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A study on prevalence of social anxiety among students

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Abstract
Anxiety is a mental health condition in which the person anticipates a future worry and reacts to specific items and situations with dread and fright. Social anxiety is a chronic mental health condition characterized by excessive and irrational fears or worries in social situations. Everyday social encounters for those with social anxiety can result in unreasonable worry, fear, self-consciousness, and embarrassment. Symptoms can include an extreme fear of being judged, feeling embarrassed or ashamed, or worry about upsetting someone. The college time is a crucial period for the rapid development of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural maturity among students. Interpersonal communication is becoming increasingly vital in college students' studies, lives, and employment. The objectives of the study were to find out the prevalence of social anxiety among students and to assess gender difference in the prevalence of social anxiety. The study was conducted on 198 numbers of college going students who falls under the age group of 19-21 years. Two questionnaires were used for data collection. The responses were coded and analysed. The research findings indicated that social anxiety was prevalent among students, as about a quarter of the students (24.8%) were found to exhibit a high level of social anxiety and 56.6 percent of the students were found to have a moderate level of social anxiety. There is a noticeable gender disparity in the prevalence of social anxiety, with females being more susceptible to higher levels of social anxiety compared to males. Social anxiety can have detrimental effects on various aspects of life, including interpersonal relationships, academic achievements, emotional well-being, and future career prospects. These consequences are particularly significant if not properly addressed. By engaging in careful preparation and comprehending the distinct impacts it has on students, educators can establish a welcoming atmosphere that facilitates learning and development of all students.

Keywords: Social anxiety, self-consciousness, interpersonal communication, prevalence, gender difference

Introduction
According to the World Health Organization, mental health refers to a state of overall well-being in which an individual is conscious of their own capacities and possesses the skill to effectively navigate common life stressors, is able to engage in productive and meaningful work, and can make positive contributions to their community. It impacts cognitive processes, the way we perceive things, and our actions. This includes aspects of emotional well-being, psychological functioning, and social interaction. It also impacts an individual's reaction to stress, social interactions, and decision-making process. Anxiety is a mental health condition in which the person anticipates a future worry and reacts to specific items and situations with dread and fright. A person with anxiety may have physical symptoms including perspiration and a racing heart. Depending on the types and degrees of anxiety, the symptoms may vary. There are numerous types of anxiety or anxiety disorders, and social anxiety is one of them. Social anxiety is a chronic mental health problem characterized by irrational anxiety during social interactions. It is common to experience feelings of nervousness and tension in certain social situations, such as going on a date or giving a presentation, which can cause butterflies in the stomach. Everyday encounters, on the other hand, create severe anxiety, self-consciousness, and embarrassment among people who suffer from social anxiety. Contrary to shyness, social anxiety goes beyond mere difficulties in socializing, school, and work. It significantly disrupts one's daily life on a greater scale. In social anxiety, fear and anxiety lead to avoidance, disrupting one's life. It is persistent and overwhelming and may affect relationships, daily routines, work, school, or other everyday activities. Individuals with social anxiety experience an overwhelming and uncontrollable fear in social situations. This intense fear can have a detrimental impact on their ability to engage in daily activities such as attending work or school. While some individuals may still be able to perform these tasks, they do so with notable levels of apprehension and anxiety.

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People affected by social anxiety often anticipate and worry about upcoming social situations for extended periods of time before they occur. They might avoid situations or locations that make them uncomfortable or embarrassed.

The precise cause of social anxiety is not fully understood, but researchers have identified several factors that may contribute to its development. Physical, biological, and genetic factors are believed to play a role in the onset of social anxiety. Neurotransmitter systems such as serotonin, dopamine, and glutamate abnormalities are thought to be involved in mood regulation and could potentially impact social anxiety symptoms. Environmental influences may also factor into the development of social anxiety; however, these influences interact with biological and genetic traits within a complex framework. Factors such as a history of abuse (emotional or physical), negative peer interactions, strict parenting methods, and an insecure attachment style have been suggested as potential contributors. Additionally, it's important to note that social anxiety can be symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder which may arise from traumatic experiences. The root cause of social anxiety is still a mystery to researchers and medical professionals. It can run in families, however, it is unknown why some family members develop it while others do not. As fear and anxiety affect various parts of our brain, social anxiety is difficult to understand and study. Researchers are also examining the possible links between how stress and the environment can lead to social anxiety.

Review of literature

Johani et al. (2022) [1] conducted a cross-sectional study titled "Social anxiety disorder and its associated factors: A cross-sectional study among medical students, Saudi Arabia". The researchers aimed to investigate the prevalence of social anxiety among Saudi medical students and identify factors associated with its occurrence. The findings revealed a high prevalence of social anxiety, with approximately 51% of the surveyed medical students experiencing this condition. Notably, female students studying at private colleges or following non-problem-based learning methods, as well as those with a history of previous academic failure or a lower grade point average, demonstrated increased likelihoods of experiencing social anxiety.

