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Research Paper

The Cognitive Amplification of Social Anxiety: Examining the Interplay between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Pre-Event Processing

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ABSTRACT

Social anxiety involves persistent concern about being negatively evaluated by others, and repetitive, anxious thinking before social situations (pre-event processing) may sustain this distress. This study examined the relationships among fear of negative evaluation, pre-event processing, and social anxiety in university students, and tested whether pre-event processing mediates the link between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety. Using a cross-sectional design, 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students (110 women, 40 men) recruited through purposive sampling completed the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, the Anticipatory Social Behaviours Questionnaire, and the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale - Self-Report. Fear of negative evaluation was positively correlated with social anxiety (r = .34) and pre-event processing (r = .52), and pre-event processing was positively correlated with social anxiety (r = .35). Mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap samples showed a significant indirect effect of fear of negative evaluation on social anxiety through pre-event processing (ab = 0.37, 95% CI [0.10, 0.68]), accounting for approximately 37% of the total effect. Because the direct effect remained significant, pre-event processing partially mediated the relationship. These findings suggest that anticipatory rumination is one pathway through which evaluative fears are translated into social anxiety, and they identify pre-event processing as a practical target for cognitive-behavioural interventions with students.

Keywords: *Social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, pre-event processing, anticipatory processing*

Social anxiety, or social phobia, involves marked fear or anxiety in social situations in which a person may be scrutinised by others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People often experience emotional and physical symptoms such as intense self-consciousness, sweating, blushing, and trembling, which vary in intensity across situations. Schlenker and Leary (1982) described social anxiety as arising when people want to make a favourable impression on others but doubt their ability to do so. As a result, individuals may

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dread public speaking, meeting new people, joining conversations, attending parties, dating, or speaking with authority figures (Hofmann, 2007).

Before entering social situations, socially anxious individuals often engage in pre-event apprehension, like replaying past mistakes, predicting negative outcomes, over-rehearsing conversations, and planning ways to escape discomfort (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hinrichsen & Clark, 2003). Many fear that visible signs of anxiety, such as blushing, shaking, or appearing awkward, will lead to embarrassment or rejection (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2013). Although avoiding these situations offers quick relief, it reinforces anxiety over time (Clark & Wells, 1995). Vassilopoulos (2004) found that higher social anxiety is associated with more frequent, intrusive, and hard-to-control negative thinking before social events.

Social anxiety is common and disruptive. Its lifetime prevalence in the United States is approximately 12.1% (Kessler et al., 2005), it tends to be chronic (Cairney et al., 2007), and it is associated with substantial impairment in education, work, and relationships (Stein & Kean, 2000; Whisman et al., 2000). Among young people, social anxiety is linked with educational and interpersonal difficulties and with peer victimisation (Acquah et al., 2016; Ranta et al., 2009). In India, the National Mental Health Survey reported a prevalence of social anxiety disorder of 0.47% among adults; most affected individuals reported disability in work (63%), social (77%), and family life (68%), and the treatment gap was 82% (Suhas et al., 2023). Understanding the cognitive processes that maintains social anxiety is therefore important, particularly in student populations.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of negative evaluation is apprehension about others evaluations, distress over negative evaluations, and the expectation that others will evaluate oneself negatively (Watson & Friend, 1969). People high in this trait tend to avoid evaluative situations and expect poor outcomes even when they perform adequately (Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993). In early work, Watson and Friend (1969) showed that when participants expected to be evaluated, those high in fear of negative evaluation worked harder to avoid disapproval.

Rapee and Heimberg's (1997) cognitive-behavioural model places fear of negative evaluation at the centre of social anxiety. In this model, the "audience" is not limited to a formal audience but includes anyone who might observe the person's behaviour or appearance. Recent studies continue to support this central role. Among 352 military academy students, fear of negative evaluation was strongly correlated with social interaction anxiety (Macovei et al., 2023), and in a large sample of Chinese college students it acted as a mediating mechanism linking negative physical self-perceptions to social anxiety (Wan et al., 2024). Kirca et al. (2024) further showed that the association between fear of negative evaluation and interaction anxiety among university students was partially mediated by cognitive flexibility, indicating that cognitive processes help explain how evaluative fears become anxiety.

