

A Culture of Judgement and a Crisis of Anxiety Among Adolescents

Dr. Rinita Jain¹; Prerana Jain²

¹Consultant Academic, Counselling and Rehabilitation Psychologist

²RCI Licensed Child Psychologist, Member PsyCare Foundations.

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Abstract: Adolescence is a vulnerable period, where they are prone to emotional vulnerability and are more sensitive to peer evaluations and social judgement. In today's social environment, superficial judgement based on appearance, behaviour, or social image has emerged as a potential contributor to anxiety among adolescents. The present study was to determine the level of anxiety in adolescents, examine their perceptions regarding superficial judgement in social settings, and explore the co-occurrence of anxiety and perceived judgemental social climate. A pilot study was done with a sample of 150 school and college-going adolescents. The study used the Adolescent Anxiety Scale (AAS) developed by Dr. Rinita Jain and Khushboo Pareek, along with a single-item measure assessing whether participants believed that “people should be less judgemental about superficial things.” The results depicts that moderate to high anxiety levels (AAS \geq 7.5) were prevalent among the adolescents, as 62.7% of them showed moderate to high levels of anxiety. Additionally, 100% of participants agreed that people should be less judgemental about superficial matters, reflecting a strong and unanimous perception of judgemental social environment. Due to the absence of variance in the judgemental perception variable, inferential statistical correlation could not be computed. However, the ceiling effect itself emerged as a significant psychological finding, suggesting a strong cultural consensus regarding superficial peer judgement. The study highlights the possible role of social-evaluative threat in adolescent anxiety and emphasises the need for emotionally safe and non-judgemental environments in schools and colleges. Future studies could investigate the effects of peer pressure, body image, social media, self-esteem and family environment using larger and more diverse samples.

Keywords: Adolescent Anxiety, Social Evaluation, Judgemental Climate, Peer Pressure, Mental Health, Study.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is the most significant stage of human development. It is a transitional phase marked by rapid changes in physical, emotional, cognitive and social growth. In this stage, adolescents experience an increasing sense of self, self-awareness and stronger social belonging. This is also an emotional phase, with rising sensitivity to social feedback and heightened susceptibility to psychological stress.

In contemporary society, adolescents are growing up in an environment where appearance, social image, popularity, academic success, and online presence are constantly evaluated and compared. Social media platforms, peer interactions, and competitive academic environments have intensified the pressure to meet socially accepted standards. As a result, many adolescents experience fear of judgement, criticism, rejection, or humiliation.

Superficial judgement has become deeply embedded in social interactions among young people. Adolescents are often judged based on their appearance, clothing, skin colour, body shape, communication style, academic performance, social circle, or online activity. Such judgemental attitudes may negatively affect self-esteem, emotional security, and mental health.

Anxiety has emerged as one of the most common psychological concerns among adolescents worldwide. Anxiety in adolescents may manifest in the form of excessive worry, fear of social situations, nervousness, emotional distress, overthinking, difficulty concentrating, and avoidance behaviour. According to psychological theories, fear of negative evaluation and social rejection plays an important role in the symptoms of anxiety.

Social-evaluative threat is a concept that is especially pertinent to the understanding of adolescent anxiety. Social-Evaluative threat is the threat of negative evaluation by others. When adolescents constantly perceive themselves as being observed, criticised, or evaluated, their emotional stress levels may increase significantly.

Although several studies have examined adolescent anxiety, limited research in the Indian context has explored adolescents' perceptions regarding judgemental social environments and their possible relationship with anxiety. Hence, in the present study, the authors wished to explore the anxiety symptoms among adolescents as well as their opinion about superficial judgement in society.

➤ *Need and Rationale of the Study*

Anxiety has become a growing problem in the lives of adolescents and is a major concern for educators, psychologists, counsellors and parents. Adolescents today are exposed to multiple forms of pressure arising from academics, peer relationships, family expectations, social comparison, and digital media exposure. Along with these pressures, judgemental attitudes in society may further intensify emotional distress.

Young individuals often internalise criticism and become highly conscious of how they are perceived by others. Repeated experiences of judgement may lead to insecurity, low confidence, social withdrawal, and emotional discomfort. Despite this growing concern, discussions around judgemental culture and its psychological impact are often neglected.

The present study is important because it attempts to understand adolescents' own perceptions regarding judgemental attitudes in society. It also gives descriptive evidence of the level of anxiety symptoms among adolescents. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing emotionally safe educational environments and strengthening adolescent mental health support systems.

Previous psychological research consistently points to the relation between social evaluation and emotional well-being among adolescents. In this developmental stage, in which peer acceptance becomes highly important. Fear of criticism, rejection, or humiliation often affects emotional adjustment.

Research on adolescent anxiety suggests that social pressure and peer judgement are significant predictors of psychological distress. Adolescents who experience social rejection or fear negative evaluation are more prone to symptoms of anxiety, loneliness and low self-regard.

Studies on social comparison theory proves that individuals evaluate themselves through comparing themselves with others. The prevalence of social media has intensified this process by exposing adolescents to unrealistic beauty standards, achievements, lifestyles, and popularity indicators. Continuous comparison may increase dissatisfaction and emotional stress.

Research on social anxiety also demonstrates that adolescents often fear embarrassment or negative judgement in social situations. Such fears may lead to avoidance behaviours, excessive self-consciousness, and emotional discomfort.

