The Effect of Social Phobias on Academic Performance of University Students in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Social phobia or social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a psychiatric disorder characterized by a high level of anxiety in social situations and low self-esteem as the person is scared of being judged by others. This can be a serious problem in university contexts, causing almost a serious impediment to the academic performance of students. This study attempts to investigate how social phobia impairs academic engagement, involvement and overall academic performance of university students. For this purpose, a qualitative approach was followed through case study method. The respondents were selected from different departments of Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology (BAUST), Saidpur Cantonment, Saidpur, Nilphamari, Bangladesh. The data was collected from 18 students diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, using unstructured interview schedule face to face interviews and the data was collected from two months, March 2024 and April 2024. The results reveal that social phobia has a profound impact on the academic excellence of the students with symptoms manifested in poor participation in class, poor participation in a group activity and difficulty in forming relation with peers, facing difficulties in public speaking and presentations and decline in academic confidence and performance. Even with the utilization of multiple coping mechanisms students still faced different struggle with academic achievement. Therefore, the paper advises that universities offer better individualized mental health services and academic adjustments to cater for children with social anxiety difficulties and stress the need to reduce that stigma.

Keywords: Social phobia, social anxiety disorder (SAD), effect, university, academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety disorder (SAD), common referred to as social phobia is a kind of persistent mental health ailment. SAD is a very common psychiatric disorder with lifetime prevalence rates from 7% to 13% in the general population (Hofmann *et al*., 2012). About 12% of university students globally report symptoms of social anxiety, with variable severity (LeBeau *et al*., 2018). This can cause a lot of emotional distress, such that people develop an almost pathological fear of social situations. The measure in the functional field can affect a student in the academic field by impeding his or her degree of participation in studies and relationships with peers and faculty that are indispensable for personal development and academic success. When you're dealing with SAD, you have trouble discussing things in class, presenting assignments, and working with others on group projects, all of which are important facets of academic success. Students may underperform or even avoid academic activities which involve interaction because they are afraid of being judged or they are afraid of making mistakes. Due to this, their grades and academic and career goals in the long term suffer. Dsouza *et al*., (2019) recently published a study that was conducted on 2019, the aim of the researchers was to quantify the prevalence of social anxiety disorder (SAD) in the population of medical students of a tertiary care hospital in Davangere, Karnataka; SAD was present in about 30.5% of the medical students, the results showed. Female students, in contrast, were more likely to suffer from social anxiety than male students. Moreover, students aged over 20 and particularly female students, showed a greater incidence of SAD. A recent study by

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Jaiswal *et al.*, (2020) investigated the prevalence of Internet addiction, social anxiety, and social phobia in Indian university students. According to the results, majority of the individuals i.e., more than 90% of the participants showed signs of Internet addiction. Over a one third of the students also exhibited signs of social anxiety. Moreover, internet addiction was significantly related to social anxiety. Ungar *et al.*, (2020) conducted a prevalence study on social anxiety in young people across seven countries. The study found that the actual global prevalence of social anxiety is far greater than what has been previously reported. 36% of participants had criteria for a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder. Study findings suggested that symptoms of social anxiety were not influenced by gender, but social anxiety symptoms establishment and severity were affected by age, country of residence, employment status.

Research by Beidel *et al.*, (2020) states that students suffering from social anxiety tend to have difficulty participating in class and as a result, this will adversely impact their marks. Likewise, Xu and Zhang (2021) conducted a similar study and found that students with high social anxiety avoided class discussions, public presentations and group projects, which results in a negative impact on academic performance. The socially phobic students suffer from stress more than the rest students which in turn affect concentration and memory. Worry over being judged or criticized in front of peers can also lead to avoidance of assignments, presentations, and even asking professors or peers for help (Gupta, S, *et al.*, 2022). Students who suffer from social phobia are more sensitive to perceived criticism and often will stay away from difficult academic challenges. Alden and Taylor *et al.*, (2020) discovered that socially anxious students were likely to procrastinate handing assignments or avoid being in the front to present their work to an audience. According to McCauley *et al.*, (2017) the students that will experience social anxiety are the ones who are most likely to avoid participation in the classroom as a result, this in turn reduces both grades and academic participation. Additionally, social phobia can impede students' ability to focus, as they may be lost in thoughts about their potential to be criticized or humiliated (Beidel *et al.*, 2015). All of these factors combined lead to a lower quality of academic performance, especially in settings that demand engagement and collaborative efforts. There are several coping techniques that students with social anxiety can use to help cope with their symptoms. These coping strategies can either be adaptive (therapy, taking relaxation techniques) or maladaptive (not meeting in person at all) (Crawford *et al.*, 2020). Managing social phobia is a great thing which will reduce the academic failure.

