

Research Paper

Prevalence and Gender Differences in Social Anxiety and Its Relationship with Academic Achievement Among Prospective Teachers

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ABSTRACT

In today's fast-paced and competitive academic environment, students face emotional and psychological challenges that affect their learning and performance. One common issue is social anxiety which involves a strong fear of social interactions and situations where one might be judged or get embarrassed. This fear interferes with daily activities such as speaking in class, giving presentations, or interacting with peers and teachers. For pre-service teachers who are preparing for a profession that relies on communication and social engagement, the presence of social anxiety is particularly concerning. It may influence their academic progress, classroom participation, and future teaching effectiveness. Despite increasing awareness of mental health, social anxiety among students in teacher education programs in India remains underexplored. This study aimed to assess the prevalence of social anxiety among pre-service teachers, compare levels across gender, and examine its connection with academic achievement. A quantitative approach was used, and data were collected from 114 pre-service teachers in Varanasi through a self-developed Social Anxiety Scale and academic records. The results indicated that most students were classified in the average level of social anxiety category (73.7%). Only a smaller proportion fell into the low (14.9%) or high (11.4%) categories. Female students were proportionally more represented in the high social anxiety category (20.8%) than male students (4.5%). Although this pattern shows that higher social anxiety was more common among females, the difference between the groups was not statistically significant. The study also found no significant relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement. These findings indicate that while social anxiety is present among pre-service teachers, it may not have a direct effect on their academic performance.

Keywords: *Social anxiety, Pre-service teachers, Academic achievement, Mental health, Teacher education, Higher education, Student well-being, Anxiety and performance*

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In education, learning does not happen in isolation. It is closely connected with how students interact with others and perform in academics. The link between a person's mental well-being and their academic success is becoming more important than ever. Students today face many social and emotional challenges that can affect how they study, learn, and perform.

Anxiety can be described as a feeling of apprehension, tension, or uneasiness arising from the anticipation of danger, which may be internal or external (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 1980). According to The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), Generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance or medication-induced anxiety disorder, and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) are the types of mental disorders under the anxiety group. Social anxiety is one of the most common forms of anxiety and it is defined as an irrational, chronic and intense fear of social situations. It is a person's uncomfortable and inhibiting feeling that they can be the center of attention and evaluation in a social situation (Shields, 2004). Examples include social interactions (e.g., having a conversation and meeting strangers), being observed (e.g., eating or drinking), and performing in front of others (e.g., giving a speech). It is also called Social Phobia (DSM-4, APA, 1994). The average age when social anxiety starts falls within the range of early to late adolescence. However, reports indicate that it may manifest as early as 7 or 8 years old (Chavira & Stein, 2005). The self-presentation model of social anxiety suggests that it occurs in situations, whether real or imaginary, where individuals aim to create a specific impression on others but lack the confidence in their ability to do so (Schlenker & Leary, 1985). Individuals with social anxiety disorder experience such intense fear in social situations that they feel it is beyond their control. It is concerned with social interactions or the potential outcomes that can cause feelings of fear. Every prospective teacher maintains a social life and situations in social life frequently cause anxiety. It grows when one tries to interact socially or communicate verbally or non-verbally. Bhatnagar (1969) considers academic achievement or academic performance as a component of their overall behaviour. It is the outcome of an individual's interaction with his/her environment, i.e., school, teachers and peers. The prevalence of social anxiety amongst higher education students continues to rise, which affects their academic performance as well as their social skills. Socially anxious students may lose learning opportunities by avoiding interaction, either physically or psychologically. Clark and Wells (1995) found that social anxiety makes it difficult for students to focus on academic work. Their ability to communicate with their peers and tutors may also get affected by the fear of negative evaluation (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). It also results in lower self-esteem, increased stress levels and decreased quality of life among college students. Campbell et al. (2015) found that some students have such a high level of social anxiety that they suffer from more isolation and anguish, find it difficult to communicate with others and use avoidant behaviour, which ultimately hinders their ability to learn. Additionally, students who experience social anxiety have a tendency to misjudge their own abilities in social situations.

The mission of pre-service teacher education is to foster the holistic development of individuals within a dynamic educational environment. To achieve this, universities must adopt a comprehensive perspective that addresses obstacles hindering students' educational journeys, and includes both physical and mental well-being. Among the challenges faced by college students, social anxiety emerges as a significant psychological issue, impacting academic, personal, and professional aspects of their lives (Zhaoxia Pan et al., 2018).

