

Demographic Differences in Perceived Acceptance, Emotional Intelligence, and Social Anxiety among Adolescents in Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Adolescence is a period of heightened social evaluation, and the levels of perceived acceptance, emotional intelligence (EI), and social anxiety that young people report may differ across demographic groups. This cross-sectional study examined gender, age, grade-level, and institution-type differences in these three constructs among 300 adolescents (150 boys, 150 girls; age 10–19 years, $M = 14.16$, $SD = 2.46$) recruited by convenience sampling from private, semi-government, and government institutions in Islamabad, Pakistan. Participants completed the Perceived Acceptance Scale, the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test, and the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents (fear and avoidance subscales). Boys scored higher than girls on EI, $t(298) = 3.32$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.38$, and on social anxiety avoidance, $d = 0.66$, whereas girls scored higher on fear of negative evaluation, $d = 0.83$; perceived acceptance did not differ by gender. Perceived acceptance was higher in mid-adolescents (14–16 years) than in early adolescents, $F(2, 297) = 3.87$, $p = .022$. Students in Grades 11–12 reported more fear and avoidance than younger students, and government-school students reported more fear and avoidance than semi-government-school students, whereas EI was highest in private schools. EI was negatively related to avoidance ($r = -.15$, $p = .009$), but perceived acceptance was unrelated to the other variables. The findings show that adolescents' emotional and social functioning varies systematically by demographic group and point to gender-sensitive, grade-targeted, school-based prevention.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental period in which peer evaluation becomes central to the self. Young people judge their own worth partly by how accepted they feel by peers, family, and teachers, and these judgments shape their emotional adjustment. Sociometer theory holds that self-esteem works as a gauge of relational value, signalling how far a person is accepted or at risk of rejection (Leary, 2005). When the gauge signals low acceptance, adolescents may become more sensitive to social cues and more inclined to avoid social situations, which are core features of social anxiety.

Social anxiety is common and typically begins early. A worldwide meta-analysis estimated the pooled prevalence of anxiety disorders in children and adolescents at about 6.5% (Polanczyk et al., 2015), and in a United States national survey, social phobia had a median age of onset of 13 years (Kessler et al., 2005). In a German community sample of 1,180 adolescents and young adults aged 14–21 years, lifetime social anxiety disorder was found in 6.6% of participants, and it was more than twice as common in girls (9.9%) as in boys (3.6%); fear and avoidance rose markedly from about age 11 onward (Ernst et al., 2023). Social-evaluative fears likewise increase from late childhood through mid-adolescence (Westenberg et al., 2004), and peer relations and friendship quality are closely tied to adolescents' social anxiety (La Greca & Harrison, 2005; La Greca & Lopez, 1998).

Emotional intelligence, the ability to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions, is a promising protective factor. Trait EI predicts adolescents' social competence and school behaviour (Mavroveli & Sánchez-Ruiz, 2011), and among 505 Spanish adolescents, higher EI was associated with lower social anxiety and stress (Cejudo et al., 2018). Whether EI, perceived acceptance, and social anxiety differ by gender, age, or school context is less clear, and the evidence is mixed.

Gender Differences

Girls generally report more social anxiety. La Greca and Lopez (1998) found elevated social anxiety in girls among 250 high-school students, and social anxiety was more strongly linked to girls' than boys' peer functioning. In Pakistan, a school-based survey of 544 adolescents aged 10–19 years in peri-urban Karachi found that girls were considerably more likely than boys to show moderate-to-severe anxiety (26% vs. 7% of the total sample; Seemi et al., 2023). Girls' greater relational orientation may make them more responsive to peer evaluation (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Findings on EI are less consistent: Ahmad et al. (2009) reported higher EI in male students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, whereas a large Spanish sample of 2,283 adolescents showed no sex differences in emotional comprehension or regulation, and girls scored higher only on emotional attention (Garaigordobil, 2020).

Age and Grade Differences

Developmental studies suggest that social anxiety increases across early and middle adolescence (Ernst et al., 2023; Westenberg et al., 2004). A Pakistani study of 716 adolescents found that 22.5% scored high on social anxiety, with the highest rate among middle adolescents (25.5%) compared with early (21.4%) and late (21.2%) adolescents (Bano et al., 2019). Social anxiety in adolescence has also been linked with poorer school functioning and lower educational aspirations (Jystad et al., 2021). Little is known, however, about how perceived acceptance varies across age groups or grade levels in Pakistani adolescents.

