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Review Article

Gender Differences in the prevalence, manifestation, and coping mechanism of social anxiety among male and female University Students in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a widespread but poorly understood mental health disorder among university students, who are in a period of complicated social, academic, and developmental adjustments. Even though current literature provides that social anxiety is more common among females, minimal focus has been directed towards the effect of gendered social norms on social anxiety expression and reporting. The purpose of this study was to conduct a systematic review of existing literature regarding gender variation in prevalence, manifestation and coping mechanisms of social anxiety in university students in the United Kingdom.

The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were followed in the systematic review. Peer-reviewed articles published in 2015-2025 were searched in 4 academic databases (CINAHL, APA PsycInfo, PubMed, and MEDLINE Ovid). Following the screening of 876 articles and stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria, 9 high-quality articles were incorporated in the final synthesis.

Results showed that female students were always found to have higher scores pertaining to social anxiety but this was attributed to high levels of emotional expressiveness, academic self-comparison and cultural pressures with respect to appearance. Conversely, male students tended to internalise the symptoms and not seek help because of the masculine norms that equate emotional vulnerability to weakness. Expressive and relational coping strategies that are gendered manifested in females, and avoidant and suppressive in males featured prominently in studies.

The conclusion of this review is that gender is an important factor that affects the experience and management of social anxiety. It suggests gender-sensitive university policies, peer-support model, and academic staff training to enhance the early detection and provision of support to the affected students.

Keywords: *Gender perspective of social anxiety, prevalence of social anxiety, manifestation of social anxiety, coping mechanisms of anxiety.*

Introduction

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a widespread mental disorder, which is marked by excessive fear of social contacts and the risk of negative judgment (Rose & Tadi, 2022). This renders SAD as an incapacitating illness, that affects overwhelmingly university students, a group that is undergoing significant transitions into adulthood. Academic stress, the requirement to acclimate to the new social context, and various peer relationships precondition students with problems related to mental health, such as social anxiety (Cordova et al., 2023). The fact that these issues are extensively documented but still they leave a gap as far as gendering of these experiences is concerned. To illustrate the point, the article by Farhane-Medina et al. (2022) discusses a particular factor that usually presents a higher proportion of women compared to men that have symptoms of social anxiety, which is often attributed to causal factors, societal factors,

societal expectation, gender roles, and psychological differences. However, in the majority of researches, the findings that reveal higher rates of social anxiety in women do not take into consideration the fact that males are more likely to be pressured to act in certain roles positions in society (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023), and they are less likely to report the problems with social anxiety due to the stigma that surrounds the idea of being emotionally vulnerable in male groups. This implies that more in-depth analysis of these gendered aspects is required because the simplistic dichotomy of social anxiety based on gender might not be so clear as it is presented.

It is a common point in the existing literature that women are more likely to have a social anxiety than men (Remes, 2016; Asher et al., 2017; Baloğlu et al., 2018). Although, the expression of anxiety occurs more frequently as compared to how it is experienced because of the social and cultural constructions that exist in femininity and masculinity. As an example, women will be more ready to express their emotional distress or seek help as compared to men due to the traditional gender ideas that a man should not be emotional and behave stoically and, therefore, their anxiety will be underreported or not reported at all (Chaplin et al., 2008). Moreover, the social influence on men to fit in the image of being tough makes them unwilling to admit emotional issues such as social anxiety, consequently distorting research results (Zaiba & Sinha, 2023). It shows that there was a severe flaw of the investigation: the fact that the expression of social anxiety could be gendered does not necessarily mean that its inner world is not as dissimilar between the sexes as it was believed. Thus, it is necessary to ask the question whether the increased prevalence rates of social anxiety among women can be attributed to the true prevalence or to the social norms, according to which the symptoms of anxiety should be recognized and expressed.

In the case of the students of the university located in the UK, the issue of meeting mental health needs is also made complex by the educational environment that can isolate the discussion on the subject of emotional health (Campbell et al., 2022). Despite the fact that the overall mental health support resources are quite numerous in the UK, the complexity of the male and female students issue must be revealed in most instances regarding social anxiety support, and the needs seems to be discussed without references to the gender-specific parameters. Women, in their turn, may respond to more cooperative and open treatment solutions, and men may need to be treated, which refutes the conservative image of masculinity and opens the door to emotions (Ogrodniczuk et al., 2024). Such mistaken identification of gendered experiences of mental health in campus serves to add to poor systems of positive support, further fuelling the anxieties students feel. To effectively overcome social anxiety in the UK universities, the universities have to focus on research that delves into the peculiarities of gender influence on not only how the disorder is experienced but also how students seek help and respond to treatment.

Topham and Russell (2012) estimate that social anxiety affects between 10-15% of University students in the UK although McLean et al. (2011) and Li et al. (2022) report a tendency toward a higher prevalence rate among the female student population with a factor of 1.5 to 2 of females often reporting a higher rate of anxiety than males. However, the differences in gender rates and expressions of social anxiety have not been given enough attention especially in the UK university system. Gender norms and expectations, including the propensity to suppress emotions, not alien to the domain of masculinity, can influence help-seeking proportions, emotional control, and coping skills in the meantime (Aharon et al., 2024). The latter, in its turn, results in the difference between how male and female students perceive, define and address social anxiety. This absence of studies in the literature is especially significant in the necessity to research which directly considers the question of gender as a predictor of the experience and treatment of social anxiety in the context of the educational setting of the UK in its own. The synthesis of the existing research will make this study offer an in-depth insight into gendered experiences of social anxiety and will serve to inform the creation of the specific interventions.

Research Question

Table 1.1 PEO framework of the research question

PEO Framework	Details
Population (P)	University students in the United Kingdom
Exposure (E)	Gender differences in the prevalence and expression of social anxiety
Outcome (O)	Prevalence rates, manifestation, coping mechanisms, and influence of gendered expectations on social anxiety experiences and management in university students

From the table 1, the research question is "To what extent do gender differences influence the prevalence, manifestation, and coping mechanisms of social anxiety among university students in the United Kingdom, and how do gendered expectations and societal norms shape these experiences? "This study examines how gender, cultural norms, and gendered expectations affect university students' social anxiety prevalence, expression, and control.

Methodology

Research Design

This research used the systematic review design to thoroughly collect, analyse, and integrate the available body of knowledge of gender disparities in prevalence and manifestation of social anxiety among college students in the United Kingdom.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 3.2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria by PEO

PEO Elements	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Population	University or college students in the United Kingdom	Studies on populations outside the UK	Ensures cultural, structural, and educational context is consistent and specific to the UK.
Exposure	Studies examining social anxiety or social phobia	Studies focusing solely on clinical interventions or pharmacological treatment	Focuses the review on natural prevalence and sociocultural factors rather than intervention efficacy.
Outcome	Explored gender or sex differences in prevalence, expression, or experience	Studies that did not stratify findings by gender or sex	Aligns with the core research question investigating gender-based differences.
Timeframe	Studies published between 2015 and 2025	Studies published before 2015	Captures recent developments, norms, and educational policies influencing social anxiety among students in the UK.
Language	English language publications	Non-English publications	Ensures accessibility for quality appraisal and analysis.
Study Design	Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods peer-reviewed research	Grey literature (e.g., opinion pieces, conference abstracts, dissertations); studies without full-text access	Maintains scientific rigour and ensures transparency, replicability, and appraisal of evidence quality.

Search Strategy

The literature search used four major electronic databases: CINAHL, PubMed, APA PsycInfo and MEDLINE Ovid. As seen in Table 3.1, the search focused on peer-reviewed articles published in English and incorporated a refined Boolean search string: ***"Social anxiety" or "anxiety" or "social anxiety disorder" AND "Gender" or "male" or "female" AND "University students" or "students" AND "Uk" or "United Kingdom" or "Scotland" or "Wales" or "England" or "Ireland"***.

Table 3.1 Keywords and MeSH Terms Used in the Literature Search

Concept	Keywords	MeSH Terms
Social Anxiety	"social anxiety" OR "anxiety" OR "social anxiety disorder"	"Social Anxiety" OR "Anxiety Disorders" OR "Social Phobia"
Gender	"gender" OR "male" OR "female"	"Gender" OR "Sex" OR "Sex Factors" OR "Male" OR "Female"
University Students	"university students" OR "students"	"Students" OR "Students, College" OR "Universities"
Geographic Location (UK)	"UK" OR "United Kingdom" OR "Scotland" OR "Wales" OR "England" OR "Ireland"	"United Kingdom" OR "England" OR "Scotland" OR "Wales" OR "Ireland"
Combine Search	"Social anxiety" or "anxiety" or "social anxiety disorder" AND "Gender" or "male" or "female" AND "University students" or "students" AND "Uk" or "United Kingdom" or "Scotland" or "Wales" or "England" or "Ireland"	

Study Selection

The search strategy involved the use of a Boolean operator (as outlined in section 3.3) and was used in four electronic academic databases CINAHL, PubMed, APA PsycInfo, and MEDLINE Ovid. In particular, 69 articles of CINAHL (Appendix 3), 381 of PubMed (Appendix 4), 84 of APA PsycInfo (Appendix 5), and 320 of MEDLINE Ovid (Appendix 6) were retrieved in the database search. A total of 876 articles were located by searching other sources of academic and grey literature, which constituted an additional 22 articles. These 876 entries were later loaded into Rayyan Ai, to be screened (as in appendix 1). The first screening automatically identified and eliminated 15 duplicates in Rayyan. Thus, a total of 861 articles were retained as the title and abstract screened articles. At this screening stage, 852 articles were filtered out according to set eligibility criteria. The reasons behind the exclusion were: wrong study design (262 articles), wrong type of publication (224 articles), wrong population (187 articles), irrelevant outcomes (79 articles), and same types of publication i.e. systematic reviews (47), combined systematic reviews and meta-analyses (33), and meta-analyses (20). Finally, 9 studies were found to be eligible and used in the final synthesis of this review.