Previous studies in this regard were mostly conducted in international and American areas. There is no finding related to social phobias and university student's academic performance in Bangladesh specially in the university of north region. The present study would be a good resource for the government and non-government policy makers to make a versatile policy to ease the diverse effect of social phobia on academic performances of students of university. However, this study is focused on a specific university's students of Bangladesh. So, the results and findings are not able to generalize for all the universities of Bangladesh.

METHODS
The current study used qualitative research design as a case study method approach to determine the effects of social phobia on students of Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology (BAUST). The qualitative approach makes it the appropriate one because it allows in-depth exploration of participants lived experience, perceptions and strategies, and could provide insight into the academic and social struggles experienced by SAD students. The researchers have developed some inclusion criteria to select the respondents based on the following criteria:
1. Confirm SAD Diagnosis: Participants must have had a confirmed diagnosis of SAD by a licensed mental health professional.
2. Currently enrolled students of BAUST: The data had to be relevant to the academy that is why only those students who were currently enrolled at BAUST were invited to participate.
3. Informed consent: Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, were assured about the confidentiality of their responses and agreed to voluntarily participate.

There were 18 participants (10 men, 8 women, ages 19–24 years). The participants were selected from multiple departments such as engineering, business, and humanities at BAUST to include diversity in their academic background. For primary data collection, purposive sampling was used to collect data directly from the participants. The secondary data used in this study were obtained from the book, journals, reports, and others. One type of time and cost-effective sampling technique is purposive sampling. Due to this, the researchers have selected this sampling as the work has been done by the researcher's self-sponsorship, hence saving money and time. Data collected through unstructured face-to-face interviews over two months (March-April 2024). Interviews focused on issues like academic participation, peer relationships, coping strategies and mental health support on campus. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes each and all transcripts were reviewed to identify recurring themes. All participants gave informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and had the right to withdraw at any time. The study was conducted keeping in view the guidelines for research on sensitive topics like mental health. Of course, there are some limitations in the present study: The participants of the study were limited to 18 students and the study was conducted at only one university so the conclusion cannot be generalized to all the universities.

Finally, what the participants reported in interviews formed the data collected in this study, and what they reported may not always be true. Last but not the least, the research describes what it was like to be a student with social anxiety at some point in the life cycle, but is unable to show how social anxiety impacts students over time.

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

Impact on Academic Participation:

According to Gant *et al*., (2023) the moment students have to speak in front of classmates, students with social anxiety will feel more anxious, and therefore tend to avoid public speaking and group discussion. This avoidance is correlated to many academic impasses, like late assignments submissions, lowered grades and less participation in the course (Kern *et al*., 2023).

From the respondents interviews an important finding is students who experience social phobia are reluctant to participate in class. Asked to respond to questions or to participate in group discussions, participants felt anxious in response to this request. This is how they used to be, they couldn't speak in class, they didn't want themselves to be noticed. A participant, named Afsana (pseudonym) a second-year undergraduate student studying BBA, had crippling anxiety symptoms in lectures and group situations. She had previously skipped a full year of class activities, impacting her grades. She avoided assignments and postponed submitting work out of fear she would be judged on its quality, so ultimately received lower scores. Her GPA was far lower than that of her peers, but it did improve a bit after she attended some counseling sessions and practiced some relaxation techniques.

Shamim (pseudonym) is a student of Department of English with an exceptionally high IQ, but his social anxiety prevented him from contributing to any class discussions, or engaging in group activities – leading to extreme avoidance. When interacting socially he often would sweat and tremble. Although Mark did well in written assignments and exams, his limited participation in group discussions and presentations hindered his overall academic journey and affected his relationships with professors and peers.

A first semester student of EEE, Sarah (pseudonym), had problems with group projects and group assignment. She feared judgment on the part of her peers more than anything, and as a result caused conflict within groups never to confront and never to ask assertively for her ideas to be heard. Also, Sarah's social anxiety made her to be mentally unwell and unable to carry good advancement in academics. In her first semester, she said she saw her grades drop and blamed the fact she wasn't able to participate in classroom activities.

Impact on Public Speaking and Presentations: The majority of participants identified public speaking as one of the most anxiety-provoking aspects of their academic experience. Fear of being judged or making mistakes during presentations was a significant source of stress.

