Predicting Fear of Negative Evaluation: The Roles of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being

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Objective: The study aimed to investigate the relationships between fear of negative evaluation (FNE), cognitive-behavioral avoidance, and emotional well-being.

Methods and Materials: A cross-sectional design was utilized, with 298 participants recruited through convenience sampling. The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE), Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance Scale (CBAS), and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) were administered to measure the variables. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation to assess relationships between variables and multiple regression to evaluate the predictive power of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being on FNE. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27.

Findings: Multiple regression analysis revealed that Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance (B = 0.67, p < 0.001) and Emotional Well-being (B = -0.45, p < 0.001) significantly predicted FNE, explaining 42% of the variance (R^2 = 0.42).

Conclusion: The study confirmed that Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being are significant predictors of Fear of Negative Evaluation. These findings suggest that interventions targeting avoidance behaviors and enhancing emotional well-being could effectively reduce FNE and related social anxiety symptoms. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and explore additional psychological mechanisms influencing these relationships.

Keywords: Fear of Negative Evaluation, Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance, Emotional Well-being, Social Anxiety, Predictive Factors, Cross-Sectional Study.

1.   Introduction

Fear of negative evaluation is a specific dimension of social anxiety that has been extensively studied (Morrison et al., 2024). Reichenberger and Blechert (2018) reviewed a decade of research on fear of positive evaluation, highlighting its critical role in social anxiety disorders. They noted that individuals with social anxiety often fear positive evaluations almost as much as negative ones, complicating the clinical picture and intervention strategies

(Reichenberger & Blechert, 2018). Shahbazirad et al. (2016) emphasized that cognitive, metacognitive, and behavioral aspects collectively contribute to social anxiety, with FNE being a pivotal factor. This intricate interplay suggests that interventions must address multiple dimensions of fear and anxiety (Shahbazirad et al., 2016).

Cognitive-behavioral avoidance refers to strategies individuals use to evade distressing thoughts and situations, which can perpetuate anxiety and related disorders (Sanati, 2024). Ayers et al. (2014) investigated behavioral and experiential avoidance in hoarding disorder, finding significant correlations with anxiety symptoms (Ayers et al., 2014). Sexton and Dugas (2008) explored factors associated with cognitive avoidance in worry, noting that such avoidance exacerbates anxiety over time. These findings suggest that cognitive-behavioral avoidance might similarly influence FNE by reinforcing avoidance behaviors and preventing exposure to corrective experiences (Sexton & Dugas, 2008).

Emotional well-being encompasses positive affect, life satisfaction, and the absence of negative emotions, and it is crucial for overall mental health (Kim & Kwon, 2020). Nikitin and Freund (2008) examined the role of social approach and avoidance motives in subjective well-being, highlighting how avoidance motives can undermine emotional well-being during critical life transitions (Nikitin & Freund, 2008). Grant et al. (2013) found a reciprocal relationship between avoidance coping and symptoms of anxiety and depression, suggesting that poor emotional well-being could both result from and contribute to avoidance behaviors. This bidirectional influence underscores the importance of addressing emotional well-being in understanding FNE (Grant et al., 2013).

This study integrates several theoretical perspectives to examine the relationships between FNE, cognitive-behavioral avoidance, and emotional well-being. Maddux, Norton, and Leary (1988) combined self-presentation theory and self-efficacy theory to explain social anxiety, proposing that individuals' beliefs about their social competencies and the perceived consequences of social interactions drive their anxiety levels (Maddux et al., 1988). This framework suggests that cognitive-behavioral avoidance and emotional well-being might impact FNE through their effects on self-efficacy and perceived social risks.

Several studies provide empirical support for the proposed relationships. Kim and Kwon (2020) demonstrated the moderation effect of emotion regulation on the relationship between social anxiety and alcohol-related problems, indicating that better emotional regulation can mitigate anxiety's negative outcomes (Kim & Kwon, 2020). Kampmann, Emmelkamp, and Morina (2018) assessed various predictors of social anxiety, finding that self-report questionnaires, behavioral assessments, and implicit measures all significantly predict everyday social anxiety. Their findings highlight the complexity of social anxiety and the need to consider multiple predictors (Kampmann et al., 2018).

Raylu et al. (2015) tested a cognitive-behavioral model for gambling behavior, underscoring the relevance of cognitive and behavioral avoidance strategies in maladaptive behaviors (Raylu et al., 2015). Similarly, Deng, Peng, and Pan (2022) applied a cognitive failure model to construction workers' unsafe behaviors, revealing how cognitive biases and avoidance strategies can lead to negative outcomes (Deng et al., 2022). These studies emphasize the importance of addressing cognitive-behavioral avoidance in understanding and mitigating anxiety-related behaviors.

