

## Social Phobia in Undergraduate University Students in Oman: Prevalence and Correlates with Academic Achievement and Personal Characteristics

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to determine the prevalence of social phobia among undergraduate university students in Oman and investigate its relationship with the subjects' academic performance and personal characteristics. This cross-sectional correlational study was conducted at Sultan Qaboos University in April-May 2019 among undergraduate students. The self-administered Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS) was administered to assess scores of social phobia among participants. The analytical tools were independent t-tests, fitting single linear regression and multiple linear regression models for the outcomes of social phobia and academic GPA, and personal characteristics. A total of 170 nursing students self-completed the study survey. The results showed a high prevalence (82.4%) of social phobia among study subjects. Single linear-regression analysis indicated a negative association between social phobia and the academic GPA ( $t = -3.04, p = .21$ ), although it was not significant. The participants' characteristics significantly predicted level of social phobia [ $F(10, 159) = 2.38, p < .05$ ], adjusted R-square = .08. Using stepwise-regression analysis gave only one model with one predictor, age, which was significant ( $t = -4.0, p < .05$ ), adjusted R-square = .08. This study lays the foundation for succeeding studies that will seek an understanding of the contributing factors related to the incidence of social phobia among Omani university students. The study also sheds light on the impact of social phobia on academic performance among Omani university students. The study calls for policy advisors in Higher Education to consider raising awareness about this disorder and ensuring accessibility to the available treatment. University faculty should consider planning appropriate assessment methods to maximize the benefit to the students.

**Keywords:** social phobia, social anxiety disorder, university students, prevalence.

## 阿曼本科生的社交恐惧症：患病率以及与学业成绩和个人特征的相关性

**摘要：**本研究将确定阿曼本科生社交恐惧症的患病率，并调查其与受试者学习成绩和个人特征的关系。这项横断面相关性研究于2019年4月至2019年5月在苏丹卡布斯大学的本科生中进行。使用自我管理的利博维茨社交焦虑量表来评估参与者的社交恐惧症得分。分析工具是独立的t检验，适用于社交恐惧症和学术平均绩点的结果以及个人特征的单线性回归和多元线性回归模型。共有170名护生自行完成了学习调查。结果显示，研究对象中社交恐惧症的患病率很高（82.4%）。单线性回归分析表明社交恐惧症与学业平均绩点之间存在负相关（ $t = -3.04, p = .21$ ），但并不显著。参与者的特征显著预测社交恐惧症的水平 [ $F(10, 159) = 2.38, p < .05$ ]，调整后的R平方 = .08。使用逐步回归分析仅给出了一个具有一个预测变量的模型，即年龄，这是显著的（ $t = -4.0, p < .05$ ），调整后的R平方 = .08。这项研究为后续研究奠定了基础，这些研究将寻求了解与阿曼大学生社交恐惧症发病率相关的促成因素。该研究还揭

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示了社交恐惧症对阿曼大学生学习成绩的影响。该研究呼吁高等教育的政策顾问考虑提高对这种疾病的认识，并确保获得可用的治疗方法。大学教师应考虑规划适当的评估方法，以最大限度地使学生受益。

**关键词：**社交恐惧症，社交焦虑障碍，大学生，患病率。

## 1. Introduction

A social phobia that is formerly known as a social anxiety disorder (SAD), is the second most commonly diagnosed type of anxiety disorder, affecting 5.2 % - 60% of young adults based on the population composition and the diagnostic tool used [1, 2]. Globally, the prevalence of social phobia and social-related impairment in sufferers increases. Social Phobia is characterized by "marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or possible scrutiny by others" [3]. The incidence of social phobia is linked to environmental and hereditary factors. Environmental factors include lack of social support during critical phases in life, low socioeconomic status, low level of education, and unemployment [4]. Research indicated that shy children who have bad-tempered moods are more likely to have a social phobia over time. In addition, children raised by authoritative and over-protected parents are more potential to develop social phobia [4].

