

# Predictive Role of Demographic Variables on Social Anxiety among University Students

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## Abstract

**Objective.** The aim of the study was to assess the predictive role of demographic variables on social anxiety among university students.

**Research Design.** Cross sectional study

**Method.** The study was consisted of representative sample of 385 university students, age ranged from 18 to 23. The predictive role of age, gender, institutional affiliation, education, department and family income was measured.

**Results.** The study showed that family income is the only significant negative predictor of social anxiety ( $\beta = -.31^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Social Anxiety was significantly less in male young adults ( $M = 76.79$ ,  $SD = 17.17$ ) as compared to the female young adults ( $M = 93$ ,  $SD = 20.69$ ). MANOVA showed the significant difference in social anxiety based on gender [ $F(5, 375) = 14.197$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Pillai = .159, partial  $\eta^2 = .159$ ] and family income [ $F(10, 752) = 4.46$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Pillai = .112, partial  $\eta^2 = .056$ ].

**Conclusion.** Social anxiety is the crucial factor that requires careful management because of its interlinked effect with income and gender differences. In Pakistan, social anxiety is high in females due to varied grooming pattern that need to be flexible to control their social anxiety.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Anxiety, Young Adults, Family Income, Department, Age, Education, Gender

## Introduction

Social anxiety is the "stage fright of everyday life" [12]. Social anxiety is the mental disorder that is characterized due to impairment and most commonly occurs in common members of society. Social anxiety is the devastating psychiatric condition that has taken the attention of scholars and practitioners from the past three decades [4].

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual define social anxiety, as "Social anxiety is a persistent fear of being evaluated by other people, and the avoidance of situations involving scrutiny and possible negative evaluation" [2]. After alcohol abuse and depression, social anxiety is the third most common disorder. One out of ten persons faces social anxiety once in his life [18]. This phenomena is experienced in every culture. The large portion of people in adulthood admits the experience of social anxiety while performing in front of others as well as speaking in public.

The diagnosis of social anxiety disorder is complicated because it overlaps with other psychological disorders such as agoraphobia and general phobia. The three functioning areas of life: home, peer, and educational institute come

under the influence of social anxiety that averts individuals in reaching their goals. Severe form of social anxiety leads toward the development of comorbid disorders including avoidant personality disorder, anxiety disorder, depressive disorder, and substance use disorder. Social anxiety onsets after specific phobia and separation anxiety disorder, but for some disorders, it develops initially in the person. The major depressive disorder is diagnosed in the person when the social anxiety comorbid with the chronic social isolation. In young adults, social anxiety has a high level of comorbidity with the depressive symptoms. Medicines can be used to control the social anxiety, but the symptoms of substance intoxication can also be the source of social fear [18].

The comorbidity of social anxiety is with body dysmorphic disorder and bipolar disorder. It also comorbid with the avoidant personality disorder in which the person may start avoiding the social situations [2]. It is also correlated to other clinically significant problems including drug addiction, isolation, culpable responses, depression, schizophrenia, school fear, social withdrawal, eating disorders including anorexia nervosa and bulimia Nervosa, sexual dysfunction and sexual felonies. Social anxiety is

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high in our society as compared to the other anxiety disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, agoraphobia, and panic disorder [8].

Individuals suffered from anxiety disorder have significant impairment in their life domains. The people with social anxiety evaluate themselves negatively in the social setting by having false thinking that other people have negative judgments and evaluations about them. Such individuals have an inaccurate view of themselves that is an interpretation bias [5]. Individuals with social anxiety are more accurate in recognizing negative emotions such as fear, as compared to the non-anxious individuals [16] while other studies were not in its favour [15].

The individuals who suffer from social anxiety disorder have more intimidating neutral and ambiguous stimuli as compared to the non-anxious individuals. Most of the time social anxiety is adaptive and have an adverse impact on the performance and functioning of an individual. Social anxiety is problematic at a severe level, but at the moderate level, it motivates individual to perform at an optimum level within the community [9].

Socially anxious individuals have maladaptive functioning in their interpersonal relationships or their daily based social communications. Children, as well as adults, come under the negative influence of social anxiety. Both men and women are affected due to fear of social situation equally but vary to some extent depending on the type of social encounter on which the individual is evaluated. Social anxiety disrupts the individual's performance in various social settings. It can encumber the intimate relationships and interactions with bosom friends [10].

