

Fear Behind the Raise of a Hand: Social Anxiety in University Classrooms

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Abstract

The current research study used a quantitative correlational design to investigate the impact of social anxiety on university students' participation in classroom activities. The research study included a sample of 300 students who were divided equally into 150 male students and 150 female students aged 20 to 28 years from various academic programs. The Social Phobia Inventory SPIN (Connor et al., 2000) was used by participants to assess their social anxiety situations, while the Social Engagement Questionnaire SEQ (Handelsman et al., 2005) measured their classroom participation throughout multiple learning environments. The results demonstrated that social anxiety created a strong negative link with classroom engagement ($r = -.78, p < .001$). The results showed that social anxiety established a powerful negative relationship that affected students' classroom engagement. A heightened degree of social anxiety in students led to more visibly reduced participation in verbal and physical classroom interactions and academic activities. Regression analysis showed that social anxiety worked as a strong predictor for classroom participation, explaining 56% of the variance ($R^2 = .56$). Social anxiety affected non-verbal skills, which people used for group work, peer relationships, and academic discussion activities. The results demonstrate the need for treatment programs that combine psychological methods with cognitive-behavioral methods to address both cognitive and behavioral aspects. The creation of supportive classroom environments by teachers through group work and student interaction, together with positive feedback and nonjudgmental assessment methods, leads to increased academic engagement, improved self-esteem, and better communication skills and academic achievement for students.

Key Words

Social Anxiety Impact, Classroom Participation, University Students

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Introduction

Anxiety describes the fear of social situations that people experience when they believe others will judge them. The condition functions as a main symptom of social anxiety disorder, which disrupts people's ability to communicate and establish relationships while they face public or group situations. Students who have high social interaction anxiety face difficulties with classroom participation, group work, and building relationships in academic

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settings. The problem develops when anxiety reaches extreme levels because it makes people excessively self-aware, which prevents them from participating in social events (Veale, [2003](#)).

McCroskey ([1977](#)) defined communication apprehension as the fear of speaking, which leads to decreased student participation in classroom discussions. They want to respond to the question, but an unknown force prevents them from doing so. The university system considers class participation as an essential component of academic evaluation because it awards students 20% of their total marks based on their attendance. Majeed et al. ([2022](#)) discovered that social anxiety causes university students in Pakistan to avoid participating in class and studying activities, which results in their academic withdrawal from all school environments. Students experience academic assessment problems because they fear that others will perceive them negatively. Students with social anxiety disorder avoid attending social events and participating in group discussions. Most people experience difficulty when they need to speak to a group, but they usually manage to overcome their anxiety after two minutes of beginning their speech, which enables them to convincingly communicate with the audience. For instance, Leary ([1983](#)) proposed a social anxiety framework, suggesting that individuals experience anxiety in situations where they fear negative evaluation, which leads to avoidance of social and evaluative situations such as classroom participation. Richard ([1990](#)) proved that people suffering from social phobia show both social situation avoidance and cognitive distortions, which disrupt their ability to participate in group discussions and educational activities.

The research conducted by Asif ([2020](#)) showed that anxiety disorders affect most university students in Pakistan. The disorder hinders their ability to focus on studies and participate in academic activities and shows negative effects on their overall performance. The student with social anxiety disorder has difficulties conducting normal school activities because he keeps thinking about his former practice sessions. Socially anxious students experience higher chances of achieving both low academic performance and poor career development. The students show no desire to enhance their academic results at school, according to Van Ameringen ([2003](#)). Socially anxious scholars see social surroundings as dangerous rather than salutary. The core element underpinning social anxiety is the fear of negative evaluation, which refers to the torture individuals feel when they anticipate being judged unfavorably by others (Watson & Friend, [1969](#)). Scholars who sweat judgment avoid speaking in class despite their complete readiness to bandy the subject because they know the material. Socially anxious scholars tend to stay quiet and avoid eye contact while sharing in group conditioning, which they do because they sweat making miscalculations. Students with social anxiety disorder focus their efforts on controlling their symptoms instead of learning their presentation material. The students face two main challenges because they need to present their speeches while also requesting teacher assistance.

