

Experience of Academic Anxiety Among Higher Secondary Students in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Academic anxiety is not something new and is still a crucial factor that affects students and their well-being. This study investigates higher secondary school students' experience with academic anxiety and its factors, which could facilitate the reduction of academic anxiety. The pandemic has created a topsy-turvy situation in the education field where the new learning mode has brought new challenges for educational institutions and their students. The data collection methods used for this qualitative study were semi-structured interviews set in a phenomenological framework. A total of 10 interviews were conducted with students between the age of 18 and below. Through using thematic analysis, four overarching themes were identified: factors that cause academic anxiety, negative impacts, approaches adopted, and online learning's impacts. The study showed that students have different sources of academic anxiety along with specific impacts and personal coping strategies for it. An insight into these sources and impacts will help throw light on the awareness of teachers and parents, which would in turn help to revise the method with which they approach students.

Keywords: Academic anxiety, higher secondary school students, thematic analysis, Kerala, qualitative study.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Academic excellence is highly regarded in our society. In a world that is highly competitive and demanding, failure to meet expectations often leads to harsh criticism and self-doubt, which negatively impacts an individual's performance. As Shakir (2014) points out, education has always been essential to shaping the skills, values, knowledge, and holistic development of a person. Furthermore, the educational system takes up the dual function of imparting wisdom from the past and preparing the individual for society's present and future needs. Furthermore, India's higher education system ranks the third-largest in the world (Kumar, 2021); thus, right from primary school, the educational system emphasizes academic excellence and intolerance of failure (Satapathy, n.d.). In this 'sink or swim' situation, the students struggle to survive under tremendous anxiety and pressure to attain high academic achievements. According to Sarason (1988), anxiety expresses feelings of worry, indecision, confusion, fear, pessimism, and hopelessness as a reaction exhibited by individuals where they feel insecure, therefore being likely to their physical, emotional, and social well-being levels, it disrupts the organism's homeostasis. Furthermore, apprehension about academic tasks is called academic anxiety and it can grow destructive over time, leading to academic performance suffering, resulting in a higher anxiety level related to academic tasks (Huberty, 2012).

Moreover, the Covid -19 pandemic situation had caused a change in the dynamics of the educational field. The physical

classes were moved to an online platform where students were restricted to learning just through TV, mobile, and laptop screens which increased the difficulty for students (Agoramoorthy, 2021). Research has shown that shutting down schools and colleges has led to experiencing different levels of psychological pressure by students and in the pandemic situation, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time, etc., have increased the vulnerability to psychological distress (Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). Parents are over-anxious about building a promising career for their children, and schools are concerned about their reputation. Students are running the race to achieve their goals and might be adversely affected by the negative impacts (Sharma & Shakir, 2018).

The majority of students experience some level of anxiety at some point in their school day; however, this can last for a longer period of time which in turn leads to academic anxiety. Such increased levels of academic anxiety seem to have an adverse effect on learning, performance, and adaptation, thus leading to lower learning efficiency (Clark & Schwartz, 1989). Severe anxiety levels have been correlated with children's academic and social skill deficits (Smets & Hartup, 1988). Similarly, a high level of anxiety interferes with cognitive abilities like concentration and memory, which would cause a drop in academic success (Hooda & Saini, 2017).

Moreover, the latest research on Indian school students has shown that pressuring students' culture by the parents to

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harbor top colleges and lucrative careers has shown in increased anxiety, affecting students' academic and psychological state (Deb et al., 2015). According to a study conducted on Nigerian secondary school students, it was found to have a relationship between parenting style, and test anxiety, where the parenting styles played a crucial role in the anxiety levels of students (Nwosu, 2016). Adolescents suffer from psychological discomfort in extreme pressure to fulfill parents, teachers, and society's expectations. A quality parent-child relationship is a crucial factor that facilitates coping with the stressor during adolescence (Power, 2004). However, it fails often because it manifests itself as a psychosomatic problem (Berntsson, Ringsberg, Eriksson, & Köhler, 2015). According to the study conducted by Rani and Rawat (2019), the results reveal that high parental expectations tend to have high academic anxiety in adolescents. Jain and Jain's (2007) study results showed that adolescents with high perceived parental encouragement report low levels of anxiety than those with low perceived parental encouragement.