Individuals with a social phobia could be diagnosed with generalized social phobia or specific social phobia. Generalized social phobia is the individual avoidance of any social performance. In contrast, specific phobia avoids specific social performances such as eating or drinking in front of others or speaking in public [5]. People who have social phobia may fear looking anxious in front of others, which will be embarrassing and humiliating. Therefore, they often try to avoid any social contact. If the situation is unavoidable, they exhibit significant distress symptoms evident by blushing, slurred speech, palpitations, tremors, sweating, and nausea [5].

Evidence shows that individuals who suffer from social phobia experience a noticeable decrease in the quality of life, impairment in work, social relationships. Also, they have lower self-esteem than those who do not have the same disorder, which leads to missing many educational and occupational opportunities [6]. In addition, individuals with social phobia are also more likely to develop major depressive disorder and alcoholism [7].

Although social phobia has been an exciting topic for discussion among specialized clinicians and researchers in the field, however and in the developing world, the prevalence of social phobia and its impact

on students' academic performance is not well documented. Moreover, few studies examined the relationship between social phobia and students' academic performance [2]. Since public speaking is a common academic requirement, it is pivotal to extensively examine the impact of social phobia on the students' academic achievement and identify the potentially modifiable predictors of social phobia among university students. Therefore, this study aims to determine the prevalence of social phobia among a group of students in an Arabic university and investigate its relationship with the students' academic performance (Grade Point Average, GPA). The study also examined the predictors of social phobia (students' age, gender, income, residence, marital status, academic level, presence of health problems, smoking, alcohol consumption, and history of childhood abuse). We hypothesized a negative relationship between social phobia level and academic performance in this cohort.

The results of this study are expected to lay the foundation for succeeding studies that will seek an understanding of the predictors of social phobia among university students in the developing world. In addition, the results of this study will help inform the policymakers in the country, the Ministry of Higher Education, and the undergraduate universities in designing effective and culturally sensitive educational programs to curb social phobia-related disabilities, inferior academic performance.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design and Setting

This cross-sectional correlational and comparative study was conducted in the College of Nursing (CON) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Muscat, Oman, from April to May 2019. The College of Nursing is the leading Nursing School in the country of Oman. The total number of students at CON is 550, with an annual enrollment of about 100 students. Students enrolled in the CON consist predominately of Omani citizens from various country regions; thus, it is the ideal setting for study as its students represent university students.

### 2.2. Study Sample

The sample included undergraduate students attending the CON at SQU during the study timeframe

and able to speak, read and write in the English language. Undergraduate students with known mental illness and those who were unwilling to participate were excluded from the study. One hundred and fifty (150) participants were required to be included in the regression analysis (11 predictors), assuming a power of 80% with alpha level 0.05, two-tailed, and medium effect size (0.12). With a 20% attrition rate, the final estimate for the overall sample was set at 170 participants. Convenient sampling was used to recruit the required study sample.

### 3. Study Procedure

Ethical approval of the study was obtained from the Scientific Ethics Committee in the CON. The recruitment process was coordinated with the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Study office and with the Course Coordinators offered in the CON after being provided with an orientation to the study purpose and the eligibility criteria. First, a list of the courses offered during the study timeframe and their class timings was generated. Then the study investigators approached the target sample at the end of their classes to invite them to participate in the study. Finally, informed consent was obtained from subjects after explaining the study's objective and confirming study eligibility.

#### 3.1. Measures

The subjects were administered two instruments, including the demographic information sheet and the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS). Both instruments were administered in English to the study subjects because English is the official language of instruction for undergraduate students at Sultan Qaboos University. In addition, the approval to use the LSAS was obtained from the developer of the tool prior to utilization.