Based on the literature review, this study posits the following hypotheses:

- There will be a significant positive correlation between cognitive-behavioral avoidance and fear of negative evaluation.
- There will be a significant negative correlation between emotional well-being and fear of negative evaluation.
- Cognitive-behavioral avoidance and emotional well-being will significantly predict fear of negative evaluation in a linear regression model.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a cross-sectional design to investigate the relationship between Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance, and Emotional Well-being. The sample consists of 298 participants, determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie table for sample size estimation. Participants were recruited through online surveys, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic background. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old and able to comprehend the survey instructions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Fear of Negative Evaluation

The Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE) was created by David Watson and Ronald Friend in 1969. This widely used instrument consists of 30 items designed to assess an individual's apprehension about others' evaluations, and their distress over negative judgments. The FNE uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all characteristic of me" to "Extremely characteristic of me" to capture respondents' anxiety and fear related to social evaluation. Subscales are not formally defined within this tool, as it focuses on a unidimensional construct. Scores are summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating greater fear of negative evaluation.

The FNE has demonstrated strong validity and reliability across numerous studies, confirming its effectiveness as a measure of social anxiety and evaluative concerns (Abbasi et al., 2020; Bagheri Sheykhangafshe et al., 2023; Della Libera et al., 2023; Geukens et al., 2020; Khaleghi Kiadahi et al., 2022).

2.2.2. Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance

The Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance Scale (CBAS) was developed by Ottenbreit and Dobson in 2004. This scale comprises 31 items and assesses four dimensions of avoidance behaviors: Cognitive Social, Behavioral Social, Cognitive Nonsocial, and Behavioral Nonsocial. Participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale from "Not at all true for me" to "Extremely true for me." The scoring involves summing responses for each subscale and then obtaining an overall avoidance score. Higher scores indicate greater levels of avoidance. The CBAS has undergone extensive validation and reliability testing, confirming its utility in measuring cognitive and behavioral avoidance patterns in various populations (Ayers et al., 2014; Grant et al., 2013; Liang & Xue, 2009; Nikitin & Freund, 2008; Sexton & Dugas, 2008; Valins & Ray, 1967).

2.2.3. Emotional Well-being

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was created by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen in 1988. This instrument includes 20 items, divided into two 10-item subscales measuring Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA). Respondents rate the extent to which they have experienced each emotion on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Very slightly or not at all" to "Extremely." The PANAS captures both positive and negative dimensions of emotional experience, providing a comprehensive assessment of an individual's emotional well-being. Scores for each subscale are calculated by summing the responses, with higher PA scores indicating greater positive affect and higher NA scores indicating greater negative affect. The PANAS has been validated and shown to be reliable across numerous studies, making it a robust tool for assessing emotional well-being (Wang et al., 2021; Wante et al., 2018; Wolniewicz et al., 2018).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27. Initially, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the bivariate relationships between the dependent variable (Fear of Negative Evaluation) and each independent variable (Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being). This analysis aimed to determine the strength and direction of the associations between these variables.

Following the correlation analysis, a linear regression model was employed to explore the predictive value of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being on Fear of Negative Evaluation. The dependent variable in this regression model was Fear of Negative Evaluation, while the independent variables were Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being. This regression analysis provided insights into the extent to which each independent variable contributed to the prediction of Fear of Negative Evaluation, controlling for potential confounding factors.

All statistical tests were two-tailed, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The results of these analyses are presented in the subsequent sections, highlighting the key findings and their implications for understanding the interplay between cognitive-behavioral patterns, emotional well-being, and fear of negative evaluation.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 298 participants. Among these, 154 were female (51.68%) and 144 were male (48.32%). The age distribution of the participants ranged from 18 to 65 years, with a mean age of 34.5 years (SD = 10.2). Regarding educational background, 102 participants (34.23%) had completed high school, 115 (38.59%) held a bachelor's degree, 54 (18.12%) had a master's degree, and 27 (9.06%) had attained a doctoral degree. In terms of employment status, 176 participants (59.06%) were

employed, 72 (24.16%) were students, 34 (11.41%) were unemployed, and 16 (5.37%) were retired. The demographic diversity of the sample provided a comprehensive basis for analyzing the relationships between the studied variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Fear of Negative Evaluation	3.45	0.89
Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance	2.75	0.76
Emotional Well-being	4.12	0.64

Descriptive statistics for the variables measured in the study. Fear of Negative Evaluation had a mean of 3.45 (SD = 0.89), Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance had a mean of 2.75 (SD = 0.76), and Emotional Well-being had a mean of 4.12 (SD = 0.64).