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Social anxiety can exert a profound negative impact on mental health, interpersonal connections, and academic achievement, particularly during the early years of higher education. Globally, social anxiety disorder's prevalence ranges from 4.9% to 80% in the general population (Wittchen et al., 1999; Stein & Stein, 2008). In India, according to the National Mental Health Survey 2015-2016, 1.9% of the population of all ages suffers from phobic anxiety disorder. While social anxiety has been extensively researched in Western nations, there is a notable dearth of studies examining social anxiety among Indian students enrolled in higher education. Cultural factors may contribute to how social anxiety is experienced by Indian students, particularly in collectivist societies like India. The emphasis on social peace, harmony, conformity, and respect for authority may pose unique challenges for students dealing with social anxiety, including fear of observation, scrutiny, difficulty in assertiveness, and fear of negative criticism.

In teacher education programs, as academic content becomes more challenging, anxiety rises, especially in assessments involving performance and presentations. While students are encouraged to seek assistance from both tutors and peers, socially confident individuals exhibit greater class participation. Conversely, students grappling with social anxiety experience a tension between their desire to engage in the program and interact with peers and their fear of scrutiny and embarrassment. The influence of social anxiety on class participation, academic engagement, and overall performance among pre-service teachers remains an unexplored area. Unlike general college populations, pre-service teachers are preparing to enter a profession where effective communication and interpersonal skills are paramount. Thus, the impact of social anxiety on their ability to fulfil these requirements may have far-reaching consequences for both their personal development and their future effectiveness as educators. Understanding the nuanced relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement in pre-service teachers holds substantial implications for teaching practices within teacher education programs.

Objectives

1. To assess the prevalence of social anxiety among pre-service teachers.
2. To compare the prevalence of social anxiety and the social anxiety scores between male and female pre-service teachers.
3. To study the relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement among pre-service teachers.

Null Hypotheses

- **H₀₁:** There is no significant difference in the level of social anxiety between male and female pre-service teachers.
- **H₀₂:** There is no significant relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement among pre-service teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The present study adopted a quantitative approach. A descriptive correlational research design was employed to examine the levels of social anxiety and its relationship with academic achievement among pre-service teachers.

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Participants

The sample comprised 114 pre-service teachers from two institutions in Varanasi city. Participants were selected using the purposive sampling method to ensure inclusion of students from teacher training institutions.

Tools and Instruments

a. Social Anxiety Scale for Prospective Teachers (SAS-PT)

A self-constructed scale was used to measure social anxiety among participants. The tool consists of 23 items across four dimensions:

- **Somatic:** Examines physiological manifestations of social anxiety.
- **Behavioural:** Assesses observable actions and reactions.
- **Cognitive:** Explores underlying thought processes associated with social anxiety.
- **Subjective:** Captures self-reported emotional experiences.

The SAS-PT uses a 5-point Likert scale. The reliability of the tool was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and was found to be 0.84, which shows good internal consistency. McDonald's omega was calculated in RStudio 2025.09.1 and was found to be 0.87, which supports the reliability of the tool. For items that are non-tau-equivalent, coefficient omega has been suggested and recommended as a more appropriate measure (Zhang & Yuan, 2016). Content validity was established through expert judgment. Based on the total social anxiety scores, norms were established using the mean $\pm$ 1 SD method. Scores $\leq$ 48 were classified as low social anxiety, scores 49–71 as average social anxiety, and scores $\geq$ 72 as high social anxiety.

b. Academic Achievement

Academic achievement was measured using the percentage of marks obtained in the previous examination by each participant.

Findings of the study

Based on the data obtained through SAS-PT, the objective-wise findings of the study are presented as follows:

Objective 1: To assess the prevalence of social anxiety among pre-service teachers

The study included 114 pre-service teachers from Varanasi. The levels of social anxiety were measured using the Social Anxiety Scale for Pre-Service Teachers (SAS-PT). The total social anxiety scores ranged from 31 to 96, with a mean of 59.35 and a standard deviation of 11.38.

Table 1: Social Anxiety Levels of Pre-Service Teachers (N = 114)

Social Anxiety Level	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low	17	14.9%	14.9%
Average	84	73.7%	88.6%
High	13	11.4%	100.0%
Total	114	100.0%	

Table 1 shows the distribution of social anxiety levels among pre-service teachers. A total of 11.4% of the participants exhibited high levels of social anxiety. While 73.7% fell within the

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average category, representing moderate levels and 14.9% of the participants demonstrated low levels of social anxiety.

Objective 2: To compare the prevalence of social anxiety and the social anxiety scores between male and female pre-service teachers.

The findings related to this objective have been depicted in Table 2a and Table 2b. Table 2a shows the distribution of male and female pre-service teachers across different levels of social anxiety, while Table 2b presents the comparison of social anxiety scores between the two groups.