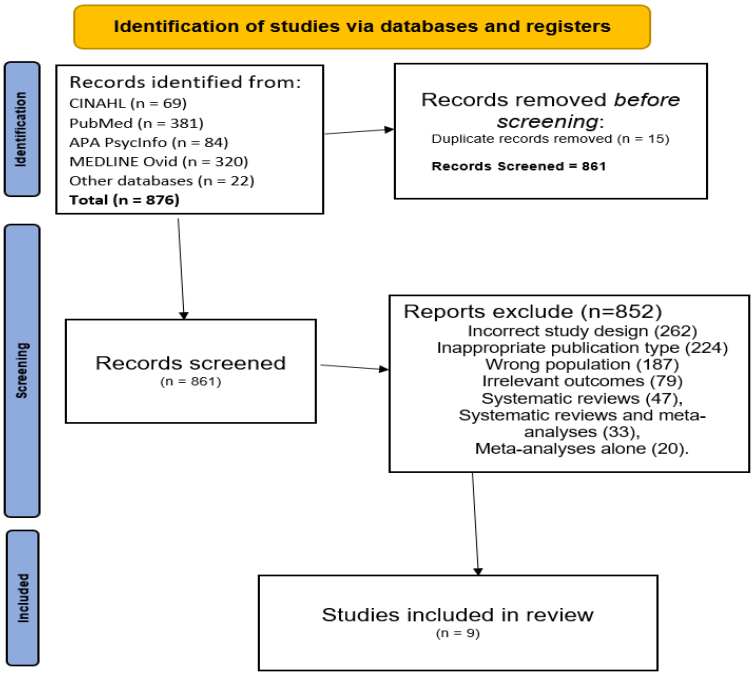
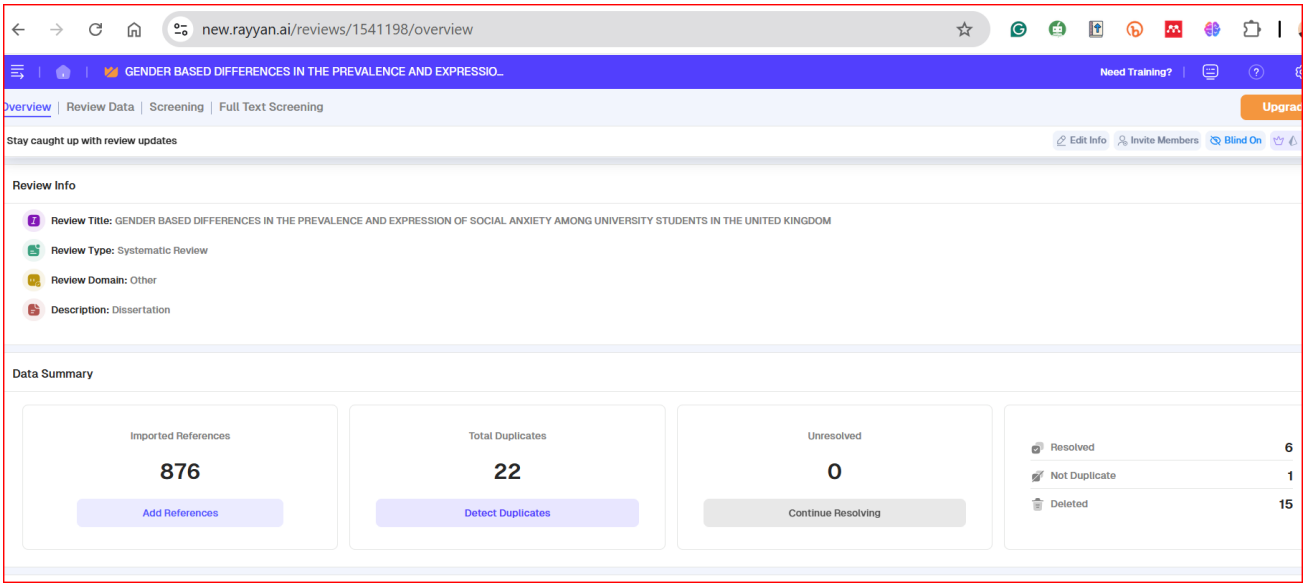
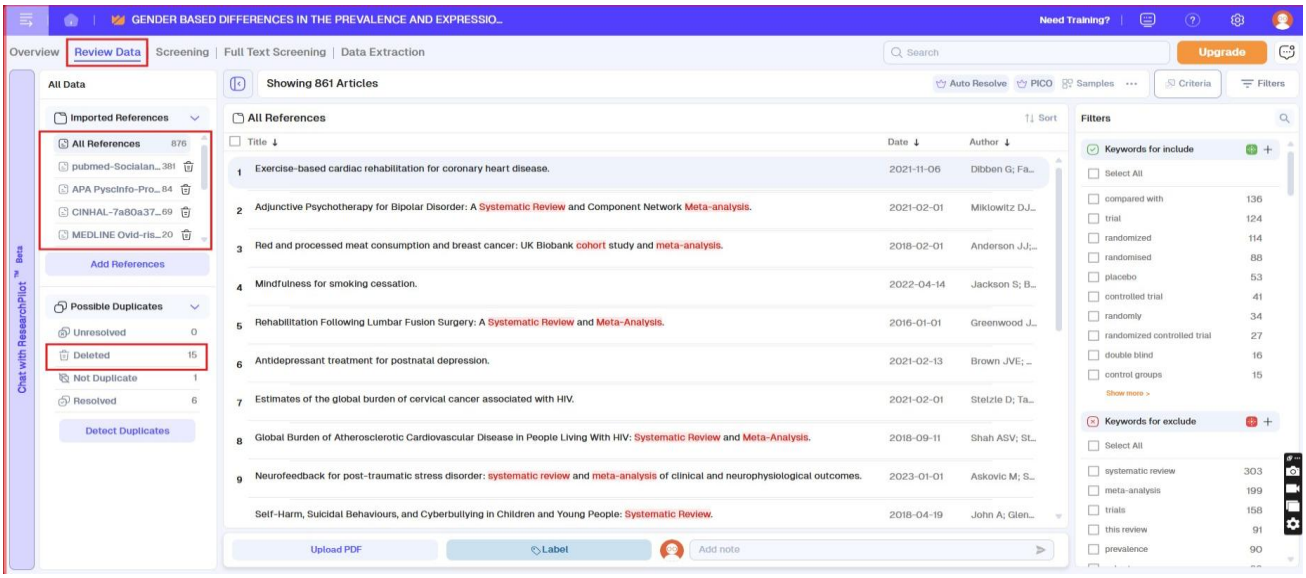


