



## **Perspectives of Social Anxiety in Relation to Academic Performance among Undergraduate Students in Zanzibar**

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**Abstract:** This study dealt with perspectives of social anxiety in relation to academic performance among undergraduate students in Zanzibar. The study employed the descriptive design. The study purposely selected three out of six universities. The total population was 5,600 students from which the researchers selected a sample size of 230 subjects. The study used a questionnaire and an interview schedule as data collection tools. Data analysis took place through descriptive statistics and content analysis approach. Based on the findings, the study concludes that social anxiety is prevalent among university students in Zanzibar. Most of the students experienced moderate level of social anxiety with basic symptoms like reduced engagement in class activities and fear of public speaking. Only a few exhibited mild to severe symptoms of social anxiety. The study recommends that universities in Zanzibar should provide students' access to mental health services, providing counseling and therapy options to students with social anxiety. The universities should also provide workshops on stress management for students to manage their social anxiety symptoms effectively. They should also develop initiatives that promote inclusive and supportive classroom settings in terms of peer mentoring and group study sessions to reduce the participation and public speaking pressure.

**Keywords:** Social anxiety; academic performance; undergraduate student; Zanzibar University.

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### **Introduction**

Social anxiety (SA), also known as social phobia is a condition which is characterized by strong desire to make favorable impression of oneself on others in conjunction with marked insecurity about one's ability to do so (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Social Anxiety is one of public health

concerns with its prevalence ranging from 3% to 13% in the general population and therefore it becomes the most common disorder after major depression and alcoholic dependence (Sadock et al., 2015). In universities, SA has been among existing problems that hinder student's ability to perform well. Fear of Speaking in public is a

common symptom of social anxiety in universities, which yields avoidance of academic activities including lectures, seminar presentations and group discussions. There are many factors associated with SA, including family history, genetic factors, temperament, birth order and social demands (Hudson & Rappen, 2000; Lie et al., 2000; Mussen et al., 1990; Ost, 1985). Currently, estimations show that 13% of the global population meets the diagnostic criteria for social phobia. However, in academic settings, recent studies suggest that lifetime prevalence rates may be much higher (America Psychiatric Association. 2013).

A study conducted by Nordstrom et al. (2014) in America revealed that 45% of students experienced low social anxiety; 32% experience moderate social anxiety and 28.6% experience higher social anxiety. In Europe, a study conducted by Oss et al. (2018) reported that 61.4% of college students experienced low social anxiety, 10% experienced moderate and 28.6% experienced higher social anxiety. A study in Sweden revealed that the prevalence of social phobia among the Swedish university students was 16.1%, comparable with 15.6% previously reported for the general population. The study further revealed that social phobia is associated with the use of dysfunctional avoidant strategies in educational situations and in anticipation of public speaking. These strategies include skipping classes, hiding behind others during sessions, and pretending to be sick during presentations. In Asia, the prevalence of SA is not consistent. Cai (1998) found that 6.9% of Chinese primary school students experienced SA symptoms. With the same assessment tool and cutoff point, Gao et al. (2013) reported the rate of 26.3% in a similar population. Social anxiety was less common among students following a pedagogic university program (Tillfor & Furmark, 2007). Overall, these studies underscore the widespread nature of social anxiety and its significant impact on students' academic experiences.

In Africa, the problem of social anxiety on academic performance has also been a crosscutting issue that affects students (Desalegn et al., 2019). Study findings report the impact of social anxiety on students' performance. For example, a study by Bella and Omigbodun (2009) in a Nigeria reported that the prevalence of social phobia among university students is above 8.5%. A study in Ethiopia reported even higher prevalence rates of 31.2% (Desalegn et al., 2019). In the same study,

16.7% of students had mild social phobia, 9.3% had moderate social phobia and 3.8% and 1.39% had severe and very severe social phobia, respectively. In the studies, social phobia was associated with lifetime depression, psychological distress and poor health conditions.

Despite the growing recognition of social anxiety as a prevalent global issue that affects students, there is limited empirical evidence specifically addressing its impact on university students' academic performance in Tanzania, and particularly in Zanzibar. Existing studies, such as those by Hecker et al. (2016); Nkuba et al. (2018); Leon-Himmelstine et al. (2021), focused on the effect of mental health issues, including anxiety, on the well-being and academic performance of children and adolescent students. Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

This study employed the descriptive design under the mixed method approach. Descriptive design provides comprehensive picture of a phenomenon (Croswell, 2002).

