

# Family Income, Perfectionism and Social Anxiety among Higher Education Students

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## Abstract

University students are members of the youth community who have enormous potential to contribute towards the development of the country. The health and wellbeing of students are reflected in their low social anxiety and perfectionism. Family SES factors such as income also affect social fears and avoidance and influence the adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism among university students. This study, conducted using the survey method was performed on 1618 university students aged 18 – 25 year across Malaysia selected via a multistage stratified sampling as respondents. A self administered questionnaire containing demographic information and the Almost Perfect Scale- Revised (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001), and Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Heimberg et al., 1999), to tap on perfectionism, and social anxiety was used for data collection. Results of this study found that slightly more than half of the respondents scored higher than the mid-point of perfectionism standard, indicating high level of perfectionism standard ( $M = 36.55$ ,  $SD = 6.31$ ). However, slightly more than half of the respondents scored lower than the mid-point of the remaining study variables, suggesting low levels of perfectionism discrepancy ( $M = 56.36$ ,  $SD = 10.81$ ), fear social anxiety ( $M = 28.36$ ,  $SD = 12.70$ ), and avoidance social anxiety ( $M = 26.00$ ,  $SD = 12.36$ ). As for social anxiety, majority have moderate fear and avoidance while 5.6% have severe fear and 3.8% reported severe avoidance social anxiety. The results

show that majority of students in Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) have positive social outlook and low maladaptive perfectionism personalities even though the family SES is at a moderate level. The implications of the study findings on family roles are also discussed in this article.

**Keyword** : Social anxiety, Perfectionism personality, Higher education, Family income

## INTRODUCTION

There have been many studies that had been carried out on mental wellbeing of students. Students at Public Higher Learning Institutions (PIHLs) were often regarded as having suffered from social anxiety, which subsequently led to frequent failures in academic achievement, low self-esteem and mental health problems (Nordstrom A. H., Swenson Goguen L.M., and Hiester M. 2014). Additionally, Xueting Zhou, Hong Zhu, Bin Zhang, and Taisheng Cai (2015) in their studies had found that students in the higher learning institutions (IHLs) were depressed due to their perfectionism.

Social anxiety is a common, distressing and persistent mental illness. Recent studies have identified a number of psychological factors that could explain its persistence (Ale & Morris, 2011; Bogels, Alden, Beidel, Clark, Pines, Stein, & Voncken, 2010; Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009). The term social anxiety is another label for social phobia, which was introduced in the DSM-IV as an alternate label for this social

anxiety syndrome (Morris, 2001). People with social anxiety have an excessive fear of being humiliated or judged negatively in social situations. In feared situations, persons with social anxiety tend to be self-conscious and self-critical. Physical symptoms of anxiety, such as blushing, palpitations, sweating, and trembling are often experienced; the fear of humiliation or embarrassment may arise out of perception of people noticing these symptoms. The extent of feared situations can range from one or two discrete social settings, such as public speaking, or to most social situations (Alden, Ryder, & Mellings, 2002).

Individuals with higher social anxiety appear vulnerable to poorer outcomes. Hebert, Fales, Nangle, Papadakis, and Grover (2012) conducted a study among 314 adolescents within age 14-19 years old to identify the importance of examining the multiple downstream effect of social anxiety on perceived social functioning in adolescence. Research found that social anxiety would influence relationships through its influences on functioning in same and other-sex friendships. Result indicated that social anxiety develops through age and perfectionism is one of the contributing factors that have strong relation to social anxiety.

Perfectionism is described as a negative trait that is characterized by high standards of performance and achievement, which leads to fear of failure, shame, and emotional distress (Burns, 1980; Stoeber, Harris, & Moon, 2007). Perfectionists evaluate others with high standards of performance and achievement (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). While everyone who has high standards of performance and achievement does not necessarily experience distress, those who failed to achieve their high standards of performance and achievement are more likely to experience anxiety and depression.

Mental health among students has also been associated with career selection amongst students. The findings of Slyter's study (2000)

found that highly perfectionist students often faced problems in socializing in the work environment compared to those with low perfectionism. The study by Joanne Doleres AK Drahman & Ferlis Bin Bullare @ Bahari (2014) had stated that the students' situation in IHLs showed that psychological wellbeing could affect their life goals, whether explicitly or implicitly. Additionally, students' level of psychological wellbeing was important in positively influencing their environment in everyday life.

Students with poor socioeconomic backgrounds may also have a higher level of anxiety that is associated with both depression and anxiety symptoms. Studies related to family income show IHL-students from low income families were found to experience higher social anxiety compared to those from high income families (Khadijah Shamsudin, et. al, 2013). A study by Fayegh Yousefi, Ma'rof Redzuan, Mariani, Rumaya Juhari & Mansor Abu Talib (2010) attempts to determine the relationship between family income, test-anxiety and academic achievement among Iranian high school students. The findings of the study show that family income among high school students could affect their learning process and other school activities and test-anxiety.

