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Research Paper

Exploring the Interplay of Assertiveness, Social Anxiety, and Communication Competence Among College Students in Lunglei, Mizoram

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ABSTRACT

Assertiveness, as a social skill, plays a vital role in buffering social anxiety and enhancing effective communication and self-efficacy beliefs. This study aimed to explore the interplay of assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy among college students. A sample of 130 participants from Lunglei district, Mizoram, were assessed using the Rathus Assertiveness Scale, Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, Communication Competence Scale, and General Self-Efficacy Scale. The result of t-test revealed significant gender differences in assertiveness (p=.022) and self-efficacy (p=.001). Correlation analysis indicates a negative association between assertiveness for both males (r=-.251*) and females (r=.256*). An association between assertiveness and self-efficacy was found only for males (.265*). Further analysis indicates a positive association between communication competence and self-efficacy for both males (r=.320**) and females (r=.290*). Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that social anxiety negatively predicts assertiveness for both males (β = -.251, ΔR2 = .048, p=.044) and females (β = -.278, ΔR2 = .062, p=.025). However, self-efficacy was found to be significant predictor of assertiveness only for males (β = .259, ΔR2 = .085, p=.045). Communication competence was not found to be a significant predictor of assertiveness for neither males nor females. These findings elucidate the significance of assertiveness crucial factor for effective social functioning, its relationship with social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy. An understanding of the interplay of these behavioural measures can contribute to the development of interventions aimed at enhancing assertiveness skills and promoting positive social behaviours among college students.

Keywords: *Assertiveness, Social Anxiety, Communication Competence, Self-Efficacy*

Assertiveness is an important component of personal and interpersonal interactions (Pfafman, 2020). It can be defined as the ability to express oneself openly and honestly, stand up for one's rights, and recognize and appropriately express emotions (Alberti & Emmons, 1970; Smith, 1985). As a social skill, it acts as a buffer for social anxiety (Wolpe, 1958), promotes effective communication (Sobhana, 2020), fosters

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healthy relationships, and contributes to the personal growth and development of an individual (Malarchick, 1976).

Social anxiety is the fear of social situations in which embarrassment may occur or a risk of being negatively evaluated by others. It involves apprehensiveness about one's social status, role, and behavior (Lazarus, 1973). Wolpe (1958) proposed inhibition in self-expression is the core of social anxiety. Those with social inhibition often exhibit cognitive biases, such as the fear of being negatively evaluated, which contribute to their anxiety.

In contrast, the ability to express oneself without inhibition and undue fear was seen as the core of assertive behaviour (Wolpe, 1958; Lazarus, 1973; Masters, 1947). Various empirical research studied the relationship between social anxiety and assertiveness and consistent results were found wherein assertiveness and social anxiety had negative relationship (Gay et al.,1975; Miers et al., 2013).

Communication competence refers to the possession of effective and appropriate communication patterns and the ability to use and adapt knowledge in various contexts (Cooley & Roach, 1984). Hence, persons with communication competence are able to express themselves which helps them in establishing their social identity and reach their goals (McCroskey, 1984).

Assertiveness at the core is a communication construct (Norton & Warnick, 1976). It is the most effective communication style (Sobhana, 2020). It encompasses communication skills including making requests; refusing unreasonable requests; expression of one's personal rights; and the ability to initiate, maintain and end a conversation (Pfafman, 2020).

Self-efficacy refers to the set of beliefs an individual possesses regarding their capacity to effectively accomplish a specific task or behaviour (Bandura, 1997). The self-efficacy theory has significant implications for assertiveness. Individuals exert assertive behaviour when they have sufficient positive psychological capital, which means that they are equipped with enough self-efficacy belief to be able to handle conflict situations (El-Bialy, 2015).