Table 2a: Sex-wise Distribution of Pre-Service Teachers across Levels of Social Anxiety (N = 114)

Gender	Low	Average	High	Total
Male (n = 66)	14 (21.2%)	49 (74.2%)	3 (4.5%)	66 (100%)
Female (n = 48)	3 (6.2%)	35 (72.9%)	10 (20.8%)	48 (100%)
Total	17 (14.9%)	84 (73.7%)	13 (11.4%)	114 (100%)

Table 2a shows the distribution of male and female pre-service teachers across different levels of social anxiety. Among males, 21.2% had low social anxiety, 74.2% had average, and 4.5% had high social anxiety. Among females, 6.2% had low, 72.9% had average, and 20.8% had high social anxiety. Overall, the majority of participants (73.7%) fell in the average category, while high social anxiety was more prevalent among females (20.8%) than males (4.5%).

Table 2b: Comparison of Social Anxiety Scores between Male and Female Pre-Service Teachers

Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Male	66	54.19	3576.50
Female	48	62.05	2978.50
Test Statistic		Value	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Mann-Whitney U		1365.50	0.210
Z		-1.255	

A comparison of social anxiety scores between male and female pre-service teachers was conducted. The normality of the variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The Shapiro–Wilk test is more suitable for small sample sizes (<50), though it can also be applied to larger samples, whereas the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test is used for $n \geq 50$. (Mishra et al., 2019).

As the normality was not met for the male group (Kolmogorov-Smirnov $D = 0.130$, $p = 0.007$), the **Mann-Whitney U test** was used. The analysis revealed that the mean rank for males was 54.19 and for females was 62.05. The difference was not statistically significant ($U = 1365.50$, $Z = -1.255$, $p = 0.210$). This shows that social anxiety levels were similar across both genders in this sample.

Objective 3: To study the relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement among pre-service teachers

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The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was applied to examine the normality of the variables. The results indicated that both social anxiety ($D(114) = 0.057, p = 0.200$) and academic achievement ($D(114) = 0.055, p = 0.200$) were normally distributed.

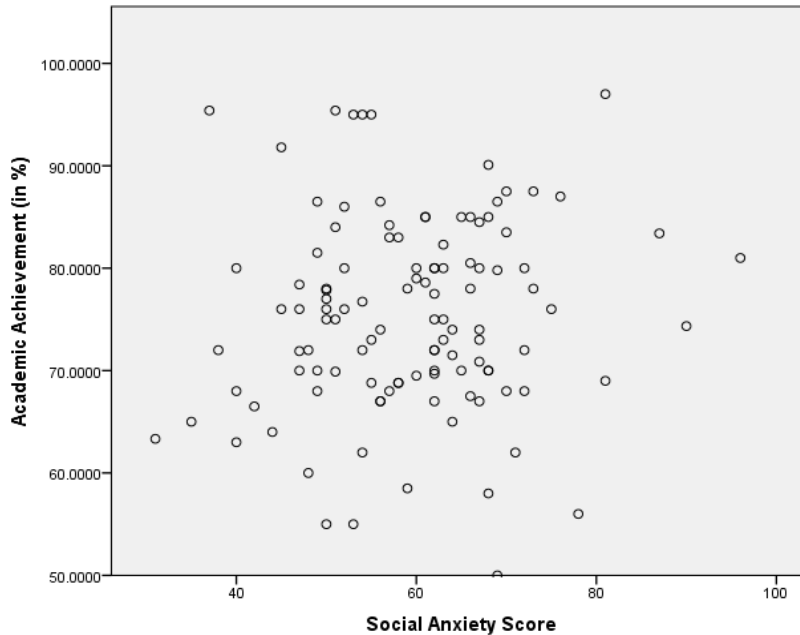


Figure 1: Scatterplot showing the relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement among pre-service teachers.

The scatterplot showed that the data points were widely dispersed without any clear trend. This indicates that there was no visible linear relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement. Therefore, the Spearman rank correlation test was used to examine the relationship between the two continuous variables.

