Deconstructing the Impact of Gender, Culture and Society on Public Speaking Anxiety: Perspectives of Psychologists and Business Studies Students

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Abstract

Most people, across the globe, fear the prospect of standing and speaking in front of an audience. This study elucidates the process by which preconceived gender roles, societal expectations, and cultural dynamics contribute to public speaking anxiety (PSA) amongst male and female undergraduate Business Administration students in Karachi, Pakistan. Through a qualitative approach, this research highlights distinct gendered experiences of public speaking anxiety (PSA), with female students reporting higher anxiety levels driven by societal pressures and unwanted scrutiny. However, in the same context, male students also suffer from public speaking anxiety, but for various different reasons, including hegemonic masculinity and societal expectations that discourage vulnerability and display of emotion. As a coping mechanism, female students mostly report a reliance on social support, while male students report a preference to avoid any situations that would lead to a speech in front of an audience. This study provides significant insights into the intricate interplay of societal norms, cultural dynamics, and gender stereotypes in shaping individuals' experiences with public speaking anxiety (PSA). The findings hold critical implications for educators, counsellors, and policymakers, informing their efforts to establish inclusive and supportive environments conducive to developing strong communicative competencies.

INTRODUCTION

According to McCroskey (2009) and Hope et al. (2019), approximately 70% of the global population suffers from public speaking anxiety. Defined by fear, apprehension, and avoidance (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012), public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a normal and common reaction to the prospect of speaking in front of others, observed in people from all backgrounds and

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cultures (Bodie, 2010). This type of anxiety can be represented as cognitive anxiety, including self-doubt, negative thoughts, and difficulty concentrating (He, 2017; Maya et al., 2024). Bodie (2010) and Richmond et al. (2013) describe fidgeting and weak eye contact as behavioral symptoms of public speaking anxiety and sweating, dizziness, and palpitations as signs of physiological responses to PSA. Several authors affirm that PSA may have an important impact on the students' academic achievements and career opportunities (Hope, et al., 2019; Maya, et al., 2024; Pandey and Pandey, 2014).

In Pakistan, the levels of public speaking anxiety are influenced by the sociocultural context of gendered roles, such as "who speaks about what" and "who speaks how", as well as the societal expectations which guide individuals' communication ability and self-confidence (Hussain et al., 2021). These pressures are particularly pronounced for undergraduates, as public speaking is integral to their academic readiness and a crucial skill for professional life (Soomro et al., 2019). Within such a sociocultural and gendered context, a critical understanding of how these structures either intensify or alleviate stress among male and female students becomes imperative. This qualitative study seeks to explore how PSA appears among undergraduate Pakistani students of Business Administration, with a particular emphasis on the impact of gender stereotyping, cultural dynamics and societal expectations on their experience. The study's rich narratives draw attention to the wider implications of public speaking anxiety (PSA), offering educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers a framework for structuring more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides insights into public speaking anxiety (PSA) by integrating psychological, sociocultural and gendered perspectives in a theoretical approach. The model is built on the argument that Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is a subtype of a broader range of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) Theory. Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is characterized by an enduring and debilitating fear of humiliation, negative evaluation, embarrassment, rejection, and/or being scrutinized during social and performance situations (Hofmann, 2007; Liebowitz, 1987; Zha et al., 2023). This form of fear manifests in avoidant behaviors and even physiological systems that can closely resemble the experiences of people with PSA (Salari et al., 2024).

Likewise, McCroskey's Communication Apprehension Theory (1977) is a foundational concept in the field of communication studies. McCroskey (1977) defined CA as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons." It helps elaborate that PSA is further augmented when situational elements, for example, audience size, perceived evaluation, interact with an individual's psychological traits. Approaching the phenomenon from a sociocultural perspective, Eagly's (1987) Social Role Theory links socially prescribed gender role expectations to behavior, specifically in public speaking contexts. Traditional gender norms in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan, prescribe submissiveness and modesty to women, and this can further compound PSA, particularly in the female student population (Khurshid, 2017; Rabia, et al., 2019). Using this theory to explore the gendered variations in public speaking experiences allowed for a richer understanding of such experiences in context. Harding's theory of Feminist Standpoint (1991) positions new lenses which enhance understanding of the lived experiences of the challenges

that women face in public speaking situations. It contends that systemic marginalization augments not only the lack of access to public stages but also induces the internalized fears and self-doubt that inform women's experiences with PSA. This viewpoint is essential to tackle this issue effectively since the intersections of gender and culture intensify the prevalence and severity of PSA especially among female students.