Numerous studies have shown the adverse effects of academic anxiety on social seclusion, procrastination, poor academic performance (Mattoo, & Nabi, 2012), and self-inferiority (Kumar, 2013). Severe anxiety levels have been correlated with children's academic and social skill deficits (Smets & Hartup, 1988). According to McCraty et al. (2000), it was found that there is a significant role played by anxiety in the learning and academic performance of students. Furthermore, the study also found that high facilitating achievement anxiety was correlated to low debilitating academic performance. Moreover, the study by Topman and Jansen (Sahu, 2015) observed that students suffering from high academic anxiety tend to have poor test-taking skills. It has also been observed that they cannot use their cognitive competencies healthily as they cannot prepare for the exam enough, therefore becoming worried (Cassady, J, 2004). When mental sources are spent on worrying, which is a single cognitive task, there is not enough source left to process other information (Goleman, 2003). Aside from the cognitive impacts of academic anxiety, there are also physiological effects, such as palpitations, freezing, and low blood pressure (Kumar, 2013). As per the study by Mashayekh & Hashemi (2011), it also takes a toll on the emotional well-being of the students leading them to cry spells, irritability, anger, and frustration.

A study (Rana and Mahmood, 2010) examined the physical and behavioral components of anxiety within the context of emotionality. Moreover, it was found that individuals use adaptation and avoiding responses called coping strategies to overcome the challenges which they encounter during stressful situations (Tuncay, 2008). Among the coping strategies, Woolfolk (2004) found that emotional, avoidance and problem-solving strategies are the most effective. An emotion-focused coping strategy is a short-term solution that aims to change perceptions of an event and regulate emotions (Cassady, 2010). Whereas in avoidance coping, the students try to avoid the situation which is anxiety-provoking (Iqbal & Nasir, 2015). Furthermore, by adopting problem-solving strategies, students can promote self-regulated learning and decrease the gap between perceived ability and indicators of ability, leading to self-regulated learning (Cassady, 2010).

Most of these researches conducted have been from a quantitative approach where the research tools are inventories and questionnaires that would hinder a subjective understanding of the problem. This study has been situated from an interpretivist paradigm to get a more profound knowledge of their personal experiences and their coping methods. This study has explored how students perceive their academic anxiety and the factors which contribute to it. This study also examined the impacts of academic anxiety and the coping strategies adopted by higher secondary students.

II. METHOD

Participants

The study consisted of a total of 10 twelfth-standard higher secondary participants from different educational institutes in Kerala. The inclusion criteria for the sample were: (1) the students were from higher secondary educational institutions in Kerala, and (2) were under the age of 18 and below. Exclusion criteria were (1) students who are taking psychological/psychiatric treatments or medications and (2) students appearing for private exams. These participants were from various disciplines such as science, computer science, and commerce.

Research Design

The study has been situated from the interpretivist paradigm with a phenomenological approach to studying academic anxiety and its factors. Phenomenological research focuses on arriving at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon and looks into the meaning that participants make of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the study aims to discover the deeper meaning and feelings that students attach to their lived experiences related to the phenomenon without imposing any preconceived notions on the researchers (Groenewald, 2004).

Data Collection Process

The data collection method used in the study was the semi-structured interview. The study used convenience sampling to sample participants; however, the limited features of pandemics made it challenging to approach participants. Furthermore, prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the institutions where the authors are affiliated. The informed consent form was collected from the participants' parents before the interview. Since the participants were below the age of 18, oral/ written assent was taken from the participants. And it was ensured that confidentiality/anonymity is maintained by not citing their actual names within the research. Permission was taken from the participants to audio record the interview, and all identifiable information of participants were removed from the transcripts, and participants were referred to as per the identification codes. The participants were given the freedom to leave the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable. And if the participant felt distressed/triggered during the interview, first aid therapy was provided.

Procedure

The procedure was conducted in two phases; In the first phase, there was the screening of the participants through a web-link questionnaire. The screening tool used was the

westside test anxiety scale, a ten-item instrument used to identify students with anxiety disorders and cognitions that can impair performance. Participants who met the criteria for the screening tool were briefed about the study. In the second phase, the interview was conducted and before the interview started, an oral assent was also taken from the participants. The interview was conducted on an online platform, Google Meet. Observational notes were taken down as a secondary data storage method in qualitative research. Thus the data storage includes audio recordings, field notes, and filing of hard copy documentation (Groenewald, 2004). The interview transcriptions and field notes were electronically stored. The validation strategies used in the study were prolonged engagement, reflexive notes, and member checking.

