

A Comparative Analysis of Social Interaction Anxiety Among University and College Students of Gujrat, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Social interaction anxiety (SIA) is increasingly recognized as a significant challenge among students, influencing academic achievement, social adjustment, and psychological well-being. In contexts such as Pakistan, cultural expectations, family pressures, and limited access to mental health services can further intensify these experiences. The study aimed to examine the prevalence and severity of SIA among university and college students in Gujrat, Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey design was employed with 400 participants, including 200 university students and 200 college students. Using a convenient sampling technique, data were collected using the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) along with a demographic questionnaire. The majority of university students (71.3%) experience low social interaction anxiety, and 70.5% college students reported low levels of social interaction anxiety. The findings show that university students reported slightly higher anxiety ($M = 31.27$, $SD = 12.18$) than college students ($M = 29.40$, $SD = 9.61$), but the difference was not significant ($t = 1.70$, $p = .090$). In other words, social anxiety was found to be a shared struggle across both groups. By situating these results in the unique sociocultural landscape of Gujrat, this study contributes to a limited but growing body of literature on student mental health in Pakistan. It underscores the importance of addressing social anxiety to improve students' academic and personal development.

KEYWORDS: Social Interaction Anxiety, Mental Health, University and College Comparison, Cultural Context

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Introduction

Social interaction anxiety can be described as a fear of interacting with others and being exposed to social situations (Mattick & Clarke, 1998). Fear of social situations might result in social interaction anxiety, where they believe they will be negatively judged by others or that their presence would make them uncomfortable (Heimberg, 2014). Social anxiety is defined as an overwhelming fear of potentially humiliating or unpleasant events in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.). In Western societies, acute and continual fear of shame and embarrassment are characteristics of social anxiety. In some places, particularly in Asian cultures, social anxiety can also show up as other people's emotional state. Fears of trembling, blushing, perspiring, looking nervous, uninteresting, or incompetent are common worries related to social anxiety (APA, 2013).

Social interaction anxiety represents a significant psychological concern, characterized by lasting fear of social situations in which embarrassment may occur (Kayani et al., 2022). This anxiety can manifest as emotional discomfort, apprehension, and fear towards social situations and the evaluations made by others, profoundly impacting an individual's social and emotional adjustment, as well as their general quality of life. Specifically, for university and college students, this pervasive anxiety can hinder academic performance, impede the formation of crucial peer relationships, and limit involvement in extracurricular activities (Ayeras et al., 2024). Moreover, the prevalence of anxiety among university students globally is substantial, with research indicating that over 30% of students report moderate to severe symptoms, exacerbating academic pressures and social challenges (Zhang et al., 2022).

SIA is a common disorder that can occasionally become chronic, having a significant negative influence on an individual's ability to function in social, professional, and academic contexts as well as their overall psychological health (José et al., 2023). People who experience social anxiety distinctly find it awkward in social settings (Schneier, 2002). Commonplace actions like drinking, eating, and using restrooms in public can also induce anxiety or fear in people because they worry about being rejected, mocked, and abused (NIH, 2022). People with an increased level of social anxiety manifest symptoms of depression, low self-worth, and heightened life dissatisfaction. Moreover, SIA has been linked to generalized anxiety disorder, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. One of the main traits of SIA patients is their inability to control their emotions. Therefore, a person's ability to deceptively manage their emotions during social situations that make them nervous may be greatly influenced by their ability to recognize or interpret emotions (José et al., 2023).

The implications of social anxiety are numerous and include a decline in overall wellbeing and mood, challenges in a number of areas of life, and more (Mineka, 1998). They report lower performance and more days missed from work (Stein, 2008). Social interaction anxiety is considered to be more prevalent among adult and late adolescents as compared to other developmental phases in life (Ollendick & Becker, 2002). According to Murad's (2020) report, social anxiety is prevalent among men more than women. People who are not highly educated, never married, do not have jobs, or have parents who are the victims of social anxiety have high chances of developing social anxiety. In addition, people with social anxiety usually think negatively about themselves and have lower self-esteem than their peers. People who are the victims of social anxiety experience and show a range of behavioral traits, such as unease, irritability, fear, and concern, all of which negatively impact their identity and character. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, one of the most important psychological needs is self-esteem. It stands for the primary driving force behind self-actualization and accomplishment in a variety of spheres of life, including relationships with others, the arts, and social interactions.