Finally, Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) offers a psychological framework for investigating the role of self-belief in overcoming PSA. The assumption is that a person's likelihood of succeeding with a task is greatly affected by confidence in the ability to do the task. This fear of failure is amplified for those with low self-efficacy, due to social and cultural factors such as gender, age, and prior experiences, which can ultimately lead to avoiding public speaking situations. Therefore, this study builds on five relevant theories: Social Anxiety Disorder Theory, Communication Apprehension Theory, Social Role Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory to explore the prevalence of causes of PSA among the undergraduate students in Pakistan. This theoretical literature review enables a more nuanced exploration of how psychological, cultural, and gendered aspects influence public speaking encounters within a given sociocultural milieu.
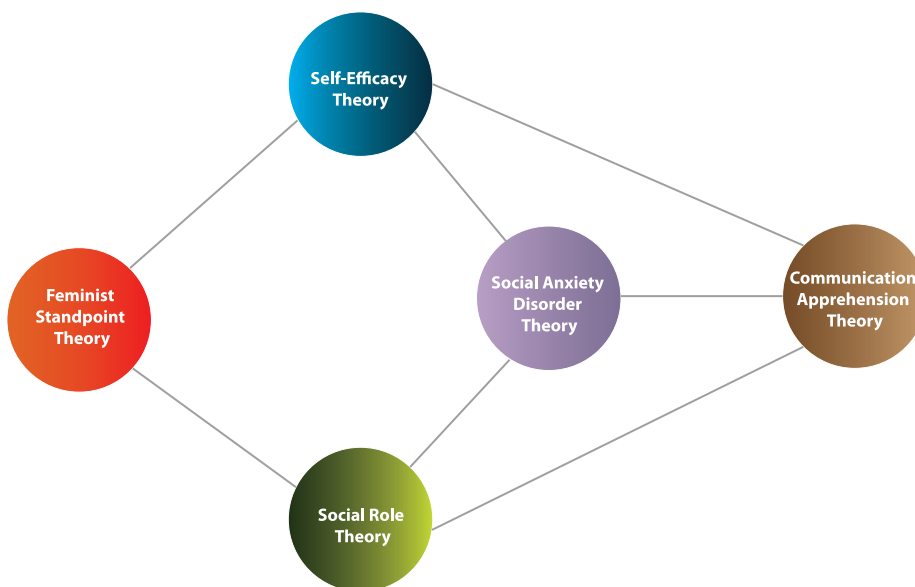

Figure 1: *Theoretical framework*

Gender, Culture, Society and Anxiety

Gender plays a crucial role in how people live their lives in any given human society. Men and women have different roles to play in different societies and as such are treated in different manners (Bian, et al., 2017; Brandt, & Henry, 2012; Carli, et al., 2016). Pakistani society is no exception. Therefore, in Pakistan too, gender influences how a person will behave, act or speak in a given situation (Ahmed, et al. 2017). Men are traditionally expected to be assertive, outspoken, and confident. Women, on the other hand, are often trained to be demure, cautious with their words, and even shy. This creates a fundamental difference in how girls and boys are raised (Bian et al., 2017; Brandt & Henry, 2012). Displaying a 57.5 per cent gender parity,

Pakistan has been ranked 142 out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report, 2023). Numbers reveal a high literacy rate for males, higher average income for males, and a higher number of cases of depression and evidently a higher anxiety or stress level for females (World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report, 2023; Niaz, 2004). With only Iran, Algeria, Chad and Afghanistan below, Pakistan is near the bottom of both the regional and global rankings according to the report (World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report, 2023). Such expansive disparity leads to a pervasive lower self-esteem and lower self-confidence amongst female members of the society. As per another report i.e. UN Women's National Report (2023) on the status of women in Pakistan, "a staggering 53% of females (15-64 years) reported that they never attended school compared to 33% of males in the same age range."