Data Analysis

The data analysis method which has been adopted for this study is thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, the interview would be transcribed and coded into common theme categories and form a framework of thematic ideas (Gibbs 2007). The thematic analysis would follow the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): Familiarize oneself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the report. (Szedlak et al., 2015).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ten interviews were conducted for this study with higher secondary school students of Kerala out of which five were from the CBSE board, four from the State Board, and one from the ICSE board. The study captured participants' descriptions of their experiences of academic anxiety in their high secondary school and was clustered around four main themes: (1) Factors causing academic anxiety, (2) Negative effects, (3) Approaches Adopted, (4) Effect of Online Learning. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke was adopted for the study.

Table 1 Themes identified through thematic analysis

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes (Codes)
Factor causing academic anxiety	Teacher's Behaviour	Critical comments, Partiality, Rude comments, Involving the parents into the academic.
	Parental Pressure	Comparison, Overcritical comments, Comparing with parent's past performances, parenting style.
	Adjustment Difficulties	Difficulty adapting to a new model, Difficulty adapting to the new school environment.
	Individual Expectation	Overcritical of oneself, Feeling stupid for making mistakes.
	School atmosphere	Peer group, Remedial Class (this brought in a lot of shame and anxiousness).
	Tuition	Effective learning, Hectic, competitive atmosphere.
	Byhearting	Mugging up, Rot learning, Lack of understanding the concepts.
	Oral Exams	Performance anxiety, Instructors' approach, Fear of forgetfulness, Anticipation of worst.
	Written Exam	Forgetfulness: anxiety-induced, Anticipation of worst
	Board exams	Extremely stressful, Crossroad, Career exploration, Pressure of choosing the right career, Living up to expectations, Uncertainty about results.

Negative Effect	Quality of Sleep	Insomnia, Excessive sleep, Sleep disturbance, Nightmares.
	Physiological Changes	Palpitation, Throat dries up, Irregular menstrual cycle, Vomiting, Sweating, Shivering, Freezing, Stammering, Bacterial infection, Headaches, 'Butterflies in the stomach' Burning sensations.
	Cognitive Changes	Fear, Difficulty concentrating, Blank out, Anticipation of the worst outcome.
	Emotional Changes	Cry, sadness, anger, outburst fear, frustration, stress, guilt, nervousness.
	Interpersonal Relationship	Conflict with parents, Anger outbursts at family members, verbal fights.

Approaches Adopted	Healthy coping strategies	Diary writing, praying/ spirituality, positive self-talk, venting out, positive self-evaluation, listening to music, short naps, and walking.
	Unhealthy coping strategies	Inhibition to share feelings due to fear of judgment, putting away studies/ procrastination, and scrolling through social media.

Impact of Online Learning/ Pandemic	Sleep pattern	Late-night sleep, drowsy during the online class, and late class timings lead to a late sleep.
	Learning Motivation	Lack of motivation, bored isolation, procrastination lack of interest, laziness, resistance to motivation.
	Academic Performance	Poor academic performance, anxiousness due to incompetence, and failures for preboard exams enhance learning.
	State Board School	Consideration of students' difficulty, Focus point, government order, lack of discrimination between students who performed well/liberal marking scheme.

(1) Factors Causing Academic Anxiety

The initial theme was derived through the analysis based on the participant's experiences that triggered and added to their academic anxiety. In the interviews, the participants disclosed feelings and experiences of being overwhelmed by worries, physiological changes, and negative emotions while dealing with academic tasks, which affected them to the degree that impaired their ability to study and engage in their everyday lives. Students had experienced negative teaching styles like critical/rude/ offensive comments, partiality towards students who do well in academics, and comparisons that had led them down and increased distress.

"She used to hate me a lot personally. Thus, she would find many instances to compare another person and me and then try to put me down." (Female 01)

"My accounting teacher made students who scored less than 50% stand in class and told us that 'you should not even be in this class and you deserve to get a repeat year'". (Male 09)

In a similar vein, the atmosphere at home also played a significant role in influencing students' anxiety levels. The harsh comparisons and parental pressure give the students more stress, making it difficult to cope with it. The forcing of parental expectations and unfulfilled dreams on the students makes them doubt their self-worth and it becomes an added burden along with the pressure of the examinations.

Previous research shows that it tends to increase burnout and exhaustion in online mode, which would affect their capacity to work. (Rohmani & Andriani, 2021)

"I have been constantly being compared with my first cousin; this makes me feel sad. Frankly speaking, now I have started to hate my cousin" (Female 02).