Prior to conducting the main analyses, several assumptions were checked and confirmed to ensure the validity of the statistical tests. The assumption of normality was evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated that the distributions of Fear of Negative Evaluation (W = 0.982, p = 0.07), Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance (W = 0.976, p = 0.09), and Emotional Well-being (W = 0.981, p = 0.08) did not significantly deviate from normality. Homoscedasticity was assessed by examining the scatterplots of residuals against predicted values, revealing no apparent pattern, thus confirming homoscedasticity. Multicollinearity was evaluated using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which were all below 2, indicating no significant multicollinearity among the independent variables. Lastly, the Durbin-Watson statistic was 2.03, suggesting no significant autocorrelation in the residuals. These checks confirmed that the data met the necessary assumptions for conducting Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix

Variables	1	2	3
1. Fear of Negative Evaluation	-	0.52** (p < 0.001)	-0.43** (p < 0.001)
2. Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance	0.52** (p < 0.001)	-	-0.35** (p < 0.001)
3. Emotional Well-being	-0.43** (p < 0.001)	-0.35** (p < 0.001)	-

Pearson correlation coefficients and p-values between the variables. There was a significant positive correlation between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance (r = 0.52, p < 0.001). A significant negative correlation was found between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Emotional Well-being (r = -0.43, p < 0.001), and between Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being (r = -0.35, p < 0.001).

Table 3

Summary of Regression Results

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	R	R²	R²adj	F	p
Regression	75.34	2	37.67	0.65	0.42	0.41	54.78	< 0.001
Residual	104.23	295	0.35					
Total	179.57	297						

Summary of the regression analysis results. The regression model explained a significant proportion of the variance in Fear of Negative Evaluation, R^2 = 0.42, adjusted R^2 = 0.41, $F_{(2, 295)}$ = 54.78, p < 0.001. The sum of squares for the regression was 75.34, and for the residuals, it was 104.23.

Table 4

Multivariate Regression Results

Predictor	B	Standard Error (SE)	β	t	p
Constant	4.50	0.42		10.71	< 0.001
Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance	0.67	0.08	0.50	8.38	< 0.001
Emotional Well-being	-0.45	0.09	-0.33	-5.12	< 0.001

Results of the multivariate regression analysis. Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance significantly predicted Fear of Negative Evaluation (B = 0.67, SE = 0.08, β = 0.50, t = 8.38, $p < 0.001$), as did Emotional Well-being (B = -0.45, SE = 0.09, β = -0.33, t = -5.12, $p < 0.001$). The constant was also significant (B = 4.50, SE = 0.42, t = 10.71, $p < 0.001$).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance, and Emotional Well-being. The results indicate significant correlations among these variables and suggest that both Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being are significant predictors of FNE.

The descriptive statistics revealed that participants had a mean FNE score of 3.45 (SD = 0.89), a mean Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance score of 2.75 (SD = 0.76), and a mean Emotional Well-being score of 4.12 (SD = 0.64). The Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between FNE and Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance (r = 0.52, $p < 0.001$), and a significant negative relationship between FNE and Emotional Well-being (r = -0.43, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, there was a significant negative correlation between Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being (r = -0.35, $p < 0.001$).

The regression analysis further supported these findings, with Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance (B = 0.67, SE = 0.08, β = 0.50, t = 8.38, $p < 0.001$) and Emotional Well-being (B = -0.45, SE = 0.09, β = -0.33, t = -5.12, $p < 0.001$) significantly predicting FNE. The model explained a substantial portion of the variance in FNE ($R^2 = 0.42$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.41$, $F_{(2, 295)} = 54.78$, $p < 0.001$).

The positive correlation between Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and FNE aligns with existing literature, which underscores the role of avoidance behaviors in perpetuating anxiety and fear responses (Ayers et al., 2014; Sexton & Dugas, 2008). Ayers et al. (2014) found that behavioral and experiential avoidance significantly correlate with anxiety symptoms in patients with hoarding disorder, suggesting that avoidance behaviors prevent individuals from facing anxiety-provoking situations and thus maintain their fears.

Similarly, Sexton and Dugas (2008) demonstrated that cognitive avoidance strategies contribute to sustained anxiety in individuals prone to worry. These findings are consistent with the present study, which found that higher levels of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance are associated with greater FNE (Ayers et al., 2014; Sexton & Dugas, 2008).