The ripple effects of such a situation know no bounds and affect generations. Uneducated women struggle with raising confident, empowered women, and the whole situation transforms into a vicious circle. UN Women's National Report (2023) mentions, "the overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) of women in Pakistan at 21% stands well below the global percentage at 39%." UN Women's National Report (2023) further states, "at the national level, the refined LFPR of women (aged 15-64 years) is very low at 26% compared to 84% for men." The societal expectation of women primarily performing the role of homemakers further limits their exposure to public speaking situations. Women mostly stay at home as housewives and do not become a part of the country's workforce, not needing public speaking skills and not executing or learning it for the same reasons (Chaudhry, 2007). These societal and cultural norms, gendered roles, educational disparities and limited professional opportunities conspire to fuel public speaking anxiety in females further (Perveen et al., 2018).

Problem Statement

Research shows that a large portion of the global population, i.e., 69 per cent, faces some level of anxiety related to public speaking (Hope et al., 2019). Proficient communication skills, which are crucial for success in international corporations and often a requirement for employment, are obstructed by this anxiety (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). In Pakistan, too, anxiety-induced reluctance to engage in public speaking significantly hinders students' academic performance (Hussain et al., 2021) and limits their participation in classroom discussions, presentations, and co-curricular activities (Ahmed et al., 2017). This type of anxiety manifests differently in male and female students and stems from cultural, educational, and societal reasons (Bodie, 2010). Gender-based causes of prevalence and severity of public speaking anxiety, which are rooted in the societal and cultural fabric of Pakistan, remain understudied in the Pakistani context and need exploration to develop relevant strategies and support services (Hussain et al., 2021; Soomro et al., 2019). In the local context of Pakistan, public speaking anxiety (PSA) needs to be explored among business administration students, specifically because effective communication is a key skill in both their academic and professional lives. These students are preparing for leadership roles in management, marketing, and entrepreneurship—fields where confident speaking is essential. In academic settings, PSA can lower performance, reduce classroom interaction and impact self-esteem. Professionally, it can limit opportunities to lead, pitch ideas and represent a company effectively. Employers also consider people with public speaking skills to be better candidates for employment. Karachi's cultural and social dynamics also play a role in how students express themselves. By understanding and addressing PSA

early, we can foster self-confidence in students and the communication skills needed to succeed in a competitive, global environment.

Research Purpose

The study aimed to explore the different forms of manifestation of public speaking anxiety and the underlying reasons for its prevalence as experienced by Business Administration students in Karachi. The researchers also explored the similarities and differences between the experiences of the male and female students with public speaking anxiety. Furthermore, the study explored the role of gender, culture and society in inducing anxiety amongst Business Administration students from the perspective of psychologists and included the strategies recommended by the same for addressing public speaking anxiety in undergraduate students.

Research Questions

- What underlying factors do male and female undergraduate Business Administration students in Karachi identify as contributing to their experiences of public speaking anxiety?
- How do male undergraduate Business Administration students in Karachi describe their experiences with public speaking anxiety?
- How do female undergraduate Business Administration students in Karachi describe their experiences with public speaking anxiety?
- How do psychologists in Karachi perceive the influence of gender, cultural norms, and societal expectations on public speaking anxiety among students?
- What strategies do psychologists recommend for supporting undergraduate students in managing public speaking anxiety effectively?

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is most suitable given the focus on exploring in-depth experiences, perceptions, and subjective understandings of public speaking anxiety (PSA) among male and female undergraduate students in Karachi. Strauss and Corbin (2015) indicate that qualitative research is "designed to provide a wealth of detail about a phenomenon," which undoubtedly makes it particularly suitable for studies that wish to explore meanings and interpretations of participants. They additionally claim that "discovering patterns of action and interaction is crucial to qualitative inquiry," particularly in research where discovering contextual and relational dynamics is a goal. To achieve this goal, data were primarily collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Furthermore, as qualitative research is a great means to explore the "lived experience" of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this methodology is ideally aligned with the current research's aims of understanding how gender, culture, and social expectations collectively contribute to the development and manifestation of PSA among Karachi's Business Administration students.