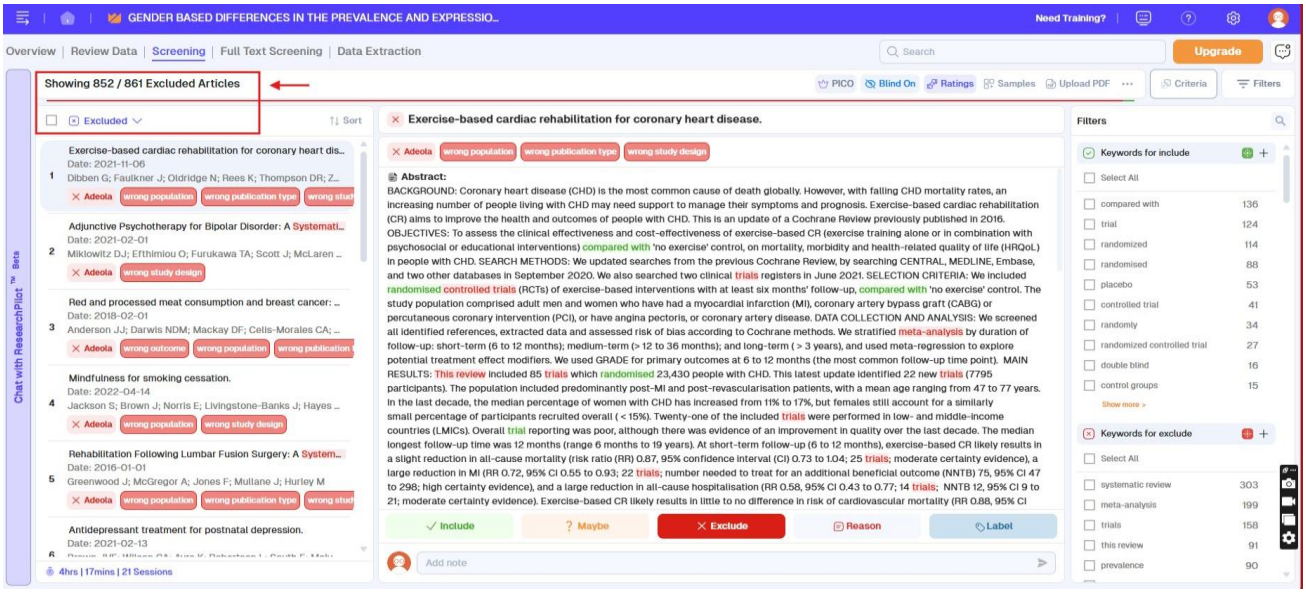
Figure 4.1 PRISMA Flowchart

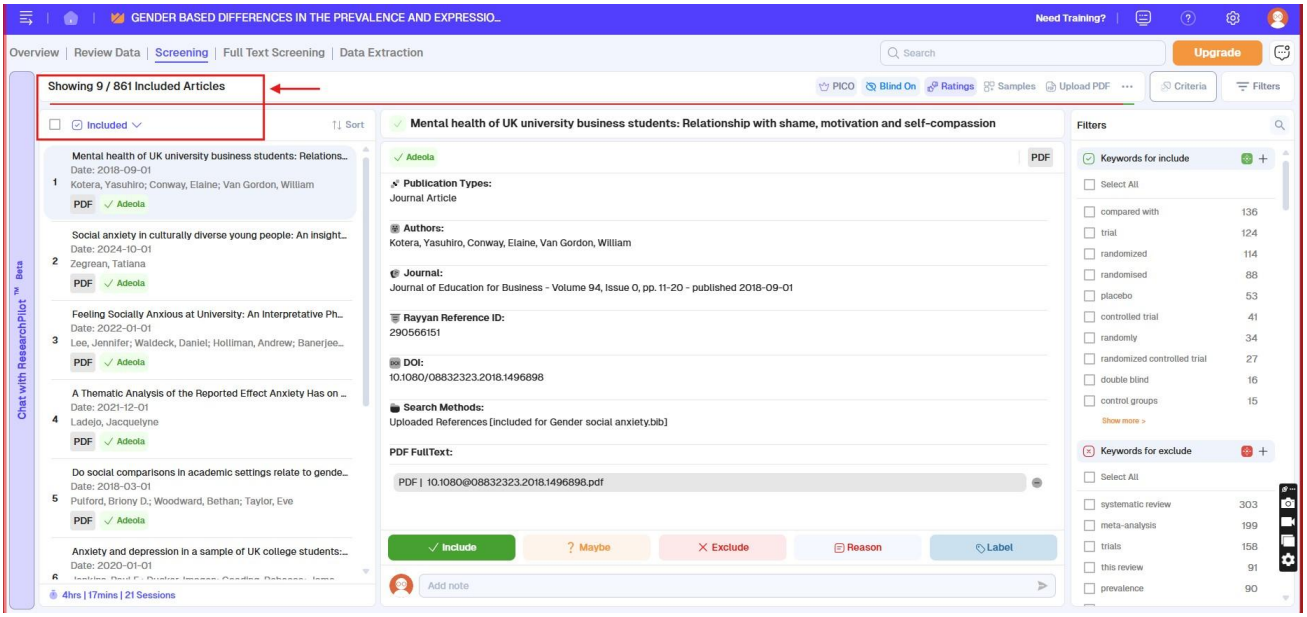
Study Characteristics

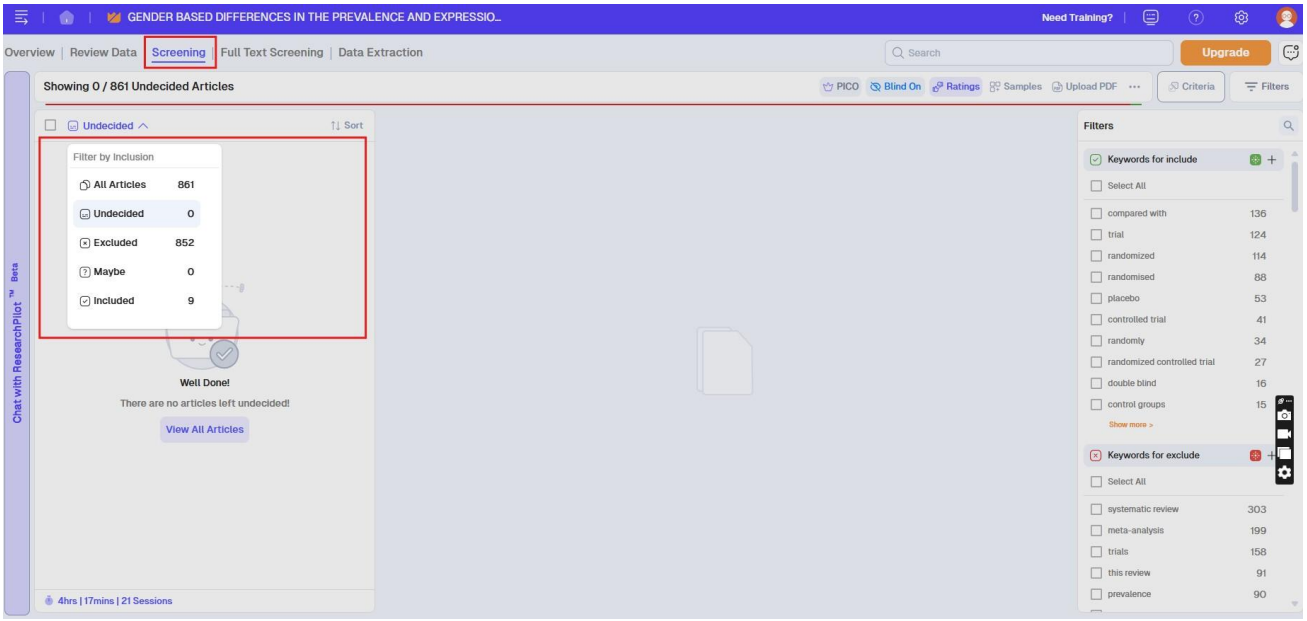
Appendix 1: Screening on Rayyan

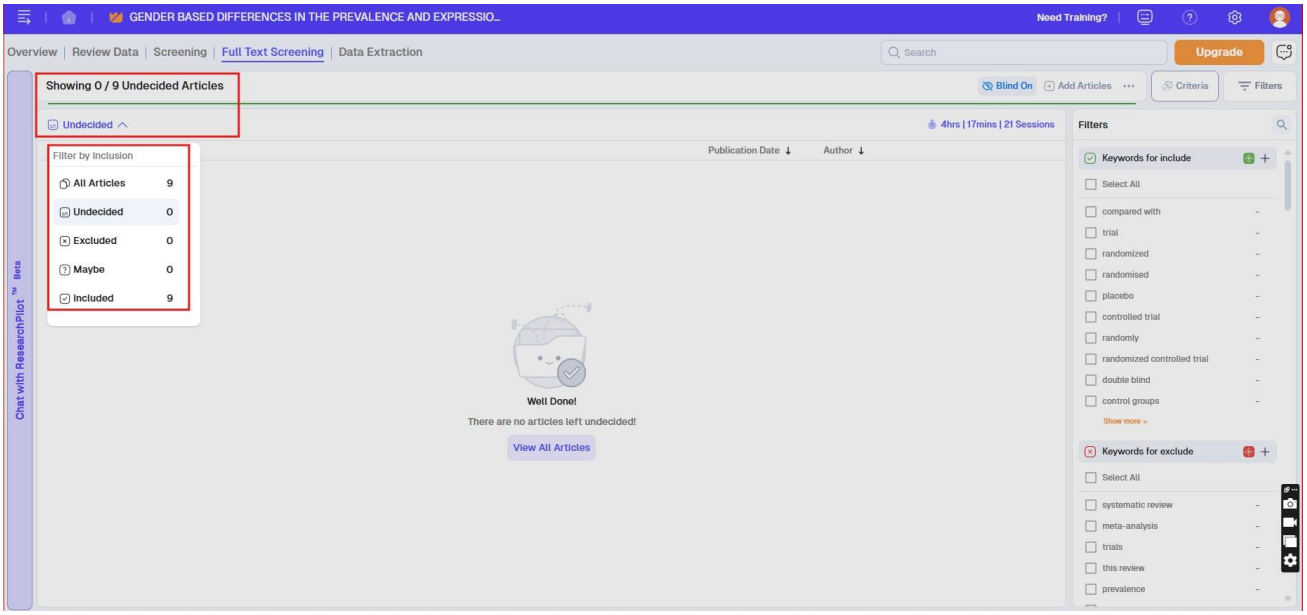








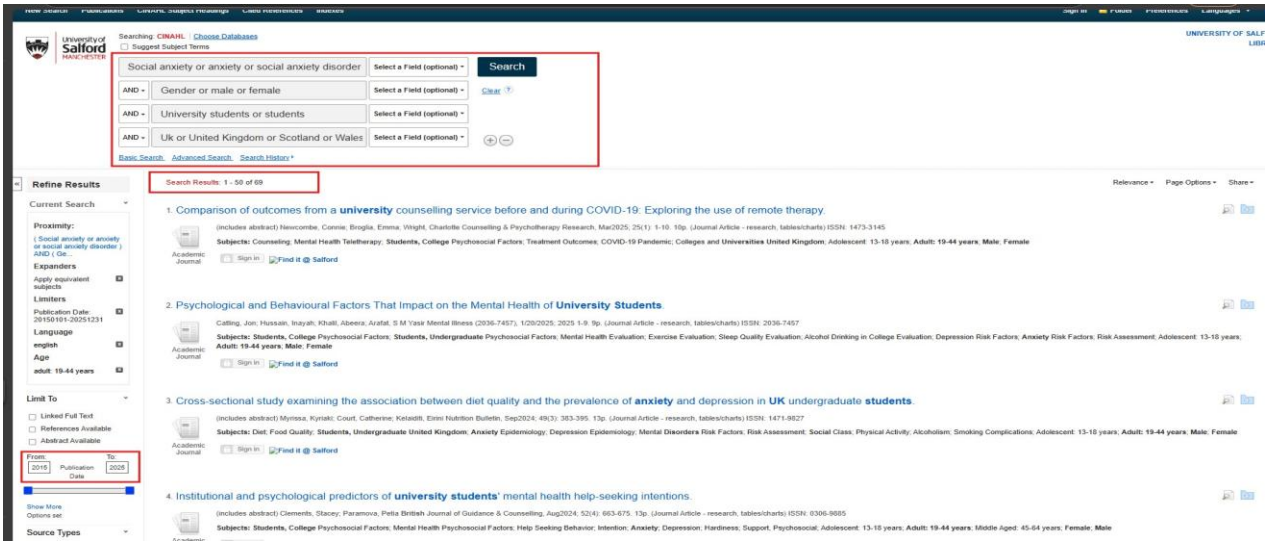




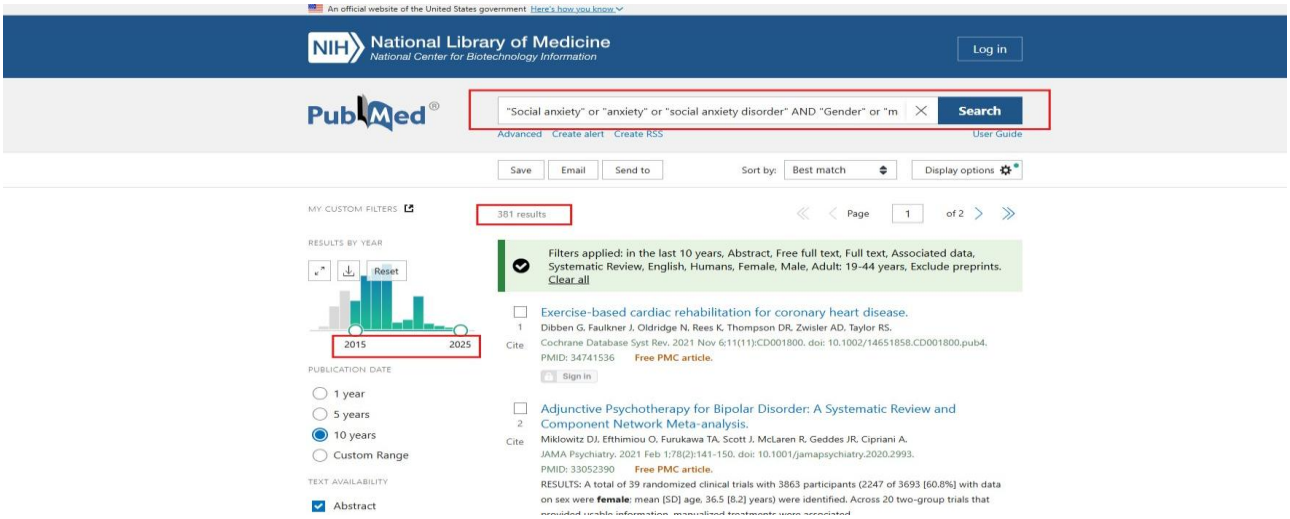
Appendix 2: Coding/framework analysis

Verbatim quotes from the authors	
I'm a very social person so I like that side of social media. It helps me stay connected with people all around the world, even my cousins who live abroad [Student 22] I've met like some of my closest most dear friends through it [Student 7] I lost contact with him for 10 plus years. We found each other through Instagram. So, we started messaging again. [Student 12] In terms of my mental well-being, it can help me stop loneliness and keep in touch with friends and family especially when I'm at university. [Student 27] So even though you're at home, by yourself, or with just your family, you're actually like, connected with the world out there. [Student 6] I'm fortunate enough to belong in one where everyone seeks to uplift one another, with the work you are producing being praised and promoted. [Student 21] In lockdown, where a lot of people were then doing like the virtual calls and virtual iftars and virtual like, talks and things and it created such a nice community. [Student 6] I can follow someone that has a healthy living account for example I find that seeing posts like that would encourage me to be better or to go out and go for a run or pick something healthy to do. [Student 15] So in terms of creativity, it makes me happy seeing other people's work and then using that to inspire myself. [Student 17] I've learned a lot from people through social media, just different people's mindsets and different people's viewpoints. I think specially with certain campaigns, such as BLM [Black Lives Matter] for example, that really showed the power of people when they come together. [Student 6] Social media has benefited me a great deal in terms of coming closer to my own faith. I follow a lot of religious accounts on social media and they tend to show positive, bitesize clips that really provides me with hope and motivation to continue being strong in your faith. [Student 27] The endorphins that come with posting or the number of likes does have a positive impact on me [Student 22] It's nice getting positive feedback from people on stuff that you posted and it's nice receiving compliments, but also complementing other people on stuff they've posted. [Student 15] If there is anything in the real world that affects my anxiety, funnily social media can act as a way of helping me cope with it. It puts my mind in another place; a place where I don't have to think too much [Student 