The social interaction anxiety that creates difficulties for academic achievement functions as the social participation procedures that develop between university students who face social anxiety through their classroom participation and group work process with teachers. Watson and Friend ([1969](#)) showed that social anxiety disorder develops when people experience the fear of negative evaluations because they will try to avoid any situations that involve potential judgment from others. Students who avoid social interaction because of their social anxiety end up experiencing isolation, which leads to decreased academic enthusiasm. The research shows that students with high social interaction anxiety will tend to procrastinate their work while experiencing low self-efficacy, which results in lower academic performance because their fear of negative assessment interrupts their ability to learn (Russell & Topham, [2012](#)). The essential elements that lead to successful university existence require students to take part in extracurricular activities while they engage with multiple social environments, which produces anxiety problems that obstruct their academic progress. Students with social anxiety disorders showed lower social control capabilities together with restricted social interaction skills, which made them scared to participate in spoken

dialogue, according to Strahan (2002). study. Students experience more psychological stress, which harms their academic performance, because of today's fierce academic competition and social requirements.

The research conducted by Fatima et al. (2024) discovered that students develop high levels of language anxiety during their classroom presentations, which results in their speaking fears and their decreased participation in classroom activities. According to Strahan (2002), social anxiety negatively affects students' academic performance because it restricts their ability to participate and diminishes their capacity to interact with others. Leary (1983) demonstrated that social anxiety, through negative evaluation fear, causes people to avoid social and performance activities, which include classroom attendance. People with social anxiety disorder tend to stay away from social situations because those situations make them experience anxiety, which interferes with their ability to function in different aspects of life, including schoolwork and relationships. Heimberg et al. (1990) discovered that people with social phobia exhibit two main problems, which include avoidance behavior and cognitive distortion, that hinder their ability to participate in social and academic activities. People who experience social interaction anxiety end up with low self-esteem because their condition prevents them from achieving academic success. Social anxiety involves people experiencing discomfort and anxiety in social situations because they fear being evaluated by others, which leads them to leave social events. The experience of social anxiety leads to extreme anxiety during situations like public dining and classroom presentations, where audience members can evaluate the speaker (Comer, 2005). Social anxiety disorder causes people to fear social situations because they believe others will evaluate them and develop critical opinions about their behavior (Richards, 2007). Among different anxiety disorders, social anxiety disorder is the most common form of anxiety disorder, which affects adolescents. The disorder leads to harmful consequences that affect bodily health and job performance (Obadeji & Kumolalo, 2022). According to Brook & Willoughby (2015), a study was conducted that determined that social interaction and academic change both create anxiety for students, but their relationship is negative. The study proved that social anxiety disorder affects the academic performance of college students who have just started their studies. Students who experienced social anxiety disorder showed poor academic performance, while students who did not have this condition achieved better results. Social anxiety disorder creates problems for students across multiple aspects of their academic experience in college.

Rationale of the Study

The learning process of students and their academic success depend on their active participation in classrooms, which helps them develop their learning abilities, critical thinking capacity, and social interaction skills. Students who experience social anxiety face considerable challenges when trying to take part in classroom activities. Socially anxious students face challenges with their concentration and their ability to express their thoughts, which results in academic difficulties because they worry about how others will judge them. International studies have researched how social anxiety affects classroom participation, yet there are no empirical studies about this topic in Pakistan's educational system. The essential need exists to study this particular relationship in Pakistan because it will provide essential insights about social anxiety challenges, which educators, academic counselors, and policymakers need to understand. The research findings will support the creation of specific intervention programs and support methods and classroom strategies that will help students achieve academic success while maintaining their mental health.

Objectives

To investigate the relationship between social anxiety and classroom participation. To assess gender differences in levels of social anxiety and classroom participation.

Hypotheses

There is a significant negative predictive relationship between social anxiety and classroom participation.

There are significant gender differences in the levels of social anxiety and classroom participation between male and female students.

Methodology

A cross-sectional research design was used to assess social anxiety effects on classroom-participation traits in university students. The research centered around university students who are also socially anxious in academic settings. Researchers used convenience sampling to recruit 300 participants, who consisted of 150 males and 150 females, to study possible gender differences. The researchers conducted the questionnaires as a single assessment, and they maintained all answers confidential to promote truthful answers. The researchers used correlation and regression analyses to evaluate the gathered data. The researchers used correlation analysis to determine how social anxiety affects classroom participation, while regression analysis was applied to assess how social anxiety predicts students' classroom participation, which helps understand how social anxiety affects students' academic participation.