In most research studies, social anxiety was used to refer to social performance anxiety and social interaction anxiety. As a result, social anxiety and social interaction anxiety were used interchangeably in the current study. Social anxiety affects most people at some point in their lives (Sanders, 2002). There are certain risk factors that trigger social interaction anxiety among the adolescent and adult populations. A few of these factors include personality characteristics such as introversion and neuroticism, fewer social skills, a history of traumatic events, parenting influences, academic stress, and peer relationships. Some individuals may experience one, whereas others may be exposed to a combination of these factors (Heimberg, 1995; Miers, 2008; Bruch, 1989; Beidel, 2007).

Social anxiety is a challenge many students quietly struggle with, and its effects go far beyond just feeling nervous in social situations (Archbell & Coplan, 2021). For some, the fear of being judged or embarrassed makes it difficult to raise a hand in class, start a conversation, or even ask for help from a teacher. This hesitation can slowly chip away at their academic engagement and communication skills, making success in school much harder (Mou et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2023). Studies show that around 16% of college students experience social anxiety so severe that it disrupts their daily lives and lowers their overall quality of life (Li et al., 2020). Instead of enjoying friendships, group work, or new opportunities, many end up withdrawing, caught between a constant cycle of worry and self-doubt (Diana et al., 2022). Over time, that isolation doesn't just affect a student's grades or social life—it can also take a serious toll on their mental health. Without the right support, social anxiety can become a chronic, debilitating condition (Ouyang et al., 2020).

Social Interaction Anxiety among University Students

Many university students struggle with social anxiety, which can subtly harm their academic performance and make them feel isolated (Pini et al., 2014). This is not simply a case of nervousness; rather, it is a particular and severe dread of being judged, which can cause students to deliberately avoid social settings or to feel extremely uncomfortable when they are unable to. According to studies, anxiety affects over 66% of students on campus, making it a serious problem. A student's academic performance and anxiety levels are clearly related (Marzouqi et al., 2022). These struggles are often made worse by the pressure of heavy academic workloads and the uncertainty of their futures (Adeoye-Agboola & Evans, 2015). Even if anxiety disorders in general are becoming more prevalent among students, it's crucial to pay particular attention to certain kinds, such as social interaction anxiety. Exam or study stress is not the same as this (Malik, 2015; Vitasari et al., 2010). In light of this, the current study attempts to differentiate social interaction anxiety from other types of anxiety by determining how common and severe it is among university students in Gujrat, Pakistan.

Social Interaction Anxiety among College Students

Social interaction anxiety among college students requires particular attention because their developmental stage, academic pressure and social environment are different from those of university students. College students who are younger and new might be more vulnerable. It might be because of new peer interactions, increased self-consciousness and biological changes common among adolescents. These rapid changes can intensify the fear, resulting in social withdrawal and anxiety (Xu & Li, 2024). The college setting itself can create unique social interactions, shaping both the prevalence and expression of social anxiety in students (Topham et al., 2016).

In order to understand how students deal with social anxiety, it is important to understand the culture of Gujrat, Pakistan. Family dynamics, societal expectations, social roles and the school system all have a combined effect on how anxiety is perceived and interpreted. People who are more inclined towards social values and norms find it harder to fit and experience increased social anxiety (Abbas & Shehzad, 2018). Moreover, the stigma attached to mental health issues in Pakistan makes it more difficult for people to approach treatment. Not only this, but the availability of mental health services is also restricted. Such problems increase the difficulties over time if not treated (Vera, 2019).

Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To assess the levels and severity of social interaction anxiety among university students in Gujrat, Pakistan.
2. To assess the levels and severity of social interaction anxiety among college students in Gujrat, Pakistan.
3. To compare the levels and severity of social interaction anxiety between university and college students in Gujrat, Pakistan.
4. To identify the demographic and academic factors associated with social interaction anxiety in both university and college student populations.

Rationale and Significance

According to recent reports, social anxiety may be on the rise. Many researchers have focused on one dimension of social anxiety, which is social performance anxiety. However, there is less research focusing on the other dimension, i.e., social interaction anxiety (Sanders, 2002). The purpose of this study is to focus on the second dimension of social anxiety and find out the prevalence among college and university students in Gujrat, Pakistan and compare their prevalence in both populations. By focusing on social interaction anxiety, it will be a step forward towards raising awareness about this type of anxiety. It will further help to develop the needed support systems and interventions necessary to lessen social interaction anxiety. The results of the study will also broaden the field of anxiety research in educational settings. Future research can focus on other age groups and educational settings, and research on different variables linked to the prevalence of social interaction anxiety in Pakistan.

