EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEER RELATIONSHIPS, FAMILY UNPREDICTABILITY AND SOCIAL APPEARANCE ANXIETY AND EMOTIONAL AUTONOMY IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the relationships between peer relationships, family unpredictability and social appearance anxiety and the emotional autonomy levels of individuals in adolescence. The sample of the study consists of a total of 442 high school students, 278 girls and 164 boys, studying in science high schools, Anatolian high schools and vocational high schools in Istanbul in the 2023-2024 academic year. The age range of the adolescents included in the study is between 13 and 18 years old. The study was conducted on a voluntary basis while collecting data. The data of the study were collected through the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS), Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale (REAS), Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS), Peer Relationship Scale (PRA) and Demographic Information Forms. When the analyses were examined; it can be said that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between family unpredictability and emotional autonomy. Social appearance anxiety negatively correlates with emotional autonomy, while peer relationships show a positive correlation. Emotional autonomy levels vary by class level and high school type but not by gender. Additionally, social appearance anxiety, peer relationships, and family unpredictability predict adolescent autonomy. Findings were discussed alongside similar studies, with recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

Keywords: Social appearance anxiety, family unpredictability, peer relationships.

1. Introduction

Today's adolescents seek academic, social, and cultural competences to compete in a globalized world. They navigate complex environmental factors while balancing social norms and individual freedom. Healthy adolescence is crucial for social and emotional adjustment later in life. Understanding and fostering adolescents' emotional autonomy helps them realize their potential and fulfill social responsibilities It shapes future relationships, careers, and well-being, forming the foundation of key life skills like goal setting, decision-making, and problem-solving (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1969, Steinberg, 2007). Autonomy involves individuation, resisting external pressures, self-confidence, and independent reasoning in social, political, and moral issues (Özdemir & Çok, 2011). Adolescents seek independence, make life decisions, and redefine their identities while valuing social perception (Çetinkaya et al., 2019). Friends and social support, parental consistency, and fulfilling family responsibilities are crucial for adolescent autonomy. Early relationships, attachment, family structure, and parenting styles shape emotional autonomy. Family unpredictability, linked to attachment and learned helplessness theories, affects development (Ross & Hill, 2000). Research highlights the role of parental sincerity (Kulaksız, 2011; Hazan & Shaver, 1994) and effective communication in fostering autonomy (Kalkan, 2021; Collopy, 2008). Family instability is also associated with depression and low self-esteem in adolescents (Hood, Ross, & Wilss, 2020).

Adolescents place great importance on their appearance and are sensitive to how others perceive them (Çetinkaya et al., 2019). This period involves accepting physical changes, developing gender roles, achieving emotional autonomy, forming friendships, and shaping identity (Santrock, 2021). Research shows a link between social appearance anxiety and negative, repetitive thoughts, leading to body dissatisfaction, negative emotions, reduced individualization, and increased anxiety (Reilly et al., 2018).

Peer groups help adolescents meet social and psychological needs by providing a sense of belonging and shared experiences. Increased emotional autonomy strengthens peer commitment (Çalık & Bal, 2020), while dissociation and individuation significantly impact peer relationships (Aslan & Çiçek, 2020). Positive peer relationships enhance adolescent happiness, especially as they challenge authority (Köse, 2015). Peer interactions support autonomy development. This study aims to explore adolescents' emotional autonomy and examine the influence of family unpredictability, social appearance anxiety, and

peer relationships, testing related hypotheses. H1: Does the level of emotional autonomy in adolescents differ according to gender? H2: Does the level of emotional autonomy in adolescents differ according to grade? H3: Does the level of emotional autonomy in adolescents differ according to school type? H4: Is there a significant relationship between the level of peer relationships and the level of emotional autonomy in adolescents? H5: Is there a significant relationship between the level of social appearance anxiety and the level of emotional autonomy in adolescents? H6: Is there a significant relationship between levels of family unpredictability and levels of emotional autonomy in adolescents?

2. Method

2.1. Study group

The study sample consists of 442 high school students (278 female, 164 male) from Science, Anatolian, and Vocational High Schools in Istanbul, selected through random sampling. Participants are aged 13 to 18.

2.2. Data collection tools

This study used the Emotional Autonomy Scale (EAS), Retrospective Family Unpredictability Scale (RFAS), Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS), Peer Relationship Scale (PRS), and Personal Information Forms for data collection.

2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 23.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) and parametric tests (t-test, ANOVA, Pearson Correlation, Multiple Regression) were applied, as the data met normality per the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

3. Findings

The demographic analysis showed that 37.1% (n=164) of participants were male and 62.9% (n=278) female. Grade levels were: 30.5% ninth grade (n=135), 16.1% tenth grade (n=71), 17.9% eleventh grade (n=79), 32.8% twelfth grade (n=145), and 2.7% graduates (n=12).. The school types were: 24.4% science high school (n=108), 52% Anatolian high school (n=230), and 23.5% vocational high school students or graduates (n=104). The mean age was 2.27 (SD=0.69).

