

Social Anxiety Disorder Among University Students: A Narrative Review of Prevalence, Impact and Interventions

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Abstract

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), a prevalent mental health issue, significantly affects university students' academic performance, social relationships, and psychological well-being. This review synthesizes literature from 2010 to 2025 to examine the prevalence, impact, and intervention strategies for SAD among university students. Findings reveal that prevalence rates vary globally (ranging between 5% and 53%), with higher rates reported among females, medical students, and individuals facing academic or social stressors. The review identifies that SAD contributes to academic avoidance, poor classroom participation, and low self-esteem. Evidence-based interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), internet-delivered therapy, mindfulness-based approaches, and physical exercise have shown significant symptom reduction. This review emphasizes the need for early screening, integrated mental health programs, and university-based intervention frameworks to mitigate SAD's long-term consequences. Educational institutions must prioritize awareness and accessibility to support students' well-being and academic success.

Keywords: Social Anxiety, University Students, Prevalence, Impact, Interventions.

Introduction

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), a prevalent mental health issue, is characterized by a massive fear of social gatherings, where individuals are worried about the negative comments by others. This disorder is commonly prevalent among university-going students, a particular phase where they face unique challenges such as academic tensions, parents' high expectations, social pressure, and the transition to adulthood. Previous studies have revealed that SAD has a significant impact on scholars' daily routines, which impairs their ability to participate in classroom activities, build friendships, and engage in cocurricular activities (Clarke & Fox, 2017; Wachsmuth et al., 2023).

The occurrence of social anxiety in university students is increasing day by day. Statistics suggest that up to 20% experience clinically severe symptoms (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Al-Darmaki, 2020). Although it is an alarming percentage, many students with SAD did not prefer to consult psychologists due to multiple reasons, such as a lack of available awareness, facilities, or stigma related to mental health. The untreated SAD can bring negative consequences like tension in social relations, failure in academic activities, mental health issues, and overall poor quality of life (Schneier et al., 2002). These students are more prone

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to absenteeism in class activities, low academic achievement, and difficulty in building personal and professional connections (Vilaplana-Pérez et al., 2021).

This comprehensive review is designed and planned to explore the social anxiety disorder prevalence, impacts, and available interventions for treatment in university students by synthesizing the available published research (2010-2025) for clear comprehension. This review will contribute to the existing literature by providing the latest scenario and help create a better-educated atmosphere for supporting students who suffer from SAD in educational settings.

Methodology

This review paper integrates available research studies on Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) among university students. The focus of the search in the paper was the prevalence, impacts, and intervention of social anxiety disorder. To ensure a complete and systematic approach, the following methodology was used:

Search Strategy

A thorough literature search was conducted by searching various academic literature databases (Scopus, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and PubMed) to identify the latest studies published between 2010 and 2025. The following key terms were used: "social anxiety disorder", "university students", "prevalence", "impact", "interventions", "mental health in higher education", and "treatment for social anxiety". The search was restricted to articles written in English and included peer-reviewed studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and original research articles.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they focused on university students (18-25 years old), assessed the prevalence of social anxiety or its impact on academic or social outcomes, or evaluated interventions targeting social anxiety in this population. Studies on general anxiety disorders without a specific focus on social anxiety were excluded. Articles that were not published in peer-reviewed journals, those with inadequate sample sizes, and studies with participants outside the university student population were also excluded.

Data Extraction

Data were extracted from the selected articles regarding the study design, sample size, key findings on prevalence, impacts, and interventions. Key outcomes of interest included the prevalence rates of SAD, the social and academic effects of the disorder, and the effectiveness of various intervention strategies.

Quality Assessment

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) was used to assess the quality of included articles in the present review. Articles were evaluated for methodological rigor, sample representativeness, and the reliability of the findings.

Data Synthesis

The findings from several studies were summarised and categorised using a narrative synthesis approach. The findings are organised into three major themes: prevalence, impact, and interventions.

Results

Prevalence of Social Anxiety Disorder Among University Students (2010–2025)

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), defined by an extreme fear of social gatherings, criticism, or negative judgment by others, is a major growing mental health issue in university students

globally. Increased academic workload and unusual social contexts tend to occur throughout the adjustment to higher education, and these triggers may worsen or exacerbate symptoms of SAD.

Global Prevalence

According to a thorough meta-analysis and review of papers reported up to 2020, 39.65% of undergraduate learners experienced a significant amount of non-specific anxiety, including SAD signs. This high prevalence shows how common anxiety issues are among undergraduates (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Regional Prevalence