Table 3: Correlation Between Social Anxiety and Academic Achievement ($N = 114$)

Variable	Social Anxiety	Academic Achievement (%)
Social Anxiety	1.000	0.115
Academic Achievement (%)	0.115	1.000

Note: Spearman's rho correlation coefficient; $p = 0.224$ (2-tailed)

The Spearman's rank correlation between social anxiety and academic achievement was found to be $\rho = 0.115$ with $p = 0.224$, which is not statistically significant at both the 0.05 and 0.01 levels. **Based on these results, we fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_{02}).**

DISCUSSION

The findings for Objective 1 revealed that the majority of pre-service teachers (73.7%) experienced moderate levels of social anxiety, while 14.9% had low levels and 11.4% had high levels. These findings align with recent studies indicating a significant prevalence of social anxiety. a study by Şimşek and Başaran (2023) identified two distinct social anxiety profiles among 249 pre-service teachers: 77% with low anxiety and 23% with high anxiety. Similarly, another study by Laldinpuii and Bhattacharjee (2023) reported that approximately

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24.8% of students in higher education settings exhibited high levels of social anxiety, and 56.6% had moderate levels.

The findings for Objective 2 indicate that there was no significant difference in social anxiety levels between male and female pre-service teachers. Although females showed a slightly higher percentage of high social anxiety (20.8%) compared to males (4.5%), the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that the difference was not statistically significant ($U = 1365.50$, $p = 0.210$). This means that both male and female pre-service teachers experienced similar levels of social anxiety. These findings align with previous research showing no significant gender differences in social anxiety. Studies conducted by La Greca and Lopez (1998) as well as La Greca and Harrison (2005) reported no significant sex differences in the mean levels of social anxiety. Their findings also suggested that the relationship between social anxiety, social ties, and academic achievement was similar across males and females. However, some recent studies have observed higher social anxiety levels among female students. For instance, Hayat et al. (2024) found that female college students reported higher levels of social anxiety compared to males. Similarly, Archbell and Coplan (2022) noted that social anxiety among females was associated with less communication with instructors, lower engagement and poorer socio-emotional functioning.

The findings of Objective 3 suggest that there is no significant relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement among pre-service teachers. The Spearman's correlation coefficient was $\rho = 0.115$ with $p = 0.224$, which indicates a non-significant association. This result is consistent with previous researches showing similar patterns. Social anxiety did not emerge as a significant predictor of college GPA (Strahan, 2003), and no correlation was found between GPA and social anxiety among university students (Tayag, 2021). However, some studies have reported significant effects. A significant negative indirect effect of social anxiety on academic achievement was observed through the mediating role of social ties (Brook & Willoughby, 2015). Similarly, students with higher social anxiety, as measured by SPAI-23, had lower GPA and academic achievement (Jin & Zhang, 2022). These mixed findings indicate that the relationship between social anxiety and academic performance may vary depending on context, measurement tools, and mediating factors. Brook & Willoughby (2015) showed that social anxiety can indirectly reduce academic achievement by weakening students' social ties. This suggests that peer connections play a mediating role. Overall, while anxiety alone may not directly affect grades, its influence on social integration can lead to secondary academic disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the prevalence of social anxiety and its relationship with academic achievement among pre-service teachers in Varanasi. The findings revealed that most participants (73.7%) experienced moderate levels of social anxiety, with a smaller percentage showing high (11.4%) and low (14.9%) levels. These results are consistent with existing research on the widespread presence of social anxiety in higher education. The analysis found no significant difference in social anxiety levels between male and female pre-service teachers. Although a higher percentage of females reported high anxiety as compared to males but the statistical test showed the difference was not significant. This suggests that social anxiety affects both genders similarly in this context. Lastly, the study found no significant relationship between social anxiety and academic achievement. The correlation was weak and non-significant. However, previous studies suggest that social

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anxiety may affect academic outcomes indirectly through factors like social ties and engagement.

In conclusion, while social anxiety is moderately prevalent among pre-service teachers, it does not appear to directly impact academic performance. Future research should explore indirect effects and mediating variables to better understand how social anxiety influences educational outcomes.

Educational Implications

1. As the study indicates a moderate prevalence of social anxiety among pre-service teachers, therefore teacher education programs should include components (such as mindfulness, communication and public-speaking training, peer-support groups, counseling services, and confidence-building workshops) to help future teachers manage and reduce anxiety.
2. Although the difference in social anxiety between male and female pre-service teachers is not statistically significant, the higher proportion of females in the high-anxiety category suggests that interventions should be sensitive to gender-related factors and provide additional emotional and social support to those who may be more affected.
3. Educational institutions should provide comprehensive mental health support and counseling services to enhance both academic performance and overall well-being.
4. Training on managing social anxiety can better prepare pre-service teachers to handle their own anxiety and support their future students effectively.
5. Raising awareness about social anxiety among pre-service teachers and educators can help reduce stigma and encourage those affected to seek help and support.
6. Assessment of social anxiety at regular intervals can allow for early detection and intervention to prevent social anxiety from negatively impacting learning or professional development over time.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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