Prevalence of anxiety among students, especially social anxiety, highlights the need for more targeted studies. Researches need to be conducted in different cultural and educational backgrounds (Islam et al., 2020). The distinct culture in Gujrat, Pakistan, impacts how mental health is seen and managed. Studying social anxiety among university and college students of Gujrat seeks to cover a significant gap in knowledge (Abbas & Shehzad, 2018). The study will emphasise the non-Western setting of Gujrat. It will help evaluate how the lack of mental health resources in a city like Gujrat impacts young adults (Ahmad & Koncsol, 2022). Results of the study are intended to bring improvement in the quality of life of the young population (Ayeras et al., 2024). It also aims to assist in the development of interventions and support programs. It brings attention towards the need for improvement in mental health aid and lessens the stigma in Pakistani colleges and universities. Given the increase in mental health issues all over the globe, the study is particularly necessary (Sifat et al., 2023; Husain & Amir, 2020).

Literature Review

Many students around the globe are affected by social anxiety. A study conducted at Hawassa University in Ethiopia has reported that social anxiety affected roughly one in three (32.8%) of students studying health sciences (Reta et al., 2020). According to studies conducted in the field of education sciences, the majority of students were suffering from moderate (41.9%) or severe (28.3%) social anxiety, but others exhibited minor symptoms (Rukhos et al., 2017). These results demonstrate that social anxiety is a serious issue that has a huge impact on students' academic and personal lives.

The problem is not unique to Ethiopia. Research from Nigeria, involving 500 university students, showed that social anxiety is widespread and often tied to other difficulties such as depression, emotional distress, and even poorer physical health (Bella & Omigbodun, 2009). In China, the issue has been explored in depth through qualitative research. Interviews with college students with social anxiety disorder revealed recurring struggles such as disrupted self-awareness, fear of being judged, and overwhelming physical and mental reactions in social situations (Luan et al., 2022). These personal accounts bring to life what statistics alone cannot capture: the exhausting cycle of worry, fear, and avoidance that defines daily life for many students. At the same time, studies have proven certain factors that can influence the intensity of social anxiety. For example, research at Hawassa University found that while 32.8% of medical students reported social anxiety, the likelihood of experiencing it decreased as students advanced in their studies (Reta et al., 2020). This suggests that maturity, experience, or perhaps confidence gained over time can reduce vulnerability to social fears.

The COVID-19 pandemic added a new layer of complexity to this issue. A study by Sreekumar and Nair (2021) found that students who already felt anxious in social situations became even more vulnerable during the pandemic. Fear of infection heightened social interaction anxiety, which in turn reduced student engagement and willingness to participate in learning. This shows how quickly external stressors can intensify psychological struggles that students are already facing. Other research has explored the links between social anxiety and broader aspects of life satisfaction. For instance, a large study in Mexico with more than 1,100 students revealed that those with stronger emotional intelligence—particularly skills in emotional clarity and repair—were able to soften the negative impact of social interaction anxiety on their overall happiness. This highlights an important protective factor: while anxiety can be difficult to manage, personal and emotional skills can help students cope better and maintain a sense of balance.

Taken together, these studies paint a clear picture: social interaction anxiety is a widespread and pressing issue for students around the world. It affects not only how students perform academically but also how they see themselves, connect with others, and experience life satisfaction. Although the specific numbers may differ across settings, the message is consistent—students are struggling, and the effects are profound. Yet despite this international body of work, very little research has focused on Pakistan, and almost none has looked specifically at students in Gujrat. This gap makes the current study essential, as it not only documents the prevalence of SIA in this context but also offers insights that can guide culturally relevant interventions.

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine and compare the prevalence of social interaction anxiety (SIA) among college and university students in Gujrat, Pakistan. A total of 400 students participated, with equal representation from both groups (200 college students and 200 university students). Participants were selected through a convenience sampling technique from different institutions, ensuring that both genders, a range of age groups, and diverse academic backgrounds were represented.

