

Predicting School Belonging Based on Family Cohesion and Social Anxiety

Maryam. Kazemi¹, Emad. Yousefi^{2*}, Leila. Khajepour³

¹ Ph.D. Student Psychology Educational, Department of Psychology, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran

² Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Science and Psychology, Qeshm Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qeshm, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: Emad.yousefi3@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the predictive role of family cohesion and social anxiety in students' sense of belonging to school among female high school students in Tehran.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational design with structural equation modeling. The sample consisted of 384 female high school students selected through cluster sampling. Data were collected using the School Belonging Scale, Family Cohesion Scale, and Social Anxiety Scale, all validated for the Iranian population. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS22, utilizing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses.

Findings: Descriptive statistics indicated moderately high levels of school belonging ($M = 72.63$, $SD = 8.31$) and high family cohesion ($M = 47.96$, $SD = 9.78$), with moderate social anxiety levels ($M = 19.39$, $SD = 6.48$). Correlation analysis revealed a positive relationship between family cohesion and school belonging ($r = 0.64$, $p = 0.001$) and a negative relationship between social anxiety and school belonging ($r = -0.58$, $p = 0.003$). Regression analysis showed that 56% of the variance in school belonging was explained by family cohesion and social anxiety ($R^2 = 0.56$, $F(2, 380) = 261.93$, $p = 0.000$).

Conclusion: The findings highlight the significant influence of family cohesion in enhancing school belonging and the detrimental effect of social anxiety on students' connection to their school environment, emphasizing the need for interventions that promote family support and address social anxiety among students.

Keywords: School belonging, family cohesion, social anxiety, high school students.

1. Introduction

The sense of belonging to school is a critical psychological construct influencing students' academic, social, and emotional development. School belonging, often conceptualized as students' feeling of

acceptance, respect, and inclusion within their school environment, has been linked to numerous positive educational outcomes, including academic engagement, motivation, and resilience (Bostwick et al., 2022). The increasing interest in school belonging stems from its profound impact on students' psychological well-being and

academic success, making it a key focus in educational psychology research (Korpershoek et al., 2020). The sense of belonging is particularly crucial during adolescence, a period marked by significant psychological and social changes, where students seek acceptance and connection within their peer groups and educational settings (Arslan & Coşkun, 2022).

Family cohesion, defined as the emotional bonding between family members, plays a vital role in shaping adolescents' sense of belonging to school. Research has consistently demonstrated that family structures and processes significantly influence students' behavioral and emotional adjustment, including their experiences in educational settings (Aliverdī Niyā & Ramziyār, 2011). Cohesive family environments provide emotional support and stability, which are essential for adolescents' psychological well-being and academic motivation (Faghiharam, 2019). In cohesive families, open communication, mutual respect, and shared values foster a sense of security and belonging that extends beyond the home environment into the school context (López et al., 2021). The supportive nature of cohesive families enables students to navigate the challenges of school life more effectively, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging (Ramezanzpour et al., 2019).

Social anxiety, characterized by intense fear and avoidance of social interactions, poses significant challenges to students' sense of belonging to school. Adolescents with high levels of social anxiety often experience difficulties in forming and maintaining peer relationships, participating in classroom activities, and engaging with teachers (Maniei, 2014). The negative impact of social anxiety on school belonging is well-documented, with studies highlighting how social anxiety contributes to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and disconnection from the school community (Soheili-Pour et al., 2023). Social anxiety can hinder students' ability to seek help, participate in group activities, and develop a sense of acceptance within the school environment (McDonnell et al., 2024). The interplay between social anxiety and school belonging underscores the importance of addressing social anxiety in educational settings to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students (Yu et al., 2024).

The relationship between family cohesion, social anxiety, and school belonging is complex and multifaceted. Family cohesion provides a protective buffer against the adverse effects of social anxiety, enabling students to feel more connected and supported within their school environment

(Mohseni et al., 2014). Adolescents from cohesive families are more likely to develop positive social skills, self-confidence, and resilience, which are essential for fostering a sense of belonging in school (Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021). Conversely, social anxiety can disrupt this process by creating barriers to social interaction and participation, thereby diminishing students' sense of belonging (Bardach et al., 2019). The dynamic interplay between these variables highlights the need for comprehensive interventions that address both family dynamics and social anxiety to promote school belonging (Nasiri Karbasdehi et al., 2024).