Family income could also affect students' learning motivation and their ability to pay attention and concentrate in learning, and this eventually could lead to academic failure. Therefore university students whose families are from low socioeconomic status tend to have high levels of anxiety and are in need of social support (Sakin Ozen, Ilker Ercan, Emel Irgil & Deniz Sigirli, 2010). Another study by Banerjee (2005) investigated the mediating role of the three dimensions of perfectionism on the relationship between parental and social anxiety. Two hundred and eighty participants completed questionnaires measuring dimensions of perfectionism, social anxiety and retrospective parental report. The study found that in the presence of each of the three mediators, the

relationship between parental and social anxiety was reduced to non-significance, indicating a mediating influence of each dimension of perfectionism on the relationship. In Malaysia many studies had been carried out on mental health involving social anxiety, perfectionism and family income, but they remained limited. Under such last mentioned circumstance that the study presented in this paper was conducted. The study investigates social anxiety, perfectionism and family income among IHL students.

## RESEARCH PURPOSE

This study is aimed at identifying the level of social anxiety and the type of perfectionism personality among students currently studying in Malaysian institutions of higher learning. It also demographically looks at the relationship between family socioeconomic status and the perfectionism personality.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research design

This study was conducted quantitatively using the survey research design. It involved the nominal, ordinal and interval data. The study was carried out in four zones: the North, South, and Central Peninsular of Malaysia, and the Sabah/Sarawak zones. Public and non-public universities were chosen randomly. Within each type of university, students from a science faculty/school and a social science faculty were selected as respondents.

### Research subject

In total, 1618 students aged 18-25 were randomly sampled for the study. 750 (46.4%) of the respondents were science-stream students while 868 (53.6%) were from the art-stream.

### Research Instruments

This study used questionnaires administered by the researchers themselves and one appointed

enumerator for each of the four zones. The questionnaire consists of three sections, namely, A: Demographic, B: Social Anxiety, and C: Perfectionism. The demographic section consists of 11 items: age, university study level, study stream, academic achievement (GPA), gender, marital status, ethnicity, religion, origin, weight, and height.

The section on social anxiety was designed based on the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale questionnaire by Heimberg, Horner, Juster, Safren, Brown, Schneier & Liebowitz, (1999) that consisted of 24 items. Liebowitz's questionnaire measures social anxiety in terms of phenomena of anxiety or avoidance in social interactions. A high score of the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale survey illustrates that subjects were likely to experience higher levels of social anxiety or avoidance of social interaction.

Meanwhile, the Perfectionism section was tailored using the Almost Perfect Scale – Revised (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001), which contained 23 items. High score in this questionnaire indicates that the subject was perfectionist while low score depicts that the subject had no perfectionist character traits. The difference in the score determines whether the subject had adaptive or maladaptive features.

### Statistical Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed descriptively using the percentage, mean and standard deviation. The data were presented in the form of tables of percentages. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 22.0.

## FINDINGS

The sample involved 1618 students aged between 18-25 years old, categorized as youth. Of the total sample, 54.7% were students in Public Higher Education Institutions and 45.3%

from Private Higher Education Institutions that were randomly selected. As presented in Table 1, a total of eight IHLs were involved, representing the four mentioned zones: the south zone (31.0%), the central zone (26.3%), the north zone (22.9%) and the Sabah/ Sarawak zone (19.8%). In terms of gender, 34.8% were male students and 65.2% were female students.

Table 1: List of Universities and number of student involved in research (N=1618)

University	n	%
Universiti Putra Malaysia	243	15.0
UCSI Kuala Lumpur	182	11.2
University of Science Malaysia	200	12.4
UTAR Kampar	171	10.6
Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia	238	14.7
Multimedia University	263	16.3
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak	184	11.4
UCSI Sarawak	137	8.5

From the demographic aspect, the age of participants ranged between 17-25 years (mean age = 20.69, SD = 1.54). As shown in Table 2, the results also show that the majority of the samples were unmarried (89%) and were living in the city (64.2%). The majority of the sample population were Malays (42.6%) and Chinese (41.4%). In terms of religion, 48.0% were Muslims, 31.1% Buddhists, 4.4% Hindus, 14.1% Christians and 2.3% others. A total of 38.3% (n = 620) of the subjects were in the first year of study, 29.4% (n = 474) were in the second year; 27.0% (n = 436) were in the third year, and 5.0% were final year students.

Table 2: Demographics of IHLstudents

Demographics	Category	n	Percent
Gender	Male	563	34.8
	Female	1055	65.2
Religion	Islam	776	48.0
	Hindu	72	4.4
	Buddhist	504	31.1
	Christian	228	14.1
	Others	37	2.3
	Missing	1	0.1
Year of Study	1	620	38.3
	2	475	29.4
	3	436	27.0
	Final	85	5.2
	Missing	2	0.1
Marital Status	Single	1452	89.7
	Couple	147	9.1
	Married	11	0.7
	Missing	8	0.5
Race	Malay	690	42.6
	Chines	670	41.4
	Indian	84	5.2
	Indigenous	121	7.5
	Others	51	3.2
	Missing	2	0.1
Origin	Urban	1039	64.2
	Rural	555	34.3
	Missing	24	1.5

In terms of family, the fathers' age of samples in this study was higher than the mothers' age with the mean of fathers' age (M = 53.80, SD = 6.50) and the mean of mothers' age (M = 50.09, SD = 5.57). From the income aspect, fathers also registered higher than the mothers' income. As shown in Table 3, the mean of fathers' income was (M = 3575.69, SD = 4708.67) and mothers' income (M = 1314.0, SD = 2475.79). This showed that parents' income of respondents in the study was low.