Institution Type

School environments differ in teaching practices, activities, and resources, which may affect emotional development. In a sample of 1,500 Indian adolescents aged 15–17 years, private-school students had higher EI than government-school students, with no gender difference within either school type (Kumar, 2021). Comparable evidence on social anxiety and perceived acceptance across private, semi-government, and government institutions in Pakistan is scarce.

The Present Study

Most of this evidence comes from Western or other non-Pakistani settings, and few studies have examined all three constructs together across gender, age, grade, and institution type in one sample. This study therefore tested four hypotheses: (H1) boys will score higher than girls on EI and girls will score higher than boys on social anxiety; (H2) perceived acceptance, EI, and social anxiety will differ across early, middle, and late adolescence; (H3) social anxiety will differ across grade levels; and (H4) perceived acceptance, EI, and social anxiety will differ among students of private, semi-government, and government institutions.

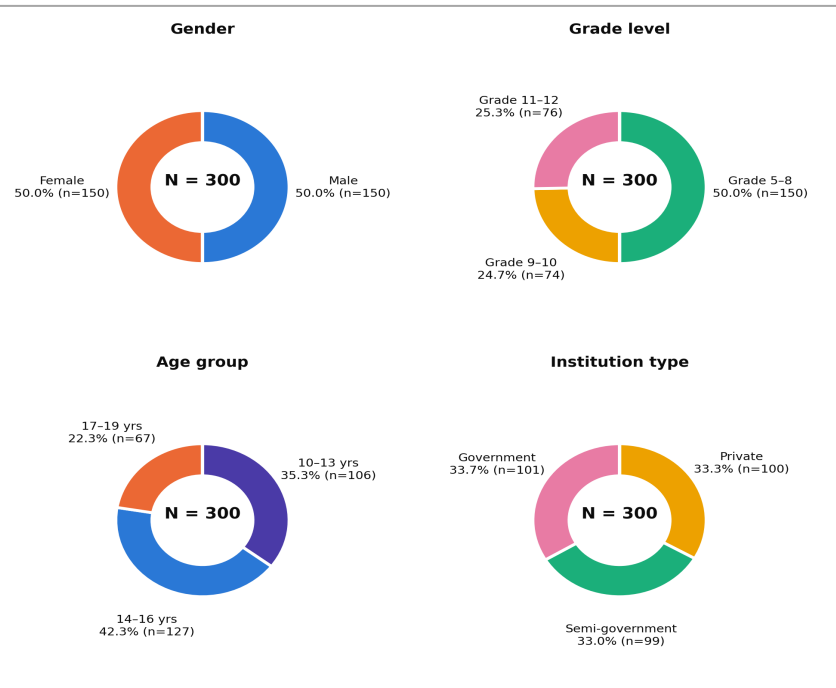
Method
Design and Participants

A cross-sectional design was used. The sample size was calculated with GPower, and 300 adolescents were recruited by convenience sampling from private, semi-government, and government schools and colleges in Islamabad, Pakistan. Participants were aged 10–19 years ($M = 14.16$, $SD = 2.46$) and were enrolled in Grades 5–12. Gender was balanced (150 boys, 150 girls), and institution types were nearly equal in size (Table 1, Figure 1). Students were included if they were currently enrolled in Grades 5–8, 9–10, or 11–12 and had working knowledge of English. Students who were under current physical or psychological treatment, or who were not enrolled in an educational institution, were excluded.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 300)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	150	50.0
	Female	150	50.0
Grade level	Grade 5–8	150	50.0
	Grade 9–10	74	24.7
	Grade 11–12	76	25.3
Age group	10–13 years (early)	106	35.3
	14–16 years (middle)	127	42.3
	17–19 years (late)	67	22.3
Institution type	Private	100	33.3
	Semi-government	99	33.0
	Government	101	33.7

Figure 1
Demographic profile of the sample by gender, grade level, age group, and institution type (N = 300).



Note: Percentages are shares of the total sample; n = number of participants

Measures

Demographic Sheet: Age group, gender, grade level, and institution type (private, semi-government, government) were recorded on a demographic information sheet.