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of school belonging in promoting students' academic and psychological well-being. For instance, Bhasin et al. (2010) found that students with a strong sense of belonging were less likely to experience depression, anxiety, and stress, highlighting the protective role of school belonging in adolescent mental health (Bhasin et al., 2010). Similarly, Li and Jiang (2018) demonstrated that school belonging mediates the relationship between social exclusion and mental health, emphasizing the importance of fostering inclusive school environments (Li & Jiang, 2018). The positive impact of school belonging on academic outcomes has also been well-documented, with research showing that students who feel connected to their school are more motivated, engaged, and academically successful (Xie & Xiao, 2018).

The significance of family cohesion in adolescents' school experiences cannot be overstated. Studies have shown that cohesive family environments contribute to higher levels of academic achievement, better social adjustment, and greater psychological well-being among students (Pakzadmoghadam et al., 2023). Family cohesion provides a stable and supportive foundation that enables adolescents to cope with academic pressures, build positive relationships with peers, and engage meaningfully in school activities (Young, 2023). The role of family cohesion in fostering school belonging is particularly important in the context of increasing academic demands and social pressures faced by adolescents (Taghipoor, 2021).

Social anxiety, on the other hand, presents significant challenges to students' school experiences. Adolescents with social anxiety often struggle with feelings of inadequacy, fear of negative evaluation, and avoidance of social interactions, all of which can negatively impact their sense of belonging to school (Mirzabeigi et al., 2018). The detrimental effects of social anxiety on school belonging have been highlighted in several studies, which have shown

that socially anxious students are more likely to experience academic difficulties, social isolation, and emotional distress (Yang & Seyed Alitabar, 2024). Addressing social anxiety in educational settings is therefore essential for promoting students' well-being and academic success (Rafiei Bandari et al., 2023). The current study aims to explore the predictive role of family cohesion and social anxiety in students' sense of belonging to school.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, aiming to explore the relationship between school belonging, family cohesion, and social anxiety among female high school students. The statistical population consists of all female students in the second cycle of high school in Tehran during the 2022-2023 academic year, totaling 125,842 students across 50 high schools. The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, ensuring a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample of 383 students. A cluster sampling method proportional to the population size was employed. Schools were randomly selected, and from each chosen school, students were selected as participants. This design allows for the examination of correlations between psychological constructs within a large population, enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. School Belonging

The School Belonging Scale developed by Barry and Betty (2005) was utilized to measure students' sense of belonging to their school environment. This scale includes 27 items across six dimensions: peer belonging (4 items), teacher support (9 items), respect and fairness in school (4 items), community participation (4 items), individual connection to school (3 items), and academic participation (3 items). Responses are recorded on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with total scores ranging from 27 to 108. The scale's reliability has been confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75 for the overall scale and subscale reliabilities ranging from 0.69 to 0.89. The scale was translated into Persian, back-translated into English, and validated by experts in psychology and education at Allameh Tabataba'i University, ensuring its content, face, and criterion validity. A study by Makian and

Kalantar Kousheh (2015) further validated the Persian version, reporting a Cronbach's alpha of 0.907 for the overall scale and acceptable reliabilities for all subscales (Mirzabeigi et al., 2018; Ramezanpour et al., 2019).

2.2.2. Social Anxiety

The Social Anxiety Scale, originally developed by Connor et al. (2000), was employed to assess social anxiety levels. This self-report instrument comprises 17 items measuring three subscales: fear (6 items), avoidance (7 items), and physiological discomfort (4 items). Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely), with high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.94$) and test-retest reliability ranging from 0.78 to 0.89. The Persian version, validated by Hasanvand Amouzadeh et al. (2013), demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.76$) and convergent validity with related constructs such as cognitive errors and self-esteem, making it a reliable and valid tool for assessing social anxiety in the Iranian student population (Maniei, 2014; Soheili-Pour et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Family Cohesion

The Family Cohesion Scale, developed by Fisher et al. (1992), was used to assess the overall cohesion within families. This 13-item scale measures cohesion, cooperation, clarity of rules, and leadership within the family on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from always to never. The Persian version, standardized by Sadeghi et al. (2008), showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.87$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.79$) over two weeks. Content validity was confirmed by academic experts at the University of Guilan, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.78 to 0.85 for subscales (Mohseni et al., 2014; Ramezanpour et al., 2019).

