SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study investigates the relationship between Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) and low self-esteem among students at the University of Patras. After defining the key concepts, the paper explores how these issues affect individuals, particularly students, and how Social Anxiety Disorder negatively impacts self-esteem or, conversely, how low self-esteem exacerbates the symptoms of SAD. The research was conducted using an online questionnaire, which was divided into three sections to gather relevant data from the sample. The collected data were then analyzed statistically to draw conclusions. The results reveal statistically significant relationships between anxiety/fear, avoidance behaviors, self-esteem, and mental health issues. Additionally, a significant correlation was found between avoidance behaviors and low self-esteem, affirming the research hypothesis that social phobia and self-esteem are interrelated.

Keywords: social anxiety, self-esteem, university students, Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (TLSAS-24), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [RSES-10]

1. Introduction

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), also known as Social Phobia, is characterized by a persistent and excessive fear of social situations, particularly those where individuals may be scrutinized by others, including strangers, or simply exposed to their presence (Kring, 2007). Unlike other phobias, SAD is classified as a disorder because the challenges it creates are more pervasive, making even simple activities significantly more difficult

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(Koyuncu *et al.*, 2019). This disorder is notably prevalent among university students, for whom the transition to university life can be a stressful and challenging process, often exacerbating the difficulties associated with SAD (Purdon *et al.*, 2001).

Upon entering university, students with SAD may struggle with making friends or participating in social activities, such as parties or events, due to discomfort with social interactions and particularly the process of meeting new people (Blanco *et al.*, 2002). Many students find themselves in departments or schools where they know no one, which can intensify feelings of isolation. They often avoid public speaking or presentations, fearing criticism and embarrassment from fellow students and professors. Some students may even experience anxiety or panic attacks before or during social events (Bögels & Mansell, 2004). Additionally, students with SAD may find it challenging to ask questions or actively participate in classroom discussions, and they often hesitate to approach professors for help. More broadly, they feel uncomfortable in large groups or crowds, a common scenario in university settings, where first-year students vastly outnumber those in primary and secondary education (Clark *et al.*, 2006).

If left untreated, Social Anxiety Disorder can have a detrimental impact on academic performance and overall well-being. Fortunately, many universities provide resources to support students with SAD, including counseling services, support groups, and workshops focused on stress management and social skills development (Heimberg, 2002). Additionally, some universities offer accommodations such as extended deadlines or alternative assignments to help these students manage their academic responsibilities.

The occurrence and manifestation of Social Anxiety Disorder are significantly influenced by a person's gender and cultural context (Kring, 2007). Although SAD affects individuals across all genders, research suggests that gender differences exist in the prevalence, presentation, and impact of the disorder. Moreover, while anxiety disorders are present across all cultural contexts (Huppert *et al.*, 2008), the specific fears and anxieties associated with SAD may vary depending on cultural norms and values (Kring, 2007). SAD is the most commonly occurring anxiety disorder, often manifesting at an early age, with 50% of individuals experiencing symptoms by age 11 and 80% by age 20 (Stein & Stein, 2008). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association, the typical age of onset for this disorder is adolescence, with an average age of 13 years (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Self-esteem is another critical concept closely linked to Social Anxiety Disorder. Widely studied in psychology, self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth and confidence, which can be influenced by a variety of factors. SAD often leads to negative self-perceptions and a reduced sense of self-worth (Izgiç *et al.*, 2004). Individuals with SAD tend to magnify their perceived flaws and shortcomings (Klumpp & Fitzgerald, 2018), which can erode their self-esteem. The constant fear of scrutiny and negative evaluation from others reinforces the belief that they are inadequate, leading to a cycle of self-criticism and low self-esteem (Hofmann, 2014) Additionally, SAD often coexists with other anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, and specific phobias (Koyuncu *et al.*, 2019).

The aim of this research is to investigate the prevalence of social anxiety and avoidance behaviors among students at the University of Patras, using the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) (Liebowitz, 1987). Additionally, the study seeks to assess the self-esteem of these students through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 2011), and to explore the relationship between Social Anxiety Disorder and self-esteem.

2. Methods

This study utilized an online questionnaire, divided into three parts, to gather data from 119 students at the University of Patras, with the sample consisting of 77 women, 41 men, and 1 individual who identified as "other." The research was approved by the Board of Directors of the Department of Education and Social Work. The questionnaire included a demographics section that collected basic participant information, such as gender, age, year of study, field of study, marital status, psychological or physical health issues, history of psychotherapy, and current medication use. All these factors were considered in the data analysis. To assess Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) was employed (Caballo *et al.*, 2019), which evaluates fear and avoidance across social interactions, public speaking, observation by others, and eating or drinking in public. The scale measures both anxiety and avoidance behaviors related to these situations (Heimberg *et al.*, 1999). Additionally, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to gauge the self-esteem of participants, with instructions to respond honestly and without overthinking (García *et al.*, 2019). The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software, focusing on the prevalence of SAD and its correlation with self-esteem.