Perceived Acceptance Scale (PAS): Perceived acceptance was measured with the 44-item PAS (Brock et al., 1998), which covers acceptance by mother, father, family, and friends and is rated on a Likert scale; higher scores indicate greater perceived acceptance. Internal consistency in the present sample was acceptable ($\alpha = .73$).

Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT): EI was measured with the 33-item SSEIT (Schutte et al., 1998), rated on a five-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*); higher scores indicate higher EI. Reliability in this sample was high ($\alpha = .93$).

Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale for Children and Adolescents (LSAS-CA): Social anxiety was measured with the 24-item LSAS-CA (Masia-Warner et al., 2003), which is rated on four-point scales and yields separate fear (of negative evaluation) and avoidance scores (each 0–72). Reliability was high for fear ($\alpha = .93$) and avoidance ($\alpha = .91$).

Procedure and Ethics

Permission to use the instruments was obtained from their authors, and approval for data collection was obtained from the heads of the participating institutions. Because participants were minors, informed consent was obtained from guardians and assent from the adolescents. Participants were told about the study aims, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. No names, school identification numbers, or contact details were collected, and completed questionnaires were anonymized and stored securely.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were computed for all scales, with $\alpha \geq .70$ taken as acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Pearson correlations examined associations among the scales. Independent-samples *t* tests compared boys and girls, and one-way ANOVAs with Tukey post hoc tests compared age groups, grade levels, and institution types. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's *d* and η^2 , interpreted against Cohen's (1988) benchmarks. The significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

All four scales showed acceptable to high internal consistency, exceeding the .70 criterion (Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	k	α	M	SD	Actual range	Potential range	Skew
Perceived acceptance	44	.73	138.04	13.03	84–205	44–220	0.73
Emotional intelligence	33	.93	144.70	9.02	132–165	33–165	1.36
Social anxiety: Fear	24	.93	22.97	16.30	0–72	0–72	0.69
Social anxiety: Avoidance	24	.91	28.84	15.97	0–72	0–72	0.16

Note: k = number of items; α = Cronbach's alpha

Correlations among the Study Variables

Emotional intelligence was negatively correlated with social anxiety avoidance, $r = -.15$, $p = .009$, but not significantly with fear, $r = -.10$, $p = .084$. Fear and avoidance were strongly and positively correlated, $r = .58$, $p < .001$. Perceived acceptance was not significantly correlated with EI ($r = -.10$, $p = .084$), fear ($r = -.03$, $p = .605$), or avoidance ($r = .07$, $p = .227$).

Table 3

Pearson Correlations Among the Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional intelligence (SSEIT)	—	-.10	-.15	-.10
2. Social anxiety: Fear		—	.58	-.03
3. Social anxiety: Avoidance			—	.07
4. Perceived acceptance (PAS)				—

Note: $p < .01$

Gender Differences

Boys scored significantly higher than girls on EI ($M = 117.52$, $SD = 14.04$ vs. $M = 112.44$, $SD = 12.40$), $t(298) = 3.32$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.38$, a small-to-medium effect (Table 4). Girls reported substantially higher fear of negative evaluation than boys ($M = 28.85$ vs. 16.54), $t(298) = -7.15$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.83$, a large effect. In contrast, boys reported more social anxiety avoidance than girls ($M = 33.82$ vs. 23.82), $t(298) = 5.71$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.66$, a medium-to-large effect. Perceived acceptance did not differ by gender, $t(298) = 1.55$, $p = .122$, $d = 0.18$. The 95% confidence intervals for the significant differences did not include zero.

Table 4

*Independent-Samples *t* Tests for Gender on the Study Variables*

Variable	Boys M	Boys SD	Girls M	Girls SD	<i>t</i> (298)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>	95% CI (M - F)
Emotional intelligence	117.52	14.04	112.44	12.40	3.32	.001	0.38	[2.07, 8.09]
Fear	16.54	13.20	28.85	16.44	-7.15	< .001	0.83	[-15.70, -8.92]
Avoidance	33.82	15.22	23.82	15.13	5.71	< .001	0.66	[6.55, 13.45]
Perceived acceptance	139.20	14.65	136.87	11.10	1.55	.122	0.18	[-0.62, 5.28]

Note: $n = 150$ per group. CI = confidence interval for the mean difference (boys minus girls). Cohen's *d* is reported as an absolute value.

