

Body Sensations and Emotional Reactions of Social Anxiety Among Young Adults

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Abstract

This study examined the patterns of social anxiety symptoms among seventy young adults, with a focus on understanding how these symptoms vary across gender. Using primary data collected through a structured questionnaire, the study assessed body sensations such as trembling, sweating, and muscle tension, along with emotional responses that included nervousness, discomfort, withdrawal, and avoidance. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes, namely body sensation experiences, emotional response patterns, and avoidance or withdrawal behaviour. Female participants reported stronger body sensations and more intense emotional reactions, while male participants exhibited fewer symptoms overall. The findings support existing evidence that gender influences emotional sensitivity and physiological reactions in socially demanding situations. These results highlight the importance of gender informed approaches in mental health screening and suggest the need for early intervention strategies within educational and community settings. Understanding gender based variations in social anxiety can provide valuable guidance for counsellors, educators, and health professionals involved in youth mental health care.

Keywords: Social anxiety, young adults, gender differences, body sensations, emotional responses, avoidance behaviour

1. Introduction

Social anxiety is a widely recognized psychological condition that involves an intense and persistent fear of social situations in which individuals believe they may be observed, judged, or evaluated by others. It is considered one of the most common anxiety disorders, affecting both emotional wellbeing and daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals who experience social anxiety often report significant distress when engaging in conversations, meeting new people, or performing tasks in front of others. This distress arises from a fear of embarrassment, rejection, or negative evaluation, which can lead to a strong desire to avoid social interactions.

Social anxiety is usually expressed through two primary domains. The first includes physical sensations such as trembling, sweating, muscle tension, and increased heart rate. These sensations reflect heightened physiological arousal and often contribute to further anxiety because individuals fear that others may notice these symptoms (Heimberg et al., 2014). The second domain involves emotional and cognitive reactions, including nervousness, discomfort, withdrawal, and avoidance. These reactions

reinforce the cycle of fear and contribute to ongoing difficulties in academic, occupational, and interpersonal settings (Clark & Wells, 1995).

Young adults, especially those in college or professional courses, are considered a high risk group for the development of social anxiety. This period of life involves academic expectations, public speaking tasks, relationship formation, and increased social comparison, all of which may intensify feelings of self consciousness (Knappe et al., 2015). Many students experience anxiety related body sensations and mood symptoms during classroom interactions, group activities, interviews, or presentations. When these symptoms become frequent or persistent, they may interfere with learning engagement and hinder personal growth.

Research has shown that untreated social anxiety can lead to reduced academic performance, impaired communication skills, strained peer relationships, and decreased overall life satisfaction (Stein & Stein, 2008). Individuals who consistently avoid social tasks may miss opportunities for skill development and confidence building. Furthermore, repeated avoidance can strengthen the belief that social situations are threatening, contributing to long term emotional difficulties. Given these concerns, understanding the presence of social anxiety related symptoms in young adult populations is important for prevention and early support. Identifying patterns of body sensations and emotional signs can help educators, counselors, and health professionals create strategies that reduce psychological distress and improve student wellbeing. The examination of these symptoms provides insight into the broader emotional climate of young adults and highlights the need for accessible mental health resources in educational and community environments.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To investigate the presence and patterns of social anxiety related body sensations and emotional responses among individuals, and to determine how these symptoms differ between male and female participants.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive research design to explore the patterns of social anxiety symptoms and to examine how these symptoms vary across gender. The study relied entirely on primary data collected directly from participants through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic information such as age, gender, education level, occupation or student status, and marital status. It also contained several items that measured social anxiety related experiences. These items assessed body sensations such as trembling, sweating, and muscle tension, along with emotional responses such as nervousness, discomfort, withdrawal, and avoidance. Participants were also asked whether they had any previous diagnosis or treatment for anxiety related conditions.

The sample consisted of individuals from various educational and occupational backgrounds. A large proportion of the participants were young adults between eighteen and twenty five years of age, most of whom were students in undergraduate or professional programs. The sample also included working professionals, homemakers, business owners, and a small number of retired individuals. Both male and female participants were included, which allowed for meaningful comparison of gender based variations in social anxiety symptoms.

Data were entered and organized systematically. The frequency of each symptom was calculated, and the distribution of symptoms was compared between male and female participants. Body sensations and mood related responses were examined carefully, since these factors often serve as early indicators of social anxiety patterns. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Participants provided their information voluntarily, and all responses were kept strictly confidential to ensure privacy and respect for individual experiences.

RESULTS

A thematic analysis was conducted to explore patterns of social anxiety symptoms among seventy young adults and to examine how these symptoms differed across gender. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: Body Sensation Experiences, Emotional Response Patterns, and Avoidance and Withdrawal Behaviour. Each theme represents a cluster of related responses that were frequently reported by participants.

