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RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Exploratory Study of Social Anxiety Among First-Year English Language Undergraduates: Evidence from Kasdi Merbah University, Ouargla

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Abstract

Social anxiety represents a significant psychological factor that may affect academic adjustment, interpersonal interaction, and overall well-being among university students, particularly during the transition from secondary education to higher education. This study aims to explore the level of social anxiety among first-year English language students at Kasdi Merbah University of Ouargla, Algeria, and to examine potential differences according to gender and residential status. A descriptive exploratory research design was adopted. The study sample consisted of 100 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the English language program, aged between 19 and 21 years. Data were collected using a standardized Social Anxiety Scale, and statistical analyses were performed to determine levels of social anxiety and to identify significant differences related to gender and residence (internal/external). The findings indicate that the overall level of social anxiety among the sampled students is low. However, statistically significant differences were observed with respect to gender, with female students exhibiting higher levels of social anxiety than their male counterparts. In contrast, no statistically significant differences were found according to residential status. These results suggest that while first-year English students generally demonstrate adequate psychosocial adjustment, gender remains a relevant factor in the experience of social anxiety. The study highlights the importance of early psychological assessment and preventive interventions within university settings to support students' mental health, promote social confidence, and facilitate successful academic and social integration during the first year of university life.

Introduction

Universities are one of the strongholds of knowledge. They are responsible for preparing their students to meet contemporary standards by providing them with the knowledge and skills that help them shape their futures in a spirit of interaction and psychological harmony. They play a significant role in promoting sound psychosocial adjustment and behavioral modification. Therefore, it has become the duty of universities to consider the circumstances surrounding students, especially those new to colleges and institutes. (Mr. Ali Abbas Al-Yousfi, 2008, p. 2)

Anxiety is one of the types of conflicts that a university student may face. New university students may feel anxious at various times, such as worrying about how to prepare and attend lectures, which have a different structure than high school, worrying about how to choose new friendships and interact with the university community in general, and fearing appearing confused in front of others. All of these are indicators of social anxiety, which may be prevalent among first-year university students.

A recent study conducted by Kozler in America (1994) showed that the prevalence of social anxiety reached approximately 13.3%, making it the third most common mental disorder in the United States after drug abuse and major depressive disorder. Stein and Gorman (2001) indicated that the age at which social anxiety appears ranges between 10 and 21 years. In Arab societies, social anxiety appears to be more prevalent, and is usually attributed to parenting styles in childhood, including the lack of encouragement for children to take the initiative and express themselves in social situations (Taha Abdel-Azim Hussein, 2009, pp. 57-58). Given the importance of mental health for new university students, we have undertaken the current study, which attempts to uncover the level of social anxiety among first-year English language students, ensuring their psychological and social adjustment and helping them achieve their future ambitions with confidence and effectiveness.

Problem of the Study

The process of education and training is a social, human, and civilizational process that aims to achieve optimal student development, which is the foundation for societal advancement. This is done to achieve harmony and healthy growth. This is because paying attention to students' behavior and harmony is essential for societal progress and achieving the highest levels of employing and developing their energies in accordance with societal needs. (M.M. Lamia Hassan Abdel Qader Al-Azzi, 2010, p. 183).

Abdul Rahman Al-Aissawi notes that university students, especially new students, experience many problems due to their age, as they transition from adolescence to adulthood and attain psychological and social independence. There is a common belief that first-year university students suffer from greater psychological stress than other students due to their recent arrival at university and their transition to an unfamiliar environment in terms of the teaching system and diversity, and some living far from others. This is in addition to the stresses placed on the student's mind by the nature of the study itself. (Mawaheb Abdel Rahim Mohammed, 2011, p. 4) One of the most important symptoms of social anxiety disorder is fear of evaluation. Negative, as studies by Dean Boyer and Rock (1999) and others have revealed that fear of negative evaluation is one of the fundamental causes underlying social anxiety, and that individuals with this fear are sensitive and self-absorbed. (Ali Musa Ali Dababish, 2011, p. 3)

Individuals with social anxiety also exhibit heightened physiological arousal in social situations, which represents a general aspect of the individual's behavior, affecting performance and adjustment, and restricting their vital sphere. Clinical observations and epidemiological studies have confirmed the high prevalence of this disorder. (Taha Abdel Azim, 2009, p. 51).