Age Differences

Perceived acceptance differed significantly across age groups, $F(2, 297) = 3.87$, $p = .022$, $\eta^2 = .03$ (Table 5). Tukey tests showed that adolescents aged 14–16 years ($M = 140.22$) felt more accepted than those aged 10–13 years ($M = 135.50$, $p = .016$); the 17–19-year group ($M = 137.89$) did not differ significantly from either. Age groups did not differ in EI, $F(2, 297) = 0.35$, $p = .701$; fear, $F(2, 297) = 2.60$, $p = .076$; or avoidance, $F(2, 297) = 1.53$, $p = .21$ (Figure 2).

Table 5*One-Way ANOVA Across Age Groups*

Variable	10–13 (n = 106) M (SD)	14–16 (n = 127) M (SD)	17–19 (n = 67) M (SD)	F	p	η^2	Post hoc
Emotional intelligence	144.09 (8.25)	145.01 (9.56)	145.07 (10.14)	0.35	.701	.00	
Fear	22.94 (18.14)	20.66 (15.24)	26.16 (13.72)	2.60	.076	.02	
Avoidance	—	—	—	1.53	.21	—	
Perceived acceptance	135.50 (11.18)	140.22 (15.05)	137.89 (10.85)	3.87	.022	.03	14–16 > 10–13

Note: Post hoc comparisons are Tukey tests at $p < .05$. Group means for avoidance by age category are not tabulated; the omnibus test is reported.

Grade-Level Differences

EI, $F(2, 297) = 0.09$, $p = .918$, and perceived acceptance, $F(2, 297) = 0.46$, $p = .630$, did not differ across grade levels (Table 6). Fear differed significantly, $F(2, 297) = 4.58$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .03$, with Grade 11–12 students ($M = 27.42$) scoring higher than Grade 5–8 students ($M = 20.76$, $p = .009$); the difference from Grade 9–10 ($M = 21.77$) was not significant ($p = .078$). Avoidance also differed, $F(2, 297) = 6.06$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .04$, with Grade 11–12 students ($M = 34.23$) scoring higher than both Grade 5–8 ($M = 26.96$, $p = .003$) and Grade 9–10 students ($M = 27.02$, $p = .014$).

Table 6*One-Way ANOVA Across Grade Levels*

Variable	Grade 5–8 (n = 150) M (SD)	Grade 9–10 (n = 74) M (SD)	Grade 11–12 (n = 76) M (SD)	F	p	η^2	Post hoc
Emotional intelligence	144.88 (9.01)	144.35 (9.40)	144.69 (8.75)	0.09	.918	.00	
Fear	20.76 (17.39)	21.77 (15.37)	27.42 (13.16)	4.58	.011	.03	11–12 > 5–8
Avoidance	26.96 (16.87)	27.02 (14.31)	34.23 (14.51)	6.06	.003	.04	11–12 > 5–8, 9–10
Perceived acceptance	138.34 (13.83)	138.67 (13.30)	136.81 (11.05)	0.46	.630	.00	

Note: Post hoc comparisons are Tukey tests at $p < .05$.

Institution-Type Differences

Institution type was associated with EI, $F(2, 297) = 4.23$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .03$: private-school students ($M = 146.79$) scored higher than semi-government students ($M = 143.34$, $p = .018$), while the difference from government students ($M = 143.97$) was not significant ($p = .066$). Fear differed significantly, $F(2, 297) = 5.22$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .03$, with government students ($M = 26.73$) scoring higher than semi-government students ($M = 19.76$, $p = .006$); the difference from private students ($M = 21.53$) was marginal ($p = .055$). Avoidance differed most strongly, $F(2, 297) = 9.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$: semi-government students ($M = 23.46$) scored lower than both government ($M = 32.97$, $p < .001$) and private students ($M = 29.94$, $p = .010$). Perceived acceptance did not differ across institution types, $F(2, 297) = 1.88$, $p = .154$ (Table 7, Figure 3).