22] Pull me out of my like, state of like despair, into anything that's stimulating. That's why I was like, watching things that were just like, utter trash, like it made no sense. But like, it was something to just distract me. And that's what I needed at that time. [Student 4]	It's also a nice break in the day so if you had a busy day at work you can just have a quick scroll through. [Student 16] Sometimes if you're just feeling a bit you know, as you put like, a bit anxious or maybe overwhelmed. Just doing something pretty mundane, can sort of help. [Student 20] When people post a lot of content about their lives whilst you're just at home, not doing anything special, you feel anxious in that you should really be doing something. Or that I am not doing enough [Student 21] ...just looking at the success of others and comparing it to my lack of success really heightened my anxiety and pushed me down further. [Student 27] So you can actually see who is financially more well off or of a higher social economic class and then you're kind of comparing yourself to these people who have more money than you [Student 10] I had like an issue with body image. It wasn't a big thing, but it played on the back of my mind. And with social media like Instagram, where a big part of it is posting photos of yourself, I could definitely see why it would be a negative [Student 11] I think it comes down to influencers – like they have good body types and things that can make you quite insecure. [Student 25] I would not use my phone for even just 2 hours and I would feel like I was missing out on something. This would drive me crazy and add so much unnecessary stress [Student 24] You see so many different stories of people doing different things. Sometimes you get that fear of missing out. [Student 11] People around me were always on their phones using these apps, so naturally, I would do the same. If I wasn't on it, it would bring the fear that I felt like I was missing out [Student 24] if I have a deadline or things to do, like exam preparation, I am not one to just focus on that. I tend to procrastinate an unhealthy amount. Social media takes time away from me completing my uni work, doing my chores or doing things to better myself and, in turn, this increases my anxiety levels. [Student 22] With WhatsApp, there's kind of a chronic stress and background, especially when you have like later messages and stuff coming through and you can kind of feel obliged to kind of just continually be online and be active [Student 5] There is so much overthinking with it; thinking that maybe this person didn't like me. Or perhaps you message someone, and you see that they are online, but they do not message you. Again, sometimes I look at this and think "Ok, does this person not have enough time for me?" [Student 27]