Table 1. Independent Sample T-Test Results of Emotional Autonomy Scores According to Gender.

	Men Mean			Women Mean			t	p
	n		ss	n		ss		
Emotional Autonomy	164	32,02	7,155	278	31,5	7,526	-0,717	0,474

It was observed that the difference in the mean scores obtained was not statistically significant in terms of gender (t= -0.71, p>.050).

Table 2. Results of One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Conducted to Determine Whether the Mean Scores Obtained by Adolescents from the Emotional Autonomy Sub-dimensions Differ According to School Type.

	Science High School			Anatolian High School			Vocational High School			$F_{(2,439)}$	p
	n	Mean	ss	n	Mean	ss	n	Mean	ss		
Idealization	108	10,96	2,513	230	10,92	2,924	104	12,13	3,516	6,369	0,002
Independence	108	9,06	2,291	230	9,08	2,553	104	9,87	2,709	3,923	0,020
Individuation	108	10,96	2,808	230	11,08	3,137	104	11,8	3,472	2,281	0,103
Emotional Autonomy total	108	30,98	6,243	230	31,08	7,277	104	33,8	8,346	5,556	0,004

The analysis showed significant differences in the idealization (F(2,439)=6.36, p<0.010) and independence (F(2,439)=3.92, p<0.05) sub-dimensions, while individuality showed no significant difference (F(2,439)=2.28, p>0.05). Adolescents in vocational high schools scored higher in emotional autonomy sub-dimensions than those in science and Anatolian high schools.

Table 3. Results of One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Conducted to Determine Whether the Mean Scores Obtained by Adolescents from the Emotional Autonomy Sub-dimensions Differ According to Grade Level.

	9th Class			10th Class			11th Class			12th Class			Graduate			F (4,437)	p
	n	Mean	ss	n	Mean	ss	n	Mean	ss	n	Mean	ss	n	Mean	ss		
Idealization	135	11,9	3,139	71	11,34	2,803	79	10,58	2,687	145	10,87	3,094	12	10,08	2,392	4,103	0,003
Independence	135	9,76	2,558	71	9,51	2,535	79	8,7	2,446	145	9,06	2,564	12	8,25	1,913	3,164	0,014
Individuation	135	11,73	3,146	71	11,1	2,977	79	10,72	3,025	145	11,14	3,34	12	10,33	2,146	1,683	0,153
Emotional Autonomy total	135	33,47	7,426	71	31,94	6,885	79	30	6,831	145	31,08	7,73	12	31,08	7,73	3,875	0,004

The analysis showed significant differences in the idealization (F(4,437)=4.10, p<0.05) and independence (F(4,437)=3.13, p<0.05) sub-dimensions, while individuation showed no significant difference (F(4,437)=1.68, p>0.05). Ninth grade students scored higher in emotional autonomy sub-dimensions than tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students.

Table 4. Correlational Relationship Between Social Appearance Anxiety and Emotional Autonomy and Emotional Autonomy Sub-dimensions in Adolescents.

	1	2	3	4	5
Idealization	1				
Independence	0,621**	1			
Individuation	0,553**	0,558**	1		
Emotional Autonomy total	0,859**	0,837**	0,845**	1	
Social Appearance Anxiety total	-0,212**	-0,187**	-0,324**	-0,29**	1

**p<.001

Significant negative relationships were found between social appearance anxiety and idealization (r=-0.212, p<.001), independence (r=-0.187, p<.001), individuation (r=-0.324, p<.001), and total emotional autonomy (r=-0.290, p<.001). Adolescents with social appearance anxiety had lower emotional autonomy than those without.

Table 5. Correlation Relationship Between Peer Relationships and Peer Relationship Sub-dimensions and Emotional Autonomy and Emotional Autonomy Sub-dimensions in Adolescents

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Idealization	1								
Independence	0,621**	1							
Individuation	0,553**	0,558**	1						
Total Emotional Autonomy	0,859**	0,837**	0,845**	1					
Closeness	0,136**	-0,023	-0,069	0,018	1				
Popularity	0,248**	0,131**	0,10*	0,189**	0,430**	1			
Trust	0,184**	0,123**	0,129**	0,173**	0,636**	0,552**	1		
Understanding	0,246**	0,233**	0,133**	0,238**	0,477**	0,231**	0,468**	1	
Total Peer Relations	0,231**	0,10*	0,049	0,15**	0,908**	0,65**	0,837**	0,652**	1

**p<.001

Significant positive relationships were found between peer relationships and idealization (r=0.231, p<.001), independence (r=0.10, p<.05), total emotional autonomy (r=0.15, p<.005), closeness (r=0.90, p<.001), popularity (r=0.65, p<.001), trust (r=0.83, p<.001), and understanding (r=0.65, p<.001). As peer relationships increased, emotional autonomy levels also increased.