Data were collected using two instruments. The first was the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS), a widely used and validated measure that assesses anxiety related to social interactions. The scale was developed by Mattick & Clark (1998). Consistent with previous research, a score above 36 was considered indicative of clinically significant social anxiety (Peters, 2000). The scale is frequently employed in clinical settings as well as

general settings. The test is used to measure how social anxiety affects a person in a variety of situations. The Social Anxiety Scale was developed in response to the demand for tools to evaluate a range of social circumstances that are frequently feared. SIAS is valid and reliable to be used in the Pakistani context. The second was a brief demographic questionnaire designed to capture background information such as age, gender, and educational level. Together, these tools provided both contextual and psychological insights into the participants' experiences.

Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and asked to provide informed consent. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, with participation being voluntary and withdrawal permitted at any stage without penalty.

To conduct analysis, responses were entered in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Inferential tests were conducted to examine differences between college and university students. These statistical approaches allowed us to identify the prevalence of social interaction anxiety. It also helped to test whether the type of institution had any meaningful effect on reported anxiety levels.

Results and Discussion

The results provide a detailed description of the statistical analysis employed in the research. At the same time, this section of research provides the statistical view of the relationship among variables. All the statistical analysis was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. (SPSS, V 24.0)

Data Screening

Data screening is done to ensure the integrity of the data we entered into SPSS. It is very important to screen the data for the variables and cases used for the analysis in the report. Data screening means checking the errors in the data and also fixing and removing the errors in the report or in the data.

Demographic information was collected from the sample that is reported in Table 01, given below.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=400)

Variables	F	%
Age	293	72.9
19-22	108	26.9
23-26		
Gender		
Male	199	49.5
Female	202	50.2
Education		
University	201	50
College	199	49.5
Marital status		
Unmarried	364	90.5
Married	37	9.2
Family system		
Joint	136	65.9
Nuclear	265	33.8

Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the sample's demographic determinants. These characteristics include age, gender, education, marital status, and family system. The age of majority of the members lay between 19-22 (i.e., 72.9%), whereas the remaining lay between 23-26 (26.9%). Male and female participants did not have many differences. The female population was slightly higher (i.e. 50.2%) than the male population. Sample (49.5%). The marital status of the majority population was unmarried, which makes up 90.5% of the sample. Only 9.2% were married out of all. 65.9% of the sample belonged to the joint family system, while 33.8% to the nuclear family system.

Table 2

Cut off Point for SIAS (n=400)

Cut points	n%
Low (≤ 36)	71.3
High (≥ 37)	28.8

Table 02 shows the distribution of students based on the SIAS cut-off point (N = 400). The majority of students (71.3%) scored at or below the cut-off of 36, indicating low social interaction anxiety. Meanwhile, 28.8% of students scored 37 or above, suggesting high social interaction anxiety. This means that nearly one-third of the sample is experiencing elevated anxiety levels that may interfere with their social and academic functioning.

Table 3

Levels of Social Interaction Anxiety among University Students

Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Low	144	72
High	56	28

The findings show that the majority of university students (72%) reported low levels of social interaction anxiety, whereas 28% reported high levels. This suggests that while most students experience only minimal difficulties in social interactions, a considerable proportion still experience elevated anxiety, which may affect their daily functioning and adjustment.

Table 4

Levels of Social Interaction Anxiety among College Students

Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Low	141	70.5
High	59	29.5

The results indicate that 70.5% of college students reported low levels of social interaction anxiety, while 29.5% reported high levels. This pattern is consistent with the university group (72% low; 28% high), suggesting that social interaction anxiety is present in a similar proportion across both educational settings. Although the majority of students in both groups fall into the low-anxiety category, nearly one-third of college students experience high levels of social interaction anxiety.

Table 5*Summary of Independent T-Test*

Social Interaction Anxiety	M	SD	F	t	MD	p
University	30.4600	10.851	.328	.113	.12500	.910
College	30.3350	11.200		.113		.910

The results of the independent samples t-test indicated no statistically significant difference in social interaction anxiety between university students ($M = 30.46$, $SD = 10.85$) and college students ($M = 30.34$, $SD = 11.20$), $t(398) = 0.113$, $p = .910$. The mean difference ($MD = 0.125$) was negligible, and Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant ($F = 0.328$, $p = .567$), confirming the assumption of equal variances.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to measure the prevalence and to compare the levels of social interaction anxiety among college and university students. The results of Table 03 show that the majority of university students (71.3%) experience low social interaction anxiety. In the meantime, 28.8% of students had high social interaction anxiety. Prevalence among college students, Table 04 shows that 70.5% of college students reported low levels of social interaction anxiety, while 29.5% reported high levels. Although the majority of students in both groups fall into the low-anxiety category, these findings of this study align with the study that one third of adults in the world experience social anxiety, and this severity is increasing day by day (Jefferies & Ungar, 2020; Luan et al., 2022; Khuda et al., 2024).

