=.506$, $p=.000$), indicating that a high level of SE is highly associated with a high level of SC. Medium negative correlations were observed between the levels of DA and S ($r=-.506$, $p=.000$), and low negative correlations between the levels of DA and SC ($r=-.373$, $p=.000$). These results indicate that, as expected, DA negatively connects with

SE and SC, meaning a person with a high level of DA will also have a lower level of SE and of SC.

The forth and fifth hypotheses were tested through a linear regression analysis. After the generation of the correlation matrix, a linear regression analysis was applied aiming to establish the degree in which DA is predicted by SE. The correlation between SE and DA was statistically significant, with a value of $r = -.506$, $p = .000$, indicating a medium negative correlation between the two variables. The regression equation that indicates degree of prediction of DA by SE is $Y = 129.423 - 1.678X$. SE explains the increase of DA in proportion of 25.6% ($R^2 = .256$), $F(1,198) = 67.968$, $p = .000$.

Next step was to analyse the degree in which social connectedness predicts dating anxiety. Following the analysis, it appears that social connectedness explains the increase of levels of DA in proportion of 13.9% ($R^2 = .139$), $F(1,198) = 32.035$, $p = .000$. The correlation between SC and DA had a value of $r = -.373$, $p = .000$, indicating a low negative correlation. The regression equation that indicates the degree of prediction of DA by SC is: $Y = 110.406 - 1.039X$.

Regarding the sixth hypothesis, it was expected that, depending on the gender of the participants, to observe differences in the levels of the three variables. Specifically, it was expected that the female participants will have a higher SE and a higher DA than the male participants. For the variable social connectedness, no differences between genders was expected. The results indicated that the female participants had higher levels of DA and lower levels of SE compared to the male participants. No statistically significant differences between participants was obtained for the variable SC (Table 1).

Table 2. Comparisons between the levels of the variables based on gender (DA – dating anxiety, SE = Self-esteem, SC = social connectedness)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Average</i>
DA	$t = 1.637$	Feminine	81.99
	$p = .103$	Masculine	76.09
SE	$t = -1.222$	Feminine	28.74
	$p = .223$	Masculine	30.07
SC	$t = -.598$	Feminine	28.41
	$p = .551$	Masculine	29.19

The comparison between the categories of relationship status indicated significant differences (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparisons between variables based on relational status (DA – dating anxiety, SE = self esteem, SC = social connectedness)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Involved in a relationship Yes/No</i>		<i>Average</i>
DA	$t = -2.901$	Yes	76.36
	$p = .004$	No	84.83
SE	$t = 2.420$	Yes	30.12
	$p = .016$	No	27.99
SC	$t = 2.217$	Yes	29.78
	$p = .028$	No	27.44

In terms of age, the participants were divided in two categories: 18-23 years old and 24-30 years old. It was expected that the participants in the first category of age

(18-23 years) will have a higher level of DA, a lower level of SE and a lower level of SC than the participants from the second category (24-30 years).

Table 4. Differences between variables based on the two age categories (DA= dating anxiety, SE = self-esteem, SC = social connectedness)

<i>Variables</i>		<i>Age interval</i>	<i>Average</i>
DA	t=3.537 p=.001	18-23 years old	83.60
		24-30 years old	71.63
SE	t=-2.347 p=.020	18-23 years old	28.44
		24-30 years old	30.88
SC	t=-1.149 p=.252	18-23 years old	28.23
		24-30 years old	29.67

The results indicated statistically significant differences between the two age groups, i.e. the level of DA was higher for the participants with in the age group 18-23, whereas the level of SE was lower in the same age group compared to age group 24-30 (Table 4). For the variable social connectedness, no statistical difference was found between the age groups.

4. Discussions

Given the multitude of changes that happens during adolescence and later on during the early stages of the adulthood, romantic relationships gain more and more importance in an individual life, in terms of decision making and of assessing of various social factors, e.g. social support. Once with the countless possibilities of developing new connections through common friends that the two partners of the relationship have, it also appears the possibility of increasing the feeling of social connectedness. Social connectedness is known to bring many benefits on mental health and social functioning, representing a strong predictor (and protective factor) of both variables (Saeri et al., 2017).

Our findings indicate a positive association between the levels of self-esteem and social connectedness, indicating that participants with a higher self-esteem also had higher levels of social connectedness. This finding can tell us that when a person has a good opinion about him/herself, one can expect that he/she has the capacity to express social connectedness. Hypothesis 2 and 3 were also confirmed, as we observed negative correlations between DA and SE and between DA and SC, indicating that higher levels of dating anxiety correlated with lower levels of SE and SC in our sample of young adults in Romania. The regression analysis indicated that SE and SC explained 25.6% respectively 13.9% for the increase levels of dating anxiety expressed by the participants. SE is highly associated with romantic relationships but also with the young people's ability to generally function in interpersonal interactions. People with low SE tend to have a general opinion about themselves more negative, being harder for them to form/initiate interpersonal relations in general, and romantic relationships in particular, given the anxiety that will resurface following the negative evaluation of their ability to get in contact with new persons and to communicate with them or being accepted by someone else.

Another important result of our study is represented by gender differences in terms of dating anxiety, self-esteem and social connectedness. The male participants in our sample had lower levels of DA, higher levels of self-esteem and social connectedness compared to the female participants, who reported higher levels of DA and lower levels in SE and SC. Participants with the ages between 18-23 years old had higher levels of dating anxiety, lower levels of self-esteem and social connectedness,

compared to the young adults within the age 24-30 years old. Differences resulted from comparisons based on age can be explained by the fact that young people are at the beginning of their journey on searching a romantic partner and they have fewer experiences regarding dating compared to older people. Moreover, young people (18-23) can have a lower self-esteem and a lower social connectedness feeling because of their continuous search not only for romantic relationships, but also for other potential significant connections that might enhance their professional and/or academic development. In terms of gender difference, the male participants had lower levels of dating anxiety, higher levels of self-esteem and social connectedness than female participants. These results are in line with other studies indicating that male adults have higher levels of self-esteem than females (Sprencher, Brooks, & Avogo, 2013). With a higher level of self-esteem, one can assume that is more likely that they can find it easier to initiate a romantic relationship, and, consequently, they express a lower level of DA and a higher level of social connectedness.

The last finding refers to the comparison between participants that are involved or not in a romantic relationship (minimum length of 6 months). The first group of participants had lower levels of DA, higher level of self-esteem and a higher subjective feeling of social connectedness compared to participants that were not involved in a romantic relationship.

As pointed out by several studies, once the transition from adolescence to young adulthood takes place, people begin to develop a particular interest toward spending time socializing with their peers and with potential partners, i.e. people whom they are attracted to romantically and/or sexually (Reis et al., 1993 apud Collins & Madsen, 2006; Larson, Whitton, Hauser, & Allen, 2007). A low level of social connectedness and of socialization in this period of time can increase the risk of installation of dating anxiety and, later on, of the social anxiety (Neider & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001 apud Glickman & La Greca, 2004). Being aware of these risks, as well as of the correlations between DA, social connectedness and self-esteem, as indicated by our results, opens the possibilities for the inclusion of these aspects in the psycho-educational programs addressing the management of interpersonal relationships in young adults.

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