In order to develop the capabilities of first-year English language students to achieve academic success and integrate into the university community, we posed the following questions:

- What is the level of social anxiety among the sample students?
- Are there differences in the level of social anxiety among the sample students attributable to the gender variable?
- Are there differences in the level of social anxiety attributable to the residential style variable (indoor/outdoor)?

Study Hypotheses

Based on the previous questions, the student formulated the study hypotheses as follows:

➤ We expect that the level of social anxiety among first-year English students will be low.

➤ There are statistically significant differences in the level of social anxiety among the sample students attributed to the gender variable.

➤ There are statistically significant differences in the level of social anxiety among the sample students attributed to the residential type variable (internal/external).

Study Objectives

The specific objectives of the current study are as follows:

o To determine the level of social anxiety among the sample students.

o To detect differences in social anxiety levels attributed to gender.

o To detect differences in social anxiety levels attributed to the variable of internal/external residence.

Importance of the Study

The current study is significant in that it seeks to contribute to enriching an important aspect of clinical psychological studies, namely, detecting social anxiety among first-year English language students at the University of Ouargla. The study is significant because, first, it focuses on new students, who represent the elite of society. Second, it reveals the reality of the English language major at the University of Ouargla, in terms of the efficiency of the college's administrative system and the extent of professors' contribution to the academic and psychological preparation of students. It is essential to ensure that students possess the ability to form social relationships with others, characterized by self-confidence and self-assertion, so that they can lead society and fulfill their roles, on the one hand, and control the stressful events they encounter from society,

on the other, and commit to using all available psychological and environmental capabilities to confront anxiety. When students believe in their ability to utilize all psychological resources and effectively interpret and direct life events, they tend to be more accomplished and self-esteemed, and their ability to control the anxiety they face is enhanced.

Operational definition of study variables

- Social anxiety

It is a marked and persistent fear among first-year English students of one or more social or performance situations in which the individual is subject to scrutiny by others. This fear leads to the student fearing that they will behave in a shameful manner, and the individual perceives this fear as excessive and unreasonable. Social anxiety is operationally defined in this study by the score obtained by a first-year English student on the Social Anxiety Scale used in this study.

Previous studies

-The study by the US National Institute of Mental Health (1984), which aimed to determine the prevalence of social anxiety. This study applied the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III), and concluded that the prevalence of social anxiety ranged between 0.9% and 1.7%.

- A. Wheeler et al.'s (1996) study on social phobia was part of a World Health Organization study aimed at studying psychological problems in public health care. The study was conducted on a sample of 2,096 patients regularly attending primary care hospitals. The results showed that the prevalence rate of social phobia over a one-month period was high, reaching 4.9%.

- H. Chino et al.'s (1999) study conducted a longitudinal study to determine the prevalence of social phobia on a sample of 3,021 individuals aged 14 to 42 years. The prevalence rate was 9.5% among females and 4.9% among males.

- F. Izgić et al.'s (2001) study in India aimed to determine the prevalence of social anxiety on a sample of 1,003 male and female university students (391 females and 612 males). The study found that the prevalence rate among females was 9.8% and among males was 9.4%. (Bashir Maamaria, 2007, p. 139)

- Taha Abdel-Azim's (2009) study aimed to identify the causes of social anxiety. It concluded that social anxiety is due to a series of traumatic and painful experiences experienced during childhood, which cause a person to feel a lack of self-efficacy, avoidant behavior, and fear of social evaluation situations. (Hazem Shawqi Muhammad Al-Tantawi, 2009, p. 7).

Definition of Social Anxiety

- Akasha (1998) indicates that social anxiety is a condition in which the patient fears appearing in public, fearing criticism and embarrassment. Therefore, they avoid these social situations and interactions with others. A person with social anxiety disorder fears eating in public. (Lina Farouk Abbas and Salim, 2012, pp. 395-396 .In the same context, Talal Abdullah (2006) indicates that social anxiety is a persistent fear of social situations in which the individual is exposed to mixing and interacting with people. (Talal Abdullah Hassan Al-Ghamdi, 2006, p. 36)

It can be said that social anxiety is an excessive fear of one or more social situations. This is reflected in the individual's behavior and is evident in their avoidance of social situations, which are perceived as threatening. This leads to clear difficulties in communicating with others, and physical symptoms such as hand tremors and heart palpitations appear. They may also have a distorted self-image, such as a diminished sense of self. It diminishes or diminishes its value.