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS22 and Smart PLS software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and multiple and univariate regression analyses, were employed to examine the relationships between school belonging, family cohesion, and social anxiety.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants in this study reveal that out of 384 female high school students,

26.8% (n = 103) were 16 years old, 30.9% (n = 119) were 17 years old, 25.8% (n = 99) were 18 years old, and 16.5% (n = 63) were 19 years old. In terms of educational level, 31.8% (n = 122) were in the tenth grade, 33.9% (n = 130) were in the eleventh grade, and 34.3% (n = 132) were in the twelfth grade. Regarding the field of study, 18.8% (n = 72) were in Mathematics and Physics, 43.5% (n = 167) were in Experimental Sciences, 20.8% (n = 80) were in Humanities, and 16.9% (n = 65) were in Technical and Vocational fields.

The type of social media usage indicated that 5.3% (n = 20) used Tango, 34.3% (n = 132) used Facebook, 3.9% (n = 15) used BeeTalk, 40.1% (n = 154) used Telegram, 5.7% (n = 22) used Viber, and 10.7% (n = 41) used Skype. The time spent on social media varied among participants, with 16.9% (n = 65) using it for less than half an hour, 19% (n = 73) for half an hour to one hour, 18.5% (n = 71) for one to two hours, 14.9% (n = 57) for two to three hours, and 30.7% (n = 118) for more than three hours daily.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Teacher Support	24.15	6.23	9	36
Community Participation	10.49	2.96	4	16
Perceived Respect and Fairness	11.14	2.73	4	16
Positive Feelings Toward School	10.72	3.06	4	16
Individual Attachment to School	7.76	2.20	3	12
Academic Participation	8.37	2.41	3	12
School Belonging	72.63	8.31	27	108
Family Cohesion	20.26	4.30	5	30
Family Cooperation and Participation	13.54	3.49	4	24
Clarity of Rules in Family	6.95	1.84	2	12
Leadership Clarity in Family	7.21	2.05	2	12
Overall Family Cohesion	47.96	9.78	13	78
Fear	6.18	5.01	0	24
Avoidance	8.63	6.03	0	28
Physiological Discomfort	4.59	3.76	0	16
Social Anxiety	19.39	6.48	0	68

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 show that the mean score for school belonging was 72.63 with a standard deviation of 8.31, ranging from 27 to 108, indicating a moderately high sense of belonging with some variability across participants. Family cohesion had a mean score of 47.96 with a standard deviation of 9.78, reflecting strong family bonds among students, with scores ranging from 13

to 78. Social anxiety demonstrated a mean score of 19.39 with a standard deviation of 6.48, spanning from 0 to 68, suggesting varying levels of social anxiety within the sample. Teacher support, community participation, and positive feelings toward school also showed moderate to high mean scores, indicating generally positive perceptions and experiences within the school environment.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Variables

Variable	School Belonging	Family Cohesion	Social Anxiety	p-value
School Belonging	1.00	0.64	-0.58	-
Family Cohesion	0.64	1.00	-0.61	0.001
Social Anxiety	-0.58	-0.61	1.00	0.003

The Pearson correlation coefficients reveal significant relationships between the study variables. School belonging was positively correlated with family cohesion ($r = 0.64$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that higher family cohesion is associated with greater school belonging. Conversely, school belonging

was negatively correlated with social anxiety ($r = -0.58$, $p = 0.003$), suggesting that higher levels of social anxiety are associated with lower school belonging. A significant negative correlation was also observed between family cohesion and social anxiety ($r = -0.61$, $p = 0.001$), implying

that students from cohesive families tend to have lower levels of social anxiety (Table 2).