Pre-Event Processing

Clark and Wells (1995) identified anticipatory processing as a core feature of social anxiety. Their model describes several cognitive patterns before a feared event: replaying past failures and using them to predict future failure, constructing negative mental images of oneself from an observer's perspective, monitoring internal threat cues such as heart rate or

blushing; and assuming that feeling anxious means appearing anxious and incompetent to others. Hinrichsen and Clark (2003) found that this kind of processing increases anxiety before social events, and Vassilopoulos (2004) showed that higher social anxiety was associated with more negative pre-event predictions even after controlling for general anxiety and depression.

Recent work suggests that pre-event processing has consequences beyond the anticipatory period. Basanovic et al. (2023) found that negative expectancies formed before a simulated job interview, together with state anxiety during the event, fully accounted for the link between social anxiety and negative thinking in the week after the event. Longitudinal research with Chinese college students has also shown that rumination and social anxiety predict each other over time (Wu et al., 2024), and a meta-analysis of 26 studies found that psychological interventions produce large reductions in pre-event rumination, especially when treatments target it directly (Donohue et al., 2024).

The Present Study

Although fear of negative evaluation is consistently linked to social anxiety, the cognitive pathways connecting the two need further clarification. Because pre-event processing may amplify evaluative fears before a social situation even begins, it is a plausible mechanism through which fear of negative evaluation is translated into social anxiety. Testing this pathway in Indian university students also addresses the relative scarcity of research on these processes outside Western samples. The present study therefore examined the relationships among fear of negative evaluation, pre-event processing, and social anxiety, and tested whether pre-event processing mediates the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety.

The study had four objectives: (a) to assess the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety, (b) to assess the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and pre-event processing, (c) to assess the relationship between pre-event processing and social anxiety, and (d) to test whether pre-event processing mediates the link between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety. We hypothesised that fear of negative evaluation would be positively related to social anxiety (H1) and to pre-event processing (H2), that pre-event processing would be positively related to social anxiety (H3), and that pre-event processing would significantly mediate the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety (H4).

METHOD

Research Design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design to evaluate the mediating role of pre-event processing in the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety.

Participants

The sample comprised 150 university students recruited through purposive sampling from two colleges of Bangalore. Participants were 110 women (73.3%) and 40 men (26.7%) aged 18 to 35 years (M = 20.90, SD = 2.16). Of these, 94 (62.7%) were undergraduate and 56 (37.3%) were postgraduate students, all enrolled in the science stream (see Table 1). Inclusion criteria were fluency in English and current enrolment in an undergraduate or postgraduate programme. Individuals with a comorbid psychotic illness were excluded.

Measures

- **Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale–Self-Report (LSAS-SR):** The LSAS-SR (Liebowitz, 1987) contains 24 items describing social interaction and performance situations. Each item is rated separately for fear or anxiety (0 = *none*, 3 = *severe*) and for avoidance (0 = *never*, 3 = *usually*), yielding Fear and Avoidance subscale scores (each ranging from 0 to 72) and a total score ranging from 0 to 144. Higher scores indicate greater social anxiety. The self-report version has shown strong internal consistency and convergent validity (Baker et al., 2002; Fresco et al., 2001). In this study, the total score was computed as the sum of the Fear and Avoidance subscales.
- **Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE):** The BFNE (Leary, 1983) is a 12-item measure of apprehension about being evaluated negatively by others. Items are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic of me*), four items are reverse-scored, and total scores range from 12 to 60, with higher scores indicating stronger fear of negative evaluation.
- **Anticipatory Social Behaviours Questionnaire (ASBQ):** The ASBQ (Hinrichsen & Clark, 2003) assesses anticipatory processing and preparatory behaviours before social events, such as mentally rehearsing conversations, recalling past social failures, and planning ways to avoid or escape the situation. Higher scores indicate more pre-event processing. The ASBQ consists of 12 items rated on a 5-point scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always), yielding total scores from 0 to 48. Higher scores indicate greater engagement in anticipatory processing before social events.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee of Gurukula Kangri (Deemed to be University), Haridwar, India. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and told that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. After providing written informed consent, they completed a demographic sheet and the three questionnaires in person.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for all study variables, and distributional assumptions were examined using skewness, kurtosis, and the Shapiro–Wilk test. Pearson product-moment correlations were used to test H1 to H3. H4 was tested with a simple mediation model following the regression-based approach of Hayes (2022; PROCESS Model 4), with fear of negative evaluation as the predictor (X), pre-event processing as the mediator (M), and social anxiety as the outcome (Y). The indirect effect was evaluated with 5,000 percentile bootstrap samples and was considered significant when its 95% confidence interval excluded zero. As a supplementary analysis, undergraduate and postgraduate students were compared with independent-samples *t* tests. Analyses were conducted in Python using the SciPy and NumPy libraries, and the significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Mean scores were 35.15 (*SD* = 7.72) for fear of negative evaluation, 31.00 (*SD* = 6.94) for pre-event processing, and 49.10 (*SD* = 22.90) for social anxiety. Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within ±1. Shapiro–Wilk tests were significant for fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety (*p*s < .05) but not for pre-event processing (*p* = .181). Because this test is highly sensitive with a sample of