Theme 1: Body Sensation Experiences

This theme captures the physical sensations young adults reported when experiencing social anxiety. Both males and females described these sensations, but their frequency and intensity varied.

Table 1: Sub Themes Under Body Sensation Experiences

Sub Theme	Description
Trembling	Strong bodily shaking, more common in females than males.
Sweating	Physical moisture associated with anxiety, reported mainly by females.
Muscle Tension	Tightening of muscles reported by both genders but slightly higher in females.

Body sensations were more frequently reported by female participants. Trembling and sweating were especially common among females, suggesting a stronger physiological activation when faced with social discomfort. Male participants reported fewer physical symptoms overall, with muscle tension being their most common bodily response.

Theme 2: Emotional Response Patterns

This theme reflects the emotional experiences linked to social anxiety. Young adults expressed a range of emotions, with notable gender differences in intensity and frequency.

Table 2: Sub Themes Under Emotional Response Patterns

Sub Theme	Description
Nervousness	Intense worry or uneasiness felt before social situations.
Discomfort	Emotional unease during interactions, reported mostly by females.
Fear of Negative Evaluation	Concern about being judged by others.

Females reported stronger emotional reactions, especially nervousness and discomfort. Males expressed these emotions less frequently. The concern about negative evaluation appeared in both groups, but females were more likely to acknowledge it openly.

Theme 3: Avoidance and Withdrawal Behaviour

This theme captures the behavioural reactions associated with social anxiety, particularly the tendency to withdraw or avoid challenging social interactions.

Table 3: Sub Themes Under Avoidance and Withdrawal Behaviour

Sub Theme	Description
Withdrawal	Stepping back from social interactions due to anxiety.
Avoidance	Intentionally staying away from social settings.
Reduced Participation	Hesitation to engage in group activities or communication tasks.

Avoidance and withdrawal behaviours were more prominent among females. Withdrawal was commonly linked to fear of embarrassment or discomfort. Male participants showed avoidance less frequently, which may reflect different emotional regulation styles or reduced reporting of internal discomfort.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the patterns of social anxiety symptoms among seventy young adults and explored how these symptoms varied across gender. The thematic analysis revealed that females reported stronger body sensations, more intense emotional reactions, and greater avoidance behaviour compared to males. These findings reflect broader evidence showing that females tend to experience higher levels of anxiety related physiological arousal, including trembling, sweating, and muscle tension (McLean et al., 2011). Such body based symptoms often intensify emotional discomfort and can increase sensitivity toward social evaluation (Heimberg et al., 2014).

Emotional response patterns also showed gender differences. Female participants reported higher levels of nervousness and discomfort, which is consistent with research indicating that women generally experience greater emotional reactivity in anxiety provoking situations (Turk et al., 2001). The concern about negative evaluation appeared in both genders, but it was expressed more frequently by females. This aligns with findings that women are more likely to internalize anxiety and show heightened attention to social threats (Weeks et al., 2010).

Avoidance and withdrawal behaviour were also more common among females in this study. Prior literature suggests that females tend to engage more in avoidance strategies due to greater fear of embarrassment and social judgment (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Avoidance strengthens the cycle of anxiety by preventing exposure to corrective social experiences. Male participants reported fewer avoidance behaviours, which may reflect different emotional expression patterns or greater reluctance to acknowledge internal discomfort.

Therefore, the findings support existing research that gender plays a significant role in the expression of social anxiety. Young adult females appear to experience a more complex combination of physical, emotional, and behavioural symptoms. These results highlight the importance of gender informed approaches in anxiety screening and intervention. Educational institutions and mental health services should focus on early identification of these symptoms to prevent long term impacts on academic performance, confidence, and social functioning.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined social anxiety symptoms among young adults and identified clear gender based variations in the experience of body sensations, emotional responses, and avoidance behaviour. Female participants reported stronger physiological reactions such as trembling and sweating, along with greater emotional discomfort and higher levels of withdrawal. Male participants showed fewer symptoms overall, suggesting differences in emotional expression or coping patterns. These findings indicate that gender influences the presentation of social anxiety and highlight the need for gender sensitive approaches in mental health screening and support. Early identification and intervention may help reduce long term emotional and social difficulties among young adults.

LIMITATIONS

1. The sample consisted mainly of young adults, which limits the generalization of findings to other age groups.
2. The study focused only on gender differences and did not examine other factors such as socioeconomic background or personality traits.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Mental health programs in colleges should include early screening for social anxiety symptoms, especially for young adult females.
2. Gender sensitive counselling strategies may help individuals manage body sensations and emotional discomfort linked to social anxiety.
3. Awareness programs can reduce fear of social judgment and encourage healthy coping patterns among young adults.
4. Future research should explore additional factors that influence social anxiety to support more comprehensive intervention planning.

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