Building upon the rationale for a qualitative approach, the methodological rigour of this study was further ensured through a commitment to ethical considerations, systematic data analysis, and robust strategies for trustworthiness. Prior to the interview, all students provided informed consent, ensuring their voluntary involvement and understanding of the

study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time (Stewart & Cash, 2006). Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Data analysis primarily employed a thematic analysis approach, involving an iterative process of familiarization with the data, initial coding to identify emergent themes, searching for patterns, reviewing and refining themes, and ultimately defining and naming them. Researcher reflexivity was continuously practised, with the primary investigator maintaining a reflective journal to acknowledge and bracket personal biases and assumptions, thereby enhancing objectivity in interpretation. Data saturation was systematically pursued by continuing data collection until no new themes or significant insights emerged from the participants' narratives, indicating a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, the trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through multiple strategies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), including member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with participants for validation, and peer debriefing, involving discussions with an experienced qualitative researcher to examine the analysis and interpretations critically.

Context of the Research

Pakistan's largest city and its educational hub, Karachi, is home to many public and private universities serving a wide variety of constituencies. Two universities with Business Administration departments were selected for this study to reflect a balance between accessibility, logistical feasibility, manageability and data richness. The universities were further chosen based on their comprehensive offering of two communication-focused courses, i.e. Professional and Business Communication and Professional Communication Skills, which align with the fourth-year students' profiles necessary for this research. This focus allows for an in-depth exploration of experiences among students already engaged in public speaking as part of their academic curriculum, thus providing relevant and comparable insights.

Participants

The student participants were selected through purposive sampling from the fourth-year cohort enrolled in Professional and Business Communication and Professional Communication Skills courses. These courses were chosen for their focus on speech and communication, ensuring that participants had relevant experience with public speaking as part of their academic curriculum. A total of twenty students (ten male students and ten female students) and five clinical and educational psychologists were included in the study. Snowball Sampling was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with clinical and educational psychologists. Along with the semi-structured interviews with psychologists, separate focus groups were conducted for male and female students to explore shared experiences and gender-specific insights into PSA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a common experience among students of both genders with shared physical symptoms and overall fears; however, the manifestations and responses occur in the context of gendered cultural and societal norms. Both genders shared some similar symptoms, such as shaking and fast heartbeats, and high anxiety levels over fears of being scrutinized. However, the gendered coping mechanisms were different: male students were

more likely to internalize their anxiety and fear, employing avoidance tactics, trying to live up to male ideals of calmness and infallibility, while female students were more likely to externalize, seeking affirmation and reassurance. This divergence is emblematic of wider social pressures shaping their response to anxiety and varied coping mechanisms.

Core Themes Emerging from Male Students' Responses

Generally, the male students pointed to audience dynamics as a key factor in their anxiety, particularly the combination of a formal setting and interaction with someone in authority or a stranger. Disinterested or critical audiences lead to perceived evaluative pressure, which is likely to amplify self-doubt (Bodie, 2010). Likewise, societal narratives associating masculinity with confidence and dominance create an internal conflict, as vulnerability is shunned (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Male participants also highlighted the lack of training in communication and emotional intelligence as a barrier to overcoming PSA, reflecting broader educational shortcomings. Coping mechanisms such as humour and assertiveness are employed to mask vulnerability, aligning with Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, where individuals strive to maintain socially acceptable images. Public speaking becomes a platform for negotiating masculinity, illustrating Butler's (1990) performativity theory, as men reconcile societal expectations with personal traits.

Core Themes Emerging from Female Students' Responses

As for general responses of female students, their experiences also revealed significant audience-related anxiety, particularly in hierarchical and collectivist cultural contexts, where audience reactions carry significant weight (Hofstede, 2001). The fear of disengagement and silence also reflected a heightened need for external validation, deeply tied to patriarchal expectations of agreeable and likeable behavior (Ridgeway, 2011). Internalized fears of failure and perfectionism, stemming from self-objectification and societal pressures, further inhibited their confidence and participation in public speaking tasks (He, 2017; Maya et al., 2024). Cultural narratives valorizing silence as a feminine virtue compound this issue, with silence equated to modesty and respectability (Khan, 1998). Despite risks associated with visibility, female participants see public speaking as necessary for social transformation, reflecting Foucault's (1980) idea of disrupting power structures through resistance. Public speaking becomes a site of resistance and empowerment for female participants. It allows them to challenge societal norms and reclaim their voices, resonating with Hooks' (1989) emphasis on voice as a tool for empowerment. However, the burden of representing all women in public spaces underscores the weight of societal expectations, aligning with Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality, which highlights compounded oppression through overlapping identities.