Components of Social Anxiety

In his Social Anxiety Scale, scientist Rollin Wei identified the components of social anxiety in terms of symptoms, as follows:

 Physical symptoms: These include:
• Excessive sweating and clamminess in the hands and palms
• Dry mouth and throat
• Stomach problems and pain
• Involuntary trembling and shaking

 Emotional symptoms: These include:
• Feeling self-absorbed
• Feeling embarrassed
• Feeling insecure
• Feelings of inadequacy

In the student's opinion, the following distinguishes social anxiety in terms of symptoms:

 Social anxiety in terms of its psychological symptoms: Enjoying solitude rather than being in a group, feeling that communicating with others is a great burden, a desire for silence, and feeling insecure when in a group.

 Social anxiety in terms of its physical symptoms: Lack of relaxation when in a group, exhaustion when in a group. Social anxiety in terms of its behavioral symptoms: avoiding being with groups, staying away from others as much as possible.

Subtypes of Social Anxiety

Throughout the main components of social anxiety, we mentioned that the behavioral component includes avoidance and escape from social situations. It is worth noting here that social situations, or rather the fear of social situations, are of various types. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition (DSM-4), there are two main types of social anxiety: generalized social anxiety and non-generalized or specific social anxiety.

 Specific (non-generalized) social anxiety

This is defined by the fear of public speaking, such as a student selected by a professor to give a speech in front of his classmates. Individuals with this type of social anxiety experience one or two performance situations that cause anxiety, while they perform well in other types of social situations. (Murray P. Stein, 2002, p. 20)

Specific or specific social anxiety is associated with avoiding a limited number of performance and social interaction situations. The fear appears in one or two situations, such as the fear of eating or speaking in public in front of others. (Taha Abdel-Azim Hussein, 2009, p. 56)

Generalized social anxiety

It is worth noting that this type of anxiety occurs in many situations that require interaction or common situations in which the individual is required to behave spontaneously. Individuals with generalized social anxiety They fear a wide range of social situations, so they feel uncomfortable in many types of social situations that everyone takes for granted, such as: eating in restaurants, attending parties, and other social events. (Murray B. Stein, 2002, p. 20)

Study Methodology

The nature of the research, the study variables, and its purpose determine the methodology used. Given the overall objective of the study, which is to determine the level of social anxiety among first-year English students, the appropriate methodology is the descriptive-exploratory methodology. Skeets defines the descriptive methodology as follows: "It is the methodology that focuses on collecting and summarizing the facts related to a set of circumstances or phenomena that a person may wish to study." (Marwan Abdel Majeed Ibrahim, 2000, p. 125)

This method is used to study reality or a phenomenon, and is concerned with accurately describing it and expressing it qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative expression provides a description of the phenomenon, clarifying its characteristics, while quantitative expression provides a numerical description, clarifying the magnitude or size of the phenomenon and the degree of its correlation with other various phenomena. The descriptive methodology, according to the study, aims to determine the level of social anxiety as it exists in reality.

We will also analyze and interpret the results obtained.

Study Tools

The student relied on the Rollin and Wee Social Anxiety Scale, translated by Magdy Mohamed El-Dessouki.

The Rollin and Wee Social Anxiety Scale was developed in 1994 to measure social anxiety. The scale is a valid tool for identifying individuals who meet the criteria of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, related to anxiety or social phobia. This scale is suitable for use on individuals aged 12 years and older (Magdy Mohamed El-Dessouki, 2004, p. 25).

Study Sample

The study population (statistical community) consists of 180 male and female students studying first-year English. Since the study sample is centered on students aged 19-21, the sample size was estimated at 100 male and female students. **Table 1** briefly outlines the characteristics of the basic sample:

Table1: Details of the used sample in the study

Sex	Residence Type		
	Internal	External	Total
Male	28	27	56
Female	23	21	44
Total	51	48	100

Study Results

1. Presentation and Analysis of the Results of the First Hypothesis

"We expect the level of social anxiety among first-year English students to be low." To test this hypothesis, the student calculated the median (MD) to divide the students' scores into low and high levels using the following equation:

MD = 46 + ((50-43) x 4) / 14, i.e., MD = 48.

Therefore, the low level of social anxiety is represented by scores below (48), while the high level is represented by scores greater than (48). Table (1) shows the results obtained.