The study investigators developed a form capturing demographic information of the subjects. It included data on participants' age, gender, income, residence, marital status, academic year, academic GPA, chronic health problems, smoking, alcohol consumption, history of childhood abuse. The Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale was used to measure the individual's social anxiety. This 24-item self-administered tool was scored on a Likert scale ranging from zero to three, first on the fear felt during the situation, and then the same items are rated on avoidance of the situation. With the total scores for the "fear" and "avoidance" section, the total score lies between 0-144, with a score of more than 95 indicating very severe social anxiety, a score between 80-95 indicating severe social phobia, 65-80 marked social phobia and 55-65 moderate social phobia. The internal reliability of the original tool was found to be good (Cronbach's alpha value: 0.88), and the internal consistency was deemed to be very good [7].

### 3.2. Data Analysis Plan

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 21 (IBM, 2016). Entered data were double-checked manually in order to maintain data accuracy. Prior to data analysis, frequencies and summary statistics were checked to ensure sufficient data were available for each variable planned in the analysis. Descriptive statistics and graphical summaries were obtained for the critical outcome and predictor variables to check for outliers, missing data, and the need for transformations or non-parametric methods. In particular, to characterize the sample, we computed means and standard deviations (continuous measures) and percentages (categorical variables) for all measures. The analytical tools were Pearson correlation, independent t-test, fitting single linear regression, and multiple linear regression models for the outcomes of social phobia and academic GPA, and personal characteristics.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Sociodemographic Characteristics

A total of 170 undergraduate students agreed to participate in the study and have completed the study questionnaires with a zero attrition rate. Of these, 114 (67.1%) were female students, and 56 (32.9%) were males. The mean age of the study participants was 20.4 (SD= 1.66) years. There was almost equal representation of subjects from all academic years, except students from level six (3; 1.8%). The majority of the subjects categorized themselves as having moderate socioeconomic status (74.7%). In addition, the majority of the study subjects were from rural areas; 105 (61.8%) and 167 (98.2%) did not have a history of child abuse. About the other study variables, the mean social phobia score was 50 (SD= 22.5), and the mean academic GPA was 2.5 (SD= 0.7) (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Total N= 170 M (SD) or N (%)
Age (Years)	20.42 (1.66)
Gender	
Female	114 (67.1%)
Male	56 (32.9%)
Academic Year	
First Year	36 (21.2%)
Second Year	31 (18.2%)
Third Year	34 (20.0%)
Fourth Year	35 (20.6%)
Fifth Year	31 (18.2%)
Sixth Year	3 (1.8%)
Academic GPA	2.5 (0.7)
1.0 – 1.49	12 (7.1%)
1.5 – 2.49	73 (42.9%)
2.5 – 3.49	74 (43.5%)
3.5 – 4.0	11 (6.5%)

Continuation of Table 1	
Residence	
Rural	105 (61.8%)
Urban	65 (38.2%)
Marital Status	
Single	158 (92.9%)
Married	12 (7.1 %)
Socioeconomic Status	
Low	25 (14.7%)
Moderate	127 (74.7%)
High	18 (10.6%)
Health Problem	
Yes	4 (2.4%)
No	166 (97.6%)
Alcohol use	
Yes	0
No	170 (100%)
Medication Use	
Yes	5 (2.9%)
No	165 (97.1%)
Smoking	
Yes	1 (0.6%)
No	169 (99.4%)
History of Child Abuse	
Yes	3 (1.8%)
No	167 (98.2%)
Social Phobia Score	50.8 (22.5)
No Social Phobia	31 (18.2%)
Mild	54 (31.8%)
Moderate	30 (17.6%)
Marked	42 (24%)
Severe	10 (5.9%)
Very Severe	3 (1.8%)

## 4.2. Prevalence of Social Phobia

The results indicated that 55 (32.4%) students had mild social phobia, and 42 (24.7%) had marked social phobia. A small number, 10 (5.9%) and 3 (1.8%) of the students had severe and very severe social phobia, respectively. We further categorized social phobia into two groups that are "no social phobia" and "with social phobia." The study results showed that out of 170 subjects, 140 (82.4%) of the students had some degree of social phobia (Table 1).