SIMILARITIES

Physiological Symptoms

With regard to similarities, male and female students describe feeling the same physiological symptoms when faced with disturbing PSAs. These symptoms — sweating, shaky hands, dry mouth and a racing heart — are all common manifestations of the body's fight-or-flight response, which is triggered in high-pressure situations. "I feel my heart start pounding, and my hands

get so sweaty. I always feel like everyone can see it," a female student expressed. Similarly, a male student observed, "My hands start shaking, and I can feel my voice breaking. It's like I have no control over it." These reactions are in line with McCroskey's (1997) description of PSA as a normal physiological reaction to performance anxiety and fear of evaluation. Our conclusion is consistent with Bodie (2010) and Richmond et al., (2013), who also point out physiological indicators of PSA.

Fear of Judgment

The fear of being judged by others is also one of the basic everyday PSA experiences of both males and females. Both genders worry that they might get called out for how they speak, look or simply do their jobs. "What if I look stupid or have a squeaky voice?" a female student said. "I'm worried about people's perception of me when they see how I look and sound," she added. While a male peer explained that "You're checking there's nothing you have forgotten, nothing where you're going to suffer for. It's like, I feel like the class is lining up and waiting for me to mess up for any reason." These viewpoints are ideologically consistent with the theory of a "spotlight effect" as proposed by Gilovich et al. (2000), where individuals overestimate the amount of attention they receive, which intensifies their fear of scrutiny. The findings of He (2017), Mesri (2012) and Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013) also support these findings of our study.

DIFFERENCES

Societal and Cultural Expectations

Social and cultural expectations create substantial gender-based variation in how individuals experience PSA. For girls, societal standards focus on grace, humility and likability. "You, as a woman, are meant to use nice words, be graceful and soft, not loud," one female participant said. "There is a concern that if you speak up too forcefully, you're not going to be seen in a favorable way — you're going to be seen as rude, as bossy," said one female participant. In contrast, the male students are encouraged to appear dominant and confident, qualities associated with leadership. One male participant said: "So men are, you know, the natural leaders; they're confident; they're clear. I feel like there's this pressure to act like I'm in charge, and I don't feel good about it even when it's the right thing to do." These expectations resemble the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and Ridgeway's (2011) account of gendered behavioural scripts that enhance PSA by holding both sexes to certain high standards. The results are in line with the other studies, such as those of Brandt & Henry (2012), Maturanec (2015), Mesri (2012), and Ezzi (2012).

AUDIENCE PERCEPTION

The perception of the audience is very important, especially to male students who feel they have to display a certain degree of authority and control and power at all times and especially in situations where boys are supposed to appear as strong figures. "When I'm participating in class, I always worry about how the professor or my peers will see me. I have to be the one who knows what I'm talking about," said a male participant. At the same time, female students are less worried about authority and more about maintaining a "likeable" and "composed" persona. "What should I look like, or what will people think when they hear my loud and bold

voice? I want to look confident, but not too upfront," commented a female participant. This is consistent with cultural expectations that associate male competence with leadership and female competence with compliance and acceptability (Perveen et al., 2018; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2013; Ridgeway, 2011).

Perceptions of Vulnerability

Gender differences involve differential perceptions of vulnerability (Butler, 1990; Carlie et al., 2016). As per our findings, male students are more likely to prevent evidence of stress and do not show any traces of vulnerability, as it might be considered weakness. "I can't afford to show any sign of weakness. I feel if I say I am nervous, then that's a fail in being a man," commented one male participant. By contrast, female students are a little more comfortable with the idea of vulnerability, yet are afraid of being seen as a "weak" person. A female participant shared, "I do feel nervous. I try to calm myself by thinking it's okay to be a little vulnerable, but at the same time, I don't want to seem weak in front of anyone." These dynamics reflect the cultural conditioning of men to hide weakness and women to balance emotional openness with composure (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Tamres et al., 2002) and corroborate with several other studies as well, including Bodie (2010), Charito & Marie (2021), Öztürk & Gürbüz (2013), and Wilson (2006).