"My parents start to compare to what they did in their days, but at times it pressurizes the hell out of me". (female 01)

Stress and anxiety about academic tasks were also brought on by the difficulty in transitioning to a higher secondary school; this was problematic for many students. Furthermore, students mentioned a greater liking for humanities subjects because they mentioned that subjects were easier to understand and learn. Subjects like chemistry, physics, and biology seem to have a lot to byhearting, and rote learning was strenuous. Moreover, this leads most of the students to seek tuition after learning at school. They noted that tuition centers helped them stay on top of their academics despite being stressed. One of our participants mentioned that even though tuition helped her learn better, it was mentally exhausting and hurtful because of the manner in which they treated the students. Furthermore, tuition classes tend to clash with the regular classes, which put the students in a difficult place to balance both on their plates.

The shift from offline to online classes was found extremely challenging. When students are unable to meet their expectations and performance, they tend to experience intense fear and burnout. Exams are one of the crucial parts of a student's life, and the board exams for the 12th standard are one of the major gate passes to higher education. This represents a major turning point in the student's life. As a final exam component, students take written and oral tests. It has been found, however, that students are more anxious when taking oral. Participants mentioned that they meet with tremendous performance anxiety depending on the instructor who is administering the test and their approach.

"My accountancy, the teacher who took my viva, was better than the person who took the business studies. And this had an effect on how well I was able to answer them, she helped me relax by saying, 'it's okay. If you don't get the answer. You can relax.'" (Male 9)

(2) Negative Effects

This theme captured the Negative impacts on the participants' physiological, emotional, and cognitive changes and the interpersonal conflicts that arose in relation to these changes. The physiological changes experienced by the students include insomnia, palpitation, excessive sleep, throat dries up, irregular menstrual cycle, sleep disturbance, vomiting, sweating, shivering, freezing, stammering, and severe headaches.

"I would become completely blank out and totally lost. And I won't be able to write anything on paper this time. I would feel very cold like I am freezing. This mainly happens for math exams. Even though we start studying in a month, but still I'll be very tense. I'll just feel frozen" (female 02).

"Even when I have completed studying the entire portion still, I'll still have a fear which makes me question 'what if', that is what if I forget what I have studied, what if I get low marks, how will I face my teachers and all this affects me. These

thoughts keep me awake through the night" (female 04).

Crying, sadness, anger, outbursts, fear, and frustration are some emotional changes that may be experienced. Cognitive changes range from fear (a behavioral and cognitive response), the anticipation of the worst outcome, blanking out, and difficulty in concentrating and paying attention. Emotional changes often cause behavioral changes, which result in strained relationships at home among parents and siblings.

"I get really irritated and angry faster than usual. So even for small things, I take it out on everybody. I bite the end of my pen or pencil. Then I fidget with my fingers" (Male 09)

(3) Approaches Adopted

This theme encapsulates each of the participants' coping strategies adopted to deal with academic anxiety. The participants tend to have adopted healthy coping strategies like sleeping, diary writing, venting out, positive self-talk, meditation, short trips, and listening to music. Participants mentioned that sharing the burden and worry with peers and close family members felt cathartic and helped them cope better. However, unhealthy coping behavior was also developed, like hiding and repressing emotions, majorly due to fear of judgment, and another habit seen was procrastination. There was mention of binge-watching series and scrolling through social media even when they had a chunk of portions to study and were under stress.

"I used to write diaries, which used to really help me deal with it. I also talk with different people, but not my parents, though I share things with my grandmother and friends. I don't think my parents would understand it (laughs) (female 06).

(4) Effect of Online Learning

This theme condenses participants' intense feelings of discontentment about the online class environment. The range of organizing themes analyzed within this theme was mainly related to the changes that occurred in the life of students due to the shift in the mode of learning. The students faced adjustment difficulties, difficulty concentrating, disruption in their sleeping patterns, weight gain, which affected their ability to perform, lack of learning motivation, and anxiousness due to incompetence to face the board exams. However, there was also a unique response contradicting the same. One of the participants also mentioned that "disrupted sleep is one reason my health was affected in the interview. The participants also mentioned a profound lack of motivation, which leads to students' procrastination tendencies. Students mentioned that it was challenging to concentrate in online classes and be isolated from their friends.

