

Self-consciousness in female university students: the predictive role of social anxiety

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Abstract

Objective: To find out the degree and direction of correlation between social anxiety and self-consciousness, and to investigate the predictive role social anxiety plays in determining self-consciousness among female university students.

Method: The cross-sectional study was conducted in six public and private sector universities of Lahore, Pakistan, from February to June 2019, and comprised female students aged 18-26 years. Data was collected using a demographic sheet in addition to the Social Anxiety Scale and the revised version of the Self-consciousness Scale. Data was analysed using SPSS 21.

Results: There were 300 subjects with a mean age of 21.14 ± 2.06 years. Age had significant inverse correlation with social anxiety ($p < 0.01$), while no significant relation was found between age and self-consciousness. Private self-consciousness was positively correlated with public self-consciousness ($p < 0.01$), evaluation anxiety ($p < 0.01$) and interaction anxiety ($p < 0.05$), while significant positive correlation was observed between public self-consciousness and all domains of social anxiety ($p < 0.01$). Social anxiety was a strong positive predictor of self-consciousness ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Women experiencing elevated anxiety and distress during their social interactions or performing any task publically tended to be more self-conscious, self-critical and over-attentive to their actions.

Keywords: Social anxiety, Self-consciousness, University students. (JPMA 71: 905; 2021)

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Introduction

Social anxiety (SoA) has been observed to be increasing across the world, becoming one of the most common psychiatric disorders.¹ More and more people have been reporting to have suffered the conditions associated with SoA disorder (SAD). The fear experienced by socially anxious people can intensify depression, stress, inferiority, incompetence and self-consciousness (SC) in them. These unhealthy sentiments might lead to deficiency in individuals along with social functionality.²

Research demonstrated that SoA significantly affected young adults, especially university students, due to which they were either unable to complete their education³ or were at high risk of failing crucial examinations.⁴ A significant proportion of university students reported having experienced compromised functionality because of high SoA despite being part of one of the best educational systems in the world.⁵

SoA is characterised by the apprehension of being adversely assessed by other persons in a social gathering.⁶ The resultant stress for the sufferer of SoA is usually overwhelming. Moreover, self-consciousness has been significantly reported by socially anxious university students. Despite being interrelated concepts, SoA and SC

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among university students have not been thoroughly explored. Keeping in view the extent of spread and damaging potential of SAD and increased SC, both need to be managed proactively and progressively.⁷

SC has been described as an intensified perception of self-awareness.⁸ Many persons are habitual of being more self-conscious compared to others. Repulsive feelings, for instance, paranoia and excessive shyness are usually associated with SC. Being highly self-conscious makes people overly attentive to the most trivial of their actions, inhibiting their capability to carry out routine tasks.⁹ Studies identified that unpleasant feelings of embarrassment, guilt and shame are usually connected with SC, which, in turn, reduces level of self-esteem and pride.¹⁰ A self-conscious person, many a time, before interacting people in social settings, may be over-critical about how she or he is looking or how others will perceive his presentation and image. Though often being self-conscious is polite and civilised, excessive SC can lead to mental health issues in university students and may result as a restraining factor, rendering the sufferer dysfunctional.¹¹

SC has often been classified into two types: private self-consciousness (PrSC), involving introspection or self-examination of one's own feelings and thoughts, and public self-consciousness (PuSC), marked by overemphasis on public image of self. Severe PuSC can culminate in

persistent self-monitoring and even SoA.¹² Researchers have found a notable association between SoA and other problems related to the social context with PuSC in student population.¹³ Sufferers have even been found to face sleep disturbances, leading to poor quality of life (QOL) and deteriorated social functioning.¹⁴ It is quite critical to establish which of the two types of SC the victim of SAD is experiencing.¹⁵

Expressive behaviour of the students has been found to differ largely depending upon varying degree of SC. Self-conscious pupils may feel comfortable when they believe they are not being the centre of attention; for example, in a crowded place, among many strangers at a train station, or while being disguised. Students diagnosed with SAD and having higher level of PuSC have been observed to be more socially fearful and apprehensive, whereas SAD sufferers possessing high PrSC have been found quite elaborative and eloquent in describing their inner status, i.e., thoughts and feelings.¹⁶ This seems rational as in all the above-mentioned situations, they might believe that they are anonymous and unnoticeable. This phenomenon has been dubbed as “de-individuation” by social scientists.

The current study was planned to find out the degree and direction of correlation between SoA and SC, and to investigate the predictive role SoA plays in determining SC among female university students.

Subjects and Methods

After getting the ERC approval, the cross-sectional study was conducted in Lahore, Pakistan, from February to June 2019. The sample size was calculated using G-power calculator for 4 predictors. The calculated sample size was inflated by more than 100% for optimal accuracy.¹⁷ The sample was raised using non-probability purposive sampling technique from female students aged 18-26 years studying at different academic levels, including Intermediate, Bachelors, Masters, M-Phil/MS and PhD, enrolled with both public and private universities, like Lahore College for Women University, Government College University, University of the Punjab, University of Lahore, University of Central Punjab, and University of Management and Technology. Participants were approached after getting permission from the respective institutional authorities. Male students and those outside the 18-26 age group were excluded.