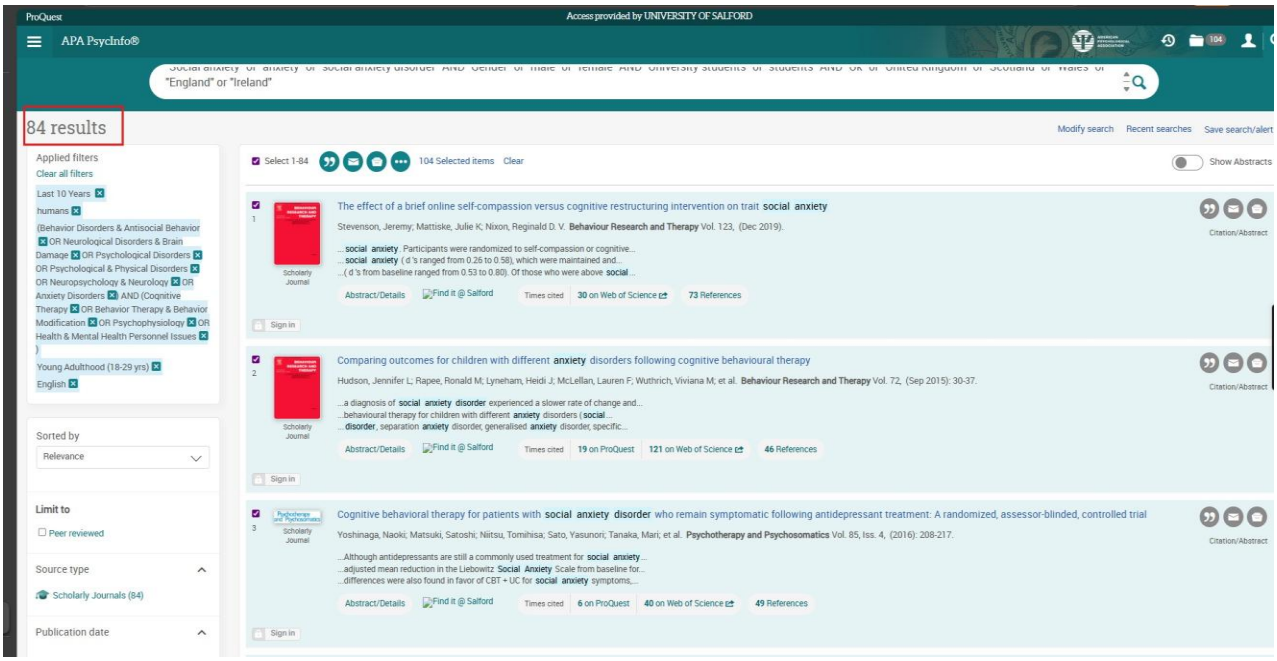
Appendix 3: Articles gotten from Cinhal



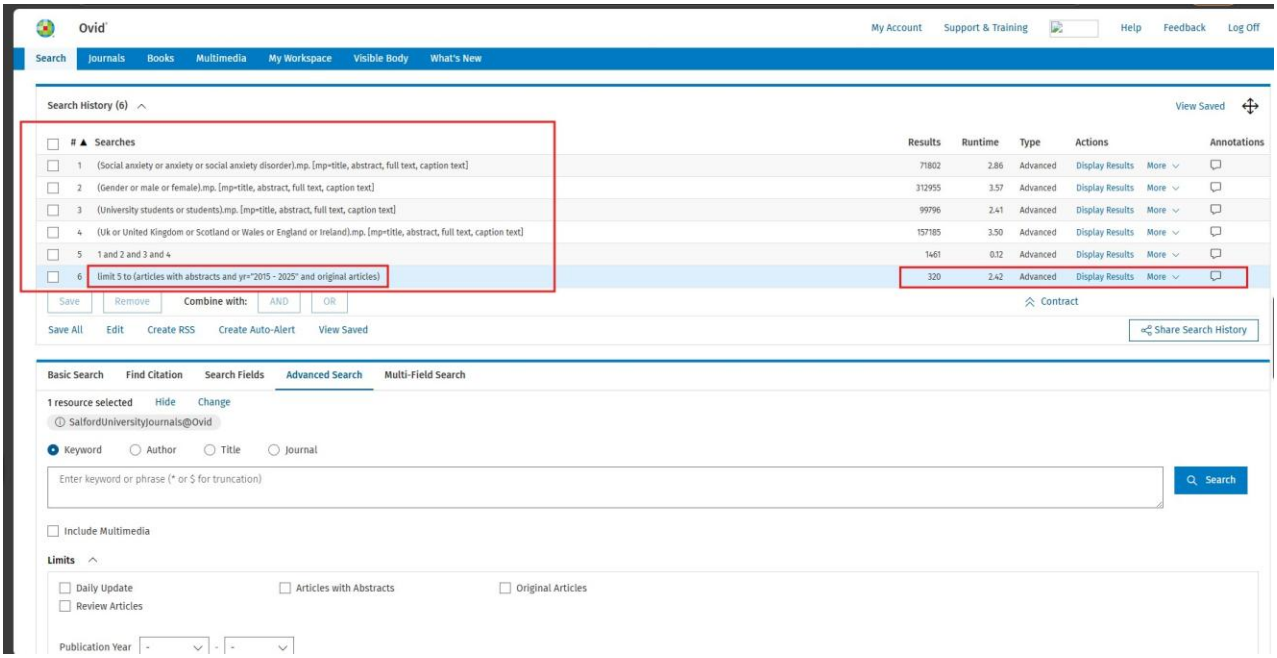
Appendix 4: Articles gotten from Pubmed



Appendix 5: Articles gotten from APA PsycInfo



Appendix 6: Articles gotten from MEDLINE Ovid



Appendix 7: Summary of the included Articles

S/N	Author(s) (Year)	Title of The Study	Aim of study	Study design	Findings	Implications
1	(Anto et al., 2023)	Exploring the Impact of Social Media on Anxiety Among University Students in the United Kingdom: Qualitative Study	This study aims to develop foundational knowledge around the association of social media and anxiety among university students and enhance extant knowledge and theory.	A total of 29 semistructured interviews were conducted, comprising 19 male students (65.5%) and 10 female students (34.5%) with a mean age of 21.5 years.	3 mediating factors that decrease anxiety levels and 5 factors that increase anxiety levels. Social media decreased anxiety through positive experiences, social connectivity, and escapism. Social media increased anxiety through stress, comparison, fear of missing out, negative experiences, and procrastination.	This qualitative study sheds critical light on how university students perceive how social media affects their anxiety levels. Students revealed that social media did impact their anxiety levels and considered it an important factor in their mental health. Thus, it is essential to educate stakeholders, including students, university counselors, and health care professionals, about the potential impact of social media on students anxiety levels. Since anxiety is a multifactorial condition, pinpointing the main stressors in a person's life, such as social media use, may help manage these patients more effectively.
2	(Jenkins et al., 2020)	Anxiety and depression in a sample of UK college students: a study of prevalence, comorbidity, and quality of life	This study sought to estimate the prevalence of depression and anxiety in UK college students and examine associations between mental health symptoms and quality of life (QoL).	Self-report measures of depression, anxiety, and QoL were completed online.	Prevalence rates were in line with global estimates and suggest female students are at elevated risk of mental health problems. Symptom severity and comorbidity were associated with greater QoL impairment.	Presence of depression, anxiety, or both was associated with QoL impairment. Findings develop understanding of the impact of mental health problems on QoL and could inform appropriate screening and effective interventions for student mental health.
3	(Kotera et al., 2018)	Mental health of UK university business students: Relationship with shame, motivation and self-compassion	To investigate the relationship between mental health, attitudes toward mental health, self-compassion, and motivation in UK business students.	This study recruited 138 UK business students and examined the relationship between mental health and shame, and mental health and potential protective factors such as self-compassion and motivation.	A significant correlation between each of the constructs was observed and self-compassion was identified as an explanatory variable for mental health. Shame moderated the relationship between self-compassion and mental health. Integrating self-compassion training into business study programs may help to improve the mental	The poor mental health of UK business students appears to be exacerbated by their negative attitudes toward mental illness, causing help avoidance. Though there is increasing awareness of the seriousness of student mental health issues in UK higher education, this is the first study to explore the relationship between mental health attitudes, mental health symptoms, motivation, and self-compassion in UK business students.

					health of this student group.	
4	(Ladejo, 2021)	A Thematic Analysis of the Reported Effect Anxiety Has on University Students	The aim of this qualitative study was to provide further insights as to why students are experiencing anxiety and into help-seeking behavior amongst university students.	A thematic analysis was used to analyze a total of 118 blog entries of students discussing the impact of university on mental health.	Findings highlighted three main themes: Balancing priorities, Fear of failure, and Critical incidents. These themes are discussed in terms of possible risk factors contributing to students experiencing anxiety while at university.	underscores how academic pressures, fear of failure, and personal crises heighten student anxiety, revealing a need for universities to implement responsive, student-centered mental health interventions that address both structural and emotional barriers to help-seeking behavior.
5	(Lee et al., 2022)	Feeling Socially Anxious at University: An Interpretative Feeling Socially Anxious at University: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	To explore how a small sample of undergraduat e students experienced feeling socially anxious at university.	Semi structured interviews were conducted with eight psychology undergraduates and interpretative phenomenologic al analysis (IPA) was used to explore their experiences and interpret deeper meaning.	Five main themes emerged, two of which are presented in the present study: “persistent self consciousness” and “avoiding reality.” Findings are discussed in relation to Clark and Wells’ (1995) cognitive model of social anxiety as well as existing literature. Areas requiring further exploration are discussed, as well as how universities may support socially anxious students.	Reveals that socially anxious students often experience persistent self-consciousness and avoidance behaviors, aligning with cognitive models of anxiety. The study highlights the urgent need for tailored university support systems that acknowledge and address these internal struggles.
6	(McIntyre et al., 2018)	Academic and non-academic predictors of student psychological distress: the role of social identity and loneliness	To identify the key social determinants of mental health symptoms in a student population	Using an online survey, we administered measures of social connectedness and mental health symptoms alongside academic and non-academic stressors to a large sample of	Loneliness was the strongest overall predictor of mental distress, while assessment stress was the most important academic predictor. Strong identification with university friendship	The study highlights the benefits of establishing strong social connections at university and the importance of minimising stress associated with assessment tasks.

				UK university students	groups was most protective against distress relative to other social identities, and the beneficial impact of identification on symptoms was mediated by reduced loneliness.	
7	(Pulford et al., 2018)	Do social comparisons in academic settings relate to gender and academic self-confidence?	Reports the development of an Academic Social Comparison Scale (ASCS) to measure students' tendencies to socially compare themselves with other students in an educational setting.	The 27-item ASCS was then measured in relation to academic self-confidence in a sample of University students, using the Individual Learning Profile (ILP) scale.	The study found that making downward academic social comparisons was not very commonly reported and did not relate to academic confidence in any domain measured. Confidence in numeracy, speaking, and hard IT were, however, significantly lower in those students who tended to make more upward social comparisons. The results also showed that the less stu dents reported that they socially compared in general, the more confident they were in reading, writing, and time management. All three subscales of the ASCS showed good reliability when tested 6–9 weeks later.	The ASCS showed that female stu dents tended to make more upward academic social comparisons and less downward academic comparisons than male students. In domains such as reading and writing people's confidence was higher if they made fewer academic social comparisons (irrespective of direction), and gender was not an important factor. Results also showed that academic confidence was neither higher nor lower in students who reported making more downwards academic comparisons.
8	(Sagar-Ouriaghli, Godfrey, et al., 2020)	Engaging male students with mental health support: a qualitative focus group study	To sought to identify potential approaches that would be relevant to improving mental health help-seeking in male students.	Three focus groups comprising of 24 male students at a London University were conducted.	Five distinct themes were identified. These were: 1) protecting male vulnerability, 2) providing a masculine narrative of help-seeking, 3) differences over	These themes represent important considerations that can be used, together with the existing literature about male help-seeking, to develop more male friendly interventions that are suitable for male students. This could help improve help-seeking attitudes and the uptake of mental health

					intervention format, 4) difficulty knowing when and how to seek help, and 5) strategies to sensitively engage male students.	interventions for male students experiencing emotional distress.
9	(Zegrean, 2024)	Social anxiety in culturally diverse young people: An insight into lived experiences	This study addresses this gap and provides an insight into the vivid world of this 'hidden' population.	Four participants from England were interviewed using semi-structured interviews.	The results revealed that the socio-cultural background of this population played a pivotal role in the prevalence and expression of SSA.	The participants' experiences were significantly influenced by the social and cultural norms of their country of origin as well as the characteristics of modern society in England. The predominant factors were the pressure of high expectations from family and society, transgenerational trauma, socio- cultural norms, uncertainty about the future and lack of opportunities to secure employment.

Quality Assessment

The rigour of methodology of the nine studies used in this review was evaluated using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist. CASP is a popular tool that is recognized to evaluate the credibility, relevance and findings of the research. The quality of the nine studies was assessed against ten domains of CASP: research aims, research methodology, research design, research recruitment strategy, research data collection procedures, researcher reflexivity, research ethics, research data analysis, research findings and research value. Each criterion had a rating system of 2 full compliance, 1 partial or ambiguous compliance, and 0 information or irrelevance.

Table 4.1 Critical appraisal of the included articles using the CASP checklist

Author(s) (Year)	Clear Aims	Appropriate Methodology	Research Design	Recruitment Strategy	Data Collection	Reflexivity	Ethical Considerations	Data Analysis	Findings	Value of Research	Total
(Anto et al., 2023)	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	19
(Jenkins et al., 2020)	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	19
(Kotera et al., 2018)	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	18
(Ladejo, 2021)	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	18
(Lee et al., 2022)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	20
(McIntyre et al., 2018)	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	18
(Pulford et al., 2018)	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2	2	18
(Sagar-Ouriaghli, Godfrey, et al., 2020)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	20
(Zegrean, 2024)	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	19
Total	18	18	18	18	18	7	18	18	18	18	169

As Table 4.1 illustrates, scores across the studies were consistently high.

$$QA = \frac{\text{Total Score Obtained}}{\text{Total possible score if each article get the maximu score}} \text{ x } 100$$

By using the quality assessment formula used in the research conducted by Odubia, Olalere, et al. (2025) - QA = (Total Score Obtained ÷ Total Maximum Score) × 100, the outcome is (169 180) x 100 = 93.88%. Such a figure indicates a high degree of overall quality implying that the evidence base being used to conduct a synthesis is methodologically sound, ethically aware, and overall suitable to the purpose of providing an answer to the research questions being asked in this dissertation. The cumulative score of 169 out of a possible 180 (i.e. 9 studies × 20 points). Based on the formula QA = (169 180) 100, the quality assessment score was 93.88 percent, which shows that the quality of the methodological standard of the evidence base was high.

Data Analysis

The results of the analysis of the included studies were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach. This will enable the researcher to go beyond reporting to the inner conceptualization of gender-based diverse differences in social-anxiety in the university students.

Ethical Considerations

There was no direct human interaction, or primary data gathering in this study, and thus the ethical factors focused on the truthfulness of data reporting, misrepresentation, and the avoidance of selective bias and the right attribution of intellectual property by proper referencing. Research met all the guidelines on academic integrity and only publicly available and peer-reviewed studies were included in the research. These principles enabled the study to uphold its ethical scholarship and offer reliable basis of evidence-based inferences.

Results and Findings

The prevalence of social anxiety among male and female university students in the United Kingdom.

Table 4.2 Subthemes on Gender Differences in Social Anxiety Prevalence and Expression

Subtheme	Verbatim Quotes / Author Insight	Simple Interpretation
Higher Prevalence in Female Students	"*37.2% of females and 16.7% of males screened positive for depression and 45.7% and 16.7% screened positive for an anxiety disorder... Females were more than four times as likely as males to screen positive for anxiety.*" (Jenkins et al., 2020) "*Female students tended to make more upward academic social comparisons and fewer downward comparisons than male students... The study confirmed a negative impact on confidence from upward social comparisons.*" (Pulford et al., 2018)	Anxiety is more common among female students, possibly due to heightened self-comparison and emotional sensitivity.
Male Reluctance to Acknowledge or Express Anxiety	*"They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't."* (Participant 5 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) "*You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally."* (Participant 2 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"I kept postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety... I am so worried that is going to ruin our friendship... so I am hesitating... it is really hard."* (Max, 20, male – Lee et al., 2022)	Male students often avoid discussing or acknowledging anxiety due to fear of appearing weak.
Internalised Pressure and Performance Anxiety (Shared but Gendered in Expression)	*"42.2% of students met the criteria for moderate anxiety... 22.2% of students met the criteria for both moderate depression and anxiety... loneliness was the single strongest predictor of mental distress."* (McIntyre et al., 2018) *"If I wasn't on [social media], it would bring the fear that I felt like I was missing out... it would drive me crazy and add so much unnecessary stress."* (Student 24 – Anto et al., 2023) *"When my parents left me alone... I had my first panic attack... I didn't venture into the kitchen for four days... That was my first real experience with anxiety and how debilitating it can be."* (Anon 103 – Ladejo, 2021)	Both genders experience internal anxiety related to performance, loneliness, and social image, but express it in slightly different ways.