Table 7

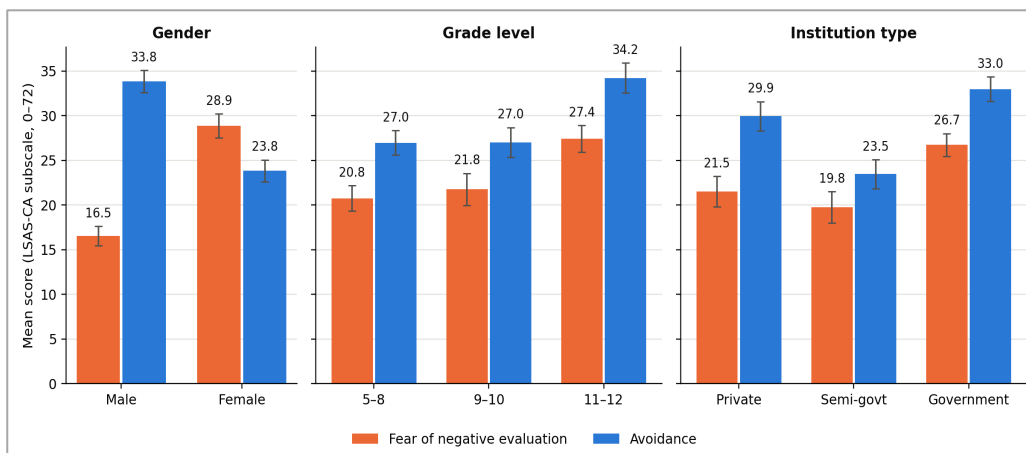
One-Way ANOVA Across Institution Types

Variable	Private (n = 100) M (SD)	Semi-govt. (n = 99) M (SD)	Government (n = 101) M (SD)	F	p	η^2	Post hoc
Emotional intelligence	146.79 (10.81)	143.34 (7.21)	143.97 (8.35)	4.23	.015	.03	Private > Semi
Fear	21.53 (17.01)	19.76 (17.43)	26.73 (12.86)	5.22	.006	.03	Govt. > Semi
Avoidance	29.94 (16.39)	23.46 (16.19)	32.97 (13.84)	9.79	< .001	.06	Govt., Private > Semi
Perceived acceptance	139.93 (13.12)	136.39 (14.17)	137.77 (11.57)	1.88	.154	.01	

Note: Post hoc comparisons are Tukey tests at $p < .05$.

Figure 2

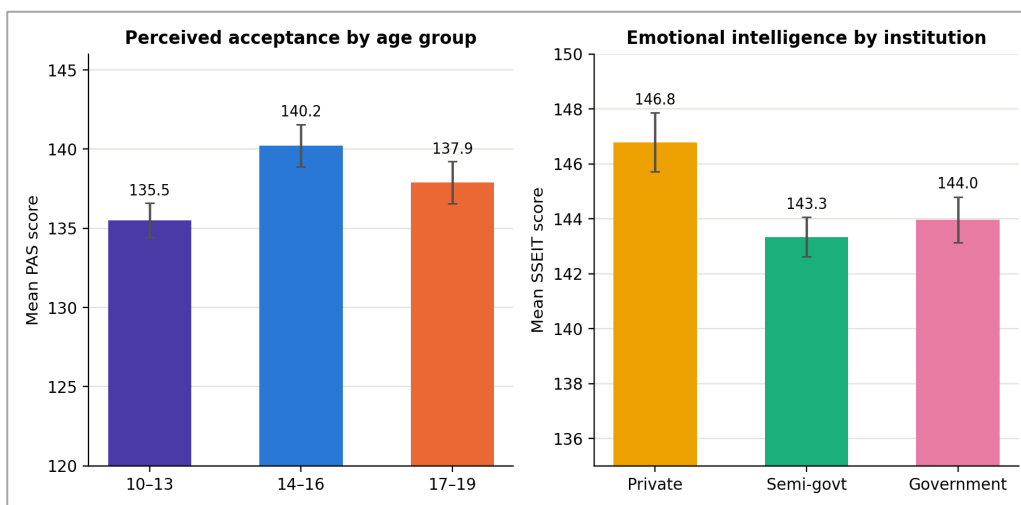
Social Anxiety Fear and Avoidance by Gender, Grade Level, and Institution Type



Note: Bars show means; error bars show ± 1 standard error. Scores range from 0 to 72.

Figure 3

Perceived acceptance by age group and emotional intelligence by institution type.



Note: Bars show means; error bars show ± 1 standard error. Vertical axes are truncated to show group differences.