The false belief of negative evaluation, embarrassment and shyness are the sources of communication barrier among socially anxious individuals. The high level of social anxiety in the social setting leads towards the adverse effect on the concentration and memory. It predicts people with social anxiety are disadvantaged in the social interactions. The young adults mostly experience social anxiety because of having extended social networks. They develop social skills to confront their fears in the form of safety measures. The research stated that the security measure enhances the individuals' problems in the way of declining in the social performance in the form of reduced speech [7].

The people with social anxiety disorder could not assess other people's views about themselves accurately at the social and performance situations. People not only observe their actions that they perform in the social conditions, but they also monitor perceived threats about themselves from other people. Social anxiety is normal when it is used as a

defense mechanism, but it becomes abnormal if there is little verge for defense activation. It continually makes individuals vigilant about the status intimidation when they do not subsist [11]. There are hazardous grounds for the progress of social anxiety such as inferiority belief systems that lead towards the increase of social anxiety. The other contributing factors are the parenting style and strict family environment that have the high impact on the expansion of social anxiety in future. Social anxiety disorder possesses attention of the psychiatrist, as its prevalence rate is high to students, professionals, and patients [13].

**The Cognitive Theory of Social Anxiety.** The Cognitive Theory of Social Anxiety states that social anxiety indicate the underestimation of positive characteristics of individual and overestimation of negative characteristics. The individuals with social anxiety overestimate the threats related to social interactions with their associated negative outcomes. These individuals underestimate their strengths to cope with the harsh situations. The theory states the effective way to deal with the individual with social anxiety is to target their constant way of thinking and encouraging them to involve in the social endeavors [3].

The theory states that thoughts and beliefs plays crucial role in the social anxiety. Such thought pattern leads towards the avoidance of social situations that later become social anxiety. According to the cognitive theory of social anxiety, the person feels threats within the social situations such as the person feels that someone is going to judge them. The individual with social anxiety feels insecure within the social settings because they thinks that they have inadequate skills to handle the social situations such as the individual feel that if he started conversation then he would say something stupid. These individuals also expects negative outcomes from the social interactions such as the person thinks that he has limited skills to continue conversations [3].

The cognitive theory states that the focus of individual on their one performance is distracting that keep them away from the positive interactions with others in social settings. Individuals pay attention to the negative characteristics when they interact with others. Individuals also remembers the past endeavors where they felt uncomfortable and faced anxiety that is why prefer to keep themselves away from the social interactions [3].

**Studies on Demographic Variables.** Merikangas and colleagues (2002) researched the social anxiety to describe its prevalence rate, course, and risk factors. The longitudinal study is used to study the impact of social anxiety on the 591 young adults whose age range was 18 to

19. The young adults were taken from the general population of Zurich, which is the major city of Switzerland. The longitudinal study continued until the participants reach the age of 35. The social anxiety is measured concerning the severity of social anxiety, gender differences, and personality traits. After the completion of the study, the research showed that the six percent of the young adults meet the diagnostic criteria for social anxiety over a 15-year period. 12 percent young adults meet the sub-threshold level while 24 percent young adults are not diagnosed, but they possess the symptoms of social anxiety. The research explored that average ratio for social anxiety for female young adults was higher as compared to the male young adults with the ratio of 1.5:1 in the Zurich cohort study [14].

According to the study of Doungrtran and Richey (1997), gender differences were high on the Vietnamese female adolescents that reported higher scores on the depressive symptoms but scored low on the self-esteem. It shows that psychological well-being is lower in females as compared to the males [6].

Adlaf and colleagues (2001) researched the Canadian Undergraduates to know about the prevalence rate of psychological distress in the students and the general population. The data in the research was based on the national probability with the sample of 7800 Canadian undergraduate students from 16 different universities. The research reported that the 30 percent students had elevated psychological distress that varied depending on the sex, region, year of study and lastly the academic course. The research showed that the rates of psychological distress are significantly higher in the students as compared to the general population. Their study also showed that the first year students have distress that is more psychological and mental health symptoms as compared to the higher year students [1].