- *Middle East:* Studies conducted in Saudi Arabia have shown that the incidence rate of SAD among undergraduate students varies. 13.5% of medical graduates claimed to have severe to extremely severe SAD, as per the study reported (Al-Hamzi et al., 2020). According to another source, 10.5% of students noticed serious to severe signs of SAD, 42.3% had moderate to severe symptoms, and 47.2% had light symptoms (Hakami et al., 2018).
- *South Asia:* Based on a study conducted in Pakistan during 2021 to 2023, undergraduate students' level of social phobia significantly rose after COVID-19. In 2023, 52.94% of students stated that they had quite severe anxiety, an increase from 5.98% in 2021 (Khuda et al., 2024).
- *Africa:* A study published at the University of Hawassa among undergraduate students in Ethiopia reported a 32.8% incidence of SAD. An incidence rate of 26.81% was observed in a systematic review on Ethiopian students. Higher rates were observed in female students from remote areas and individuals with fewer social connections (Reta et al., 2020).
- *Europe:* Based on research, 16.1% of undergraduates in Sweden are affected by SAD. Approximately 10% of pupils in the UK claimed to have mild to severe SAD (Alnemr et al., 2024).
- *Asia:* An investigation carried out in Iran indicated that 5.2% of undergraduates developed SAD, with an increased incidence in females and undergraduate students (Norouzi et al., 2016).

Factors Associated with Prevalence

Greater rates of SAD in students are related to several factors:

- *Gender:* Evidence revealed that female learners are more prone to higher levels of social anxiety as compared to male students (Bahrami & Yousefi, 2011).
- *Academic Pressure:* Apparently, because of the higher academic responsibilities, individuals from medical and related health disciplines often experience greater levels of social anxiety (Strahan, 2003).
- *COVID-19 Pandemic:* Findings demonstrated that the pandemic has rendered psychological problems, with an elevated incidence of SAD in students at that time (Khuda et al., 2024).

Table 1: Summary of Global Prevalence Rates of Social Anxiety Disorder Among University Students

Region	Country	Prevalence (%)	Reference
Middle East	Saudi Arabia	10.5–13.5	Al-Hamzi et al., 2020; Hakami et al., 2018
South Asia	Pakistan	5.9–52.9	Khuda et al., 2024
Africa	Ethiopia	26.8–32.8	Reta et al., 2020
Europe	Sweden, UK	10–16.1	Almer et al., 2024
Asia	Iran	5.2	Norouzi et al., 2016

Note: Prevalence rates indicate variability across gender, academic discipline, and socio-cultural settings.

Impact of Social Anxiety Disorder on University Students (2010–2025)

A review of the research between (2010-2025) shows that Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) significantly impedes university students on multiple levels -academically, socially, and psychologically. The primary outcomes are listed below:

Academic Impairment

Social anxiety has been frequently related to reduced academic grades, aversion of attending schools, and a higher probability of quitting out.

- As stated by Strahan (2003), learners who suffers from social anxiety disorder usually ignores critical academic practices liked discussion in groups, classroom presentations, and speaking in front of others.
- A longitudinal investigation in Sweden suggested that people with SAD had lower chances of achieving secondary school and college, suggesting long term poor academic performance (Meier et al., 2020).
- Based on study by Adil et al. (2022), learners who are emotionally nervous exhibit poorer academic confidence and passion.

Social Functioning and Campus Involvement

Considering their aversion to social situations, pupils who suffer from SAD frequently establish fewer peer ties and tend to be less involved in university activities.

- A study by Brook and Willoughby (2015), SAD could cause children to refrain from social activities, restricting their ability to establish relationships and network intellectually.
- An investigation conducted in 2021 in Brazil, Ferreira et al. (2021) identified adverse relationship among SAD symptoms, societal support and campus activity participation.

Psychological Distress and Comorbidity

SAD typically correlated with desperation, loneliness, and poor self-esteem, aggravating students' psychological strain.

- Ratnani et al. (2017) revealed that students with SAD are more inclined to suffer from comorbid depression and chronic stress.
- In 2023, research conducted in Saudi Arabia, pupils experiencing SAD expressed greater levels of emotional withdrawal, fear of adverse judgement, and embarrassment (AbuSahyon et al., 2023).

Quality of Life and Daily Functioning

SAD undermines overall well-being by rendering it more challenging for learners to cope with daily activities and sustain their feelings of pleasure in life.

- Young adults and adolescents experiencing SAD reported poorer quality of life, especially the psychological and relational parameters, based on research conducted by Ranta et al (2016).
- Based on study conducted in 2022, SAD made it harder for learners to handle their social as well as academic responsibilities, so often led to experiencing helpless (Nadkarni et al., 2022).

Cultural and Gender-Specific Patterns

Gender disparities and social conventions modify the impacts of SAD.

- The negative image related to mental illnesses promotes inadequate reporting and inappropriate ways of seeking behaviours in collectivist nations including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (Khan et al., 2020).

- Based on several studies, women are more inclined than men to ask for help, especially if they experienced higher level of social nervousness (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Table 2: Impacts of Social Anxiety Disorder on University Students

Impact Domain	Description	Supporting Studies
Academic Performance	Lower grades, avoidance of participation	Strahan, 2003; Meier et al., 2020
Social Functioning	Fewer friendships, isolation	Brook & Willoughby, 2015; Ferreira et al., 2021
Psychological Well-being	Comorbid depression and stress	Ratnani et al., 2017
Quality of Life	Reduced happiness, daily challenges	Ranta et al., 2016; Nadkarni et al., 2022

Interventions for Social Anxiety Disorder in University Students (2000-2024)

The assessment of review papers published between 2000 and 2024 revealed that cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), internet-based interventions, pharmacological treatments, and alternative therapies were the most commonly used interventions for treating Social Anxiety Disorder in undergraduate students. The typical age of the group participants, who varied from 30 to 1200, was 20 years.