Discussion

This study examined how perceived acceptance, EI, and social anxiety vary by gender, age, grade, and institution type among adolescents in Islamabad. The main findings were: (a) a gender pattern in which boys had higher EI and more avoidance while girls had more fear of negative evaluation; (b) higher perceived acceptance in mid-adolescence; (c) higher fear and avoidance in Grades 11–12; and (d) higher EI in private schools and higher social anxiety in government schools than in semi-government schools.

Gender. Hypothesis 1 was partly supported. Boys scored higher on EI, consistent with Ahmad et al. (2009) in Pakistan, but not with Garaigordobil (2020) or Kumar (2021), who found no meaningful sex differences in EI. The large gender difference in fear ($d = 0.83$), with girls higher, matches evidence that girls report more social anxiety and anxiety generally (Ernst et al., 2023; La Greca & Lopez, 1998; Seemi et al., 2023) and may reflect girls' stronger orientation toward peer relationships (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). The reversed pattern for avoidance, where boys scored higher, was unexpected. It suggests that girls and boys may express social anxiety differently, girls through worry about evaluation and boys through behavioural withdrawal, but this interpretation is tentative because avoidance was not the focus of most earlier studies and the design cannot test it. Girls and boys did not differ in perceived acceptance.

Age and grade. Hypothesis 2 was supported only for perceived acceptance, which was higher at 14–16 years than at 10–13 years. Middle adolescence may be a time when peer networks and friendships consolidate, although the study cannot determine this. Fear and avoidance did not differ significantly by age group, yet both were higher in Grades 11–12 (Hypothesis 3). Age and grade overlap, so the grade effect may reflect academic pressure, examinations, and approaching transitions as much as age. The finding is consistent with rising social-evaluative fears through adolescence (Ernst et al., 2023; Westenberg et al., 2004) and with links between social anxiety and school functioning (Jystad et al., 2021). It differs from Bano et al. (2019), who found the highest rate of high social anxiety in middle adolescents; differences in samples, measures, and categorization of age may explain this. Because social phobia typically begins by about age 13 (Kessler et al., 2005; Beesdo et al., 2009), the higher scores in older students may represent symptoms that have persisted or intensified.

Institution type. Hypothesis 4 was partly supported. Private-school students showed higher EI than semi-government students, in line with Kumar (2021), who found higher EI among private-school students. Private schools may offer more extracurricular activities and more structured support for socio-emotional development, though this was not measured here. Government-school students reported more fear than semi-government students, and both government and private students reported more avoidance than semi-government students. The relatively favourable profile of semi-government schools was not predicted, and it needs replication before any explanation is offered. Perceived acceptance did not differ by institution.

Relationships among the variables. EI was negatively related to avoidance, echoing the negative link between EI and social anxiety in Cejudo et al. (2018), although the association was small. Perceived acceptance was not related to EI or social anxiety. Perceived acceptance in this study covered family and friends together, and in a collectivistic setting, family acceptance and cultural expectations may shape social anxiety in ways not captured by the scale.

Implications

The results support school-based, gender-sensitive social and emotional programmes. Because fear and avoidance were highest among Grade 11–12 students, screening and support for older secondary students may be worthwhile. Girls may benefit most from programmes that address fear of negative evaluation, and boys from programmes that

reduce avoidance and encourage participation. EI training may be especially useful in government and semi-government schools, where EI was lower than in private schools.

Limitations and Future Directions

The design was cross-sectional, so causal or developmental conclusions cannot be drawn, and all measures were self-reported. Participants were recruited by convenience from Islamabad and needed working English, which limits generalizability. Age and grade overlapped, group sizes were unequal by grade, and no correction was made for multiple comparisons. Effects were mostly small, so the practical importance of some group differences is modest. Future studies should use probability samples from several cities, translated measures, longitudinal designs, and additional influences such as family functioning, socioeconomic status, and parenting.

Conclusion

Adolescents in Islamabad differed by gender, age, grade, and school type in emotional and social functioning. Boys had higher EI and more avoidance, girls had more fear of negative evaluation, mid-adolescents felt the most accepted, senior-grade students showed the most fear and avoidance, and private-school students showed the highest EI. Programmes to reduce adolescent social anxiety should therefore consider gender, grade, and school context.

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