

# Relationship Between Appearance Anxiety and Self-Esteem Among Foster Care Children

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**Abstract:** *This study examined the relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem among 300 foster care children aged 12 to 18 years living in registered foster care homes and child care institutions in Karnataka, India. Using a quantitative, correlational, cross-sectional design, participants completed the Appearance Anxiety Inventory (Veale et al., 2014) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) along with a demographic information sheet. Results indicated a statistically significant, weak negative correlation between appearance anxiety and self-esteem,  $r = -.115$ ,  $p < .05$ , and linear regression confirmed that appearance anxiety significantly predicted self-esteem, though it accounted for only 1.33% of the variance. Participants reported a notable level of appearance anxiety while self-esteem scores fell within the normal to healthy range, providing partial support for the hypothesised levels of both variables. No statistically significant differences in appearance anxiety or self-esteem emerged across the socio-demographic and care-related characteristics examined, including age, care duration, biological family contact, primary caregiver status, peer acceptance, social media use, reason for placement, academic performance, or grade. The findings are interpreted through Attachment Theory, Social Comparison Theory, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, and Person-Centred Theory, and are discussed in terms of their implications for counselling interventions with foster care children.*

**Keywords:** appearance anxiety, self-esteem, foster care children, adolescents, counselling psychology

## 1. Introduction

Foster care is an alternative child-care system in which children live with caregivers other than their biological parents due to circumstances such as abuse, neglect, abandonment, parental illness, death, or the inability of parents to provide adequate care (Font, 2021). Because foster placement is usually a response to family crisis rather than a matter of choice, foster children often carry emotional, psychological, and social burdens that differ from those of children raised in stable family environments. Frequent placement changes disrupt the development of secure attachment, and unstable caregiving environments can create feelings of insecurity, fear of rejection, and emotional confusion (Zeanah et al., 2010). Over time, these experiences shape how foster children view themselves and how they believe others see them.

Foster children also face social stigma; being labelled a "foster child" may make them feel different, inferior, or excluded from peer groups. When emotional validation is inconsistent, children may turn to visible features such as physical appearance to judge their worth, so that appearance becomes a substitute source of self-evaluation and identity formation. These conditions make appearance anxiety and self-esteem important psychological variables to study in this population.

Appearance anxiety refers to excessive worry, distress, and fear related to one's physical appearance and how others evaluate it (Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2016). It goes beyond ordinary body dissatisfaction and involves the belief that social acceptance and personal value depend mainly on how one looks. For foster children, appearance anxiety may develop as a coping response to early experiences of rejection or emotional unavailability, in which being physically attractive comes to feel necessary to receive love

and acceptance.

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth and personal value (Rosenberg, 1965), and it develops through experiences of emotional support, consistent caregiving, and acceptance from important others. In foster children, its development is often disrupted by early loss, trauma, and inconsistent caregiving, and children who experience abandonment or neglect are more likely to internalise beliefs such as "I am not good enough" (Harter, 2012).

Appearance anxiety and self-esteem are closely interconnected: when children base their self-worth mainly on physical appearance, dissatisfaction with appearance leads directly to lower self-esteem (Cash & Smolak, 2011). Foster children with high appearance anxiety tend to rely heavily on external validation, producing a fragile form of self-esteem that is unstable and easily threatened (Levinson & Rodebaugh, 2016).

## 2. Literature Survey

### 1) Appearance Anxiety and Well-Being

Studies across different populations show that appearance anxiety is strongly shaped by social evaluation, peer comparison, and external validation; higher concern about physical appearance has repeatedly been linked to poorer psychological well-being and quality of life, particularly where social media use and peer feedback interact with fragile self-concepts (El-Etreby et al., 2025; Duyan et al., 2022; Yinying et al., 2025).

### 2) Self-Esteem, Attachment, and Rejection

Self-esteem has been shown to develop through stable emotional support and attachment. Children and adolescents who experience rejection, bullying, or inconsistent

caregiving tend to report lower self-esteem and greater emotional difficulty, while strong attachment and emotional validation act as a protective buffer (Miljkovitch et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2025; Pi et al., 2024).

### 3) The Appearance Anxiety–Self-Esteem Link

A growing body of research shows a consistent negative relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem: individuals with high appearance anxiety tend to report low self-esteem, and low self-esteem in turn makes individuals more dependent on appearance-based validation (Kumari et al., 2025; Caryl et al., 2025; Behera & Khuntia, 2025; Shang et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2023). However, most of this evidence comes from general populations- college students, adolescents, left-behind children, and nursing students- and very few studies have examined these variables among foster children, who face unique emotional risks from early trauma, disrupted attachment, and social stigma. The role of appearance anxiety and self-esteem in the foster care context, particularly in India, therefore remains underexplored.