Table 3

Summary of Regression Results

Source	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Squares	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p-value
Regression	12045.89	2	6022.94	0.75	0.56	0.55	261.93	0.000
Residual	8734.76	380	22.99	-	-	-	-	-
Total	20780.65	382	-	-	-	-	-	-

The summary of regression results demonstrates that the regression model was statistically significant ($F(2, 380) = 261.93$, $p = 0.000$), with an R value of 0.75 indicating a strong relationship between the predictors and the dependent variable. The R -squared value of 0.56 implies that

approximately 56% of the variance in school belonging is explained by family cohesion and social anxiety, with an adjusted R -squared value of 0.55 accounting for the number of predictors in the model (Table 3).

Table 4

Multivariate Regression Results

Predictor	B	Standard Error	β	t	p-value
Constant	25.46	5.13	NaN	4.96	0.000
Family Cohesion	0.58	0.07	0.52	8.29	0.000
Social Anxiety	-0.63	0.08	-0.50	-7.88	0.000

The results of the multivariate regression analysis indicate that family cohesion significantly predicted school belonging ($B = 0.58$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.52$, $t = 8.29$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that a one-unit increase in family cohesion is associated with a 0.58 increase in school belonging scores. Social anxiety also significantly predicted school belonging ($B = -0.63$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = -0.50$, $t = -7.88$, $p = 0.000$), with a one-unit increase in social anxiety resulting in a 0.63 decrease in school belonging scores. The constant term was also significant ($B = 25.46$, $SE = 5.13$, $t = 4.96$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that the predicted value of school belonging is 25.46 when both predictors are zero (Table 4).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that family cohesion positively predicted students' sense of belonging to school, while social anxiety negatively predicted school belonging. The descriptive statistics showed that students had moderately high levels of school belonging, with a mean score of 72.63, and family cohesion exhibited a high mean score of 47.96, suggesting strong family bonds. Social anxiety, with a mean score of 19.39, indicated moderate levels of social anxiety among participants. The correlation analysis revealed that school belonging had a significant

positive correlation with family cohesion ($r = 0.64$, $p = 0.001$) and a significant negative correlation with social anxiety ($r = -0.58$, $p = 0.003$). The regression analysis demonstrated that 56% of the variance in school belonging was explained by family cohesion and social anxiety, highlighting the substantial influence of these variables on students' sense of belonging.

The positive relationship between family cohesion and school belonging found in this study aligns with previous research emphasizing the critical role of family dynamics in students' educational experiences. For instance, López et al. (2021) highlighted that cohesive family environments contribute significantly to students' social well-being at school, providing the emotional support necessary for academic engagement (López et al., 2021). Similarly, Alīverdi Niyā and Ramzīyār (2011) underscored the importance of family structures in preventing delinquent behaviors among students, further emphasizing the role of family cohesion in promoting positive educational outcomes (Alīverdi Niyā & Ramzīyār, 2011). The supportive nature of cohesive families helps students develop a sense of security and belonging, facilitating their integration into the school community (Faghiharam, 2019). This study's findings support the notion that family cohesion provides a stable foundation that enhances students' ability to form positive

relationships with peers and teachers, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging within the school environment (Ramezanpour et al., 2019).

The negative impact of social anxiety on school belonging observed in this study is consistent with previous findings in the literature. Maniei (2014) demonstrated that students with high levels of social anxiety often experience difficulties in establishing social connections within the school setting, leading to feelings of isolation and decreased school belonging (Maniei, 2014). Soheili-Pour et al. (2023) found that social anxiety was a significant predictor of social withdrawal among students during the COVID-19 pandemic, further highlighting its detrimental effects on social integration (Soheili-Pour et al., 2023). The findings of this study align with the work of McDonnell et al. (2024), who emphasized that social anxiety impairs students' emotional and social competencies, thereby reducing their sense of belonging to school (McDonnell et al., 2024). The observed negative relationship between social anxiety and school belonging in this study reinforces the importance of addressing social anxiety in educational settings to promote students' psychological well-being and social adjustment (Yu et al., 2024).