### **Population and Sampling**

This study took place in Zanzibar, which has six universities. The study purposely selected three out of the six universities and dealt with undergraduate students. The three selected universities are State University of Zanzibar (SUZA), Zanzibar University (ZU) and SUMAIT University. The total population of the sampled universities was 5,600 students. From this population, the researchers selected a sample size of 230 subjects, allowing for a detailed and insightful analysis of social anxiety experiences among the undergraduate students in Zanzibar

### **Instrumentation**

The study employed a questionnaire and an interview schedule as data collection tools. The instruments included sections for biographical information, social anxiety using the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and academic performance.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity refers to the accuracy of a measure, specifically whether the results truly represent what they are intended to measure (Creswell, 2002). In this study, expert judgment guaranteed the validity of the instruments. Some experts reviewed the constructed instruments and confirmed readiness for data collection. Reliability, on the other hand, *measures the degree to which*

research instruments produce consistent results across repeated trials or by the use of more than one instrument for data collection (Bryman, 2001). Data triangulation, with both questionnaires and interviews, guaranteed acceptable reliability. Additionally, the researchers provided a clear explanation of the tools used in the study to avoid any ambiguity. The researchers subjected the questionnaire to a pilot study whose results yielded the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.92 and above.

### Statistical treatment of data

The researchers analyzed the quantitative data using descriptive statistics. They analyzed the qualitative data through the content analysis approach.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles in conducting this research included obtaining research clearance from the university and subsequently requesting permission from government authorities. Participants provided the informed consent. There was confidentiality of data throughout the study. Participation was

voluntary. There was no special incentives or coercion.

## Result and Discussion

This section presents and discusses findings of the study based on the research questions.

**Research question 1:** What is level of social anxiety among undergraduate university students in Zanzibar?

The study's first research question sought to determine the level of social anxiety among university students in Zanzibar. In order to achieve this aim, the researchers used the Social Phobia Inventory test. The tool comprised of 17 items using a scale of 0 to 5. Those who scored below 19 revealed freedom from social anxiety. On the other hand, those who scored from 20s indicated mild level and those who scored 30s indicated moderate level. Those who scored 40 indicates severe level and those who scored 50 and above indicates very severe social anxiety.

**Table 1: The Level of Social Anxiety among University Students in Zanzibar**

Level of social Anxiety	Frequency	Percentage
Non	93	40.4%
Mild	45	19.6%
Moderate	70	30.4%
Severe	19	8.3%
Very severe	3	1.3%
Total	230	100

As indicated in Table 1, a diverse range of responses appears. Among the 230 participants, a detailed analysis of their social anxiety levels reveals a significant spectrum of experiences. That means participant experienced a wide range of social anxiety from mild to severe. A bigger portion of students, comprising 40.4% reported no social anxiety, indicating a healthy level of confidence and ease in academic social situations. In contrast, 19.6% described their social anxiety as mild, suggesting occasional feelings of unease in certain academic social contexts. Moreover, a considerable portion of the participants, accounting for 30.4% identified their social anxiety as moderate, signifying a more noticeable level of discomfort in social interactions. Additionally, 8.3% of the students reported severe social anxiety, indicating significant challenges in social situations. A smaller percentage, 1.3%, described their social anxiety as very severe, highlighting a possible intense and

debilitating impact on their social experiences and academic performance. These findings illuminate the varied social anxiety experiences among undergraduate students in Zanzibar, underscoring the importance of tailored support and interventions to cater to the diverse needs of students across this spectrum.

The quantitative findings align with those established through interviews. One of the interviewees, for instance, reported, "Honestly, social anxiety is a major problem among students, but even then, I can't say that all of them suffer from this problem; some of our students are very confident." Another interviewee reported, "I cannot say that the problem is very severe, but I can't also deny that the problem is there. In fact, the majority of our students suffer from it at varying levels. I would be wrong to say they all suffer from severe anxiety because that would be a crisis; it

would mean that all our students cannot function at all because of it.” Another respondent added, “Well, this problem exists among our students, but they experience it differently. It is mostly expressed during classes, especially when students must present tasks or interact with their teachers.” These findings indicate diverse symptoms that students show due to social anxiety, which may affect their learning and academic performance. Comparing with existing literature, Hakami *et al* (2018) in Saudi Arabia revealed similar variations in the sense that 47.2% of students had mild symptoms, 42.3% had moderate to marked symptoms and 10.5% had severe to very severe symptoms.

**Research question 2:** What is the perspective of undergraduate students regarding various aspects of social anxiety in relation to academic performance?

The second research question sought to determine the perspective of undergraduate students regarding various aspects of social anxiety in relation to academic performance.