this size and skewness and kurtosis were low, parametric analyses were retained, bootstrapping of the indirect effect does not assume normality.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Female	110	73.3
Male	40	26.7
Education level		
Undergraduate (UG)	94	62.7
Postgraduate (PG)	56	37.3
Stream		
Science	150	100.0

Note. N = 150. Participants were aged 18–35 years (*M* = 20.90, *SD* = 2.16).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Fear of negative evaluation (BFNE)	35.15	7.72	12	56	0.36	0.40
Pre-event processing (ASBQ)	31.00	6.94	17	47	0.12	-0.44
Social anxiety (LSAS-SR total)	49.10	22.90	6	105	0.39	-0.38
LSAS-SR Fear subscale	23.51	12.17	0	56	0.46	-0.22
LSAS-SR Avoidance subscale	25.59	12.57	0	56	0.21	-0.68

Note. N = 150. BFNE = Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, ASBQ = Anticipatory Social Behaviours Questionnaire, LSAS-SR = Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale–Self-Report. *SE* of skewness = 0.20, *SE* of kurtosis = 0.39. Skewness ranged from 0.12 to 0.46 and kurtosis from -0.68 to 0.40, within the ±2 range commonly taken to indicate acceptable normality.

Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 3, fear of negative evaluation was positively and significantly correlated with social anxiety, $r(148) = .34$, $p < .001$, supporting H1.

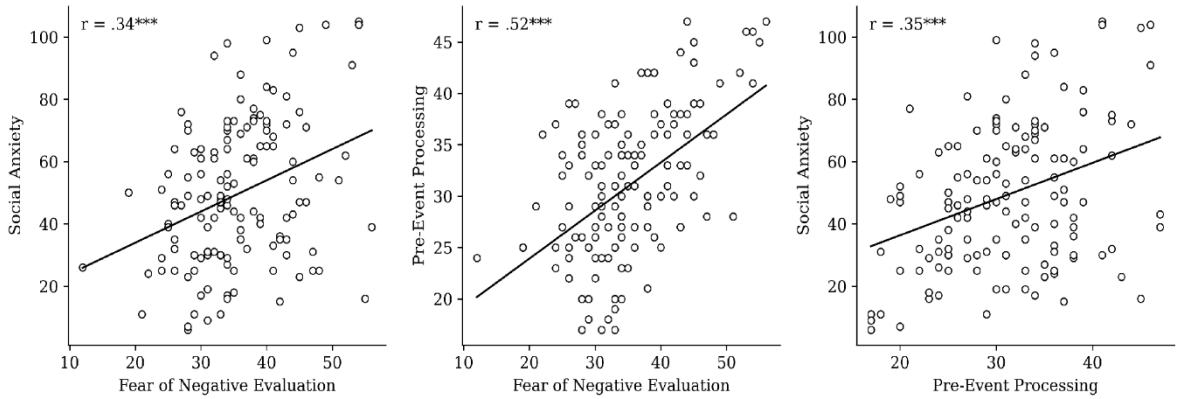
Fear of negative evaluation was also positively correlated with pre-event processing, $r(148) = .52$, $p < .001$, supporting H2, and pre-event processing was positively correlated with social anxiety, $r(148) = .35$, $p < .001$, supporting H3. Following Cohen (1988), the associations of social anxiety with fear of negative evaluation and with pre-event processing were moderate, and the association between fear of negative evaluation and pre-event processing was large. Both predictors were related to the Fear (*r*s = .39 and .35) and Avoidance (*r*s = .24 and .31) components of social anxiety (see Figure 1).

Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Fear of negative evaluation	35.15	7.72	—				
2. Pre-event processing	31.00	6.94	.52***	—			
3. Social anxiety (total)	49.10	22.90	.34***	.35***	—		
4. LSAS-SR Fear	23.51	12.17	.39***	.35***	.92***	—	
5. LSAS-SR Avoidance	25.59	12.57	.24**	.31***	.93***	.71***	—

*Note. N = 150. Social anxiety subscales (4, 5) are components of the total score (3), so their correlations with it are part–whole correlations. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001 (two-tailed).*

Figure 1 Bivariate Relationships Among Fear of Negative Evaluation, Pre-Event Processing, and Social Anxiety



Note. Each point represents one participant ($N = 150$), lines are least-squares regression lines. ***$p < .001$.

Mediation Analysis

Regression coefficients for the mediation model are presented in Table 4 and the effects in Table 5 and Figure 2. Fear of negative evaluation significantly predicted pre-event processing (path *a*: $B = 0.47$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), explaining 27.1% of its variance. Controlling for fear of negative evaluation, pre-event processing significantly predicted social anxiety (path *b*: $B = 0.80$, $SE = 0.29$, $p = .007$). Together, the two predictors explained 15.7% of the variance in social anxiety, $F(2, 147) = 13.71$, $p < .001$.

The total effect of fear of negative evaluation on social anxiety was significant ($c = 1.00$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect through pre-event processing was also significant, $ab = 0.37$, bootstrap $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.68], completely standardised effect = .13, 95% CI [.03, .23], supporting H4. The direct effect remained significant after pre-event processing was included ($c' = 0.63$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .018$), indicating partial mediation. Pre-event processing accounted for approximately 37% of the total effect (Figure 3).

Table 4 Regression Coefficients for the Mediation Model (PROCESS Model 4)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*T*	*p*	95% CI
Outcome: Pre-event processing (M) — $R^2 = .271$, $F(1, 148) = 55.07$, $p < .001$					
Constant	14.56	2.27	6.42	< .001	[10.08, 19.04]
Fear of negative evaluation (a)	0.47	0.06	7.42	< .001	[0.34, 0.59]
Outcome: Social anxiety (Y) — $R^2 = .157$, $F(2, 147) = 13.71$, $p < .001$					
Constant	2.19	9.14	0.24	.811	[-15.86, 20.25]
Fear of negative evaluation (c′)	0.63	0.26	2.39	.018	[0.11, 1.15]
Pre-event processing (b)	0.80	0.29	2.73	.007	[0.22, 1.38]
Total effect model: Social anxiety (Y) — $R^2 = .114$, $F(1, 148) = 19.12$, $p < .001$					
Constant	13.84	8.25	1.68	.096	[-2.47, 30.15]
Fear of negative evaluation (c)	1.00	0.23	4.37	< .001	[0.55, 1.46]

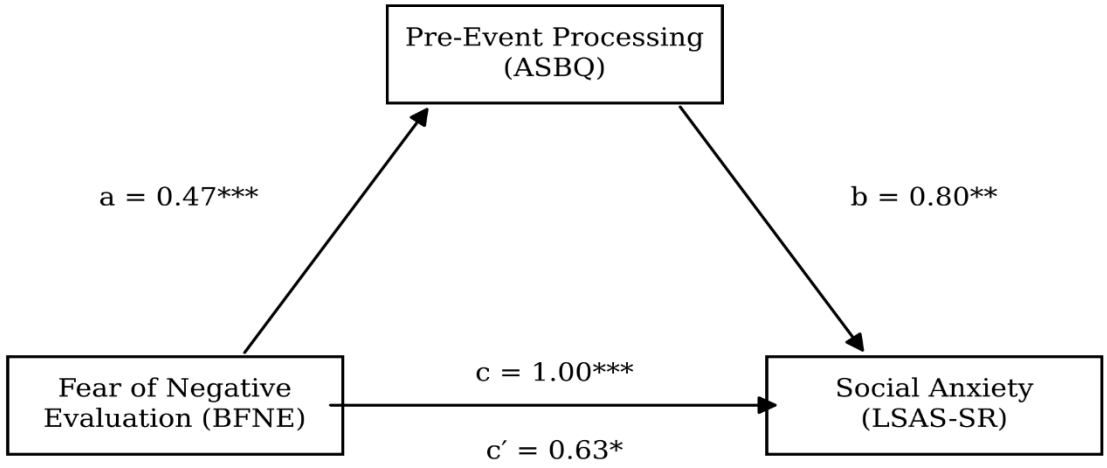
Note. N = 150. B = unstandardized coefficient, CI = confidence interval. X = fear of negative evaluation (BFNE), M = pre-event processing (ASBQ), Y = social anxiety (LSAS-SR).