Table2: The levels of social anxiety for first-year English students.

Social Anxiety Levels	Number	Percentage
Low	60	% 60
High	40	% 40
Total	100	% 100

Table (2) shows that:

- The number of students with scores falling within the low level of social anxiety was (60) students, representing a percentage estimated at 60%.

- The number of students with scores falling within the high level of social anxiety was (40) students, representing a percentage estimated at 40%.

Thus, the percentage of students with low social anxiety was greater than that of students with high social anxiety. Therefore, the level of social anxiety among first-year English language students is low, and therefore the hypothesis is confirmed.

Presentation and analysis of the results of the second hypothesis

Which read: "There are statistically significant differences in the level of social anxiety among first-year English students attributable to the gender variable." The student processed the data in the SPSS20 program, then extracted the arithmetic means and standard deviations for both males and females, and then extracted the level of statistical significance. The results are listed in **Table. 3.**

Table.3: The differences in social anxiety levels between males and females for first-year English students.

Sex	Statistical Indicators		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance level (sig)
Male = 44	43.80	7.46	0.03
Female = 56	52.56	6.06	

According to **Table.3**, the arithmetic mean for males was estimated at (43.80), while for females it was estimated at (52.56), while the standard deviation for males was (7.46), while for females it was estimated at (6.06). The significance level was estimated at (0.03), which is less than (0.05).

Therefore, there are statistically significant differences in the level of social anxiety among first-year English students attributed to the gender variable in favor of females, since the arithmetic mean for females is greater than the arithmetic mean for males, and thus the hypothesis is achieved.

3. Presentation and analysis of the results of the third hypothesis

Which stated: "There are statistically significant differences in the level of social anxiety among first-year English students attributable to the variable of residence style." To test this hypothesis, the student extracted the arithmetic means and standard deviations after processing them in the SPSS2O program. She then extracted the value of the statistical significance level. **Table.4** below shows the obtained results:

Table.4: The differences in the level of social anxiety among first-year students according to the variable of residence type

Residence Type	Statistical Indicators		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance level (sig)
Internal = 52	49.21	8.67	0.06
External = 48	45.97	7.20	

From Table (3), the arithmetic mean for students with an internal residence pattern was estimated at (49.21), while for students with an external residence pattern it was estimated at (45.97), while the standard deviation for students with an internal residence pattern was (8.67), while the standard deviation for students with an external residence pattern was estimated at (7.20), while the significance level was (0.06), which is greater than (0.05), and thus there are no differences in the level of social anxiety among first-year English students attributed to the residence pattern variable, and thus the hypothesis is not verified.

Discussion and interpretation of the study results

Discussion and interpretation of the results of the first hypothesis

Which concluded that "the level of social anxiety among first-year English students is low." This result is consistent with other studies that have shown that social anxiety among university students is low, including the study by Verda et al.

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(2004), which found that the prevalence of social anxiety among university students was estimated at 9.6%. It is also consistent with the study by Vermark et al. (1999) in Sweden, which showed that the prevalence of social anxiety among students was estimated at 15.80% (Bashir Maamaria, 2009, p. 138). The study by Lea et al. also found that the level of social anxiety among first-year students enrolled in the College of Medicine is low, reaching 32.5% (Lina Farouk Abbas and Salim, 2012, p. 398).

The results of this study differ from the results of other studies that have shown that the level of social anxiety among university students is high, including the study by Alaa Ali Hijazi (2013) in the Gaza Strip, which found that the relative weight of the level of social anxiety was estimated at 70.8% (Alaa Ali Hijazi, 2013, p. 3). Muhammad's (2008) study at Al-Mustansiriya University concluded that university students have a high level of social anxiety. (Ibtisam Saeed Ahmed, p. 133)

The student explains the low social anxiety as a result of the fact that the first-year English language student has high self-esteem, which has fostered a love of competition and a desire for academic excellence and achievement. This has led him to effectively confront various social situations without diminishing his self-worth. This is due to the positive methods used by professors and the department's administration towards new students, which contribute to the student's sense of competence and effectiveness.

This is in addition to the clubs organized by the English Department, which aim to enable students to practice the English language and discuss topics, most importantly student guidance and awareness. This leads to honing the new student's abilities and preparing them to confront stressful situations positively.