Vine, Stoep, Bell, Rhew, Gudmundsen, and McCauley (2012) researched on the association between the income and anxiety symptoms in the young adolescents. The study has been conducted on the 498 subjects whose age range was from 11 to 13 years. The data was collected from the Seattle-area middle school students. The study has used the generalized estimating equations to measure the connotation between the household income, neighborhood income and the anxiety level in children. The four multidimensional anxiety scales has been used in the study that measured the physical symptoms, avoidance symptoms, social anxiety and the panic anxiety. The study result showed that the negative association has been found between the income and physical symptoms of social anxiety as well as the panic anxiety. On the other hands, the

adolescents who lived in the higher income neighborhood reported the higher level of physical and harm avoidance symptoms. The study showed that socio-economic status plays a huge role in the development of the social anxiety in children that become higher in the adolescence and young adults [17].

The present study will be conducted on university students to know about the predictive role of demographic variables on social anxiety. It would be effective because it would highlight the crucial role of age, gender, institutional affiliation, education, department and family income.

## Method

### Objectives of study

1. To study the role of demographic variables (age, gender, institutional affiliation, education, department and family income) on social anxiety.

### Hypotheses

1. Age, institutional affiliation, education, department and family income predicts social anxiety among university students.
2. Female university students are more socially anxious as compared to male university students

### Population and sample

The data was collected from 385 university students of age group from  $\geq 8$  to  $\leq 23$  who were the most representative member of their population. Cross sectional design and random sampling technique has been used in the study.

Social Anxiety Questionnaire developed by Caballo and his colleagues in 2012 has been used in the study due to its high reliability and validity. It is the 5 point Likert scale with 30 items fall from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale is sub divided into five categories including public speaking, interaction with opposite gender, assertive expression of irritability, embarrassment and interaction with strangers. The Cronbach alpha reliability of whole scale is .93 while the subscales is .75

### Procedure

Written and informed consent were taken from the participants for the present research. Before conducting research, it was clarified to the participants that whatever they tell us will remain confidential and it will only be used for the M.Phil research purpose. Their identity will remain confidential, and the ethical standards will be maintained in this research. It was informed to the participants that read the questionnaire and respond to the every question honestly.

## Results

The present research was conducted on 385 university students of Pakistan. 49.7% female university students took

part in the research. All the students were of bachelors and masters that were broadly categorized into science and humanities. Family income was also asked from the study participants to know about its impact on the social anxiety.

**Table 1**  
*Regression Analysis Predicting Social Anxiety from Demographic Variables (N=385)*

Variables	Social Anxiety
	$\beta$
Age	-.07
Institutional Affiliation	-.06
Education	.02
Department	.02
Family Income	-.31**
$\Delta R^2$	.10
<i>F</i>	7.11**

(\*\*= $p < .01$ )

Table 1 shows the regression analysis of demographic variables i-e Age, Institutional Affiliation, Education, Department, and Family income with the main study variables i-e Social Anxiety. Age, Institutional Affiliation, Education, and Department has non-significant relationship with the study variables. The family income has the significant negative relationship with the social anxiety ( $\beta = -.31^{**}$ ,  $p < .01$ ).  $\Delta R^2$  value indicates that 10 percent variance has been found on social anxiety due to demographic variables.

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**Table 2**

*Mean, standard deviations and t-values for male young adults and female young adults on Social Anxiety with its dimensions (N=385)*

Variables	Male		Female		t	p	95% C1		Cohen's d
	M	S.D	M	S.D			UL	LL	
<b>Social Anxiety</b>	76.79	17.17	93.68	20.69	-8.71	.000	-13.08	-20.70	-0.89
Speaking in public	14.94	4.24	18.38	4.85	-7.42	.000	-2.53	-4.36	-0.76
Interactions with the opposite sex	15.80	4.52	19.18	4.76	-7.15	.000	-2.45	-4.31	-0.73
Assertive expression of annoyance, disgust, or displeasure	15.17	3.86	18.10	4.71	-6.66	.000	-2.06	-3.79	-0.68
Criticism and embarrassment	15.92	4.24	19.71	4.52	-8.49	.000	-2.91	-4.67	-0.86
Interactions with strangers	14.95	4.32	18.30	4.80	-7.18	.000	-2.42	-4.26	-0.73

*Note: CI=Confidence Interval, UL=Upper Limit, LL= Lower limit*

Table 2 indicates means, standard deviations, and t-values on Social Anxiety with its dimensions. Social Anxiety is significantly less in male young adults ( $M=76.79$ ,  $SD=17.17$ ) as compared to the female young adults ( $M=93$ ,  $SD=20.69$ ).