Table 5 Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Social Anxiety

Effect	Path	*B*	*SE*	95% CI	β
Total effect	c	1.00	0.23	[0.55, 1.46]	.34
Direct effect	c′	0.63	0.26	[0.11, 1.15]	.21
Indirect effect (via pre-event processing)	a × b	0.37	0.15	[0.10, 0.68]	.13

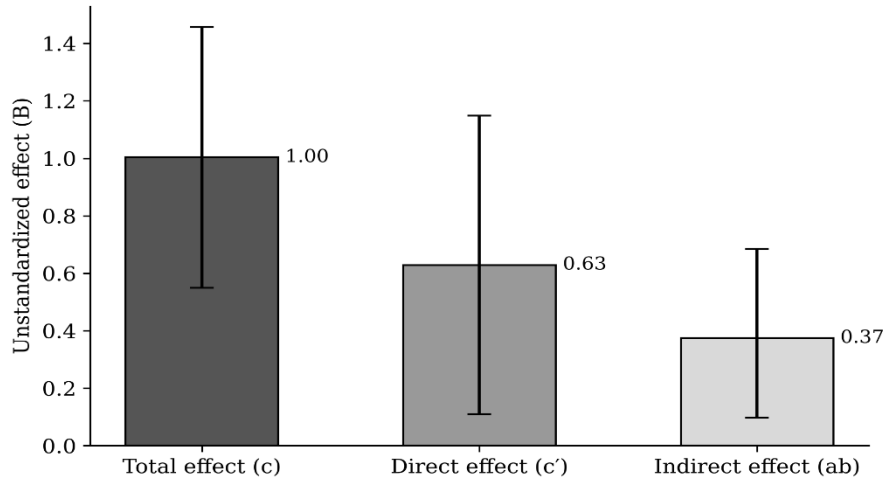
Note. N = 150. The indirect effect was tested with 5,000 bootstrap samples, its *SE* and CI are bootstrap estimates. A CI that excludes zero indicates a significant effect. β for the indirect effect is the completely standardized effect, 95% bootstrap CI [.03, .23]. Proportion of the total effect mediated = .37. Sobel test: z = 2.56, p = .010.

Figure 2 Mediation Model of Fear of Negative Evaluation, Pre-Event Processing, and Social Anxiety



Note. Values are unstandardised regression coefficients. c = total effect; c' = direct effect controlling for pre-event processing; ab = indirect effect with 95% bootstrap confidence interval (5,000 resamples). N = 150. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Figure 3 Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Social Anxiety



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals; the interval for the indirect effect is a percentile bootstrap interval based on 5,000 resamples.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how fear of negative evaluation and pre-event processing relate to social anxiety in Indian university students, and whether pre-event processing explains part of the link between evaluative fear and social anxiety. All four hypotheses were supported: students who feared negative evaluation reported more pre-event processing and more social anxiety, and pre-event processing partially mediated the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety.

Fear of Negative Evaluation and Social Anxiety

The positive association between fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety (H1; $r = .34$) is consistent with cognitive-behavioural models of social anxiety that place evaluative fear at the core of. the disorder (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Findings are also in line with recent results in student samples (Kırca et al., 2024; Macovei et al., 2023; Wan et al., 2024). The association in this sample was moderate, smaller than the strong correlation reported by Macovei et al. (2023). One reason may be measurement: the LSAS-SR assesses both fear and avoidance across a broad range of performance and interaction situations, whereas measures of social interaction anxiety focus more narrowly on evaluative interactions. In line with this, fear of negative evaluation was more strongly related to the Fear subscale than to the Avoidance subscale in the present data, suggesting that evaluative concerns may translate into felt anxiety more readily than into overt avoidance, which in students may be constrained by academic and social demands.

Fear of Negative Evaluation and Pre-Event Processing

Fear of negative evaluation showed the strongest association in the study, with pre event processing (H2; $r = .52$). Students who worry about being judged appear to spend considerable effort mentally preparing for social situations by rehearsing, anticipating failure, and recalling past embarrassments. Although such preparation may be intended to prevent humiliation, it keeps threat-related thoughts active and may increase anxiety before the event begins (Clark & Wells, 1995; Hinrichsen & Clark, 2003). This finding is consistent with Basanovic et al. (2023), who showed that negative expectancies formed before a social-evaluative task shape how people feel during it and how they think about it afterwards.