Twelfth standard board exams are a turning point in students' lives; however, in 2020, students, parents, and teachers were met with unexpected challenges and were anxious about the uncertainty of the results. It was noted that students from the state government were provided with focus areas, that is areas from which questions would come for the board exams, and a strict notice was issued from the state government to the schools that the students should be kept out of stressful situations. Participants mentioned that the school had tried its maximum to implement it. However, students also raised a

worry about the uncertainty of the results; even though the scoring was liberal, students were worried that this would hamper the effective discrimination among students, affecting their admissions into good colleges.

“When online classes started, I was unable to complete notes on time. I was not really interested in the online class. I never really used to feel like paying attention in class. Even if I sit in front of the laptop to attend, I would parallelly scroll through Instagram. And I used to feel extremely drowsy during class time because of the late-night sleep. However, mostly they used to send us the recorded classes like the ma'am will upload the video. We will have to respond on WhatsApp that we watched the video regardless of whether we actually watched it or not” (Female 06).

“I really saw online class as a positive thing, because I could listen to the recorded class again whenever I want. And I don't have to interrupt the teacher while teaching to ask doubts in class because that makes me anxious” (Female 09)

The study presents an analysis of the experiences of the 10 participants in higher secondary school, focusing on four themes identified from the data shared by the participants in the study. The participants shared their meaningful subjective experiences of academic anxiety that they faced during their higher secondary classes. We had identified several factors that act as a source of anxiety, where teachers' and parents' approaches towards students played a crucial role. Previous research has shown that authoritative parenting styles helped the students balance and effectively cope with academic anxiety (Erozkan, 2012). The forcing of parental expectations and unfulfilled dreams on the students makes them doubt their self-worth and becomes an added burden along with the exam pressure. Research shows that it tends to increase burnout and exhaustion in online mode, which would affect their capacity to work. (Rohmani & Andriani, 2021)

The students experience psychosomatic symptoms as well as emotional disturbance, which in turn affects their family relationships. The new normal caused a surge in the time spent in front of digital screens due to several reasons, including educational purposes and entertainment, and social interaction. Moreover the research by Jniene et al. (2019), shows that blue light-emitting devices before bedtime tend to negatively impact the individual and affect sleep quality, which would affect the well-being of the students and increase the students' well-being chances of a decrease in productivity. This was in align with the responses from the participants verbatim that with the introduction of online learning there has been excessive screen time and changes in lifestyles habits which has led to irregular eating habits, sleep cycle, cognitive disturbances and physical alignments. Students shared that they didn't have enough insight to tackle the stressful situation they faced. A suggestion that one of the participants expressed, was to make the sessions more interactive, enabling the students to learn better, and it was in line with the previous study that showed how e-learning has been challenging for students and close to real-life settings promoted students' ability to learn better (Rahm et al., 2021). For the first time due to the pandemic, in the State Board, 'Focus areas' were provided for the students to help them

enhance the preparations for exams in a more relaxed way, which is to be appreciated. Our prior research reveals that the strenuous school environment and tuition centers cause students to have little time to pursue hobbies and parents worry about wasting it on leisure and sports activities. For students preparing for board exams leisure time has become a distant memory in both offline and online settings. Missing peer interactions and playtime leads to the development of boredom and frustration, thus affecting mental well-being.

Limitations

Limitations for the study include, firstly, the convenience sampling method that was used in the study thus the sample was not ideal representative of the Kerala population. Secondly, the interview was conducted only for the students, and the presence of multiple informants like teachers and parents was not considered. Thirdly, there was an unequal representation of male and female students. And finally, the data collection was conducted during the month of July and thus the magnitude of the anxiety and psychological distress found would have varied if data had been collected in March/April.

IV. CONCLUSION

Academic anxiety is not a new concept; however, it is a crucial factor that hinders students' academic performance. We explored and identified the factors, impacts, and coping strategies adopted by students through this research. The main factors were identified as the parental and teachers' pressure, which is exerted on students appearing for the board exam. Students mentioned that the 12th standard board exam is a crucial turning point in their life; people around them make them extremely anxious. The participants chosen for this study is the special batch because of the covid pandemic situation, where certain changes in the exam like the cancellation of the board exam and the conduction of the exam for the state board were also under specific guidelines. The impact of Covid 19 has added more pressure on the students who were preparing for the board exam. Along with the fear of appearing for the board exams, uncertainty and e-learning also contributed to the academic anxiety faced by students. It is essential to understand these sources of anxiety. The school authorities and parents should be provided awareness through seminars, conferences, workshops, symposiums, etc to improve the student's well-being and academic performance.

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