In a recent study conducted by Itani et al. (2021) [23], the researchers examined the prevalence of severe social anxiety (SSA) among adolescents during the COVID-19 lockdown. The findings revealed that approximately 18% of the participants exhibited symptoms of severe social anxiety. No significant correlation was observed between the presence of SSA and the participants' level of awareness or fear regarding COVID-19 morbidity. However, certain factors emerged as being associated with the development of severe social anxiety. These factors included excessive texting, frequent use of social media platforms, and extensive engagement in video gaming activities.

Ungar et al. (2020) [25] conducted a prevalence study on social anxiety in young people across seven countries. Based on the study's findings, it was discovered that the global prevalence of social anxiety is significantly higher than what was previously reported. Approximately 36% of participants met the criteria for a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder. The study also indicated that the prevalence and severity of social anxiety symptoms were not influenced by gender, but rather by factors such as age, country of residence, employment status, educational level, and urban or rural living conditions.

In a recent study conducted by Jaiswal et al., the prevalence of Internet addiction, social anxiety, and social phobia among university students in India was investigated. The results revealed that a significant majority of the participants, over 90%, exhibited symptoms of Internet addiction. Additionally, more than one-third of the participants displayed signs of social anxiety. Furthermore, the study found a strong association between social anxiety and Internet addiction.

In a recent study carried out by Dsouza et al. (2019) [18], the researchers aimed to assess the occurrence of social anxiety disorder (SAD) within the population of medical students attending a tertiary care hospital located in Davangere, Karnataka. The findings revealed that approximately 30.5% of the medical students exhibited symptoms of SAD. Interestingly, female students demonstrated a higher prevalence of social anxiety in comparison to male students. Furthermore, the incidence of SAD was found to be higher among students above the age of 20, particularly among female students.

In a study conducted by Mishra and Kiran (2018) [41] titled "Parenting style and social anxiety among adolescents," the findings suggested that there is an inverse correlation with social anxiety. The study also revealed that agreeableness and openness are positively associated with social anxiety. It was found that there is a negative relationship between permissive parenting style and social anxiety. Additionally, both permissive and authoritative parenting styles have been identified as important factors in predicting social anxiety among adolescents.

Carcedo et al. conducted a study on the impact of attachment to parents on friendships, loneliness, and social anxiety during college transition. The findings suggest that attachment to parents indirectly affects the formation and satisfaction of friendships, as well as feelings of loneliness through social anxiety. Furthermore, there is a direct association between attachment and loneliness, with no significant moderating effect of gender observed.

In a study conducted by Wang et al. titled "The Association between Mobile Game Addiction and Depression, Social Anxiety, and Loneliness," the researchers discovered a correlation between excessive mobile game use and negative mental health consequences including depression, social anxiety, and loneliness. The results revealed that individuals who were addicted to mobile games displayed higher levels of these mental health issues. Moreover, gender differences were examined in relation to the impact of mobile game addiction on these outcomes. The findings indicated that male adolescents had an increased likelihood of experiencing social anxiety when engaged in addictive mobile game use.

Asher and Aderka conducted a study on "Gender differences in social anxiety disorder" and found that females are more susceptible to developing social anxiety disorder than males. Furthermore, women tend to display more severe symptoms and report higher levels of distress associated with the condition.

In a study conducted by Khadhijah and Vijaykumar (2018) [27], the researchers examined the variation in social anxiety levels between students attending single-sex schools and those attending co-education schools. The results of the study indicated that female students enrolled in co-education schools exhibited significantly higher levels of social anxiety compared to male students enrolled in single-sex schools. However, no statistically significant difference was observed

among other student groups. These findings suggest that boys tend to feel more at ease in all-boys schools, while girls attending co-education schools tend to experience heightened social anxiety.

In a study conducted by Pugh (2017) [35], titled "Investigating the relationship between smartphone addictions, social anxiety, self-esteem, age, and gender," the findings indicated that there is no statistically significant relationship observed between smartphone addictions, social anxiety, and self-esteem. Furthermore, significant variations were observed in relation to age and gender among the variables being studied.

Research design

A cross-sectional research design was adopted for conducting the present study. Cross-sectional research is defined as a research method where data is collected from multiple individuals at one specific time. This type of research involves observing variables without causing any influence. Cross-sectional studies are employed across various disciplines such as economics, psychology, medicine, epidemiology, and social sciences. For example, psychologists may employ this design to collect and analyze data on the current prevalence of a psychological disorder of a specific group within the population.

This study is a cross-sectional study as it aims to examine the prevalence of social anxiety among specific group of students within the total students and to assess the gender difference in the prevalence of social anxiety. As a result, a cross-sectional research design is being used.