Among the various populations that can benefit from assertiveness, **college students** stand out as a significant group in need of assertiveness skills (Canter & Canter, 2001). The college environment presents unique challenges and opportunities for personal growth. Enhancing assertiveness among college students can empower them to effectively express themselves, navigate interpersonal relationships, and advocate for their rights and needs (Rusu, 2017). It equips them with the tools to face academic demands, social interactions and prepare them for their future professional endeavors (Gultekin, Ozdemir & Budak, 2018).

The present study aims to investigate the concept of assertiveness and its implications for social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy among college students Lunglei in Mizoram. Based on the theoretical and empirical evidences, assertiveness has shown positive effect on these variables. However, the understanding and practice of assertiveness within the specific cultural context of Mizoram remains largely unexplored. The perception, expression, and acceptance of assertive behaviour can be greatly influenced

by **cultural and situational context** (Furnham, 1979; Larsen & Jordan, 2017). The cultural and situational specificity of assertiveness further necessitates the study.

Given the limited research on assertiveness and its training in the Mizo society, it is important to investigate the concept's relevance, factors influencing its development, benefits, barriers, and behavioural manifestations. The Mizo society, being a low-context culture is expected to have low assertiveness (Furnham, 1979). Additionally, by contextualizing assertiveness within the educational setting, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of assertive behaviours among college students in Lunglei Mizoram.

Based on the above literature highlighted, the following objective and hypothesis had been formulated.

Objectives

- To assess gender differences in assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy.
- To find out if there is any relationship between assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy.
- To determine if social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy predicts assertiveness.

Hypothesis

- There will be significant gender differences in assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy.
- There will be a significant negative relationship between assertiveness and social anxiety and a significant positive relationship between assertiveness, communication competence, and self-efficacy.
- Social anxiety will negatively predict assertiveness and communication competence and self-efficacy will positively predict assertiveness.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Sample: A random sampling procedure was used for the present study. 130 college students (65 males and 65 females) from the district of Lunglei Mizoram were selected as a sample for the present study. The age of the student range between 17-26 years and the mean age is 20.13.

Design of the study

The study utilized a between-subject design to meet the objectives of the study. It also employed a correlational design to determine the associations between the constructs of assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy in both male and female participants. Additionally, the study aimed to examine how social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy serve as predictors of assertiveness.

Measures

The following tools were used to achieve the objectives:

- ***Rathus Assertiveness Scale (RAS) (Rathus, 1973)***
  The Rathus Assertiveness Scale (RAS) is a 30-item scale developed by Rathus (1973) to measure assertiveness. It is a self-report inventory that is scored on a 6-

point likert rating from 'very much like me' to 'very much unlike me'. The schedule exhibits reliable test-retest ($r = .78$; $p < .01$) and split-half ($r = .77$; $p < .01$) reliability, ranging from moderate to high levels (Nevid & Rathus, 1978).

- ***Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE) (Watson & Friend, 1969)***
  The BFNE, developed by Watson and Friend (1969) is used to measure social anxiety. The scale consists of 12 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale with response options ranging from 'Not at all characteristic of me' to 'Extremely characteristic of me'. Out of the ten items, eight items describe the presence of worry while the remaining four describe the absence of worry. Hajduk et al. (2015) found the test to have an internal consistency for both the positive items ($\alpha = .94$) and the negative scored items ($\alpha = .80$).

- ***Communication Competence Scale (CCS) (Wiemann, 1977)***
  CCS developed by Wiemann (1977) is used to assess communicative competence by responding to 36 items using Likert scales that range from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The scale measures communication competence on five dimensions of general competence, empathy affiliation/support, behavioral flexibility, social relaxation and interaction management. However, for the purpose of the current study, the whole scale will be used as it meets the purpose of the study. Wiemann (1977) reported a coefficient alpha of .96 which indicates the scale to be internally consistent.

- ***General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995)***
  The GSES is developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1955) to assess a general sense of perceived self-efficacy. The scale is designed for use among general adult population. The scale consists of 10 items with a 4-point Likert rating ranging from 'not at all true' to 'exactly true'. In a sample conducted from 23 nations, the internal consistency (α) ranged from .76 to .90 wherein the majority were above .80 (Schwarzer, 1995).