Findings in Table 2 reveals that 68.3% of respondents agreed that social anxiety affects their self-confidence while only 2.2% remained neutral and 29.6% disagreed. This indicates that students considered social anxiety as a barrier to maintaining self-confidence, which is crucial for success in educational settings as indicated by Akbari (2018) and Sihotang et al (2017) that correlations exist between self-confidence and learning outcomes. Similarly, 66.5% believe that social anxiety increases their risk of failing exams, with a minimal (1.7%) neutral response and 31.8% disagreement. This highlights the students’ perceived link between social anxiety and academic performance. Furthermore, table 4 reveals 64.8% of students reporting avoiding academic activities due to worry and anxiety while 0.9% remained neutral and 34.3% disagreed. This avoidance behavior could limit students’ engagement in learning. Thamby et al. (2016) also revealed that heightened social anxiety stressors often lead to negative coping strategies such as avoidance of academic activities and substance use, which in return cause poor academic performance. This suggests a need for supportive environments that encourage participation.

**Table 2: Students’ Perspectives of Social Anxiety in Relation to Academic Performance**

SN	Perspectives of social anxiety	Disagree		Neutral		Agree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
1	Social anxiety affects my self-confidence	68	29.6	5	2.2	157	68.3
2	Social anxiety increases my risk of failing exams	73	31.8	4	1.7	153	66.5
3	I have avoided an academic due to worry and anxiety	79	34.3	2	0.9	149	64.8
4	Social anxiety affects my academic performance	75	32.6	9	3.9	146	63.5
5	Social anxiety is partly the cause of my poor grades	86	37.4	6	2.6	138	60.0
6	I experience isolation and avoidance due to anxiety	89	38.7	6	2.6	135	58.7
7	It is difficulty to participate in group discussions	76	33.0	25	10.9	129	56.1
8	Social anxiety interferes with recalling of information	87	37.8	14	6.1	129	56.1
10	I think of dropping out of school due to social anxiety	199	86.5	8	3.5	23	10.0

Additionally, 63.5% of respondents felt that social anxiety affects their performance in assignments and presentations, which are vital academic activities. Only 3.9% remained neutral and 32.6% disagreed. The impact of social anxiety extends to academic performance, with 60% of students attributing their poor grades to anxiety while 2.6% remaining neutral and only 37.4% disagreeing. This statistics highlights the potential detrimental effect of social anxiety on academic outcomes, suggesting a need for targeted support. Similarly, Graham (2012) and Archbell and Coplan (2022) highlighted social anxiety as a hidden disability negatively affecting academic performance and increasing vulnerability to exam failures, especially when

students lack appropriate support systems like counseling and group therapy.

Moreover, 58.7% of students reported developing abnormal learning behaviors, such as isolation and avoidance, due to social anxiety, with 2.6% neutral and 38.7% disagreeing. These figures suggest a prevalence of maladaptive behaviors that require intervention to promote positive social interactions and effective learning strategies. The findings further show that 56.1% of students experienced learning impairments, revealed by limited group discussion participation while 10.9% remained neutral and 33% disagreed. Similarly, 56.1% agreed that social anxiety interferes with recalling information, with 6.1% remaining neutral and 37.8%

disagreeing. This highlights the perceived cognitive challenges posed by social anxiety, underscoring the need for strategies to mitigate the potential effects on academic performance. Although 86.5% of students did not think of dropping out due to social anxiety, 10% had such a feeling and only 3.5% remained neutral. This indicates the potential severity of social anxiety and underscores the need for early intervention to prevent the students' potential academic disengagement.

Existing literature consistently demonstrates a significant relationship between social anxiety and academic performance. Leigh et al. (2021) emphasize that heightened social anxiety can impair students' concentration, leading to lower academic outcomes. Furmark (2002) similarly reported the link between untreated social anxiety and school dropout, stressing the critical need for timely intervention. Reta et al. (2020) similarly reported a correlation between severe social anxiety and the intent to leave school. Rosli et al. (2012) reported that low self-esteem can hinder effective learning and recovery from academic setbacks. Mohammad (2010) further reported a strong association between low self-esteem and poor academic performance. Collectively, these studies indicate the necessity of interventions that enhance self-esteem and improve students' academic performance.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study concludes that social anxiety is prevalent among university students in Zanzibar. Most of the students experienced moderate level of social anxiety with basic symptoms like reduced engagement in class activities and fear of public speaking. Only a few exhibited mild to severe symptoms of social anxiety. Therefore, there is need for universities in Zanzibar to establish effective supporting systems for students with social anxiety to uplift their academic potentiality. The majority of students perceived social anxiety as a factor that affects their academic performance.

## Recommendations

The study recommends that universities in Zanzibar should provide students' access to mental health services, providing counseling and therapy options to students with social anxiety. Establishing mental health awareness campaigns will destigmatize the existing social anxiety and encourage students to seek help. The universities should also provide workshops on stress management for students to

manage their social anxiety symptoms more effectively. They should also develop initiatives that promote inclusive and supportive classroom settings in terms of peer mentoring and group study sessions to reduce the participation and public speaking pressure.

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