3. Results

The questionnaire was completed by 119 participants (N=119). The majority of respondents, 67.2% (80 individuals), were aged 21-23 years, while 24.4% (29 individuals) were aged 18-20 years. Most participants were in their third (51.3%, 61 individuals) or fourth year (44.5%, 53 individuals) of study. A significant portion, 49.6% (59 individuals), were studying theoretical sciences, and 25.2% (30 individuals) were in polytechnic fields. Regarding marital status, 95% (113 individuals) identified as single, with 3.4% (4 individuals) married or cohabiting. When asked about mental health, 69.7% (83 individuals) reported no issues, while 29.4% (35 individuals) reported having mental health concerns. Additionally, 13.4% (16 individuals) were receiving psychotherapy, and 8.4% (10 individuals) were taking medication.

Statistical analysis revealed significant relationships between several variables. There was a strong correlation between total anxiety/fear and total avoidance (Pearson's r = 0.81). A moderate correlation was found between total anxiety/fear and overall self-esteem (Pearson's r = 0.48), and a weaker correlation between anxiety/fear and the presence of mental or physical health issues (Pearson's r = 0.28). Total avoidance also showed a moderate correlation with overall self-esteem (Pearson's r = 0.47). Moreover, overall self-esteem had a moderate relationship with the presence of mental or physical

health issues (Pearson's r = 0.31). The presence of mental or physical health issues was moderately correlated with receiving psychotherapy (Pearson's r = 0.39) and taking medication (Pearson's r = 0.40).

A statistically significant difference was observed between the sexes on the anxiety/fear and avoidance scales, with men reporting higher mean scores on both scales. However, no statistically significant differences were found across age groups or marital status categories on the three scales. Differences were also observed between disciplines, with statistically significant differences on both the anxiety/fear and avoidance scales. Specifically, students in the positive sciences reported higher mean scores on the anxiety/fear scale compared to those in polytechnic disciplines. Similarly, on the avoidance scale, students in the positive sciences had higher mean scores compared to those in both polytechnic and theoretical disciplines.

In the regression analysis, with total anxiety/fear and total avoidance as independent variables and total self-esteem as the dependent variable, a statistically significant regression model was identified (F-test, p = 0.000). Total anxiety/fear had a statistically significant effect on overall self-esteem (t-test, p = 0.006) (Table 2). Additionally, when including gender, age, and field of study as independent variables alongside total anxiety/fear and total avoidance, the regression model remained statistically significant (F-test, p = 0.000). However, only total anxiety/fear showed a statistically significant effect on overall self-esteem (t-test, p = 0.011).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant relationships between social anxiety (as measured by anxiety/fear and avoidance) and self-esteem, as well as between these variables and mental health issues. The results indicate that students at the University of Patras who exhibit higher levels of anxiety and avoidance also tend to have lower self-esteem, confirming the research hypothesis that social phobia is inversely related to self-esteem.

A key observation from this study is the statistically significant difference between male and female students on the anxiety/fear and avoidance scales, with men showing higher mean scores on both. This suggests that male students at the University of Patras experience greater social anxiety and avoidance behaviors compared to their female counterparts, which contrasts with some previous research findings that typically report higher levels of social anxiety among women (He, 2022). Additionally, no significant differences were observed in relation to age or marital status, indicating that these demographic factors do not substantially influence the levels of social anxiety or self-esteem within this sample.

The study also found significant differences across disciplines, with students in the positive sciences (e.g., natural sciences) reporting higher levels of both anxiety/fear and avoidance compared to students in polytechnic and theoretical disciplines. This may suggest that the academic environment and the nature of the studies in positive sciences contribute to increased social anxiety among these students. The regression analysis

further supports these findings, showing that total anxiety/fear has a statistically significant negative effect on overall self-esteem, emphasizing the impact of social anxiety on students' self-perception.

These results align with previous studies, which found a strong correlation between social phobia and low self-esteem (He, 2022; Izgiç *et al.*, 2004). However, the current study's finding that male students exhibit higher levels of social anxiety contrasts with some earlier research, highlighting the need for further investigation into gender differences in social anxiety. Additional studies reinforce the conclusion that higher levels of social anxiety are associated with significantly lower self-esteem (Nordstrom *et al.*, 2014). The consistency of these findings across different studies and populations underscores the negative impact of social phobia on self-esteem, which can be particularly detrimental in a university setting where social interaction and academic performance are closely intertwined.

5. Limitations

There are several limitations to this research that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted exclusively among students at the University of Patras, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other student populations. The convenience sampling method, which involved selecting participants to whom the researcher had easy access, may introduce selection bias, and the relatively small sample size of 119 students may not be representative of the wider student body. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study captures only a snapshot of the participants' experiences at a single point in time, making it difficult to understand the causal relationships between social anxiety, avoidance, and self-esteem. Finally, the use of self-report measures, while common in psychological research, is subject to biases such as social desirability and recall bias, which could affect the accuracy of the data. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the relationship between social anxiety disorder and self-esteem among university students, suggesting that further research is needed to confirm these findings and explore these issues in different contexts and populations.

6. Conclusions

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the relationship between social anxiety disorder and self-esteem, particularly in the context of university students. The findings highlight the importance of addressing social anxiety as part of mental health support services in universities, particularly for students in disciplines that may exacerbate these issues. Future research should explore these dynamics further, especially considering different cultural contexts and broader student populations.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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