Instruments Demographics Form: Participants provided their basic demographic data, which included their name, age, and gender information. The researchers used gender demographic data to study its impact on social anxiety and classroom participation while they investigated the social anxiety differences between male and female students.

Social Phobia Inventory Scale - Short Form (SPIN) Questionnaire: The Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) is a self-report questionnaire developed by Connor et al. (2000). The tool measures social anxiety disorder symptoms through its application in both clinical settings and research studies. The SPIN test consists of 17 items, which respondents answer by using a 5-point Likert scale to produce a total score that ranges from 0 to 68, with higher scores indicating greater social anxiety. This scale is available online, and it can be used freely for research purposes. The assessment evaluates three components, which measure social anxiety through fear, social interaction avoidance, and physical symptoms that result from social anxiety. The SPIN test demonstrates strong psychometric properties because it shows high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha between 0.89 and 0.94, and it exhibits good test-retest reliability and strong convergent validity, which makes it an effective tool for social phobia assessment.

Social Engagement Questionnaire - Short Form (SEQ): The Social Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), which Handelsman et al. (2005) developed as a self-report assessment tool that measures how people engage socially and participate in their daily activities. The test includes 23 items, which participants must assess using a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from 1, which means they never do something, to 5, which indicates they do something very often. The scale assesses different social engagement components, which include social participation and initiative, comfort, and interaction frequency, which researchers can use to study social anxiety and isolation, and programs that aim to boost social participation. The SEQ is free for research and educational use because it allows users to access its content without needing formal authorization, yet users should cite the original source (Handelsman et al., 2005) in their publications and reports that they create.

Procedure: The researchers proceeded to begin their data collection process after they established that both scales could be used without any restrictions. The academic term for Spring 2026 started the process of collecting data. The research team provided all participants with written informed consent documents that used simple language to explain the research objectives and methods. The study included only those individuals who agreed to participate

and completed the questionnaires. The study used two scales, which included the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and the Social Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ). Researchers entered all collected responses into their data system, after which they conducted a complete analysis to produce results. The SEQ shows both reliability and validity because it maintains steady internal consistency and establishes a strong correlation with other social functioning assessment tools. When conducting the study, the researchers stressed the confidentiality of participants and further reassured them that the data would be used purely for academic research.

Results

The study had a total of $N = 300$ participants who completed the survey with no missing data. The study collected 300 completed questionnaires, which included 150 filled out by male participants and 150 filled out by female participants, to achieve equal gender representation. All questionnaires were completed fully, and there were no missing values in the data, which enhanced the accuracy and reliability of the results. The age criterion for this study ranged from 20 to 28 years.

Table 1

Multiple Regression Analysis of Social Anxiety Predicting Classroom Participation (N = 300)

Variables	R	R ²	F	β	B	t	p
Constant	.754	.568	391.486	-	101.767	54.985	.000
Social Anxiety				-.754	-1.015	-19.786	.000

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive effect of social anxiety on classroom participation. The overall model was statistically significant ($R = .754$, $R^2 = .568$, $F(1, 298) = 391.486$, $p < .001$), indicating that social anxiety explained 56.8% of the variance in classroom participation. However, social anxiety was found to be a significant negative predictor of classroom participation ($\beta = -.754$, $B = -1.015$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of social anxiety are associated with lower classroom participation.

Table 2

Independent Samples t-test for Gender Differences on SPIN and SEQ among Young Adults (N=300)

Variable	M (SD) Male (n=150)	M (SD) Female (n=150)	t	df	p	95% CI of Difference	Cohen's d
SPIN	34.22 (8.66)	35.15 (11.09)	-0.81	298	.420	[-3.19, 1.33]	0.09
SEQ	66.41 (13.24)	66.78 (13.52)	-0.24	298	.809	[-3.41, 2.67]	0.03

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in SPIN and SEQ scores. As shown in Table 2, there were no significant differences between males and females on SPIN, $t(298) = -0.81$, $p = .420$, 95% CI [-3.19, 1.33], or on SEQ, $t(298) = -0.24$, $p = .809$, 95% CI [-3.41, 2.67]. With respect to these two variables (Cohen's $d = 0.09$ for total Spin; $d = 0.03$ for TOTALSEQ), gender had less sizeable differences.