The objective of the respective study was also to compare social interaction anxiety among university and college students of Gujrat. The outcomes of the study show that there is no noticeable difference in social interaction anxiety between college and university students. It means the social interaction anxiety is equally prevalent among both of them. The analysis in this study indicates that there is no significant difference with respect to social interaction anxiety between university students and college students. This study aimed to determine how frequently students in Gujrat, Pakistan, suffer from social anxiety and whether university students differ from those in colleges. While university students reported marginally higher scores, the difference was insufficient to be statistically significant. In other words, social anxiety appears to be a common challenge among students in both school contexts.

This points to a broader truth—that the pressures which fuel social anxiety are not limited to the type of institution a student attends but are deeply embedded in the cultural and social fabric surrounding them. The results echo what researchers in other countries have observed. Studies from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and China have shown that students across different contexts frequently struggle with social anxiety, whether it is fear of negative evaluation, difficulties in forming peer relationships, or feelings of inadequacy in social situations (Bella & Omigbodun, 2009; Reta et al., 2020; Luan et al., 2022).

The consistency of these findings across cultures implies that social anxiety is a universal difficulty for kids, even if it is perceived and communicated differently. It is unsurprising that there is no discernible difference between university and college students in Gujrat. Both groups are raised with comparable cultural expectations, including a heavy focus on family reputation, the importance of community opinion, and the drive to perform intellectually. The stigma associated with mental health is a significant barrier to seeking treatment; therefore, many students carry their worry discreetly (Ahmad & Koncsol, 2022).

The limited availability of counselling services in local institutions adds to this challenge, leaving young people without the resources to manage or reduce their symptoms (Sifat et al., 2023). At the same time, there are hints in the data worth considering. University students did report slightly higher levels of SIA than college students. This may reflect the fact that they are navigating more complex academic workloads, career-related concerns, and increased competition (Adeoye-Agboola & Evans, 2015). On the other hand, college students—often younger and still negotiating their identities—may experience social anxiety more in terms of peer acceptance and self-consciousness in group settings (Xu & Li, 2024). Although the overall levels of anxiety are similar, the “flavor” of that anxiety may differ depending on where a student is in their educational journey. Future research could explore these qualitative differences in more depth.

The implications are clear: SIA is not a marginal issue. It influences how students learn, how they connect with others, and even how they see themselves. Previous research has shown that students with elevated levels of social anxiety may underperform academically, isolate socially, or experience low self-esteem (Kayani et al., 2022; Pini et al., 2014). Since this study indicated a moderate amount of social anxiety across both groups, it's probable that these challenges are prevalent within the student community in Gujrat.

Conclusion

The study aimed to compare social anxiety levels between university and college students in Gujrat, Pakistan. The results have shown that while university students scored slightly higher, the difference was not statistically significant. It means that social interaction anxiety is a shared struggle for students in both the settings. The findings highlight the fact that young people are vulnerable to social anxiety, no matter their educational background. Issues like self-esteem, family expectations and mental health stigma are common in areas like Gujrat, Pakistan. Hence, the results underscore the urgent need to focus on the well-being of students. By proving the increased prevalence of social anxiety among the student population, the study supports the idea that mental health should be a priority in all institutions.

Recommendations

As per the findings of the study, it has been made clear that the educational institutions in Gujrat should provide settings that can help students feel secure and supported. To detect social anxiety at its early stages, regular mental health screenings should be made normal. It will help to prevent the onset of the issues before they get worse. Regular seminars, workshops and awareness campaigns should be done to reduce the stigma. Conducting them will help students understand that anxiety is manageable rather than looking at it as a sign of weakness. Other than this, peer support programs and mentoring programs should also be conducted for students so they can have a safe space. It will help them share their experiences and use it as a means for catharsis. Moreover, every student should be encouraged to take part in extracurricular activities to help them overcome their fears.

At higher levels, organisations must include mental health in their policy. Skilled experts should be hired to identify and help students with psychological issues and anxiety. Further research can be built on these findings by investigating social anxiety against different demographics. It would also be beneficial to investigate how family and peer support, as well as institutional procedures, affect students' well-being.

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