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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL PHOBIA AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH PERCEIVED STRESS

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Abstract
The present study was designed to understand social phobia with reference to gender differences and the role of perceived stress in its occurrence. The sample comprised of 150 participants gathered through convenience sampling technique from University of Peshawar. The age range of the sample was between 18 to 35. Social Phobia Inventory (Connor, et al., and Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) were used for data collection. Two hypotheses were proposed suggesting significant gender difference among males and females in social phobia and a positive correlation between perceived stress and social phobia. The results confirmed both the hypotheses showing males as scoring high on social phobia than females and significant positive correlation between perceived stress and social phobia. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of addressing stress and emotional responses when developing interventions aimed at reducing social anxiety and improving psychological functioning among young adults.

Introduction

Humans are inherently social beings, yet social interactions—essential to our survival and growth—can also trigger profound fear and anxiety for some individuals. For those experiencing social phobia, even everyday interactions can become sources of intense stress, shaping emotions, behaviors, and relationships. Social phobia, also referred to as Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), is a persistent and excessive fear of social or performance situations in which an individual may be scrutinized or negatively evaluated by others. This fear often leads to avoidance behaviors, emotional distress, and impaired daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Individuals with social phobia may experience heightened self-consciousness, embarrassment, and anxiety, particularly when engaging in social interactions or performing in public, fearing criticism, humiliation, or rejection (Kessler et al., 2005).

Social phobia is recognized as a common mental health disorder, with lifetime prevalence rates ranging from 7.1% to 12.1% in the general population (Kessler et al., 2005). Research indicates that the disorder often begins during adolescence or early adulthood, coinciding with critical periods of social and academic development (Stein & Kean, 2000). Recent epidemiological evidence suggests that social anxiety symptoms remain highly prevalent in young adult populations, particularly among university students facing academic and social pressures (Al-Johani et al., 2022). Epidemiological studies also suggest a slightly higher prevalence

among females than males, with a female-to-male ratio of approximately 3:2 (Kessler et al., 2005). Commonly feared social situations include public speaking, eating or writing in public, meeting strangers, dating, attending social gatherings, or initiating conversations with peers (Pollard & Henderson, 1988). If left untreated, social phobia can significantly interfere with academic performance, professional functioning, and interpersonal relationships, leading to social withdrawal, diminished self-esteem, and a reduced quality of life (Schneier, Johnson, Hornig, Liebowitz, & Weissman, 1994).

Social phobia has been conceptualized from various theoretical perspectives. This study is primarily guided by the cognitive-behavioral model (Clark & Wells, 1995), which posits that maladaptive thoughts and beliefs about social evaluation contribute to heightened anxiety and avoidance behaviors. Similarly, the diathesis-stress model suggests that individuals with a predisposition for anxiety may develop social phobia when exposed to stressful social environments or experiences (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Understanding these theoretical frameworks provides insight into the mechanisms underlying social anxiety and its interaction with other psychological variables such as perceived stress and anger. Emerging theoretical work underscores the role of cognitive biases and emotional regulation difficulties in maintaining social anxiety symptoms (Heimberg et al., 2014).

Perceived stress is a key factor influencing individuals with social phobia. Defined as the degree to which individuals perceive their life circumstances as overwhelming or exceeding their coping resources, perceived stress captures the subjective experience of stress rather than merely the presence of stressors (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Research has identified several determinants of perceived stress, including life changes, daily hassles, unpredictability, uncontrollability, and perceived coping ability (Maes et al., 1987; Moschis, 2007). High levels of perceived stress are associated with a range of negative outcomes, including increased anxiety, depression, and difficulty in emotional regulation (Cohen et al., 1983). Individuals with social phobia often report higher perceived stress due to fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance, and the constant anticipation of judgment (Heimberg et al., 2010). Research has shown that perceived stress significantly correlates with social anxiety severity, especially in academic environments where students face multiple stressors (Lee & Jeong, 2019).

Chronic exposure to stressful social situations can heighten emotional reactivity, leading to frustration, irritability, and maladaptive expressions of anger (Snell, 1995). Individuals with social phobia may struggle to assert themselves or express emotions effectively in social contexts, causing internalized stress to manifest as anger or hostility. Previous studies have shown that unregulated anger in socially anxious individuals may exacerbate interpersonal difficulties, further increasing stress and maintaining a cycle of anxiety and emotional dysregulation (Forgays et al., 1997). Contemporary research highlights that difficulties in emotion regulation are strongly linked with social anxiety symptoms (Trew & Alden, 2015).

Gender differences in social phobia have been widely explored, yet findings remain mixed. While epidemiological data suggest a higher prevalence of social anxiety among females, males often report more intense avoidance behaviors in certain social situations, such as performance-based contexts (Kessler et al., 2005). Additionally, cultural and societal expectations regarding emotional expression may contribute to these differences, influencing how anger and stress are experienced and expressed across genders (Kring & Gordon, 1998). Recent studies indicate that while females often report higher overall social anxiety levels, gender differences in emotional regulation and response to stress also play an important role in how social anxiety manifests (Asher et al., 2017). Exploring gender differences in social phobia can provide valuable insights for tailoring interventions to the specific needs of males and females.