After taking informed consent from the subjects, data was collected using the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS)⁶, which is an indigenous 22-item self-reporting inventory designed to measure intensity of SoA a person feels in various social settings. The respondents have to carefully respond to the items by choosing one response from the 5-point Likert

rating scale. The options ranged from ‘never’ (0) to ‘always’ (4). The inventory consists of Performance Anxiety and Avoidance (PAA), Interaction Anxiety (IA) and Evaluation Anxiety (EA) subscales. The PAA subscale has 8 items indicating fear, distress and avoidance experienced while performing publically (such as, “I feel anxious while addressing a group of people”). Raw score on this subscale ranges 0-32. The IA subscale has 10 items measuring an individual’s feelings of discomfort in situations where interaction with people is required (such as, “I feel nervous while talking to a stranger”). Raw score ranges 0-40. EA has 4 items assessing the level of anxiety with reference to possible scrutiny or assessment of one’s actions by others (such as, “I am fearful of getting rejection from people”). The raw score on this subscale ranges 0-16. Higher scores on each of the subscale point towards elevated level of anxiety in that dimension. The scale had good psychometric properties for the current sample, with alpha reliability of 0.90 indicating internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha for PAA was 0.84, IA 0.81, and EA 0.78 (Table 1).

SC was assessed using the Self-consciousness Scale-Revised (SCS-R)¹⁸ that consists of 22 items. A 4-point Likert scale is used to record responses of the participants with options ranging from ‘not like me at all (0) to ‘a lot like me’ (3). The inventory consists of PrSC, PuSC and SoA subscales. The PrSC subscale consists of 9 items indicating a tendency to introspect and examine one’s inner self and feelings (such as, “I generally pay attention to my inner feelings”). Raw score ranges from 0-27. The PuSC subscale has 7 items measuring an individual’s awareness of the self as it is viewed by others (such as, “I am concerned about what other people think of me”). Raw score ranges from 0-21. SoA subscale has 6 items assessing the level of anxiety, shyness or embarrassment in social environment (such as, “Large groups make me nervous”). The raw score on this factor ranges 0-18. The higher the scores, the greater the vulnerability on that dimension would be. Psychometric properties of the inventory were pretty good for the current sample, with Cronbach’s alpha for PrSC 0.74, PuSC

Table-1: Descriptive data of study variables (n=300).

Scale	Items	α	Mean \pm SD	Score range	
				Potential	Actual
PAA	8	0.84	15.28 \pm 7.09	0-32	0-32
IA	10	0.81	18.77 \pm 8.04	0-40	0-42
EA	4	0.78	4.91 \pm 3.55	0-16	0-16
SA	22	0.90	38.96 \pm 16.41	0-88	0-86
PrSC	9	0.74	16.80 \pm 4.24	0-27	3-27
PuSC	7	0.76	13.50 \pm 4.38	0-21	0-21
SoA	6	0.75	9.70 \pm 4.23	0-18	0-18
SC	22	0.80	40.0 \pm 9.81	0-66	6-63

SD: Standard Deviation, PAA: Performance Anxiety and Avoidance, IA: Interaction Anxiety, EA: Evaluation Anxiety, SA: Social Anxiety, PrSC: Private Self-consciousness, PuSC: Public Self-consciousness, SoA: Social Anxiety, SC: Self-consciousness.

0.76, and SoA 0.75.

The questionnaires used were already available in Urdu language⁶. The initial part consisted of information about demographics, including age, education, marital status, family system, socio-economic status (SES) and number of friends.

Data was analysed using SPSS 21. Preliminary data analysis consisted of reliability coefficient estimates for all subscales and the total scales using Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the participants. Pearson correlation was run to investigate the degree and direction of correlation among PAA, IA and EA, PrSC, PuSC and demographics. Linear regression analysis was used to see whether SoA served as a strong predictor of SC in the subjects. Alpha levels 0.01 and 0.05 were set for significance testing.

Results

There were 300 subjects; 50(16.66%) from each of the six participating institutions. The mean age of the sample was 21.14±2.06 years. The study sample included 11(3.7%) participants from intermediate level, 7(2.3%) undergraduate level, 232(77.3%) graduate level, 47(15.7%) post-graduate level and 3(1.0%) from doctorate level. Overall, 213(71%) subjects reported having been brought up in a nuclear family system, whereas 87(29%) were raised in a joint family setup. Birth order statistics showed that most of the subjects were either first-born or second-born; 80(26.7%) in each of the categories. The number of close friends mentioned by 12(4%) participants indicated no close ties with friends at all, whereas 288(96%) reported to have compatibility and strong emotional bonding with friends aged 2-20 years.