Higher Prevalence in Female Students

As seen in table 4.2, studies consistently show that female university students experience higher levels of social anxiety than their male counterparts. Jenkins et al. (2020) found that "37.2% of females and 16.7% of males screened positive for depression and 45.7% and 16.7% screened positive for an anxiety disorder... Females were more than four times as likely as males to screen positive for anxiety." This disparity may be linked to social and psychological pressures, including a greater tendency for women to compare themselves unfavorably to others. Pulford et al. (2018) reported that "female students tended to make more upward academic social comparisons and fewer downward comparisons than male students. The study confirmed a negative impact on confidence from upward social comparisons." These findings suggest that gender-specific cognitive patterns and societal expectations contribute to a higher reported prevalence of social anxiety among female students, though they may also reflect greater openness among women to disclose emotional difficulties.

Male Reluctance to Acknowledge or Express Anxiety

While male students do experience social anxiety, cultural norms surrounding masculinity often discourage them from acknowledging or expressing it. In a qualitative study, one male participant explained, "They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't" (Participant 5 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). Another added, "You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally" (Participant 2 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). Lee et al. (2022) shared the voice of a male student who said, "I kept postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety... I am so worried that is going to ruin our friendship... so I am hesitating... it is really hard." These quotes illustrate how male students often avoid discussing their struggles due to internalized stigma and fear of judgment, leading to underreporting and a lack of support, even when anxiety is significantly impacting their well-being.

Internalised Pressure and Performance Anxiety (Shared but Gendered in Expression)

Both male and female students report anxiety arising from academic pressure, loneliness, and social expectations, though their expressions differ. McIntyre et al. (2018) found that "42.2% of students met the criteria for moderate anxiety... 22.2% of students met the criteria for both moderate depression and anxiety... loneliness was the single strongest predictor of mental distress." The digital age further complicates this, as one student noted, "If I wasn't on [social media], it would bring the fear that I felt like I was missing out... it would drive me crazy and add so much unnecessary stress" (Student 24 – Anto et al., 2023). A particularly vivid account from Ladejo (2021) described a student's isolation: "When my parents left me alone... I had my first panic attack... I didn't venture into the kitchen for four days... That was my first real experience with anxiety and how debilitating it can be" (Anon 103). These examples reveal that while internalized anxiety affects students of all genders, its manifestation is shaped by gender norms, with women more likely to verbalize distress and men to suppress or externalize it.

The manifestation of social anxiety in male and female university students, focusing on gender-specific symptoms and experiences.

Table 4.3: Subthemes on Gendered Manifestations of Social Anxiety

Subtheme	Verbatim Quotes / Author Insights	Interpretation
Male Emotional Suppression and Reluctance to Seek Help	"*They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't.*" (Participant 5 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally."* (Participant 2 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"I kept postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety... I am so worried that it is going to ruin our friendship... so I am hesitating... it is really hard."* (Max, 20, male – Lee et al., 2022)	Male students often internalise their anxiety and avoid seeking support due to stigma and social expectations about masculinity.
Female Sensitivity to Social Judgement and Comparisons	*"I had specific rules because I came from Middle Eastern Islamic culture which is really restricted... it's the main thing that makes me anxious and makes me feel judged."* (Mina, 19, female – Zegrean, 2024) "*Female students tended to make more upward academic social comparisons and fewer downward comparisons than male students... the study confirmed a negative impact on confidence from upward social comparisons."*	Female students are more prone to feelings of inadequacy and social comparison, particularly in academic and appearance-related settings, leading to heightened anxiety.

	(Pulford et al., 2018) "*Although my grades weren't bad, I was concerned with the fact that others were doing a lot better than me... I found myself feeling worthless and eventually this led to difficulties with anxiety and depression."* (Anon 17 – Ladejo, 2021)	
Performance-Based and Internalised Social Anxiety (Shared but Nuanced)	*"When my parents left me alone... I had my first panic attack... I didn't venture into the kitchen for four days... That was my first real experience with anxiety and how debilitating it can be."* (Anon 103 – Ladejo, 2021) "*I just don't go to seminars anymore... I'm just scared of being humiliated.*" (Anon – Ladejo, 2021) *"I get really anxious and scared and my heart races... I just don't feel like I belong."* (Female participant – McIntyre et al., 2018)	Both male and female students experience performance-related anxiety and internal distress, but their outward reactions and coping vary by gender.
Use of Avoidance and Withdrawal as a Coping Mechanism	*"I kept thinking people would be judging me... so I just stayed in my room... I stopped attending classes."* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021) *"He was very reluctant to engage, I think he just didn't want to be seen as weak*." (Practitioner – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"I didn't even go out to get food for days. I couldn't bear seeing people.*" (Female student – Anto et al., 2023)	Both genders may use avoidance or social withdrawal to manage anxiety, but males often hide it under emotional detachment, while females may display isolation more openly.

Male Emotional Suppression and Reluctance to Seek Help

Male students frequently experience social anxiety but often internalise it and resist seeking help due to social expectations tied to masculinity (as seen in table 4.3). Participant 5 in Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) noted, "They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't," while another participant added, "You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally" (Participant 2). Lee et al. (2022) highlighted how such avoidance can intensify distress, with Max, a 20-year-old male student, admitting, "I kept postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety... I am so worried that it is going to ruin our friendship... so I am hesitating... it is really hard." These quotes demonstrate that societal norms around emotional strength inhibit male students from expressing or managing social anxiety effectively, leading to prolonged internal struggle.

Female Sensitivity to Social Judgement and Comparisons

Female students often experience social anxiety as a result of heightened sensitivity to perceived judgment and self-comparison, particularly in academic or cultural contexts. Mina, a 19-year-old student in Zegrean (2024), shared, "I had specific rules because I came from Middle Eastern Islamic culture which is really restricted... it's the main thing that makes me anxious and makes me feel judged." Pulford et al. (2018) similarly found that "female students tended to make more upward academic social comparisons and fewer downward comparisons than male students... the study confirmed a negative impact on confidence from upward social comparisons." Reinforcing this, a student in Ladejo (2021) confessed, "Although my grades weren't bad, I was concerned with the fact that others were doing a lot better than me... I found myself feeling worthless and eventually this led to difficulties with anxiety and depression." These findings suggest that female students are more likely to internalise external pressures, contributing to a deeper and more emotionally charged experience of social anxiety.

Performance-Based and Internalised Social Anxiety (Shared but Nuanced)

Both male and female students experience social anxiety related to academic performance and social belonging, though the symptoms may manifest in different ways. Ladejo (2021) shared the story of a student whose anxiety became physically and emotionally overwhelming: "When my parents left me alone... I had my first panic attack... I didn't venture into the kitchen for four days... That was my first real experience with anxiety and how debilitating it can be." Another student reported avoiding classes due to fear of embarrassment: "I just don't go to seminars anymore... I'm just scared of being humiliated" (Ladejo, 2021). Similarly, a female participant in McIntyre et al. (2018) said, "I get really anxious and scared and my heart races... I just don't feel like I belong." These accounts illustrate that while both genders endure the internal distress of social anxiety, women may verbalise their emotional experience more readily, whereas men are likely to mask their discomfort or disengage entirely.

Use of Avoidance and Withdrawal as a Coping Mechanism

Avoidance and social withdrawal are common coping strategies among students with social anxiety, though their expressions often differ by gender. One student in Ladejo (2021) admitted, "I kept thinking people would be judging me... so I just stayed in my room... I stopped attending classes." This retreat into isolation is mirrored by male disengagement, as noted by a practitioner in Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020): "He was very reluctant to engage, I think he just didn't want to be seen as weak." Meanwhile, a female student in Anto et al. (2023) described a more visible withdrawal: "I didn't even go out to get food for days. I couldn't bear seeing people." These testimonies highlight that while both male and female students may respond to anxiety by withdrawing socially, males often disguise their avoidance behind emotional detachment, whereas females tend to experience and display more overt forms of isolation.

The coping mechanisms employed by male and female university students in managing social anxiety.

Table 4.4 Subthemes on Gendered Coping Mechanisms for Social Anxiety

Subtheme	Verbatim Quotes / Author Insights	Interpretation
Avoidance and Social Withdrawal (Common but Often Unspoken in Males)	*"I just don't go to seminars anymore... I'm just scared of being humiliated."* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021) *"I kept thinking people would be judging me... so I just stayed in my room... I stopped attending classes."* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021) *"He was very reluctant to engage, I think he just didn't want to be seen as weak." (Practitioner* – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"I didn't even go out to get food for days. I couldn't bear seeing people."* (Female student – Anto et al., 2023)	Both male and female students avoid social situations to cope with anxiety, but males tend to hide this behavior to avoid appearing weak. Females may be more open about their withdrawal.
Seeking Support (More Common Among Females, Reluctantly Embraced by Males)	*"Once I opened up to my flatmate, things started to change... I realised I'm not alone."* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021) *"I didn't want to go to the mental health services at first, but my friend booked the appointment for me. It helped talking to someone." (Female student* – Zegrean, 2024) *"They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't."* (Participant 5 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"Peer support worked because it didn't feel like therapy... it was like someone gets it."* (Male participant – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020)	Females are more likely to seek social and professional support, while males do so hesitantly, often preferring informal or peer-based methods that feel less clinical.
Suppression and Internalising Emotions (More Prominent in Male Responses)	*"You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally."* (Participant 2 – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020) *"I kept postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety... I'm so worried that it's going to ruin our friendship... so I'm hesitating... it's really hard."* (Max, 20, male – Lee et al., 2022)	Male students tend to suppress or bottle up their emotions rather than express them, often due to social norms around masculinity and emotional restraint.
Engagement in Distraction or Over-Performance (Especially Among Females)	*"I just focus so much on studying to block out everything else... it's like I'm proving I belong here."* (Female – Ladejo, 2021) *"I keep myself busy all the time with societies and events so I don't have to think about how awkward I feel."* (Female student – Anto et al., 2023)	Female students often use overachievement or constant activity as a way to distract from their anxiety, channeling it into productivity to gain a sense of control and self-worth.