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**Table 3**

*Difference among gender and family income on the Social anxiety (N= 385)*

Variables	Gender	20,000 or below it n=(46)		20,000 to 50,000 n=(183)		Above 50,000 n=(156)		F Gender	F Family Income	F (Gender*f amily income)
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
<b>Social Anxiety Questionnaire</b>	Male	84.81	18.48	79.64	14.13	71.01	19.18	70.27***	19.68***	2.25
	Female	1.15	26.33	93.30	15.83	87.61	19.03			
Speaking in public	Male	16.93	5.23	15.70	3.60	13.41	4.40	45.54***	14.90***	1.58
	Female	21.67	5.77	18.26	4.01	17.31	4.77			
Interactions with the opposite sex	Male	16.43	4.40	16.40	3.96	14.82	5.14	55.49***	9.62***	4.97**
	Female	23.40	5.31	18.57	3.55	18.25	4.81			
Assertive expression of annoyance	Male	17.00	4.97	15.65	3.24	14.11	4.15	42.43***	19.60***	1.80
	Female	22.00	5.97	18.35	3.64	16.46	4.28			
Criticism and embarrassment	Male	18.62	5.20	16.33	3.71	14.74	4.37	47.53***	13.66***	0.13
	Female	22.30	5.72	19.81	3.83	18.69	4.32			
Interactions with strangers	Male	15.81	4.41	15.54	4.00	13.93	4.60	52.67***	12.32***	2.93*
	Female	22.13	4.99	18.30	3.93	16.90	4.77			

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

df (gender)=1,379

f (income and interaction)=2,379

Table 3 assess social anxiety relative to the gender and family income. MANOVA showed the significant difference in social anxiety based on gender [ $F(5, 375) = 14.197, p < .000; Pillai = .159, partial \eta^2 = .159$ ] and family income [ $F(10, 752) = 4.46, p < .000; Pillai = .112, partial \eta^2 = .056$ ].

**Table 4**  
*Post-Hoc test for family income with social anxiety and its dimensions (N=385)*

Variables	(I) Family Income	(J) Family Income	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% CI	
						LB	UB
Social Anxiety	20,000 or below it	20,000-50,000	16.60*	2.95	.000	9.50	23.71
	20,000 or below it	Above 50,000	22.37*	3.01	.000	15.14	29.60
	20,000-50,000	Above 50,000	5.77*	1.95	.010	1.07	10.46
Speaking in Public	20,000 or below it	20,000-50,000	3.40*	0.72	.000	1.46	4.93
	20,000 or below it	Above 50,000	4.53*	0.73	.000	2.77	6.30
	20,000-50,000	Above 50,000	1.33*	0.47	.016	0.19	2.48
Interaction with opposite Sex	20,000 or below it	20,000-50,000	3.63*	0.73	.000	1.86	5.39
	20,000 or below it	Above 50,000	4.33*	0.71	.000	2.54	6.12
	20,000-50,000	Above 50,000	0.70	0.48	.445	-0.46	1.87
Assertive expression of annoyance	20,000 or below it	20,000-50,000	3.43*	0.67	.000	1.82	5.04
	20,000 or below it	Above 50,000	4.90*	0.68	.000	3.26	6.54
	20,000-50,000	Above 50,000	1.47*	0.44	.003	0.41	2.53
Criticism and Embarrassment	20,000 or below it	20,000-50,000	3.16*	0.70	.000	1.48	4.85
	20,000 or below it	Above 50,000	4.18*	0.71	.000	2.49	5.90
	20,000-50,000	Above 50,000	1.02	0.46	.085	-0.09	2.13
Interaction with strangers	20,000 or below it	20,000-50,000	3.19*	0.72	.000	1.45	4.92
	20,000 or below it	Above 50,000	4.42*	0.73	.000	2.66	6.19
	20,000-50,000	Above 50,000	1.24*	0.48	.030	0.09	2.38

\* $p < .05$

Table 4 shows post hoc results for family income with social anxiety and its dimensions. Significant relation is found between social anxiety and two groups of family income "20,000 or below it and 20,000-50,000" and "20,000 or below it and above 50,000", but non-significant found between the "interaction with opposite sex", and "criticism and embarrassment" with one group of family income "20,000-50,000" and "above 50,000".