Procedure

The data collection process for this study employed direct personal interactions between the researchers and participants in an optimal environment, emphasizing the establishment of rapport. The study's purpose was clearly explained, and participants provided informed consent by signing a consent form in accordance with APA ethical guidelines. Detailed instructions, including clarification of the potentially complex demographic profile, were provided to minimize confusion. The researcher assisted the participants during data collection to clarify doubts and confusion. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, and their responses were collected with utmost care to ensure honesty, independence, and confidentiality. These measures aimed to uphold ethical standards, establish rapport, and obtain reliable data for subsequent analysis.

RESULTS

Prior to the test conduction, the dataset underwent preliminary preparation in Excel and it was then imported into SPSS 22 for statistical analysis. The data was then screened to ensure that the assumptions necessary for the parametric tests are met. Skewness and kurtosis were assessed, outliers were identified and winsorization technique was employed. Homogeneity of variance was examined using Levene's test and the result was satisfactory.

Descriptive statistics, which include the mean, standard deviation, and item-total coefficient of correlation (Cronbach's alpha), were computed for the behavioral scales for both males and females. The reliability of the behavioral measures employed was assessed and determined to be satisfactory ranging between Cronbach alpha values of .716 to .851.

The findings indicate that males (M=60.4) displayed higher levels of assertiveness than females (M=52.9). Conversely, females (M=39.1) demonstrated higher levels of social anxiety compared to males (M=38.6). Moreover, females (M=113) exhibited higher communication competence than males (M=112), while males (M=25.5) showed higher levels of self-efficacy in comparison to females (M=22.8).

Table 1: Gender differences in Assertiveness, Social Anxiety, Communication Competence, and Self Efficacy.

Scales	t	*p*	Cohen's *d*	Mean difference
Assertiveness	3.09	**.002**	.179	7.50
Social Anxiety	-1.78	.076	.042	-2.35
Communication Competence	.586	.559	.400	1.30
Self-Efficacy	3.37	**.001**	.039	2.72

The result of the independent t-test (Table 1), indicated statistically significant gender differences in assertiveness ($p<.05$) and self-efficacy ($p<.05$). However, no statistically significant gender difference was found in social anxiety ($p>.05$) and communication competence ($p>.05$).

Table 2: Correlation coefficients (Pearson r) between Assertiveness, Social Anxiety, Communication Competence and Self-Efficacy for male and female college students.

	AS	SA	CC	SE
AS	1	**-.251***	.061	**.265***
SA	**.278***	1	.021	-.046
CC	.234	-.103	1	**.320****
SE	.173	-.074	**.290***	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*
***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*
NOTE: male (above the diagonal), female (below the diagonal).
Abbreviations: AS=Assertiveness, SA=Social Anxiety, CC=Communication Competence, SE=Self-Efficacy.

Table 2 indicate the associations among the behavioural measures. The findings demonstrated that both male and female participants showed a significant negative correlation between assertiveness and social anxiety (males: r=-.251*, females: r=-.278*), indicating that higher assertiveness is associated with lower levels of social anxiety. However, self-efficacy was found to be significantly correlated with assertiveness only among the males (r=.265*). Notably, there were no significant relationship between assertiveness and communication competence for either males or females.

Further, the result of the correlational study indicates a positive association between assertiveness and communication competence for both males (r=.320**) and females (r=.290*), wherein the association was seen to be stronger among males. These findings highlight the complex association between assertiveness, social anxiety, communication

competence, and self-efficacy emphasizing the importance of considering gender when examining these relationships.

Table 3.1: Hierarchical regression analysis testing the predictability of Assertiveness from Social Anxiety, Communication competence and Self-Efficacy for males.