Pre-Event Processing and Social Anxiety

Pre-event processing was positively related to social anxiety (H3; $r = .35$), consistent with Vassilopoulos (2004) and with evidence that repetitive negative thinking and social anxiety reinforce each other over time in college students (Wu et al., 2024). Anticipatory rehearsal, worst-case predictions, and monitoring of bodily cues may raise baseline distress before students enter social settings, making ordinary interactions feel more threatening.

The Mediating Role of Pre-Event Processing

The mediation analysis (H4) indicated that pre-event processing is one pathway linking fear of evaluation to social anxiety: fear of negative evaluation was associated with more anticipatory processing, which in turn was associated with greater social anxiety. This pathway accounted for roughly 37% of the total effect. Because the direct effect remained significant, the mediation was partial, implying that other mechanisms also connect evaluative fear to social anxiety. These findings extend the Clark and Wells (1995) model by showing that the anticipatory phase alone carries a meaningful share of the link between evaluative fear and social anxiety. Possible explanation of these findings is that fear of

negative evaluation can trigger threat focused anticipation. Fear of negative evaluation may not only directly raise social anxiety. It first can set off the rumination which becomes the first link in the mediating chain. During pre-event processing people tend to recall earlier embarrassing episodes which can strengthen negative self-belief (ex. I come across badly. This can lead to increase in social anxiety. To manage the impression rumination then turns into rehearsing lines, planning, avoiding long conversations, checking how are others judging him/her. Constant monitoring can lead to cognitive overload. Ironically the effort to look awkward can make people behave more awkwardly. It confirms their belief that they look strange and further increases social anxiety. Pre event apprehension can feed a self-maintaining cycle with post-event processing. Anticipatory rumination tends to go together with post-event rumination, where the person replays and criticizes their performance afterwards. These "memories" can lead to next cycle of pre-event over thinking. It can result into a loop that makes fear of negative evaluation into a generalized social anxiety.

There are clinical implications of this in cognitive behavior therapy. Lowering pre-event processing can lower fear of negative evaluation and social anxiety.

Implications

The findings have several practical implications for clinicians, counsellors, and educators working with students.

- **Targeting pre-event processing.** Because anticipatory processing mediated part of the link between evaluative fear and social anxiety, interventions can help students recognise and interrupt anticipatory scripts, excessive rehearsal, and replaying of past events before social situations. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that pre-event rumination responds well to psychological treatment, particularly when interventions target it directly (Donohue et al., 2024).
- **Addressing evaluative fears.** Cognitive restructuring of beliefs about being judged, combined with behavioural experiments that test feared outcomes, may weaken the cycle both at the level of evaluative fear and at the pre-event stage. Fear of negative evaluation has been identified as a mechanism of change in cognitive-behavioural and mindfulness-based treatments for social anxiety (Morrison et al., 2024).
- **Campus mental-health services.** Considering the large treatment gap for social anxiety in India (Suhas et al., 2023), universities could incorporate brief screening for evaluative fear and anticipatory processing into counselling services and offer skills-based workshops before important evaluative campus events such as presentations, examinations, and placement interviews.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered. First, the sample of 150 students was drawn through purposive sampling from two colleges and consisted entirely of science-stream students, most of whom were women. Results may not generalise to other streams, institutions, regions, or to men. Future research should use larger, probability-based samples across disciplines. Second, the cross-sectional design means that the mediation model describes statistical associations rather than causal effects, the reverse direction, in which social anxiety drives pre-event processing, is equally plausible given evidence of reciprocal relationships (Wu et al., 2024). Longitudinal or experimental designs are needed to establish temporal order. Finally, the model did not include potential covariates such as depression, general anxiety, or post-event rumination, which future studies should examine in serial or parallel mediation models.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that fear of negative evaluation and pre-event processing are both associated with social anxiety among university students, and that pre-event processing partially explains how evaluative fears translate into social anxiety. Anxious anticipation before social situations appears to amplify the effect of being afraid of judgement. Targeting anticipatory thinking, alongside beliefs about negative evaluation, may therefore be a useful focus for prevention and intervention efforts with students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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