Avoidance and Social Withdrawal (Common but Often Unspoken in Males)

Avoidance as shown in table 4.4 is a widely reported coping strategy among university students dealing with social anxiety, though it manifests differently across genders. For many, withdrawing from social or academic settings becomes

a way to escape perceived judgment or failure. One student admitted, *"I just don't go to seminars anymore... I'm just scared of being humiliated"* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021), while another shared, *"I kept thinking people would be judging me... so I just stayed in my room... I stopped attending classes"* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021). Female students, such as one in Anto et al. (2023), were often more open about this pattern: *"I didn't even go out to get food for days. I couldn't bear seeing people." In contrast, male avoidance was more concealed, as a practitioner observed: "He was very reluctant to engage, I think he just didn't want to be seen as weak"* (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). These insights highlight that while both genders avoid stressful interactions, men tend to do so covertly to align with masculine norms of emotional control.

Seeking Support (More Common Among Females, Reluctantly Embraced by Males)

Female students are more likely to seek support, whether from peers or professional services, while male students often need external prompting and tend to favour informal, peer-based avenues. One female participant reflected, *"Once I opened up to my flatmate, things started to change... I realised I'm not alone"* (Anon – Ladejo, 2021). Another stated, *"I didn't want to go to the mental health services at first, but my friend booked the appointment for me. It helped talking to someone"* (Zegrean, 2024). For males, emotional disclosure is more challenging; as Participant 5 in Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) expressed, *"They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily, we don't." Yet when the format is less clinical, it can resonate—"Peer support worked because it didn't feel like therapy... it was like someone gets it"* (Male participant – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). These findings underscore the gendered dynamics in help-seeking: females are more inclined to talk, while males prefer informal support that feels less emotionally exposing.

Suppression and Internalising Emotions (More Prominent in Male Responses)

Male students often cope with social anxiety through emotional suppression, driven by cultural norms that equate vulnerability with weakness. Participant 2 in Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) captured this internal conflict: *"You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally."* This suppression can lead to heightened psychological tension, as illustrated by Max in Lee et al. (2022), who said, *"I kept postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety... I'm so worried that it's going to ruin our friendship... so I'm hesitating... it's really hard."* These reflections highlight that male students may experience significant emotional distress but lack the socially or personally permission to express it openly. Instead of addressing the anxiety directly, they internalize it, which can lead to cumulative psychological strain over time.

Engagement in Distraction or Over-Performance (Especially Among Females)

Female students often cope with anxiety by immersing themselves in academic or extracurricular tasks, using productivity as both a distraction and a form of validation. One student explained, *"I just focus so much on studying to block out everything else... it's like I'm proving I belong here"* (Female – Ladejo, 2021). Another echoed this tendency: *"I keep myself busy all the time with societies and events so I don't have to think about how awkward I feel"* (Female student – Anto et al., 2023). This behaviour suggests that for many female students, busyness becomes a psychological buffer, which is a way to mask feelings of inadequacy or isolation while outwardly demonstrating control and competence. Although this strategy may offer temporary relief, it can lead to burnout and prevent deeper emotional reflection, revealing the complexities of coping through overachievement.

Gendered Expectations and Social Anxiety

Table 4.5: Gendered Expectations and Social Anxiety

Subtheme	Verbatim Quotes from Multiple Authors	Interpretation
Masculine Ideals and the Pressure to Appear Emotionally Stoic	*"They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't."* – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020 *"Fighting the Expectations... emotionally repressive barriers to talking about feelings imposed by the 'rules' of masculinity."* – Ladejo, 2021" *You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally."* – Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020	Male students internalise norms that associate masculinity with emotional suppression. This discourages help-seeking and fosters silence around social anxiety, heightening isolation.

Social Comparison, Academic and Physical Ideals Affecting Women More Intensely	"*Female students tended to make more upward academic social comparisons…"* – Pulford et al., 2018 "*Just looking at the success of others and comparing it to my lack of success really heightened my anxiety…"* – Anto et al., 2023 *"I started to get really insecure… so my mum allowed me to get concealer.*" – Zegrean, 2024	Socially prescribed ideals related to physical appearance and academic achievement increase the burden of self-comparison among women, contributing to heightened social anxiety.
Cultural and Societal Expectations Internalised Differently by Gender	*"I had specific rules because I came from Middle Eastern Islamic culture… the way I dress… makes me anxious and makes me feel judged."* – Zegrean, 2024 *"You have to be the best... family puts pressure on you constantly."* – Zegrean, 2024 *"I think men can be particularly susceptible… due, in large part, to the emotionally repressive barriers… 'rules' of masculinity."* – Ladejo, 2021	Gendered expectations shaped by culture (e.g., modesty for women, achievement or emotional silence for men) manifest as anxiety in social and academic settings.
Fear of Judgment and Rejection in Social Interactions (Across Genders)	*"If I feel like someone is being cold towards me, I feel like I did something wrong."* – Lee et al., 2022 *"When I'm around a huge crowd… I feel judged… I get scared."* – Zegrean, 2024 *"I don't want to ruin my friendship… so I am hesitating saying what I want to say…*" – Lee et al., 2022	Across both genders, societal pressure to behave acceptably leads to overthinking and fear of judgment, especially in interpersonal or group settings, aggravating social anxiety.

Masculine Ideals and the Pressure to Appear Emotionally Stoic

Masculinity is frequently associated with emotional control and strength, creating internal barriers for male students to express vulnerability or seek help when experiencing social anxiety (as seen in table 4.5). Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) capture this with a participant stating, *"They have to trust you because men aren't like women, we don't open up very easily we don't," while another added, "You might also feel anxious about talking to people and then showing vulnerability, which is also a big part why guys just don't talk about their emotions generally.*" Ladejo (2021) reinforced this, describing how men battle *"emotionally repressive barriers to talking about feelings imposed by the 'rules' of masculinity.*" These insights reveal how societal expectations tied to stoicism foster emotional silence among male students, making it harder for them to address social anxiety, which often goes unspoken and untreated, deepening their sense of isolation.

Social Comparison, Academic and Physical Ideals Affecting Women More Intensely

Female students frequently internalise societal and academic pressures related to success and appearance, leading to heightened social anxiety through constant self-comparison. Pulford et al. (2018) observed that *"female students tended to make more upward academic social comparisons,"* while one participant in Anto et al. (2023) expressed, *"Just looking at the success of others and comparing it to my lack of success really heightened my anxiety…" These academic pressures are often compounded by appearance-related insecurities, as seen in Zegrean (2024): "I started to get really insecure… so my mum allowed me to get concealer."* These quotes highlight how young women face multifaceted pressures to meet societal expectations, both academically and physically, resulting in increased vulnerability to social anxiety when they feel they fall short.

Cultural and Societal Expectations Internalised Differently by Gender

Cultural and societal norms shape social anxiety differently for male and female students, depending on gendered values such as modesty, achievement, and emotional control. A female participant in Zegrean (2024) explained, *"I had specific rules because I came from Middle Eastern Islamic culture… the way I dress… makes me anxious and makes me feel judged.*" Cultural pressures also included academic performance: *"You have to be the best... family puts pressure on you constantly"* (Zegrean, 2024). Meanwhile, Ladejo (2021) highlighted that *"men can be particularly susceptible… due, in large part, to the emotionally repressive barriers… 'rules' of masculinity.*" These quotes reflect how societal messages are internalised differently. Women may experience anxiety around visibility, conformity, and success, while men grapple with emotional repression and performance pressure.

Fear of Judgment and Rejection in Social Interactions (Across Genders)

Across both male and female students, a profound fear of being judged or socially rejected fuels social anxiety, especially in group or interpersonal settings. One student admitted, *"If I feel like someone is being cold towards me, I feel like I did something wrong*" (Lee et al., 2022), while another shared, *"When I'm around a huge crowd… I feel judged… I get*

scared" (Zegrean, 2024). Social anxiety also affects communication and emotional honesty, as expressed in Lee et al. (2022): "I don't want to ruin my friendship… so I am hesitating saying what I want to say…" These examples demonstrate that the fear of social disapproval transcends gender lines and can deeply disrupt students' ability to form connections, participate in social settings, or express themselves authentically, intensifying the cycle of anxiety.

Discussion

As observed in the results, Table 4.2 of this review, the prevalence and manifestation of social anxiety among students in the UK universities are gendered. The level of social anxiety in female students is much more than in male students; this fact can be attributed to the fact that the level of self-comparing, emotional sensitivity, and academic pressure is much higher. Male students, in its turn, are more likely to suppress their anxiety and not to reveal it as it is not very socially acceptable to reveal emotions and adhere to masculine roles and behavior. These findings suggest that the given rate may be not the actual disparity, but the existence of gendered norms related to the manifestation of losses and help-seeking. The observed increase in the frequency of social anxiety among female students aligns with a lengthy trend in the literature since women scored highly as compared to men in the anxiety screening (Jenkins et al., 2020; Pulford et al., 2018). This supports what McLean et al. (2011) quoted, the trend was explained by the high emotional responsiveness and social comparisons between the women. The trends are used to note that women are more emotional communicative, and they are more socially programmed to identify and code distress.

At least, as it appears, such results confirm the psychological differences based on gender, but a further examination raises questions about the fact that these differences are no less likely to be a product of socialization than it is a natural emotional state. The reluctance of male students to report issues of anxiety as reported by both Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) and Lee et al. (2022) is a cultural taboo against weakness among women. This is reminiscent of the argument made by Chaplin (2015), who believes that the male emotional suppression has been a result of the gender-role socialisation, and not the lack of emotional distress. Therefore, the underreporting of males can produce a false impression of the lower anxiety rates. Interestingly, the internalised performance-related anxiety is reported by both sexes but the outward expression of the same differs. Ladejo (2021) and McIntyre et al. (2018) demonstrate the impact of academic stress, loneliness, and social pressure on both sexes. This result aligns with the one by Theodoratou et al. (2023) who found that women tend to obtain support more frequently when both genders experience internalised distress, whereas men are self-isolating. Therefore, the essence of the anxiety remains the same, but the visibility in the society is different. The difference in coping and disclosure behaviours makes the interpretation of prevalence data more difficult. The literature sources like Bedrov and Gable (2022) and Williams-Sims (2025) claim that the influence of gendered patterns of help-seeking on the statistics of anxiety is significant. Therefore, the so-called gender gap in prevalence can be a gap in the expression of the communication and permission of emotional expression.