## Discussion

The serious issue of social anxiety is raised here. There are many demographic variables that contribute with the onset of social anxiety to which we are unaware. In the university, we come across different age group especially adults above eighteen years old. When they visit to the university, they see varied learning environment. Some of the adults come up with the new educational methods but others cannot. Sometimes the later develops social anxiety that hinders them to fulfill majority of their tasks. In the previous researches, it has been highlighted that social anxiety is linked with numerous demographic characteristics that prompt their social anxiety.

The present study showed that family income is the only significant negative predictor of social anxiety. Those students who are socially well-settled and their parents earn good income were less socially anxious. They scored low on the social anxiety scale that predicts that if the individual belong to the good family then they are groomed in a way that their social anxiety became diminished. It is also because that such university students already exposed to such environments. They also visit to the social gathering where they met with individuals whom they never know. By this way, they cannot perplexed at the university and can have healthy conversations. In the high income families, the interaction with the opposite sex is the common and usual so in the university environment, they can never lag behind and hesitate to talk to the opposite sex. Instead, they interact with them to learn that boost up their confidence.

On the other hand, the students who belongs to the low income background are mostly possesses social anxiety comparatively high because they are not use to such environment. They are groomed in the different manner and have different family norms that is why they find the university environment very open for themselves which hinders them to grow further. The present study supports the previous work that low household income is linked with the anxiety of the adults [17].

The present study showed that age is the negative but non-significant predictor of the social anxiety. It clarifies that with age social anxiety minimized because of a lot of exposure. With the increasing age, the knowledge, awareness and exposure became maximized that brings confident among the adults to interact with others and can initiate healthy discussions. During the start of university, students speaking skills were not at the optimum level but within increase of age, they learn the tactics of practical life. Due to this thing, the anxiety is comparatively high in the adults of less age comparable to the more age. Merikangas

and colleagues (2002) showed that social anxiety decreases with age [14] but present research does not showed the significant research because of limited age criteria that was 18 to 23. If the age criteria would be vast then it was supposed that the significant results would be founded.

In addition, present research was done on the different university students of Pakistan so there was not significant differences among students of different university students instead of the fact that university were public and private. The difference in the university but no significant differences on social anxiety highlights the positive perspective of the universities of Pakistan that provide the equal level of qualification to the students in the university. We do not found the difference because the teaching methodology among all the universities is quite same that they encourage their students for presentations as well as community tasks. It is the evident thing that seems in all the universities which is the positive factor in the educational institutes that need to be appreciated. There is not difference among the universities to make their adults prepare for the practical and social life.

The other motive of the study was to comparatively analyze male and female on social anxiety. We see that in all domains of social anxiety the ranking of females is higher. While speaking in public females are not as good as men even though the fact that the world has been changed now and females are participating in every field. It is because of the grooming patterns like in Pakistan there are the cultural norms that hinders the females to have more public speaking. It is expected from the females that they speak less outside and the ones who fulfills such stereotypes get the title of good ones. It is stigma attached to the females that don't speak when not required. According to my perspective, it is the major reason, then females are comparatively more social anxious. When females become hesitate and perplexed while interacting with opposite gender then they cannot explore as well. Caballo (2012) named public speaking as one of the important domains of social anxiety. Females are also very careful regarding critic and embarrassment that is why they remained backward and not remain as much extrovert like males. It does not mean that females are always socially anxious, it only means that females are comparatively more socially anxious than males.

The present research has discussed the important demographic variables that impact on the social anxiety and also sheds light on the differences among males and females. The strength of the present research is that it has focused on the most important psychological issue that is prevailing among university students. The university students are the youth of the Pakistan so it is necessary to



highlight problems that they are facing because young blood is always the asset of the country. Another strength is that different universities has been involved in the study so that the research come up with the varied data. On the other hand the study limitation is that it has used limited age group that need to be extended and also students other than bachelors and masters should take part in the study.

## Conclusion

Overall, the study come up with the novel information that should be in cognizance of university students. It is recommended that the future researches can be done on dealing with the income factor that increase the social anxiety of low income students. Seminars, campaigns or motivational speaking can be held for the students so that they can deal with this aspect and gender differences can be dealt too.

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