Discussion

The present study examined the impact of social anxiety on classroom participation among students. The results showed that social anxiety functions as a major factor that hinders students from participating in class activities. The study found that students with higher social anxiety levels tend to participate less in classroom activities that involve speaking with others. The findings of this exploration study confirm the results of earlier examinations. For example, Stein and Stein (2008) reported that individuals with social anxiety constantly avoid social situations, particularly those that involve public speaking or evaluation, which supports our observation that socially anxious scholars share less in classrooms. Mou et al. (2022) found that scholars with social anxiety demonstrate lower

involvement in academic conversations when compared to their fellow scholars. The research examined educational environments that extended beyond traditional academic settings, while our research provided precise mathematical results that demonstrated the impact of social anxiety on classroom participation at a specific university. The SPIN scores in our sample indicate that, indeed, moderate situations of social anxiety are sufficient to reduce scholars' participation, suggesting that social anxiety has a wide and substantial impact on literacy. Students who develop such anxiety will avoid public speaking because they fear judgment from others, embarrassment, and making errors. The study results follow previous studies, which documented that social anxiety negatively affected students' ability to participate in academic activities. The consistency of these results supports their validity while demonstrating that social anxiety continues to affect students' academic performance. These results demonstrate that educational institutions should develop classroom spaces that enable all students to feel safe and supported. The use of these strategies will result in reduced anxiety levels among students, which will help them participate more fully in school activities.

The research study employed a small sample size, which limited the extent to which researchers could apply their findings to a wider population. The research study examined only one age group, which limits its ability to apply findings to different age groups. There is a first hypothesis expected to be a significant negative relationship between social anxiety and classroom participation among university students. The statement shows that social anxiety levels, which increase, lead to students who show less active participation in classroom activities, including asking questions, taking part in discussions, and presenting their ideas. People who have social anxiety at high levels will not enter social situations because they fear other people will judge them negatively, and they will experience shame and receive critical feedback. The behavior of avoiding social situations leads to a decline in their academic participation, which they show through their presence in school activities.

According to the second hypothesis, students who experience higher levels of social anxiety will experience major challenges when they try to participate in their academic work. Social anxiety poses a barrier, which does not allow students to concentrate on lectures and to express their ideas and communicate with other students and instructors. Fearful students will not seek assistance and will not participate in group work, and they will not express their ideas, which will act as a wall preventing them from learning. The problems will cause them to have reduced classroom participation, which will not allow their academic progress to mature during the academic year. One of the self-report measures, which is extensively used to measure the degree of symptoms of social anxiety, is the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) created by Connor et al. (2000). An increase in the scores on SPIN suggests increased levels of social anxiety in individuals. The research findings indicated that the participants had moderate and high social anxiety, as indicated by the data in the table of descriptive statistics. The Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) was used to measure the level of students' engagement in classroom activities. This scale measures multiple aspects of engagement, which include academic task participation, student attention, and student involvement. The increase in the scores on the SEQ indicates increased student engagement. The present study results showed different levels of student engagement because students with higher social anxiety showed decreased overall engagement.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that social anxiety has significant implications that interfere with the student's capability of attending classes and the student's capability to study. The findings indicated that those students who had a high level of social anxiety were less engaged in classroom activities and had less interest in their studies. Students with high levels of anxiety will avoid learning activities that involve them working with others, since they will not be able to convey their thoughts to others and feel at ease in the learning environment. The researchers used standardized assessment instruments that comprised the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and the Student Engagement

Questionnaire (SEQ) to get reliable information about the relationship between the two variables and each other. The findings confirm the hypothesis and are in line with the current literature in terms of the importance of social anxiety as a critical determinant of the academic experience of students.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations of the current study that must be noted. The study design does not allow researchers to draw a causal relationship between the various study variables since it is cross-sectional. The researchers will be able to apply the study findings to other populations, as they employed convenience sampling to sample the participants. The researchers gathered the data in one educational institution that lacks adequate representation of students who study in other educational institutions and have diverse backgrounds. These are some of the restrictions that indicate that the findings must be used cautiously.

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