Coping Strategies - Similarities

A very common strategy revealed by male and female students was to avoid the whole task by getting absent on the day of the speech or delaying it to every possible extent. Preparation and overthinking are common coping mechanisms across genders. Both male and female students engage in meticulous rehearsal to manage their anxiety and increase self-confidence. "I rehearse in front of a mirror multiple times, and sometimes even in front of friends. It gives me a little more confidence," shared a female participant. Similarly, a male participant explained, "I keep memorizing my speech in my head to ensure I will not forget anything. I over-prepare because I'm always worried about failing." This behavior aligns with Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory, wherein preparation helps individuals feel more competent, reducing anxiety. These attitudes are also in conformity with the results of some other research, such as those of Ahmed et al. (2017), Charito & Marie (2021), Perveen et al. (2018), and Sulistyowati & Utomo (2024).

Coping Strategies - Differences

There are also distinct coping mechanisms. Female pupils tend to depend on emotional support and external validation, including from their peers. "I try deep breathing to calm myself down and put myself in a positive frame of mind. I ask my sister as well for a bit of assurance before I talk," added a female student. "I always ask my friends if I got it right. It makes me feel better," another female student reported. On the other hand, male students prefer internally oriented coping strategies, emphasising the importance of preparation and self-sufficiency. "I don't show how anxious I am. I just prepare as well as I can and concentrate on my speech and just act confident," described one male speaker. Another male participant said, "I handle the stress myself because I don't want to appear weak." These trends are underpinned by some common gendered norms and culturally sanctioned rules that encourage males' repression of feelings and expression of emotions alongside the freedom given to

women to vent their anxieties more easily (Baloğlu et al., 2018; Charito & Marie, 2021; Hwa & Peck, 2017; Tamres et al., 2002).

The Psychological Perspectives on Public Speaking Anxiety

The psychological constructs of Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) in Business Administration students in Karachi reflect considerable gendered and cultural influences in students' patterns of behavior and their culturally approved coping strategies. Psychological perspectives show that generally the same types of physical and psychological PSA symptoms __feeling nervous or shaky, having a lack of self-confidence __ prevail across both genders but the origin and the preferred solutions to it are profoundly rooted in gender-related social roles and stereotypical norms, affecting the way that students experience and cope with their anxiety in relation to public speaking.

Psychologists emphasized that these gendered experiences reveal a compounding effect which is a result of cultural and societal norms, with men pushed to project leadership and authority and women thought to be meek, submissive and humble. "Male students are under enormous pressure to project authority, control, and leadership during public speaking," Psychologist 3 pointed out and added that falling short of these expectations can trigger feelings of inadequacy or failure. According to one psychologist, "The pressure to look authoritative and in control is all-consuming for men, and many fear losing face in public speaking, which is paralyzing" (Psychologist 1, personal communication). This highlights the expectations of hegemonic masculinity, where men are expected to be assertive and sure, making any sign of weakness during public speaking a threat to their construct. These results resonate with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) hegemonic masculinity theory, supporting the claim that society prescribes men to exemplify dominance and emotional stoicism. Moreover, masculine traits (e.g., emotional stoicism, leadership) often contradict personal vulnerability stemming from anxiety, contributing to a fear of being slandered due to others' expectations (Perveen et al., 2018; Hwa & Peck, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2017).

In contrast, female students are typically pressured to balance assertiveness and humility. Their anxiety often stems from concerns about how their behavior will be perceived in terms of appropriateness, likability, and social acceptability. A psychologist observed, "Women are caught between the need to assert themselves confidently and the fear of coming across as too dominant or unlikeable" (Psychologist 2, personal communication). This balancing act reflects Ridgeway's (2011) argument about the persistent gendered scripts that dictate women's behavior, especially in professional and academic settings. Female students also experience heightened anxiety about whether their behavior will be deemed "appropriate," reflecting deeper cultural narratives about women's roles in public and private spheres. This is connected to the concept of self-objectification, where women internalize the gaze of others, leading to greater self-monitoring and anxiety (Maturanec, 2015). "Schools should encourage female students to view their voice as a tool of empowerment, not something that they should temper for fear of rejection" (Psychologist 5, personal communication).