Several studies have found that supportive peer relationships and emotionally safe school environments reduce stress and improve psychological well-being. On the other hand, bullying, criticism, and judgemental interactions are associated with increased anxiety and emotional vulnerability.

Despite the growing literature on adolescent mental health, limited Indian research has specifically explored adolescents' collective perceptions regarding superficial judgement in society. Therefore, the present research endeavours to provide preliminary descriptive proof in those area.

➤ *Objectives of the Study*

In the present study, the following objectives were set:

- To measure anxiety among adolescents.
- To examine adolescents' perceptions regarding superficial judgement in society.
- To explore the co-occurrence of anxiety symptoms and perceived judgemental social climate.
- To understand whether adolescents believe people should be less judgemental about superficial things.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted an observational survey approach. The descriptive method was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore patterns and prevalence of anxiety symptoms and perceptions regarding judgemental attitudes among adolescents. The study was conducted as a pilot study to obtain preliminary perception into adolescent events that are connected to anxiety or social judgement. The sample consisted of 150 adolescents from different schools and colleges. Participants belonged to adolescent age groups and represented varied educational settings. A convenient sampling technique was used for data collection.

➤ *Assessment Tools Used were:*

- Adolescent Anxiety Scale (AAS): The Adolescent Anxiety Scale, developed by Dr. Rinita Jain and Khushboo Pareek, was used to assess anxiety symptoms among adolescents. The scale measured emotional and social aspects of anxiety. Scores of 7.5 or above were considered indicative of moderate-to-high anxiety levels.
- Feedback forms: Participants are told to answer the following statement: "People should be less judgemental about superficial things." This item was included to understand adolescents' perceptions regarding judgemental social behaviour.

➤ *Procedure*

Data were collected from adolescents studying in schools and colleges. The participants were briefed on the objectives of the study, and they were asked to participate voluntarily and with confidentiality.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. The prevalence of anxiety and responses of participants with respect to judgemental attitudes were analysed by descriptive frequency analysis.

IV. RESULTS

The findings revealed that 62.7% of participants reported moderate-to-high anxiety levels based on the Adolescent Anxiety Scale ($AAS \geq 7.5$). This finding suggests that a significant proportion of adolescents experience emotional distress and anxiety symptoms. The prevalence observed in the present study indicates that anxiety is becoming increasingly common among adolescents.

One of the most significant discovery of the study was that 100% of participants agreed with the statement: "People should be less judgemental about superficial things" This consensus suggests that adolescent society is highly judgemental. Participants collectively acknowledged the emotional toll of superficial judgement.

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the growing emotional vulnerability among adolescents. The high prevalence of moderate-to-high anxiety symptoms (62.7%) suggests that adolescents face significant emotional pressure. The unanimous agreement regarding superficial judgement indicates that adolescents perceive their social environments as highly evaluative and potentially threatening.

The study emphasises the importance of creating emotionally safe, empathetic, and accepting environments for adolescents. Supportive relationships, non-judgemental communication, and mental health awareness can play a crucial role in improving adolescent emotional balance. In a society where adolescents are constantly evaluated, empathy and acceptance may become essential protective factors for mental health.

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

➤ *Mental Health Professionals*

Mental health professionals should address social-evaluative concerns while working with adolescents. Counselling interventions may focus on anxiety management, self-esteem building, emotional regulation, healthy coping strategies, social confidence, and peer relationship skills.

➤ *Parents*

They should avoid excessive criticism and comparison. Adolescents benefit from emotionally supportive communication, acceptance, and encouragement

➤ *Society*

The study highlights the need for a cultural shift from judgement to empathy. Adolescents require environments where they feel emotionally accepted rather than constantly evaluated.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested based on the findings of the study:

- Schools and colleges shall organise regular mental health awareness programmes.
- Counselling services should be strengthened within educational institutions.
- Teachers and parents should receive training regarding adolescent emotional needs.
- Awareness campaigns should promote non-judgemental communication and empathy.
- Social-emotional learning programmes should be integrated into educational settings.
- Peer support groups should be encouraged.
- Adolescents should be educated about healthy social media use.
- Programmes focusing on self-esteem and emotional resilience should be developed.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

There were some limitations of the study:

- The size of the sample was relatively small.
- The study could only be considered a pilot.
- Generalisability is restricted due to the use of convenient sampling.
- The judgemental perception variable was measured by one item measure.
- The ceiling effect prevented the computation of inferential statistical correlation.
- Self-reported responses were used for the study.

Regardless of these constraints, the study offers some important initial findings about adolescent anxiety and judgemental social conditions.

IX. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE

Research Future studies may explore: Peer pressure and anxiety, body image concerns, gender differences, social media addiction, family environment, self-esteem and emotional resilience, urban-rural comparisons, school environment and emotional safety. In future studies, we may use: Larger and more diverse samples, qualitative interviews, mixed-method approaches, longitudinal designs, and advanced statistical analysis

X. CONCLUSION

The present study explored anxiety symptoms and perceptions regarding judgemental social environments among adolescents. The findings revealed that a large proportion of adolescents reported moderate-to-high anxiety levels, indicating significant emotional distress among young individuals.

The study also found unanimous agreement among participants regarding the need for people to be less judgemental about superficial matters. This strong collective perception suggests that adolescents are highly aware of judgemental social behaviour and may be emotionally affected by it.

Although inferential correlation could not be computed due to the ceiling effect, the absence of variation itself emerged as a meaningful psychological finding. The findings show that judgemental social environments might contribute to emotional discomfort and anxiety among adolescents.

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