Materials and method

The research was conducted in Hnahthial District, located in Mizoram, India. A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed to ensure a representative sample. Initially, Hnahthial District was chosen through simple random sampling as the primary stage of selection. Subsequently, the researchers purposively selected the Hnahthial R.D. Block as the second stage and selected one college using purposive sampling for the third stage of selection. To determine an appropriate sample size for this study, 198 students were drawn from the total population by applying a sample size determination formula. It is important to note that equal proportions of male and female participants were included in order to attain gender balance within the study group. Data collection utilized two questionnaires with distinct sections dedicated to gathering relevant information pertaining to their respective areas of expertise or interest. They are self-modified tool for social anxiety and self-constructed tool for life style. The self-modified tool for social anxiety and the self-constructed tool for lifestyle were utilized in this study. The self-modified tool for social anxiety comprised two sections: demographic characteristics and a questionnaire on social anxiety. The questionnaire on social anxiety assessed five variables, including fear, avoidance, physiological arousal, poor communication, and poor confidence. Each statement was rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with scores of 1 to 5 assigned respectively for positive items and reversed scores of 5 to 1 assigned for negative statements. The total score of each subscale was obtained by summing the scores of its corresponding items. Overall, there were a total of thirty items included in this assessment instrument. The self-constructed questionnaire on lifestyle encompassed four distinct domains: the physical domain, social domain,

emotional domain, and intellectual domain. Each statement in the questionnaire was rated using a five-point Likert scale. This scale ranged from "never" to "always," with corresponding scores of 1 to 5 for positive items and reversed scoring (scores of 5 to 1) for negative statements. The total score for each subscale was computed by summing up the scores obtained from both positive and negative items separately.

Results and Discussion

This section provides insight into the prevalence of social anxiety among students, as well as exploring gender differences in its occurrence.

Table 1: Social anxiety levels of the students

Levels of social anxiety	N=198	
	Frequency	Percentage
High	49	24.8%
Moderate	112	56.6%
Low	37	18.6%

The data presented in Table 7.1 provides insights into the levels of social anxiety observed among students. It is evident from the findings that social anxiety is prevalent among students, with a high level observed in 24.8% of the respondents and a moderate level in 56.6%. This study focused on respondents aged between 19 and 21 years, who fall into the category known as Generation Z or Gen Z - the first generation to have grown up completely immersed in digital technology. Prior research has demonstrated that this cohort possesses unique needs, interests, attitudes, and behaviors compared to earlier generations. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z individuals were raised during an era dominated by smartphones and widespread internet access; thus they possess a strong affinity for these technologies. Furthermore, it is notable that individuals from Generation Z, who are considered digital natives, exhibit a remarkable level of involvement on various social media platforms. As a result of this increased engagement with technology and the consequent rise in smartphone usage among this generation, there has been an observable correlation between heightened levels of social anxiety and social isolation (Association, 2018). Through discussions with multiple participants during the research process, it becomes evident that the presence of social anxiety could potentially be linked to negative parenting styles. It is noteworthy to acknowledge the significant impact negative parenting styles can have on children; these children may develop an inclination towards excessively prioritizing external opinions or their own self-perception due to such upbringing practices. Social anxiety in Generation Z may also be attributed to factors such as the evolving nuclear family structure in modern India. This generation often faces overprotective parenting practices, commonly referred to as "helicopter parenting". (J. L. Young, 2017) [20].

18.6% of the students were found to exhibit low levels of social anxiety whereas majority of the students (56.6%) were found to have a moderate level of social anxiety. The results can be supported by the research conducted by Jaiswal *et al.* (2020) [24], who discovered that over 30% of the participants exhibited social anxiety and that it was positively associated with internet addiction.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents according to the gender difference in the prevalence of social anxiety

Respondents	Mean	SD	P(Z<=z) value
Male (N=99)	76.4	18.6	0.002
Female (N=99)	84.5	20.4	

*p<0.05 (significant at 0.05%)

It can be inferred from Table 7.2 that the calculated value of Z was 0.002 which was less than the significance level (0.05). Hence, there was a significant gender difference in the prevalence of social anxiety among students. The findings can be supported by a study conducted by Pugh (2017) [35], titled "Investigating the relationship between smartphone addictions, social anxiety, self-esteem, age, and gender," the findings indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship observed between smartphone addictions, social anxiety, and self-esteem. However, notable differences were identified in terms of age and gender among the variables under investigation.

Conclusion
Individuals today are not necessarily avoiding social interaction more than they did in previous decades, but they are certainly expressing their preferences more openly. The development of digital communication has led to a group of individuals who choose to remain indoors, openly acknowledging their introverted disposition and relying on technology to meet their needs, such as ordering transportation and groceries online. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that excessive seclusion can occasionally suggest a deeper underlying concern. Social anxiety, a prevalent mental illness, remains poorly understood outside of scientific circles. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that social anxiety is prevalent among the students, particularly among first-year students. The findings have also indicated that there is a significant gender difference in the prevalence of social anxiety. It is imperative to acknowledge that social anxiety can have detrimental effects on multiple aspects of life, including interpersonal relationships, scholastic achievement, emotional wellness, and potential career prospects. However, acknowledging the signs of social anxiety is the first step towards seeking help. By understanding its effects on students and implementing appropriate strategies, educators can create a welcoming environment for all students to learn and develop. In order to mitigate the potential adverse effects of unaddressed social anxiety, it is imperative that educators and family members play an active role in providing support and empowerment to students who are dealing with this condition. By doing so, they can effectively assist them in flourishing various aspects of their lives.

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