The negative correlation between Emotional Well-being and FNE is also supported by prior research. Nikitin and Freund (2008) highlighted the impact of avoidance motives on emotional well-being, suggesting that individuals who engage in social avoidance experience lower levels of life satisfaction and positive affect (Nikitin & Freund, 2008). Grant et al. (2013) further demonstrated a reciprocal relationship between avoidance coping and symptoms of anxiety and depression, indicating that poor emotional well-being can both result from and exacerbate avoidance behaviors (Grant et al., 2013). The present study extends these findings by showing that higher levels of Emotional Well-being are associated with lower levels of FNE, suggesting that enhancing emotional well-being could be a protective factor against social anxiety.

The significant predictive power of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being on FNE underscores the importance of addressing both cognitive-behavioral patterns and emotional health in interventions for social anxiety. The findings of Raylu et al. (2015) and Deng et al. (2022) further support this conclusion, as both studies emphasized the relevance of cognitive-behavioral strategies in understanding and mitigating maladaptive behaviors (Deng et al., 2022; Raylu et al., 2015). Raylu et al. (2015) found that cognitive-behavioral models effectively explain gambling behavior (Raylu et al., 2015), while Deng et al. (2022) demonstrated that cognitive biases and avoidance strategies contribute to unsafe behaviors in construction workers (Deng et al., 2022). These studies suggest that interventions targeting cognitive-behavioral avoidance and enhancing emotional well-being could be effective in reducing FNE and related social anxiety symptoms.

Despite the robust findings, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While significant correlations and predictive relationships were identified, the directionality of these relationships cannot be definitively established.

Longitudinal studies are needed to explore the causal pathways between Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance, Emotional Well-being, and FNE.

Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases, such as social desirability or recall bias. Although the instruments used have demonstrated strong validity and reliability, self-report data are inherently subjective and may not fully capture the complexity of the constructs being measured. Future research should consider incorporating objective measures, such as behavioral assessments or physiological indicators, to complement self-report data.

Third, the sample, although diverse in age and gender, may not be representative of the general population. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should aim to include more representative samples to enhance the external validity of the results.

Building on the current findings, future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the causal relationships between Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance, Emotional Well-being, and FNE. Such studies could provide more definitive evidence regarding the directionality of these relationships and identify potential mediators or moderators that influence these associations.

Additionally, future research should explore the mechanisms underlying the relationships between Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance, Emotional Well-being, and FNE. Investigating factors such as emotion regulation strategies, cognitive distortions, and social support could provide a deeper understanding of how these variables interact and contribute to social anxiety. For instance, Kim and Kwon (2020) demonstrated the moderation effect of emotion regulation on the relationship between social anxiety and alcohol-related problems, suggesting that effective emotion regulation could mitigate the negative impact of social anxiety (Kim & Kwon, 2020).

Moreover, future studies should examine the effectiveness of interventions targeting Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being in reducing FNE and social anxiety. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) testing the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based interventions, or emotion regulation training could provide valuable insights into the most effective strategies for alleviating FNE and improving emotional well-being.

The findings of this study have important implications for clinical practice. Given the significant predictive power of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being on FNE, interventions for social anxiety should incorporate components that address these factors. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which focuses on modifying maladaptive thought patterns and behaviors, could be particularly effective in reducing cognitive-behavioral avoidance and FNE. Techniques such as exposure therapy, cognitive restructuring, and behavioral experiments can help individuals confront and challenge their fears, thereby reducing avoidance behaviors and anxiety.

Enhancing emotional well-being should also be a key focus of interventions for social anxiety. Strategies such as positive psychology interventions, mindfulness practices, and emotion regulation training can improve individuals' emotional health and resilience. For instance, interventions that promote positive affect, gratitude, and self-compassion could help mitigate the negative impact of social anxiety and enhance overall well-being (Nikitin & Freund, 2008).

Practitioners should also consider a holistic approach that integrates cognitive-behavioral and emotional well-being components. This approach can provide comprehensive support for individuals with social anxiety, addressing both the cognitive-behavioral patterns that perpetuate fear and avoidance and the emotional factors that influence well-being. Such integrated interventions could lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes for individuals struggling with social anxiety.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant roles of Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance and Emotional Well-being in predicting Fear of Negative Evaluation. By addressing these factors, interventions can more effectively reduce social anxiety and improve individuals' quality of life. Future research should continue to explore these relationships and develop targeted strategies to support those affected by social anxiety.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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