Existing literature demonstrates that social phobia, and perceived stress are interrelated constructs with important implications for mental health. For example, studies have reported a significant positive relationship between perceived stress and social anxiety, indicating that higher

stress levels are associated with more severe symptoms of social phobia (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Heimberg et al., 2010). Furthermore, the expression of anger can mediate the relationship between stress and social functioning, highlighting the complex emotional dynamics involved in social anxiety (Forgays et al., 1997). Recent research supports the role of emotion regulation and stress responses in social anxiety, pointing to their interconnected effects on psychological outcomes (Kircanski et al., 2018). Despite this, few studies have examined these variables simultaneously, particularly within the context of gender differences and among university student populations in Pakistan. This cultural context is particularly relevant, where academic pressures, familial expectations, and specific social norms may uniquely shape the experience and expression of social anxiety, stress, and anger.

Understanding these relationships is crucial for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it advances knowledge about how social anxiety interacts with stress to influence emotional and social functioning. Practically, it informs the development of targeted interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral strategies or stress management programs, to reduce social anxiety, improve emotion regulation, and enhance overall mental health (Clark & Wells, 1995; Schneier et al., 1994). Given the rising pressures of academic workload, social evaluation, and digital connectivity in modern society, university students are particularly vulnerable to the compounding effects of social phobia, perceived stress, and maladaptive anger expression (Misra & McKean, 2000).

Rationale of the Study

Social phobia is a prevalent mental health condition that impacts emotional regulation, social functioning, and stress perception. While studies have explored social phobia and its clinical treatment, limited research has examined how it interacts with perceived stress particularly among young adults. Gender differences in social anxiety also remain underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationships between social phobia, and perceived stress, and to examine potential gender differences in social phobia among university students.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between social phobia, perceived stress, and anger.
2. To investigate gender differences in social phobia among university students.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a positive correlation between perceived stress and social phobia.
2. There will be significant gender differences in social phobia, with males and females differing in their scores.

Methodology

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 150 respondents, including 75 males and 75 females. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 35 years. The majority of participants (86.75%) were between 18 and 25 years, while 13.25% were aged 26–35 years. Participants' educational backgrounds varied, with 71.53% holding a Bachelor's degree, 10.42% a Master's degree, 6.94% having completed Intermediate, and 9.72% having completed Matriculation. The sample was recruited through convenience sampling, selected from various departments at the University of Peshawar, based on accessibility and willingness to participate.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet

A brief demographic form was used to collect information on age, gender, educational level, and marital status. This provided background information for descriptive analyses and assessment of potential gender differences in social phobia.

Social Phobia Inventory

The SPIN was developed by Connor, Davidson, Churchill, Sherwood, Foa, and Weisler (2000). It is a 17-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess social anxiety across three dimensions: fear of social situations, avoidance behaviors, and physiological symptoms during social encounters. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging

from 0 ("Not at all") to 4 ("Extremely"), with higher scores indicating greater social anxiety**.** The SPIN has demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .88) and construct validity through correlations with other established anxiety measures.

Perceived Stress Scale

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) is a 10-item self-report instrument designed to assess the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as stressful, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("Never") to 4 ("Very Often"). Scores are summed to obtain a total perceived stress score, with higher scores reflecting higher perceived stress. In this study, the PSS demonstrated low internal consistency (α = .45), indicating that results related to perceived stress should be interpreted with caution.

Procedure

The research was conducted at different departments of Peshawar University. The researchers visited different departments and accessed the sample through convenience sampling technique. They were informed about the study purpose and were ensured that their data will not be used for any other purpose apart from the current research. An informed consent was sought from them after which the study scales were applied. The completion of survey took around 20 to 30 minutes depending on participant speed. It was told in the beginning that they can withdraw from the research at any point. After the completion of questionnaires, the participants were thanked for their cooperation.

Result

Table 1

Psychometric Properties For PSS, SPIN and AS

Scale	M	*SD*	Range	*α*
PSS	20.4	4.88	4-32	.45
SPIN	28.54	13.46	0-63	.88
AS	18.29	4.81	4-31	.85

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, PSS = Perceived Stress Scale, SPIN = Social Phobia Inventory, AS = Anger Scale,

In Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha for PSS, SPIN, and AS was .45, .88, and .85, respectively, suggesting that the Perceived Stress Scale demonstrated low reliability, whereas the SPIN and Anger Scale showed good reliability, with values above .70.

Table 2

Interscale Correlations Between Perceived Stress and Social Phobia Scales

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*1*	*2*
PSS	150	20.41	4.88	—	
SPIN	150	28.54	13.46	.408**	—

Note: n = 150, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, PS = Perceived Stress Scale, SPIN = social phobia Inventory

**P< (.01)

Table 2 shows the correlation between perceived stress scale and social phobia is 0.408 (p< .01), suggesting that both increase and decrease together.