Intervention Types and Efficacy

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

By 71% of the analysed studies citing it, CBT remains the most widely studied intervention. Regarding the effect sizes varying from moderate to high (Cohen's $d = 0.5$ – 1.2), both individuals as well as group-based CBT format consistently demonstrated substantial reduction in social anxiety symptoms. Based on a meta-analysis, individualized CBT was more efficient than psychodynamic psychotherapy and other forms of therapy (Mayo-Wilson et al, 2014).

Internet-Delivered Interventions

University students' indicators of SAD are reportedly being substantially minimized through digital CBT interventions, such as StudiCare SAD, showing moderate to large effect sizes. In the RCT, it was found that the Social Phobia Scale reported an effect size of $d = 0.76$; however, the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale reported an effect size of $d = 0.55$ (Kählke et al., 2019). Large effect sizes were observed in a meta-analysis of remote CBT methods from prior treatment to follow-up ($g = 1.18$) and from prior treatment to post-treatment (Hedges' $g = 1.06$) (Winter et al., 2023).

Pharmacological Treatments

Based on their efficacy and firm safety profiles, pharmaceutical drugs—specifically, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)—are frequently recommended for the treatment of SAD. Still, findings support that CBT is more effective than antidepressant medications and has long-lasting effects following treatment (Devito, 2024).

Alternative Therapies

- *Mindfulness-Based Interventions:* Mindfulness-based tactics, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), appear to have a moderate impact on the anxiety levels of undergraduate students. A meta-analysis and comprehensive review concluded that

mindfulness treatments exhibited an average effect size of -0.309 in the treatment of anxiety (González-Martín et al., 2023).

- *Exercise Interventions:* The structured physical exercise program, specifically mind-blowing integrative exercises (yoga and Qigong), substantially reduces levels of anxiety in undergraduates. Based on a meta-analysis, exercise therapists demonstrated a substantial impact on alleviating anxiety ($d = -0.83$) (Chen et al., 2025).
- *Solution-Focused Group Counselling:* A substantial reduction in anxiety levels has been found in research investigating the impact of a solution-focused group counselling approach on minimizing social anxiety in undergraduates, with persistent results during a three-month follow-up (Sagar, 2021).

Outcome Measures

The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS), Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN), and Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) are among the three most frequently used tools for the assessment of social anxiety in multiple studies. The LSAS has become a widely utilized clinician-administered tool for quantifying social anxiety, demonstrating significant internal consistency as well as sensitivity to the effects of treatment (Heimberg et al., 1999). The SPIN is a self-assessing measure that evaluates the extent of social anxiety, exhibiting significant internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Connor et al., 2000).

Kindred et al. (2022) conducted the meta-analysis and investigated the 25 randomized controlled studies that evaluated the long-lasting impacts of CBT on social anxiety disorder. The research revealed that post-treatment assessment indicated a significant decrease in the signs of social anxiety in 89% of clients. Additionally, follow-up evaluations carried out 3-12 months after therapy showed that treatment benefits were maintained in 64% of studies.

Intervention Delivery Formats

The therapeutic interventions were provided in multiple modes, including individual and group sessions, online sessions, and self-guided programs. Group-based formats were more prevalent in in-person format, yet self-guided modalities predominate online therapeutic sessions. Hybrid formats, which incorporate digital tools with therapist support, are associated with higher completion rates and improved compliance.

Theoretical Justifications

The findings of this review can be interpreted through several theoretical lenses. Cognitive Behavioural Theory explains that students' maladaptive thought patterns and fear of evaluation reinforce social avoidance and anxiety. Social Learning Theory suggests that anxious behaviours are learned through observation and reinforcement, emphasizing the role of peer dynamics and university culture. Developmental Theory highlights that emerging adulthood—a critical phase of identity formation—renders students more vulnerable to social fears. Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a deeper understanding of SAD's origins and persistence among university populations.

Conclusion

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is a significant yet often neglected psychological condition among university students. This narrative review highlights that SAD has a negative impact on students' academic achievement, social engagement, and emotional stability. The findings suggest that early identification, reduction of stigma, and accessible treatment options are essential. Integrating theoretical perspectives, particularly cognitive behavioral and social learning models, provides valuable insight into the underlying mechanisms of social anxiety.

A multidimensional strategy that combines psychological, educational, and technological interventions is vital for addressing SAD in university populations.

Recommendations

1. Universities should incorporate routine mental health screening for early detection of SAD.
2. Awareness campaigns and psychoeducation programs should be launched to reduce stigma.
3. Training programs for faculty and counsellors should focus on recognizing and managing social anxiety.
4. Expand access to evidence-based interventions such as CBT and mindfulness-based approaches.
5. Encourage future research on cultural factors influencing SAD in South Asian contexts.

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