- Discussion and interpretation of the results of the second hypothesis

which concluded that "there are differences in the level of social anxiety attributable to the gender variable, in favor of females." This result is consistent with the study of Wahid Mustafa Kamel (2004), which showed differences in the level of social anxiety among university students between males and females, in favor of females. The study of Lulwa Hamada and Hassan Abdel Latif (1999) also found significant differences between males and females in the degree of social anxiety, in favor of females (Abdul Rahman bin Eid Al-Jahni, 2010, p. 76). The study of Maysa Al-Nial (1988) also found that females are more prone to social anxiety than males. This is the same result reached by Clark et al. (1995), who found that social anxiety is higher among females than among males (Ali Musa Ali Dababish, 2011, p. 38). The study of F. Azjik (2001) also found that the prevalence of social anxiety among university students reached 9.8% for females and 9.4% for males (Bashir Maamaria, 2009, p. 139). The results of this study differ from other studies, including the study of Muhammad Ibrahim Eid (2000) concluded that there were no differences between males and females in fear of negative evaluation and generalized social anxiety disorder. This is the same conclusion reached by Alaa Ali Hijazi (2013), whose study demonstrated that there were no differences in the level of social anxiety attributable to gender. (Alaa Ali Hijazi, 2013, p. 4)

From the above, the conclusion reached, which concluded that social anxiety is more prevalent among females than males, can be explained by differences in the methods of socialization and parental treatment of the sexes. This is within the framework of the social values and trends present in society. This imposes numerous pressures on females based on the principle of modesty and many restrictions on female behavior, making females more sensitive and vulnerable to stress than males. Furthermore, females' response patterns to stressful and new situations differ from those of males, making females more susceptible to social anxiety than males.

Discussion and interpretation of the results of the third hypothesis

Which concluded that "there are no differences in the level of social anxiety attributable to the variable of internal/external residence style." The study results are consistent with other studies, including the study by Abdul Rahim (2004) in Gaza, which concluded that residence style does not affect the level of social anxiety among College of Education students. Ibrahim Askar (2001) also concluded that there were no differences in the level of social anxiety attributable to the variable of residence style among university students (Abdul Rahman bin Eid Al-Jahni, 2010).

The study by Alaa Ali Hijazi (2013) also demonstrated that there were no differences in the level of social anxiety attributable to the variable of residence style. The results of the study differ from those of other studies, including Abdul-Baqi Dafallah Ahmed's (2011) study, which demonstrated differences in the average scores of internal and external students in their anxiety levels. Saeed Abdullah Dabis's (1997) study also demonstrated differences in the level of social anxiety among university students attributed to the variable of residence, with students living far from their families showing greater anxiety than other students. The results, which demonstrated that residential style did not affect the level of social anxiety among the sample students, can be explained by the fact that residence is not a significant factor in the development of social anxiety among university students.

The family remains the primary educational institution responsible for the development of psychological disorders in individuals, including social anxiety. This is what Horney pointed out, stating that the basis of anxiety is the inability to achieve a state of reassurance, which stems from the individual's relationship with their parents. Learning basic social skills is usually acquired during childhood. It is worth noting that the sample students fall within late adolescence, the stage of entry into adulthood. Their living conditions did not prevent them from establishing positive social relationships with others, as the sample students enjoy a high level of self-esteem.

Study Recommendations

Finally, the results of the current study remain within the spatial, temporal, and human limitations used in the study. Therefore, the researcher has proposed a set of suggestions to complement the findings of this study. Among these suggestions are:

❖Developing a social anxiety scale that is compatible with the cultural characteristics of Arab society.

❖Conducting comparative studies between colleges on the level of social anxiety.

❖Researching the factors influencing the level of social anxiety among the sample students, such as economic status and socialization style.

Developing a treatment program tailored to the local environment, with the goal of reducing social anxiety among university students.

Author Contributions

Souad Lati conceptualized the study, designed the research methodology, supervised data collection, and drafted the initial version of the manuscript.

Mohammed Salim Khemis contributed to the theoretical framework, data analysis, and interpretation of results, and provided critical revisions for scientific rigor.

Hadj Mahammed Yahia participated in the fieldwork, data coding, statistical processing, and literature review.

All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards governing psychological and educational research. All participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study, and their voluntary participation was ensured through informed consent. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no identifying personal information was collected or disclosed. The research posed no physical or psychological risk to the participants and respected principles of dignity, autonomy, and academic integrity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article.

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