Societal norms also shape the coping strategies employed by male and female students. Male students tend to internalize their anxiety, relying on mental preparation and self-regulation. "Men often use humour or overconfidence as a mask," noted one psychologist, "but this only creates a veneer of control while the underlying anxiety festers" (Psychologist 3, personal

communication). This observation aligns with Goffman's (1995) theory of self-presentation, where individuals use strategies to project socially acceptable identities. For male students, the pressure to maintain a stoic appearance often leads them to bottle up their anxiety, increasing psychological distress. Female students, on the other hand, are more likely to externalize their anxiety, seeking emotional support from peers, mentors, or family members. "Women tend to reach out for support, to talk about their feelings and fears, which can be a healthy coping mechanism when managed well" (Psychologist 5, personal communication). This aligns with the societal allowance for women to express vulnerability, but while this approach allows them to share their burdens, it does not always address the root causes of their anxiety, such as the fear of judgment or perfectionism linked to self-objectification (Ahmed et al., 2017).

To address these gendered coping mechanisms, psychologists recommend tailored strategies that consider both emotional and mental preparation. For male students, psychologists suggest creating spaces where vulnerability is normalized, allowing them to express their anxieties without the fear of judgment. As one psychologist explained, "We need to create environments where men can openly discuss their fears without feeling like they are failing in their masculinity" (Psychologist 3, personal communication). Psychologists also indicated that educational programs must be tailored to both genders, in order to facilitate their unique environment and challenges. They stressed providing safe spaces for men (and women) to talk about their fears. Psychologist 2 added, "Women must be reassured that assertiveness is not a sin of their femininity." These strategies resonate with Freire's (1994) concept of creating inclusive environments where individuals feel empowered to share and learn.

In a nutshell, the PSA is highly gendered by nature in Karachi and cultural, social tendencies, along with psychological traits of people, contribute to heightening the anxiety. The psychologists emphasize the need to dismantle restrictive norms and build emotional intelligence as well as communication skills in supportive, inclusive environments. The key is in creating safe spaces where students of any gender can come, express their fears, and figure out how to deal with those fears. Through these strategies, it is hoped that students will develop the courage to cope with PSA and tackle the difficulties associated with it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of our study, we would like to make several recommendations. Teachers and counsellors need to create gender-sensitive educational programs to meet the special needs of boys and girls. This will prepare them to use initiatives aimed at redefining masculinity, such as promoting emotional vulnerability and self-expression. Society expects women to be submissive; thus, female students may need extra support to challenge this belief and assert themselves in the classroom to speak up and participate. Some interventions can be targeted separately to each group, thereby addressing the impact of the differences in coping mechanisms and societal pressures experienced by both. Universities must give students conducive environments where they can be trained to deliver public speeches in accepting, pressure-free circumstances. Other exercises, such as regular practice and peer feedback, can be used to develop confidence and lessen the fear of making mistakes in giving a speech. Campus mental health and university health services should collaborate on developing appropriate treatments for students with moderate or severe PSA. This kind of intervention could be counselling, CBT or other psychological methods that depend on the

cause of PSA. In addition, the mentors who had managed to negotiate PSA can share coping mechanisms and provide support and encouragement for their mentees.

CONCLUSION

This research comprehensively examined Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) among undergraduate students in Karachi, Pakistan, shedding critical light on how gender, culture, and societal pressures profoundly influence their experiences. The revelations from this study unequivocally demonstrate the necessity for curriculum developers, student support services, and institutional leadership to adopt gender-sensitive approaches that address the distinct emotional and psychological burdens students endure.

The practical contribution of this study lies in equipping educators, counsellors, and policymakers with evidence-based insights to cultivate learning environments that actively mitigate PSA and empower students to develop vital communication skills. From a theoretical standpoint, this research significantly advances our understanding of PSA by empirically demonstrating the profound impact of specific cultural and societal dynamics on individual anxiety manifestations, thereby extending the applicability of PSA frameworks to diverse global contexts.

While this study provides valuable insights, its findings are primarily limited to undergraduate students in Karachi due to its localized focus. Future research could broaden this focus by exploring additional contributing factors and effects of PSA, extending the inquiry to other regions of Pakistan, or examining long-term trends to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this widespread phenomenon. (5,456 WORDS).

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

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