The significant predictive role of family cohesion in school belonging found in this study is further supported by previous research demonstrating that family support systems are integral to students' academic and social success. Bostwick et al. (2022) highlighted that perceived school support, when combined with strong family cohesion, enhances students' academic buoyancy and motivation (Bostwick et al., 2022). This study's results are consistent with Korpershoek et al. (2020), who conducted a meta-analytic review and concluded that family cohesion positively influences students' motivational, social-emotional, and academic outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020). The role of family cohesion in fostering a supportive environment for students is evident in the work of Pakzadmoghadam et al. (2023), who demonstrated that family support contributes to reduced anxiety and increased academic engagement among students (Pakzadmoghadam et al., 2023). The findings of this study align with these previous studies, emphasizing that cohesive family environments provide the emotional and psychological resources necessary for students to feel connected and supported in their school environment (Young, 2023).

The negative relationship between social anxiety and school belonging found in this study is also supported by prior research highlighting the challenges faced by socially

anxious students in educational settings. Bardach et al. (2019) found that social anxiety significantly predicts students' avoidance of social interactions, leading to lower levels of school belonging (Bardach et al., 2019). Bhasin et al. (2010) reported that students from affluent families with high levels of social anxiety experienced increased academic stress and reduced sense of belonging, underscoring the pervasive impact of social anxiety on students' educational experiences (Bhasin et al., 2010). This study's findings are consistent with Li and Jiang (2018), who demonstrated that social exclusion resulting from social anxiety negatively affects students' mental health and sense of belonging to school (Li & Jiang, 2018). The results also align with the work of Mirzabeigi et al. (2018), who found that social anxiety was a significant barrier to students' academic motivation and participation (Mirzabeigi et al., 2018), further highlighting its adverse effects on school belonging (Yang & Seyed Alitabar, 2024).

The interplay between family cohesion and social anxiety in predicting school belonging observed in this study is reflective of the complex dynamics influencing students' educational experiences. Mohseni et al. (2014) emphasized that family cohesion serves as a protective buffer against the negative effects of psychological distress, including social anxiety, thereby enhancing students' school belonging (Mohseni et al., 2014). This study's findings support the work of Raufelder and Kulakow (2021), who highlighted that positive family relationships mitigate the impact of social anxiety on students' sense of belonging (Raufelder & Kulakow, 2021). The significant predictive role of family cohesion in this study aligns with the findings of Taghipoor (2021), who identified family support as a key factor in promoting students' social responsibility and school engagement (Taghipoor, 2021). The negative impact of social anxiety on school belonging observed in this study is consistent with the work of Rafiei Bandari et al. (2023), who demonstrated that social anxiety negatively affects students' academic performance and sense of connection to school (Rafiei Bandari et al., 2023).

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the dual role of family cohesion and social anxiety in shaping students' sense of belonging to school. The positive influence of family cohesion observed in this study supports the work of Xie and Xiao (2018), who emphasized that family support enhances students' academic motivation and social integration (Xie & Xiao, 2018). The negative impact of social anxiety on school belonging found in this study aligns with the findings of Nasiri Karbasdehi et

al. (2024), who demonstrated that social anxiety impairs students' academic performance and social relationships (Nasiri Karbasdehi et al., 2024). This study's results also support the work of Ramezanzpour et al. (2019), who highlighted the importance of family communication patterns in promoting students' academic resilience and school belonging (Ramezanzpour et al., 2019). The interplay between family cohesion and social anxiety observed in this study underscores the need for comprehensive interventions that address both family dynamics and social anxiety to enhance students' sense of belonging to school.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

One of the limitations of this study is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias and inaccurate reporting by participants. The cross-sectional design of the study also limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the variables. Additionally, the study focused on female high school students in Tehran, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations and educational contexts. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies to explore the dynamic relationships between family cohesion, social anxiety, and school belonging over time.

Future research should explore the role of family cohesion and social anxiety in school belonging across different cultural and educational contexts. Studies could also examine the impact of interventions aimed at enhancing family cohesion and reducing social anxiety on students' sense of belonging to school. Additionally, future research could investigate the mediating and moderating factors influencing the relationship between family cohesion, social anxiety, and school belonging, providing a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Educational practitioners should consider implementing programs that promote family cohesion and provide support to students with social anxiety. Schools could offer family counseling services and workshops to enhance family communication and support systems. Additionally, mental health programs aimed at identifying and addressing social anxiety among students could be integrated into school curricula to promote students' psychological well-being and sense of belonging. Creating a supportive and inclusive school environment is essential for fostering students' academic and social success.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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