Age had significant but weak inverse correlation with interaction anxiety ($r=-0.21, p<.01$) and overall SoA ($r=-0.17, p<.01$). Inverse weak correlations were also observed between number of close friends, level of SC ($r=-0.14, p<.05$) and SoA experienced while performing ($r=-0.17, p<.01$), and being evaluated in a social environment ($r=-0.16, p<.01$). PrSC was positively correlated with PuSC ($r=0.55, p<.01$), EA ($r=0.18, p<.01$), and IA ($r=0.11, p<.05$), whereas significant but moderate positive correlation was seen between PuSC and SoA in performance ($r=0.21, p<.01$), interaction ($r=0.29, p<.01$) and evaluation ($r=0.35, p<.01$) domains. Overall, SC was moderately and directly related with SoA in situations where students had to perform ($r=0.44, p<.01$), interact ($r=0.45, p<.01$) and were

Table-2: Correlation between demographics and variables (n=300).

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
1 - Age	-	0.00	0.05	-0.08	-0.14*	0.07	-0.10	-0.21**	-0.13*	-0.17**
2 -Close friends		-	-0.02	-0.08	0.21**	-0.14*	-0.17**	-0.13*	-0.16**	-0.17**
3 -PrSC			-	0.55**	0.16**	0.75**	0.09	0.11*	0.18**	0.13*
4 -PuSC				-	0.38**	0.85**	0.21**	0.29**	0.35**	0.31**
5 -SoA					-	0.67**	0.71**	0.62**	0.51**	0.72**
6 -SC						-	0.44**	0.45**	0.45**	0.51**
7 -PAA							-	0.72**	0.59**	0.91**
8 - IA								-	0.54**	0.91**
9 - EA									-	0.73**
10- SA										-

PrSC: Private Self-consciousness, PuSC: Public Self-consciousness, SoA: Social Anxiety, SC: Self-consciousness, PAA: Performance Anxiety and Avoidance, IA: Interaction Anxiety, EA: Evaluation Anxiety, SA: Social Anxiety: ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$.

Table-3: Linear regression analysis predicting self-consciousness from social anxiety and subtypes (n=300).

Predictor variable	R2	B	SE	β	t-test	p-value
Performance Anxiety and Avoidance	0.20	0.44	0.07	0.61	8.6	< 0.001
Interaction Anxiety	0.20	0.45	0.06	0.54	8.6	< 0.001
Evaluation Anxiety	0.21	0.45	0.14	1.26	8.8	< 0.001
Social Anxiety	0.26	0.51	0.30	0.30	10.26	< 0.001

SE: Standard error. Criterion Variable: Self-consciousness

to be assessed ($r=0.45, p<.01$) (Table 2).

High levels of SoA in terms of performance, interaction and evaluation were predictive of high degree of SC among the subjects (Table 3).

Discussion

Impact of SoA can be heavy on physical and psychological health of the person and can severely impair QOL.¹⁹

Age was found to be inversely correlated with IA and overall SoA in the current study, which means that young students during early years of their education might be more fearful and anxious while associating and building connections in their social environment. Literature characterising SAD as an early-age ailment supports this finding.^{1,7} Results revealed that highly self-conscious female students experienced greater SoA while performing in groups with intense fear of getting assessed by others and had lesser number of close friends. Due to the societal transitions, like the proliferation of internet and subsequent mushroom growth of social media platforms, the social support system in the global context has reduced further, with the result that self-conscious and anxious people have started to make cyber-friends instead of real ones. In the local setting, this trend has been observed to be increasing at a rapid pace in major cities.²⁰ These and other factors have resulted in the increased sense of introversion, leading to SoA and SC in students.

The current study indicated that PrSC was related with

PuSC and EA. Subjects revealed that they experienced perceived or actual feeling of being overly attentive either to their own self and / or to the external environment. The findings lend support to earlier studies.²¹ The current study highlighted that PuSC in female university students increased with elevation in SoA in performance, interaction and evaluation categories. It is evident from literature that SoA and other problems related to social context have notable association with PuSC.¹³

The current study revealed that high levels of SoA in terms of performance, interaction and evaluation were strong predictors of high SC degree among the subjects. It is well documented that people having a condition involving social phobia focus their attention towards their internal threat catalysts. The present findings were parallel to literature where theorists have also endorsed this perspective by proposing that attention could be focussed on internal stimulus of threat and that safety conducts can require avoiding social interaction.²²

The major limitation of the current study is that data was collected only from higher education institutions of the Punjab province, so to increase the external validity of SAS, future research should include a larger and more diverse sample, ideally one which is fully representative of the adult population. Another limitation is the implications of statistical techniques only. In future studies, state-of-the-art natural language processing and machine learning techniques would be employed to better understand the aversive effect of SAD on daily functioning.

Conclusion

The relationship between SoA and SC among female university students was strong.

Disclaimer: The text is based on a PhD dissertation.

Conflict of interest: One of the co-authors was also member of the Ethics Review Committee which approved the study.

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