Table 6. Results of Relationships Between Family Unpredictability and Family Unpredictability Sub-Dimensions and Emotional Autonomy and Emotional Autonomy Sub-Dimensions in Adolescents.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Idealization	1										
Independence	0,621**	1									
Individuation	0,553**	0,558**	1								
Total Emotional Autonomy	0,859**	0,837**	0,845**	1							
Meal	-0,275**	-0,187**	-0,201**	-0,263**	1						
Financial Unpredictability	-0,382**	-0,316**	-0,291**	-0,389**	0,368**	1					
Mother Physical-Emotional Satisfaction	-0,526**	-0,555**	-0,486**	-0,614**	0,273**	0,612**	1				
Father Physical-Emotional Satisfaction	-0,518**	-0,526**	-0,420**	-0,572**	0,283**	0,395**	0,539**	1			
Mother Discipline	-0,413**	-0,321**	-0,463**	-0,477**	0,263**	0,448**	0,432**	0,239**	1		
Father Discipline	-0,353**	-0,269**	-0,436**	-0,423**	0,209**	0,331**	0,228**	0,368**	0,568**	1	
Total Family Unpredictability	-0,619**	-0,564**	-0,573**	-0,692**	0,559**	0,704**	0,780**	0,755**	0,676**	0,625**	

$**p<.001$

Negative significant relationships were found between family unpredictability and idealization (r=-0.61, p<.001), independence (r=-0.56, p<.001), individuation (r=-0.57, p<.001), and total emotional autonomy (r=-0.69, p<.001). As family unpredictability increased, emotional autonomy decreased.

4. Discussion

This study analyzed adolescents' emotional autonomy in relation to family unpredictability, social performance anxiety, and peer relationships. It found that as family unpredictability increased, emotional autonomy decreased. Autonomy is closely linked to adolescents' mental health (Özdemir & Çok, 2011). Researchers (Ryan & Lynch, 1989) argue in their studies that autonomy is a global need and that satisfying this need to a sufficient degree is important for psychological resilience. There are no studies examining the relationship between emotional autonomy and family unpredictability, but similar studies show that family unpredictability, parental attitudes, and emotion regulation difficulties significantly impact personality disorders in adolescents, with a positive relationship between family unpredictability sub-dimensions and personality disorders (Kalkan, 2021). In another study, family unpredictability was found to be a predictor of substance use tendencies (Atlı, 2022). Chirkov and Ryan (2001) concluded in their study that autonomy support from parents and teachers towards the adolescent individual increases academic motivation and influences the adolescent's success. Similar studies suggest that consistent, supportive, and predictable family attitudes help adolescents succeed in autonomy. This study found that emotional autonomy decreased as social appearance anxiety increased. A study with Chinese adolescents showed that those dissatisfied with their appearance were more introverted, pessimistic, insecure, socially uncomfortable, and had dysfunctional thoughts leading to anxiety and avoidance. It was hypothesised that self-efficacy and self-esteem may mediate the relationship between appearance anxiety and social anxiety (Liao et al., 2023). Another study found that social appearance anxiety leads to intense anxiety about the evaluation of the adolescent's physical appearance by others and increases the adolescent's introverted behaviour (Gümüş, 2000). The results of the studies in the literature also support the findings of this study. The final variable of the study was to examine the relationship between peer relationships and emotional autonomy. It was found that positive peer relationships were associated with higher levels of emotional autonomy. The literature in general supports this finding. It has been found that the ability of adolescents to develop strong relationships with their peers can facilitate the development of autonomy (Allen & Loeb, 2015). Adolescents with high psychological capital, who are more determined in their career choices and career goals, were found to have more positive relationships with their peers (Zhou et al., 20-23). The study examined the link between adolescents' emotional autonomy and demographics. Gender, grade, and school type influenced autonomy levels, with females, vocational high school students, and ninth graders showing higher autonomy. Literature supports these findings on gender and school type (Flannery, 2006). Examining

the predictability of parental behavior and its impact on adolescent emotional autonomy is crucial. Guidance and psychological counseling experts should stay updated on dissociation-individuation research to enhance counseling quality in secondary schools. Assessing social interaction, peer relations, and individuation levels is recommended, along with individual or group counseling for related difficulties. Additionally, therapeutic programs should be developed for students struggling with individuation and socialization.

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