## 4.3. Social Phobia and Academic GPA

Table 2 presents the relationship between social phobia and the academic GPA of the study participants.

Table 2 Social phobia and academic GPA				
	Coefficient	SE	P-Value	Overall Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Intercept	58.43	78.46	0.21	.004
Academic GPA	-3.04	2.39	.21	

The findings from single linear regression indicate that the overall model fit was adjusted R-square = .004, indicating that .04% of the total variation in the subjects' academic GPA was explained by social phobia. The overall relationship was not significant [ $F(1, 168) = 1.6, p = .21$ ] (Table 2). In addition, the Pearson correlation showed that there was a negative

association between social phobia and the academic GPA,  $r = -.09, n = 170, p = .21$ . That means the greater the level of social phobia the individual has, the lower his/her academic GPA. Further analysis utilizing independent t-test showed that there was no significant difference in the academic GPA of individuals with social phobia ( $M = 2.5, SD = .7$ ) and individuals with no social phobia ( $M = 2.6, SD = .7$ );  $t(163) = .9, p = .3$  (Table 4).

## 4.4. Social Phobia and Participants' Characteristics

The influences of participants' characteristics on the level of social phobia were also tested among study participants. The participants' characteristics significantly predicted level of social phobia [ $F(10, 159) = 2.38, p < .05$ ] (Table 3).

Table 3 Participants' characteristics and social phobia				
	Coefficient	SE	P-Value	Overall Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Intercept	220.8	78.46	0.006	.08
Age	-5.19	2.8	.07	
Gender	-4.67	3.69	.21	
Academic Year	.98	3.17	.76	
Residence	4.62	3.73	.22	
Marital Status	-.33	6.77	.96	
Socio-economic Status	-2.79	3.50	.43	
Health Problem	.19	11.59	.99	
Medication Use	9.64	10.20	.34	
Smoking	-33.59	22.06	.13	
History of Child Abuse	-6.89	13.20	.60	

Using stepwise-regression analysis gave only one model with one predictor, age, which was significant ( $t = -4.0, p < .05$ ), adjusted R-square = .08. This finding suggests that social phobia decreases as subjects' age increases. Further analysis utilizing an independent t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the age ( $t(163) = 3.2, p < .5$ ) and the academic year ( $t(163) = 2.9, p < .5$ ) between individuals with social phobia and individuals with no social phobia (Table 4).

Table 4 Results of independent t-test for participants' characteristics by presence of social phobia

	Social Phobia							95% CI for Mean Difference		
	With Social Phobia			No Social Phobia						
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	p-Value		t	df
Age	20.2	1.6	134	21.3	21.3	31	.002	.38 - 1.65	3.19	163
Gender	1.3	.5	134	1.4	.5	31	.168	-.05 - .31	1.38	163
Residence	1.4	.5	134	1.3	.3	31	.411	-.27 - .11	-.82	163
Marital Status	1.1	.3	134	1.1	.3	31	.570	-.07 - .13	.56	163
Socio-economic Status	1.9	.5	134	1.9	.6	31	.512	-.26 - .13	-.65	163
Health Problem	1.9	.1	134	1.9	.2	31	.749	-.07 - .05	-.32	163
Medication Use	1.9	.1	134	1.9	.3	31	.220	-.11 - .02	-1.23	163
Smoking	1.9	.0	134	2.0	.0	31	.632	-.02 - .03	.48	
History of Child Abuse	1.9	.1	134	2.0	.0	31	.404	-.03 - .07	.83	163
Academic Year	2.9	1.4	134	3.7	1.2	31	.004	.25 - 1.36	2.89	163
Academic GPA	2.4	.7	134	2.6	.7	31	.328	-.14 - .43	.982	163