Table 3
A Comparison of Males and Females on Social Phobia

Variables	Males		Females		*t* (148)	*P*	Cohen's d
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Social Phobia	32.48	10.74	26.43	14.32	2.90	.004	0.47

Note: M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, *p* = level of significance,
Table 3 shows gender differences on social phobia scale; t value shows a significant difference (t (148) =2.90, p<.05) with males scoring high (M=32.48) than females (M=26.43). Cohen's D shows medium to large effect size.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived stress and social phobia, as well as to explore gender differences in social phobia among university students. The findings provided support for the study hypotheses. A significant positive relationship was found between perceived stress and social phobia, indicating that individuals experiencing higher levels of stress also reported higher levels of social anxiety. Additionally, significant gender differences were observed, with male participants scoring higher on social phobia compared to female participants.

The first hypothesis proposed a positive association between perceived stress and social phobia. The results confirmed this hypothesis, as a significant positive correlation was found between perceived stress and social phobia (r = .408, p < .01). This suggests that as individuals perceive greater stress in their lives, their fear and avoidance of social situations tend to increase. This result is consistent with cognitive-behavioral models of anxiety, which propose that heightened stress amplifies negative self-evaluations, threat perceptions, and avoidance behaviors in social contexts (Clark & Wells, 1995). When individuals perceive their environment as overwhelming or uncontrollable, they may become more vigilant to social threats, thereby intensifying social anxiety symptoms.

Empirical research in similar populations supports this association. A study among Pakistani university students found that academic and environmental stressors were strongly predictive of anxiety symptoms, highlighting the salience of perceived stress in this demographic (Khan et al., 2022). Furthermore, a meta-analytic review confirmed that perceived stress consistently correlates with the severity of various anxiety disorders, including social anxiety, across different cultural groups (Li et al., 2021).

It is important to note, however, that the Perceived Stress Scale demonstrated low internal consistency (α = .45) in this sample, which may have affected the accuracy and strength of the observed correlation. Therefore, while the relationship is statistically significant, it should be interpreted with caution due to potential measurement error. Future studies should employ more reliable, and potentially culturally adapted, measures of perceived stress in this population (Khoury et al., 2022).

The second objective of the study was to examine gender differences in social phobia. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between males and females (t(148) = 2.90, p = .004), with males reporting higher levels of social phobia (M = 32.48, SD = 10.74) than females (M = 26.43, SD = 14.32). Although many epidemiological studies from Western contexts report higher prevalence rates of social anxiety among females (Kessler et al., 2005), the current finding aligns with a growing body of research from South Asia that reveals a complex picture of gender and internalizing disorders.

This reversal may be explained by stringent sociocultural expectations for young men in the region, where pressures related to academic performance, future provision, and public composure are intense. The fear of failing to meet these masculine ideals may manifest as significant social evaluation anxiety (Hussain & Komal, 2023). Recent work on Pakistani students suggests

that while females may report more generalized anxiety, males can exhibit higher levels of performance-based social fears linked to perceived failure, which is a core component measured by instruments like the SPIN (Ali & Begum, 2024). This aligns with the cognitive model, where culturally specific threats fuel maladaptive social cognitions.

Overall, the findings of the present study highlight the important role of perceived stress in social phobia and emphasize the need to consider culturally nuanced gender-related differences when understanding social anxiety among university students. By identifying perceived stress as a significant correlate of social phobia—despite measurement limitations—the study underscores the importance of campus-based interventions. Stress-management workshops and cognitive-behavioral strategies tailored to address performance pressure and gender-specific stressors could be beneficial in reducing social anxiety and improving psychosocial functioning in young adults (Asher et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine the relationships between perceived stress, and social phobia among university students, as well as gender differences in social phobia. The findings indicated that perceived stress was positively associated with social phobia, suggesting that individuals who experience higher levels of stress are more likely to report increased social anxiety symptoms. This relationship highlights the role of stress as an important psychological factor that may intensify fear of negative evaluation and avoidance in social situations.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample primarily consisted of university students aged 18–35 years, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other age groups and non-student populations.

Second, the Perceived Stress Scale demonstrated low internal consistency (α = .45) in the current sample, which may have affected the accuracy and strength of conclusions related to perceived stress.

Third, the cross-sectional design of the study restricts causal interpretations of the relationships among perceived stress, and social phobia. Longitudinal or experimental designs would be required to determine the directionality of these associations.

Finally, the reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of response biases, such as social desirability or inaccurate self-perception.

It is recommended that future studies use more diverse populations along with longitudinal designs to better understand the temporal relationships between stress and social anxiety. Additionally, researchers should employ more reliable and validated measures, and collect data from sources other than self-report, such as behavioral observations or clinical interviews, to obtain more accurate and comprehensive results.

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