The Effects of Avoidance Coping, Neuroticism, Gender Role Identity, and Perceived Stress on Emotional Eating

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Abstract
The primary goal of the current study was to determine the role of avoidance coping, neuroticism, and perceived stress in predicting emotional eating behaviors. We also aimed to determine if gender role identity influences emotional eating, a previously unexplored area in the literature. Participants completed and online survey to assess each of these variables. The results indicated avoidance coping and neuroticism were significant predictors of emotional eating, but gender role identity and perceived stress were not. Furthermore, there were no differences in emotional eating based on one’s gender role classification. While gender role identity was not significantly related to emotional eating, we did find sex differences that warrant further examination in future studies.

Method
Participants
- N= 174 (130 females, 44 males)
- Mean age = 24.16 (SD= 9.95)
- Ethnicity = 79% Caucasian, 8.6% African-American, 8% Hispanic, and 5.4% Other
- Gender Role = 30.5% Androgynous, 21.6% Feminine, 22.4% Masculine, and 23.3% Unidentified

Materials
Three-Factor Eating Questionnaire-R-18 (TFEQ-R18):
The 18-item TFEQ-R18 (Karlsson et al., 2010) was used to measure eating behaviors. Participants were asked to rate the items on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, definitely false, to 4, definitely true. Only the Emotional Eating scores were used for this study.

Brief Cope:
The 32-item Brief Cope (Carver, 1997) was modified to provide Avoidance and Approach Coping style scores using Sodetstrom et al.’s (2000) technique, whereby only 8 of the 12 sub-scales were scored. Responses to the statements on typical behaviors used to deal with a stressful event were scored on 4-point Likert scales, ranging from 1, I usually don’t do this at all, to 4, I usually do this a lot. Only the Avoidance scores were used for this study.

Big Five Inventory (BFI):
The 44-item BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to measure the Big Five factors (dimensions) of personality. Items were rated on 5-point Likert scales, ranging from 1, disagree strongly to 5, agree strongly. Only the Neuroticism scores were used for this study.

Item Sex-Role Inventory (BRI):
Gender role identity was measured with an abbreviated version of the BRI (Biem, 1974), which consisted of 30 items. Using the median-split method, the scores consisted of 4 sub-scales: masculinity, femininity, androgyny and unifferentiated. A 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, never true to 7, always true, was used to measure the degree of agreement to the statements.

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS):
The 10-item PSS (Cohen et al., 1983) was designed to measure the degree to which situations in one’s life are appraised as stressful. Items are rated on 5-point Likert scales, ranging from 0, never, to 4, very often.

Procedure:
The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics. The link to the survey was posted on the college website and other online social media. Participants were asked to sign an electronic consent form before proceeding. The survey consisted of demographic questions, the TFEQ-R18, the PSS, the Brief COPE, the BRI, and the BFI. A debriefing statement was included at the end of the survey.

Results
Hypothesis 1: Test of Avoidance Coping, Neuroticism, and Perceived Stress will predict Emotional Eating
- Avoidance Coping and Neuroticism, but not Perceived Stress, significantly predicted Emotional Eating.

Table 1: Multiple regression analysis results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>AC</th>
<th>PS</th>
<th>EE</th>
<th>SEBI</th>
<th>β</th>
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<tr>
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<td>21.05</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>6.95</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>F(3, 170)=14.43, p&lt;0.001</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 2: Test of Gender Role Identity on Emotional Eating
- One-way ANOVA analysis with Gender Role Identity as independent variable did not significantly affect Emotional Eating (F(3, 170)=1.11, p=0.35).
- However, Sex did affect Emotional Eating, F(1, 172)=2.80, p=0.06, with females reporting significantly higher emotional eating (M= 7.36, SD=2.52) than males (M= 6.14, SD=2.48).

Discussion
Hypothesis 1 Partially Supported
- Avoidance Coping and Neuroticism were significant predictors of Emotional Eating when both men and women were included in the analysis.
- Consistent with Soper et al. (2007) and Heaven et al. (2001), in which participants who scored high on neuroticism and used avoidance coping were more likely to engage in emotional eating.
- Follow-up analysis revealed that Avoidance Coping was a significant predictor of Emotional Eating among women, whereas Perceived Stress was a significant predictor of Emotional Eating among men.

Hypothesis 2 Not Supported
- There was no difference in Emotional Eating scores based on whether one was considered Masculine, Feminine, Androgynous, or Unidentified Gender Role Identity.

Implications and Future Directions
- Interventions aimed at reducing emotional eating should be targeted at individuals high in neuroticism and who report using avoidance coping strategies.
- The findings that there were different predictors of emotional eating based on sex warrants future research attention.
- Future research should also examine the role of other personality traits as well as the interaction of gender role identity and sex on predicting emotional eating and other aspects of eating behavior.

References