## 5. Discussion

The current study assessed the prevalence of social phobia among undergraduate students in Oman and its possible relationship with various participants' characteristics. The present study's findings revealed that many study subjects had some degree of social phobia. The prevalence of social phobia among study subjects was 82.4%, consistent with findings among undergraduate university students in other parts of the world [2, 8, 9]. However, other studies in India and Saudi Arabia have reported lower prevalence rates, and it was estimated at 17.2%, 16.3%, and 7.8%, respectively [10, 11]. These considerable variations in the prevalence of social phobia may be attributed to the sample composition, sample size, measurement tools, and socio-cultural context of participants among studies. For instance, in India and Iraq, the Diagnostic Interview the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and Social Phobia Scale (SPS) were used to assess the prevalence of social phobia among university students, respectively [9, 11]. The current study showed no significant difference in the academic GPA between participants with social phobia and participants with no social phobia.

In contrast, in study [2], it was found that students with high social phobia scores tend to have lower academic performance. Additionally, studies on the general population by Jystad et al. [6] and Elhadad et al. [2] indicated that individuals with high social phobia scores were more likely to have impairment in education and drop out of school. Finally, in congruence with our findings, Alkhalifah et al. [1] did not find a significant correlation between social phobia scores and academic GPA.

Regarding associated factors, the results of the present study did not find differences between the social phobia group and no social phobia group in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, history of child abuse, marital status, and residence area. This study contradicts other studies, where the incidence of social phobia was correlated significantly to the female gender [3, 12], single marital status [13], low socioeconomic status [13, 14], and urbanism [13].

However, significant differences between the social phobia group and the no social phobia group were found for the age and the academic year.

Students in their first three academic years had a higher social phobia score than 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year students. This finding is supported by three other studies done in India, Ethiopia, and Iraq [3, 4, 9]. The students had to move away from their parents (family homes) for the first time, and they were exposed to a new environment. Moving to a new environment requires the students to deal with many stressors like the difference in students' backgrounds, socioeconomic differences, emotional development, and physical appearance. Therefore, it is recommended to raise awareness of social phobia among first-year students and ensure provision for the appropriate supportive facilities.

In agreement with observations from [3, 9, 15] studies, the incidence of social phobia in the present study was associated significantly with the likelihood of being young. In the current study, younger students had higher social phobia scores than older students. In contrast, in their study, Ali et al. [8] found no difference in the prevalence rate of social phobia between older and younger students.

## 6. Conclusion

This study showed a high prevalence (82.4%) of social phobia among undergraduate students in Oman. The majority of them had mild to marked degrees of the disorder. Subjects' younger age and students studying in their first three academic years were significantly associated with the incidence of social phobia. To our knowledge, this study is of its first kind in Oman. Therefore, the current study results will lay the foundation for succeeding studies that will seek an understanding of the contributing factors related to the incidence of social phobia among Omani university students. The study also sheds light on the impact of social phobia on academic performance among Omani university students. In line with the findings, this study calls for policymakers to develop preventative strategies such as raising awareness about this disorder.

and ensuring accessibility to the available treatment to reduce the negative impact of social phobia on students' overall quality of life. In addition, faculty should be aware of the symptoms of social phobia and should consider planning appropriate assessment methods to maximize the benefit to the students. Future studies should focus on developing and validating an assessment tool that facilitates early recognition of the problem among high-risk individuals and then planning an appropriate health intervention to decrease the negative consequences of social phobia among the sufferers. Finally, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the limitations of our study. Limitations of the current study are that the study subjects were from one setting and limited to undergraduate students recruited using convince sampling; therefore, there is limited generalizability of the study results to the general population. Also, although self-reporting questionnaires are time-effective and straightforward for data collection, they are known for the possibility of recall bias. On the other hand, this is the first study describing social phobia among undergraduate students sample in Oman. This study sheds light on an area that was not studied before: the prevalence of social phobia among university students and how it relates to their academic performance, demographic and personal characteristics.

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