According to the results of the current study presented in Table 4.3, social anxiety is different in male and female students of the university and depends on the gender norms and cultural expectations. Social pressure to seem emotionally tough makes male students suppress emotions, postpone help-seeking and internalise distress. But female students are more vulnerable to social judgment and comparison, particularly in academic and appearance situations, and they are at the head in outward anxiety. The embodiment of the social anxiety in the data by gender supports an emerging body of knowledge according to which mental health is a socially constructed phenomenon. According to Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) and Lee et al. (2022), males are under the pressure to conceal and evade feelings because the society requires men to display masculinity. Male gender roles and the concept of vulnerability as researches by Mahalik et al. (2003) found are emotional closed customary roles which do not support open emotional state. The expression of emotions by females is thus rather a masochinated masculinity and not a psychological disparity on the side of the males. These are exhausting performances, psychologically speaking. Boys put off or avoid seeking help on their anxiety thereby dragging the inner pain. According to Kotera et al. (2018), the use of mental health care is not used by male students despite their high level of psychological suffering. The findings reject clinical models where it is considered that the inhibition of emotions is not a maladaptive coping mechanism but rather the absence of suffering.

However, females are more concerned especially in social appraisal, academic competitiveness, and identity negotiation. The studies by Zegrean (2024) and Pulford et al. (2018) demonstrate that cultural requirements of femininity and social conformity make women more self-critical and comparative. This is a pain that is external, but nevertheless, not an indication of emotional instability, but rather a social state of affairs that adds to the stream of feelings in women (Chaplin, 2015). Ladejo (2021) shows that it can lead to internalised insufficiency, and when academic success or social acceptance is the measure of self-worth, it can get internalised. Avoidance and withdrawal are coping mechanisms used by both sexes though in different forms. Women students can explicitly isolate themselves with the help of verbal signals of distress, and male students can silently withdraw in the name of indifference or a sense of emotional toughness (Anto et al., 2023). McIntyre et al. (2018) proved that gendered emotional control sieves performance-related anxiety in both genders.

The findings of this review as reported in Table 4.4 indicate that both male and female students employ avoidance and withdrawal but the former tends to hide such tendencies in order to be emotionally stoic. When the female students do resort to coping, they do so either at an emotional or professional level but when the male students do, they resort to informal peer-based coping. The masculine norms internalize the emotions of males and causes them to push it aside and wait before they turn to help as females would channel their anxiety to the overperforming and busyness tendencies. The coping mechanisms of the social anxiety that men and women studying on the university pursue as a response to the social anxiety demonstrate the gender roles and social requirements laid deep down. The withdrawal and avoidance is an experience that both groups share but the perception and the expression of such expression is different. It is not something exceptional that female students do not hesitate to express their social withdrawal with the reason that it is the method of coping with anxiety, as the results of Ladejo (2021) and Anto et al. (2023) prove. On the other hand, as Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) note, this type of avoidance behaviour is highly secretive among male students because they fear being perceived as distressed because that will make them less masculine. The given difference echoes Mahalik et al. (2003), who says that male emotional suppression is imposed by the society.

Further, the fact that females prefer support in the form of friends or institutional mental health services indicates that the culture appreciates the emotion of the female. The peer and professional help-seeking by female students is acceptable and even more popular as observed by Zegrean (2024). Considering this, Bedrov and Gable (2022) came to the conclusion that women are more likely to obtain psychological assistance as they are not as afraid of revealing their feelings. Male students, in their turn, were unwilling to seek help, unless it was informal or peer-driven, like the male student quoted by Sagar-Ouriaghli et al. (2020) who replied positively only when the support did not feel like therapy. This means that the traditional treatment patterns can keep away male students unless they transform into attractive and non threatening forms.

No wonder, there is a high gender disparity in the emotional suppression and overcompensation approach. Male students, as in the case of the study by Lee et al. (2022), will put the experience of emotional distress further in the calendar and delay the process of expressing it, in the meantime letting it build up. This trend aligns with the existing literature on the topic of male mental health because it is a socially constructed method of coping, not a desired one (Turner et al., 2018). By contrast, female students tend to put pressure on their anxiety into performance or being busy at all times as described by Anto et al. (2023). Although this mode of coping can be fruitful in its own right, it may conceal distress and since burnout is a chronic process, it can serve to sustain it, similar to the argument by Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) that over-engagement is a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy.

The results of the review identified in table 4.5 show that male students tend to be bound by the emotional stoicism ideals, which do not encourage openness and increase isolation. Female students are however under more pressure because their social anxiety is incited by the demands of physical, academic and cultural perfection, which is high when in comparison with female students not having the pressure. The impact of the gendered expectations on the social anxiety is among the shared themes in the literature, and the findings of the study support it well. The attitude of male students to take a stoic stance towards emotions is further supported socially as a sign of masculinity, strength, and the inability to have emotions overpower them. Both Sagar-Ouriagi et al. (2020) and Ladejo (2021) explain that male students need to suppress vulnerability to conform to masculinity. This follows that of Mahalik et al. (2003) who assert that the male traditional masculinity does not allow the expression of feelings, and thus contributes to the submission of the underreporting of psychological suffering or distress in men. The result is a vicious cycle such that men oppress and repress their problems, do not seek help and are too socially anxious.

Comparatively, female students have more anxiety depending on the societal expectations of physical attractiveness, education achievement, and social relationship achievement. It is demonstrated in the results provided by Zegrean (2024), Pulford et al. (2018), and Anto et al. (2023) that female gender is more predisposed to upward social comparisons assessing themselves against the idealised ideals and acquiring a feeling of inadequacy. This is an indication of the theory by Nolen-Hoeksema (2012) that women are socialised to be interested in the relational and aesthetic spheres of life, which worsens internal stress. The two factors that compound these pressures include the twin pressures of social and academic self-monitoring and examination. These dynamics are also complicated by cultural expectations. As Zegrean (2024) explains, females students, in particular, cultural conservatives are more negatively vulnerable to judgment, as they are expected to dress in a particular way or behave in a specific way. Similarly, the motivation towards male emotional suppression could be increased by the cultural norms, which results in the growing invisibility of anxiety, despite the fact that its effects are equally detrimental. It is consistent with the findings available in the research of the study of Turner et al. (2018) who mention that cultural scripts are inclined to interacts with gender roles to impose limitations on the perception and expression of mental health. Despite the fact that these details are not the same, both sexes are afraid of the society rejection. The same tone is expressed by King (2022) in her report, where she says that the fear of being judged or judging the situation permeates the student experiences and fills them with overthinking, self-censorship, and withdrawal. This implies that the content of gendered anxiety varies but the emotional forces behind it including the need to be accepted and the fear of being ostracized are universal.

Conclusion

This systematic review of nine high-quality studies that met rigorous inclusion criteria strictly investigated the gendered nature of social anxiety in the UK students of university. The statistics indicate that the frequency of social anxiety, its manifestation, and coping strategies are highly gendered. The expectations and emotional socialisation of the society and cultural norms influence the way of coping with psychological distress among male and female students. In this review, it was concluded that female students of the university regularly noticed greater social anxiety than their male counterparts. Nonetheless, the difference is not caused by prevalence in the first place. This result suggests that, female learners tend to express more fear in verbal and emotional means that is acceptable and promoted in culture. Most of the female students compare upwards academically and are vulnerable to social assessment thereby exposing them to anxiety. Social discourses which describe women to be emotionally expressive can reveal and worsen anxiety disorders. Compared to the female students, the male students tend to develop anxiety in silence because of the masculine beliefs that do not allow them to be vulnerable to emotions. The men subject always repressed their feelings and never talked about their problems in fear of being judged as weak or socially inept. This makes male social anxiety to be underreported and misdiagnosed and therefore distorts the real prevalence. Notably, such emotional silence is not caused by the reduced prevalence but rather by social conditioning that does not allow males to talk about their mental health problems.

Gendered coping practices were also common. Expressive, relational and performance-based strategies are employed by women such as talking to peers, over studying and activities in the campus to manage emotional pain. The approaches give short-term relief but can cause rumination and exhaustion. On the contrary, males tend to avoid interpersonal interaction, miss school or suppress the fear by being emotionally distant or taking drugs. Such techniques are not often covered by institutional support systems as they are not as visible, but perhaps the most significant revelation that comes out of this review is the degree to which social norms and gender expectations influence the experiences and expression of social anxiety. Masculinity and femininity scripts also influence students to recognize their anxiety, seeking help or not seeking help, and how they do it. The existing organization of mental health services in universities is usually gender-neutral in principle but not practice. Consequently, it runs the risk of being unprepared to serve the differentiated demands of both male and female learners, especially those students the symptoms of whom are not within the typical profile of diagnosis or clinical manifestation of distress.

Recommendations

1. This review finds that male students often suppress emotional expression due to “emotionally repressive barriers to talking about feelings imposed by the ‘rules’ of masculinity” (Ladejo, 2021; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). Based on this, the Minister for Higher and Further Education needs to implement a national mental health strategy that explicitly integrates gender-sensitive outreach programmes targeting male students.
2. This review finds that female students report elevated social anxiety due to academic pressure and self-comparison, particularly through “upward academic social comparisons” (Pulford et al., 2018) and heightened body image concerns (Zegrean, 2024). Based on this, university wellbeing departments must redesign mental health programming to address perfectionism, social comparison, and appearance-based anxiety in a gender-informed manner.
3. This review finds that peer-led initiatives are especially effective for male students, who may perceive formal therapy as “clinical” or alienating. One participant stated that “peer support worked because it didn’t feel like therapy... it was like someone gets it” (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). Based on this, student unions and university counselling centres should develop expanded peer-support networks tailored to male engagement.
4. This review finds that both genders experience social anxiety through patterns of social withdrawal, though the visibility of this behaviour differs. “I stopped attending classes,” said one female student (Ladejo, 2021), while a male student was “very reluctant to engage... didn’t want to be seen as weak” (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). Based on this, university academic boards should provide training for academic staff to identify gender-specific indicators of disengagement and refer students early to supportive services.

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