Predictors	***b***	***SE* B**	**β**	**t**	***p***
Step 1					
Constant	78.3	8.82		8.88	.000
Social Anxiety	-.486	.236	-.251	-2.05	.044
Step 2					
Constant	70.6	16.7		4.21	.000
Social Anxiety	-.488	.237	-.252	-2.05	.044
Communication Competence	.070	.128	.067	.544	.589
Step 3					
Constant	58.1	17.4		3.31	.002
Social Anxiety	-.462	.232	-.239	-1.99	.051
Communication Competence	-.017	.132	-.017	-.131	.896
Self-Efficacy	.838	.409	.259	2.05	.045

Note: Δ R2 = .048 for step 1 (p= .044); Δ R2 = .037 for step 2 (p= .589); Δ R2 = .085 for step 3 (p= .045)

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted separately for both males and females to explore the relationship between Social Anxiety, Communication Competence, and Self-Efficacy as the predictors of Assertiveness. In both the analysis, assertiveness was the dependent variable and social anxiety was entered as the predictor in stage 1, communication competence at stage 2 and self-efficacy at stage three. Social anxiety is entered as the first predictor as it has a negative inhibiting association with assertiveness, it is followed by communication competence as communication is a skill necessary for assertiveness. Lastly, self-efficacy is entered as it serves as a motivating factor for assertiveness.

The hierarchical regression revealed that at stage one, social anxiety significantly predicts assertiveness with a negative relationship ((β = -.251, p = .044) and accounts for 4.8% (ΔR^2 = .048) of the variance in assertiveness. The inclusion of Communication Competence in Step 2 did not result in any significant change (β = .544, p = .589; ΔR^2 = .037). However, in Step 3, the addition of Self-efficacy to the model emerged as a significant predictor of assertiveness, indicating a positive relationship (β = .259, p = .045) and it accounts for an additional increase in the variance up to 8.5% (ΔR^2 = .085). The analysis reveales that for males, Social Anxiety and Self-Efficacy are significant predictors of assertiveness.

Table 3.2: Hierarchical regression analysis testing the predictability of Assertiveness from Social Anxiety, Communication competence, and Self-Efficacy for females.

Predictors	***b***	***SE* B**	**β**	**t**	***p***
Step 1					
Constant	72.3	8.64		8.37	.000
Social Anxiety	-.495	.216	-.278	-2.29	.025
Step 2					
Constant	44.4	18.1		2.44	.017
Social Anxiety	-.457	.214	-.256	-2.13	.036
Communication Competence	.232	.134	.208	1.73	.087
Step 3					
Constant	41.1	18.6		2.20	.031
Social Anxiety	-.449	.214	-.252	-2.09	.041
Communication Competence	.199	.140	.179	1.42	.159
Self-Efficacy	.296	.359	.103	.824	.413

Note: Δ R2 = .062 for step 1 (p= .025); Δ R2 = .091 for step 2 (p= .087); Δ R2 = .087 for step 3 (p= .413)

In comparison to the males, Table 3.2 presents the result of the hierarchical regression analysis for females. The findings showed that the inclusion of Social Anxiety at Step 1 in the regression model significantly predicts assertiveness, indicating a negative relationship (β = -.278, p = .025) and it explains 6.2% of the variance (ΔR2 = .062). In comparison to the males, Social Anxiety has a higher predictability among females. However, in Step 2, the addition of Communication Competence does not bring about any significant change (β = .208, p = .087; ΔR2 = .091). Similarly, the inclusion of Self-Efficacy in Step 3 does not result in any significant change (β = .103, ΔR2 = .087, p = .413). The findings suggest that only Social Anxiety is a significant predictor of assertiveness for females.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to **assess the gender differences** in the current sample on the measures of assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence and self-efficacy. The result revealed significant gender differences in assertiveness which aligns with the previous empirical findings of Das and Shah (2013) and Shaifq et al. (2015). These previous findings consistently found that males tend to display higher levels of assertiveness, further strengthening the current findings.