### 4) Theoretical Framework

The study draws on four psychological theories. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) holds that early emotional bonds shape a child's sense of safety and self-worth, so disrupted attachment — common among foster children — can heighten reliance on appearance for acceptance. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1968) frames adolescence as the stage of Identity versus Role Confusion, during which foster children who lack consistent emotional guidance may use appearance as a basis for identity. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) proposes that individuals evaluate themselves relative to others, and foster children with limited internal validation may engage in frequent appearance-based comparisons. Person-Centred Theory (Rogers, 1951) emphasises unconditional positive regard; in its absence, children may seek approval through external attributes such as appearance, producing fragile self-worth.

## 3. Problem Statement

Foster care children often experience emotional insecurity due to early separation from family, unstable caregiving, and social stigma. During adolescence, these experiences may heighten concern about physical appearance and the need for acceptance, which in turn may affect self-esteem and overall emotional well-being. While previous research has largely examined social media use, peer evaluation, and self-concept clarity in general adolescent populations, very limited research has specifically examined appearance anxiety and self-esteem among foster care children in the Indian context. Understanding this relationship, and whether it varies across socio-demographic and care-related characteristics, can help identify the psychological needs of foster care children and support targeted counselling interventions.

## 4. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem among foster care children.
- 2) To assess the levels of appearance anxiety and self-esteem among foster care children.
- 3) To determine whether there are significant differences in appearance

anxiety and self-esteem based on selected socio-demographic characteristics.

### Hypotheses

H1 – There is a significant negative relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem. H2 – Foster children will show moderate to high levels of appearance anxiety and self-esteem. H3 – There is a significant difference in appearance anxiety and self-esteem based on socio-demographic characteristics.

## 5. Research Methodology

### 5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, correlational, cross-sectional research design (Creswell, 2014), suitable for examining the direction and strength of the relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem at a single point in time, without inferring causation.

### 5.2 Participants and Sampling

The sample consisted of 300 foster children aged 12 to 18 years living in registered foster care homes and child care institutions in Karnataka, selected through non-probability purposive sampling. Inclusion required at least six months in care, ability to understand the questionnaires, and both caregiver consent and child assent. Children in acute emotional crisis, with severe sensory impairment, or receiving intensive psychiatric treatment were excluded.

### 5.3 Tools

A researcher-prepared demographic sheet collected background details (age, grade, duration in care, caregiver support, reason for placement). The Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI; Veale et al., 2014) is a 10-item scale (range 0–40,  $r = .87$ ) with a score  $\geq 20$  indicating elevated BDD risk. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item scale (Guttman coefficient = .92).

### 5.4 Procedure and Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee, followed by permission from participating institutions. Written informed consent from caregivers and written assent from each child were obtained following APA (2017) principles. Participation was voluntary and confidential; questionnaires were administered individually and took 20–30 minutes, with NGO counsellor support available if needed.

### 5.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed in Jamovi (v2.6). Descriptive statistics and Shapiro–Wilk tests summarised the variables; Pearson's correlation examined the appearance anxiety–self-esteem relationship; t-tests and one-way ANOVA (Welch-corrected where needed) examined group differences; linear regression tested prediction. Significance was set at  $p < .05$ .

## 6. Results and Discussion

### 6.1 Demographic Profile

The sample (N = 300) was predominantly aged 12–15 years (66.7%) and in higher school (74.3%); 73.7% had stayed 3.1–5 years in care. Leading placement reasons were poverty/family crisis (50.0%) and parental death (40.3%). Most reported family contact (95.0%), caregiver support (98.0%), peer acceptance (87.7%), and social media use (96.0%).

**Table 1:** Selected socio-demographic characteristics (N = 300)

| Variable / Group       | n   | %    |
|------------------------|-----|------|
| Age 12–15 yrs          | 200 | 66.7 |
| Age 16–18 yrs          | 100 | 33.3 |
| Reason: Poverty/crisis | 150 | 50   |
| Reason: Parental death | 121 | 40.3 |
| Peer acceptance: Yes   | 263 | 87.7 |
| Social media use: Yes  | 288 | 96   |

### 6.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

Mean Appearance Anxiety was 20.1 (SD = 4.49) and mean Self-Esteem was 25.1 (SD = 3.64); both approximated normal distributions (Shapiro–Wilk  $p > .05$  / borderline). Pearson's correlation revealed a significant, weak negative relationship,  $r = -.115$ ,  $p < .05$ - higher appearance anxiety was associated with slightly lower self-esteem, supporting H1.