One participant named Jakir (pseudonym) explained,
> "When I have to present, my mind goes blank, and I feel like everyone is just waiting for me to mess up. It's like my heart is in my throat."

Another participant named Sabina (pseudonym) from CSE department shared,
> "I avoid classes that require presentations because the thought of speaking in front of others overwhelms me. It affects my grades because I choose easier courses without presentations".

Challenges in Group Work and Collaboration: People with social phobia had problems with Group Work and k Group projects. The respondents explained that most of the people feel uncomfortable while talking to unfamiliar peers because they worry about social judgment and evaluation.

One of the participants named Jadeja (pseudonym) from Department of BBA said.
> "I hate group projects. I don't know how to do conversation, because there is just social pressure to talk to strangers or join in conversations. Anxiety about being judged caused many to disengage, and even for some students to balk at doing group work instead of working alone. This covered their academic performance in that if group projects were marked on collective participation, this directly covered it."

Emotional Impact: The cumulative effect of social phobia was evident in the emotional distress students experienced and their subsequent academic underperformance. Several participants reported feeling frustrated and inadequate, leading to lower self-esteem.

One participant named Malek (pseudonym) from IPE shared,
> "I know I'm capable of more, but my anxiety prevents me from achieving my full potential. It's frustrating because I feel like I'm wasting my opportunities."

Another student named Sabbir (pseudonym) from ME department noted,
> "From when the social anxiety started, I have seen that my academic result is going down. Though I tried to focus on it but it doesn't work at all. I feel like in compare to my class mate I am always being left behind."

Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation: Students used the various methods in pull through in handling social anxiety in academic environment. Widely-used techniques were associated with regulation of breathing, grounding techniques, and replacing a negative thought with a positive one. Some of the students also said that while doing online learning they feel safe from having to meet people face to face.

However, many participants reported that such coping strategies only relieve symptoms in the short term and actual anxiety remains an issue when the subject is faced with other academic stressors. One of the respondents named Rafi (pseudonym) explained,

"I try to use some breathing exercise before any presentation for relaxing myself, to avoid social phobia but It meaningless to use those techniques. Because most of the time it failed to reduce my anxiety. Sometimes I feel very helpless when I faced that kind of situation."

Institutional Support and Gaps in Resources: In this university counseling center for mental health or any other psychological support from medical team in not present. Several participants expressed that this institution offered as usual health support but did not specifically address the challenges posed by social phobia.

One participant named Sanai (pseudonym) stated,

"The counseling services are very beneficial for encounter the social phobia. But we have to arrange it by own. We didn't have any institutional support in this regard. In our university a medical center for general treatment is available. But no counseling service and professional psychologist available in our campus. "

Most of the respondents wanted targeted interventions, things like anxiety management workshops specifically orientated to an academic context that can be made widely available, easily accessible mental health resources and faculty training to be able to best accommodate social anxiety in students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There has to be more specific programs for kids with social anxiety in universities. Such workshops may include public speaking and group work and how to manage test anxiety in children who struggle with social phobia.
2. Counseling services should work closely with students who show signs of social anxiety and let them know that they may benefit from individual therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and group therapy, especially if it addresses academic issues. Online services also should be offered, for students who might not feel comfortable seeking help in person.

3. Assessments could be pre-recorded if the student struggles to present in front of other students or over the Internet or even taking an oral or written assessment individually outside the group presentation. There should be another means of assessment in place (i.e., pre-recorded presentations or individual written submission) for those students who feel very anxious about presenting in class.

CONCLUSION

From this study, the researchers were able to expose difficulties faced by university students with social phobia. The results indicate social phobia as a major hindrance to academic success by both affecting participation and performance along with the student's emotional wellbeing and self-esteem. Learners use a variety of tools to address their discomfort, but it has had a limited effect as much of it is contingent on personal institutional support. The study advised universities to establish more customized mental health services, funding to train and instruct faculty, as well as flexible assessment strategies to facilitate learning in students who are particularly affected by social phobia.

Above all, this work points to the pedagogical and administrative changes necessary in university practices and policies for mental health resources, academic accommodations etc. to become more supportive as a whole. A cultural transformation includes an inclusive and supportive academic culture in order for those prone to social phobia to find their feet. Other than this, addressing the stigma around mental health issues, providing tailored interventions and re-evaluating academic assessment criteria can improve the academic experience and mental health of socially anxious students at BAUST and universities worldwide.

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