An analysis of gender differences in Self-efficacy reveals significant findings with males having higher scores than females. The finding was consistent with that of Robinson et al. (2022) who found self-efficacy scores to be higher in males than females. However, a contrasting finding by Kumar and Lal (2006) revealed that young female adults scored higher in self-efficacy in comparison to the males. The contrasting findings indicated the complexity of the association between gender and self-efficacy and suggest the need for further study to understand the factors influencing this relationship.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study revealed no significant gender differences on the behavioral measures of social anxiety and communication competence. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Prabha and Babu (2021), which found no gender

disparities in the behavioral measures of social anxiety among young adults and Cholappallil et al. (2021) who also reported no gender differences in communication competence among young adults.

The **association between the behavioral measures** of assertiveness, social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy were analyzed. As hypothesized, the result indicated a significant negative relationship between assertiveness and social anxiety for both males and females, indicating that higher levels of assertiveness were related to lower levels of social anxiety. The findings were corroborated by previous research by Himaja (2021) who found a negative association between fear of negative evaluation and assertiveness. Further evidence by Abedzadeh and Mahdian (2014) also highlighted the negative relationship between assertiveness and social anxiety, indicating that lower levels of anxiety were associated with greater happiness.

In addition, the study found a significant positive association between assertiveness and self-efficacy as hypothesized; however, the association reached significance only for males. This finding contradicts previous studies wherein associations were found consistently for both males and females. This was indicated in the studies made by Rani (2019) among sportspersons and by Mostafa and Mohamed (2020) among nurses. The contrasting findings substantiate the need for further investigation.

Lastly, a significant positive association between communication competence and assertiveness was observed in both the males and females indicating that a person's self-efficacy beliefs has a positive correlation with their belief in their communicative ability. This finding was consistent with the empirical research conducted by Chang and Hu (2017) and Kim and Lee (2023) who found significant positive association between communication competence and self-efficacy.

The study aimed to determine the predictive ability of the three behavioural measures, namely social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy on assertiveness. It was hypothesized that social anxiety will negatively predict assertiveness (theoretical assumption). True to the assumption, the hierarchical regression indicated that social anxiety negatively predicts assertiveness for both males and females. The study conducted by Cherif et al. (2022) yielded consistent results, wherein the inhibitory role of social anxiety on assertiveness was emphasized along with the need for intervention aiming at reducing social anxiety to enhance assertive skills. The study also revealed the role of gender, wherein males consistently demonstrated higher levels of assertiveness and lower level of social anxiety in comparison to females.

However, the findings of the current study and that of Cherif et al (2022) had contrasting results regarding the predictive ability of communication competence on assertiveness. While Cherif et al. (2022) reported a positive predictive relationship between these variables, the present study did not find a significant association. Further research is warranted to gain a comprehensive understanding of communication competence as a predictive factor for assertiveness.

Lastly, it was hypothesized that self-efficacy will positively predict assertiveness. The current study found a significant predictive relationship as hypothesized but only for the males. Lee (1983) found a marginal association between assertiveness and self-efficacy and

states that though a significant predictor, self-efficacy has a limited predictive ability when considered as a single variable. Similarly, Paul (1983) found weak predictive power and a weak association between assertiveness and self-efficacy. Nonetheless, self-efficacy has a significant association with assertiveness as indicated by Rani (2019) and Mostafa and Mohamed (2020).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study highlight the significance of assertiveness in relation to social anxiety, communication competence, and self-efficacy. Individuals with higher levels of assertiveness tend to have lower levels of social anxiety and better communication skills. While self-efficacy's direct predictive ability for assertiveness may be limited, it emerges as an important factor alongside assertiveness in influencing interpersonal behavior.

The study's investigation within a specific cultural context provides valuable insights into the dynamics of interpersonal behavior and mental well-being among college students in Lunglei. The **practical implications** include the development of targeted interventions and support programs to enhance assertiveness, improve communication skills, and address social anxiety in order to promote healthier relationships and overall psychological well-being. **Suggestions for future research** include increasing the number of participants and expanding the population to enhance the generalizability and reliability of the findings.

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