**Table 2:** Correlation between Appearance Anxiety and Self-Esteem (N= 300). \* $p < .05$ .

| Variable           | M    | SD   | r      |
|--------------------|------|------|--------|
| Appearance Anxiety | 20.1 | 4.49 | -.115* |
| Self-Esteem        | 25.1 | 3.64 | —      |

### 6.3 Group Differences

Independent-samples t-tests found no significant differences in either variable by age group, care duration, biological family contact, primary caregiver status, peer acceptance, or social media use (all  $p > .05$ ). The largest directional (non-significant) trends were lower appearance anxiety among children without a primary caregiver ( $M = 16.8$  vs.  $20.2$ ,  $d = -0.74$ ,  $p = .073$ ,  $n = 6$ ) and higher self-esteem among children without biological family contact ( $M = 26.3$  vs.  $25.0$ ,  $d = 0.34$ ,  $p = .196$ ,  $n = 15$ ); both subgroups were small. One-way ANOVAs likewise found no significant differences by reason for placement, academic performance, or grade (all  $p > .05$ ). H3 was therefore not supported.

### 6.4 Regression Analysis

Linear regression confirmed appearance anxiety significantly predicted self-esteem,  $F(1, 298) = 4.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .0133$  (1.33% of variance). Appearance anxiety was a significant negative predictor ( $B = -0.094$ ,  $\beta = -.115$ ,  $t = -2.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ): each one-unit increase in appearance anxiety corresponded to a 0.09-point decrease in self-esteem.

**Table 3:** Regression predicting Self-Esteem from Appearance Anxiety.  $R^2 = .0133$ ,  $F = 4.02^*$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

| Predictor          | B      | $\beta$ | t       |
|--------------------|--------|---------|---------|
| Intercept          | 26.96  | —       | 28.05** |
| Appearance Anxiety | -0.094 | -.115   | -2.00*  |

### 6.5 Discussion

The negative relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem is consistent with prior findings in general and student populations (Liao et al., 2023; Behera & Khuntia, 2025; Caryl et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2025; Shang et al., 2025), and extends this pattern to foster care children — a population that has received comparatively little attention. The finding aligns with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), and Person-Centred Theory (Rogers, 1951), which together suggest that inconsistent caregiving and negative peer comparison can push children toward appearance-based self-evaluation.

H2 received partial support: appearance anxiety was notable-close to the AAI screening threshold- while overall self-esteem remained in the normal to healthy range, indicating that foster care does not necessarily produce globally low self-esteem, and that the two constructs, while related, are distinct. This is consistent with Priyadarshini and Jose (2025), who linked self-esteem among foster care adolescents to social competence and resilience.

The absence of significant differences across socio-demographic characteristics (H3) suggests that relationship quality, emotional support, and the current care environment may matter more than demographic category- consistent with Attachment Theory's emphasis on relational quality over caregiver presence alone.

### 6.6 Implications for Counselling Psychology

Counsellors working with foster care adolescents should assess appearance-related concerns without assuming globally low self-esteem. Person-centred and cognitive-behavioural approaches, attachment-informed counselling, and caregiver-focused support may together strengthen resilience, identity, and self-worth.

### Summary of Hypothesis Testing

**Table 4:** Summary of hypothesis testing.

| Hypothesis             | Result                  | Decision      |
|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| H1: Anxiety–Esteem     | $r = -.115$ , $p < .05$ | Supported     |
| H2: Levels             | Partial pattern         | Partial       |
| H3: Demographic diffs. | all $p > .05$           | Not supported |

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between appearance anxiety and self-esteem among 300 foster care children in Karnataka, India, and tested for differences across socio-demographic and care-related characteristics. A significant, weak negative relationship was found, supporting H1 and confirming appearance anxiety as one- though not the only-factor associated with self-worth in this population.

Participants showed notable appearance anxiety alongside normal-range self-esteem, partially supporting H2 and indicating simultaneous vulnerability and resilience. No significant differences emerged across the nine socio-demographic variables examined, so H3 was not supported; individual relational and emotional factors appear more relevant than demographic category. The study contributes to a limited evidence base on appearance anxiety and self-esteem among foster care children, particularly within the Indian context, and highlights the value of child-centred counselling interventions.

## 8. Future Scope

Future research would benefit from probability sampling across multiple states and care settings, and from longitudinal designs tracking change over time or across placement transitions. Additional variables- appearance-related teasing/bullying, caregiver relationship quality, resilience, trauma history, and the nature of social media use- could be examined as predictors or mediators. Qualitative research could deepen understanding of how foster children experience appearance, identity, and acceptance, and intervention studies could test whether counselling programmes targeting body acceptance and positive identity development reduce appearance anxiety and strengthen self-esteem.

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