Table 3: Income and Age of Parent

Variable	Median	SD
Monthly income of fathers	3575.69	4708.67
Monthly income of mothers	1314.12	2475.79
Age of fathers	53.80	6.50
Age of mothers	50.09	5.57

The education level in the study showed that the level of parents' education in this study was mostly at SPM level. In comparison, there were more mothers (48.1%, n = 778) with SPM

certificates compared to fathers (38.8%, n = 627, 38.8%). The data also show that both fathers (n=997, 61.7%) and mothers (n=1178, 72.9%) were not graduates from university. This shows that the level of parents' education of the students was still low. From the aspect of employment, more mothers of respondents did not work, 62.7% (n = 1051) compared to fathers which was only 15.2% (n = 246). Table 4 presents the education and employment information of respondent's mothers and fathers.

Table 4: Education and Employment of Parent (N=1618)

Demographics	Category	n	Percent
Fathers' Education	Primary school	122	7.5
	PMR/ SRP	176	10.9
	SPM	627	38.8
	STPM	51	3.2
	Diploma	138	8.5
	Bachelor Degree	257	15.9
	Master	77	4.8
	PhD	16	1.0
	No formal education	21	1.3
	Missing data	133	8.2
Mothers' Education	Primary school	145	9.0
	PMR/ SRP	159	9.8
	SPM	778	48.1
	STPM	69	4.3
	Diploma	127	7.8
	Bachelor Degree	196	12.1
	Master	32	2.0
	PhD	6	0.4
	No formal education	27	1.7
	Missing data	79	4.9
Father Employed	Yes	1276	78.9
	No	246	15.2
	Missing data	96	5.9
Mother Employed	Yes	551	34.1
	No	1051	62.7
	Missing data	16	3.2

As shown in Table 5, result of this study found that slightly more than half of the respondents scored higher than the mid-point of perfectionism standard, indicating high level of perfectionism standard (M = 36.55, SD =

6.31). However, slightly more than half of the respondents scored lower than the mid-point of the remaining study variables, suggesting low levels of perfectionism discrepancy (M = 56.36, SD = 10.81), fear social anxiety (M = 28.36,

SD = 12.70), and avoidance social anxiety (M = 26.00, SD = 12.36). As for social anxiety, majority have moderate fear and avoidance while 5.6% have severe fear and 3.8% reported severe avoidance social anxiety.

Table 5: Social Anxiety Stage and Perfectionism

Variable	Mean/Frequency	SD/ %
Perfectionism Standard	36.55	6.31
Low	789	48.8
High	829	51.2
Perfectionism Discrepancy	56.36	10.81
Low	824	50.9
High	794	49.1
Fear of Social Anxiety	28.36	12.70
Low	819	50.6
High	799	49.4
Avoidance of Social Anxiety	26.00	12.36
Low	823	50.9
High	795	49.1

Bivariate analysis shows that there is a significant relationship between family income and social anxiety ( $r = -.061$ ,  $p < .05$ ) among IHL students in Malaysia. Respondents from higher family income category have lower social anxiety reflected by lower level of fear and avoidance in the social context. It can be concluded that students from higher SES have managed their anxiety well thus resulted in a lower social anxiety. With regards to perfectionism and social anxiety, both types of social anxiety did not have a relationship with social anxiety (Perfectionism Standard,  $r = .016$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Perfectionism discrepancies,  $r = -.039$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Thus, family income did not influence the setting of high standard of performance and achievement by the students.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study showed that IHL students in Malaysia still had a high level of psychological wellbeing, which means they were experiencing low social anxiety and better adaptive perfectionism. As for influence of family income, according to Rajanah and Zuraini (2009), students with a financially stable family had a good sense of wellbeing from the psychological aspect. The students in this study came from urban or were living in the city and this made them face various challenges in life which enabled them to survive successfully, thus reinforcing that IHL students had coping skills that made them psychologically positive. Meanwhile, students in this study were young and majority were still single, which means that they still had minimal commitments and only needed to be responsible for themselves. Therefore, family financial stability, lack of commitment and life experience in the city had led the student in IHLs to have sound mental health.

In addition, family income affect has a significant negative relationship with social anxiety but not perfectionism among IHL students. Hence, family socioeconomic factor was a factor that would affect their studies or disturb them in terms of emotions that would cause them to experience anxiety. Khadijah Shamsudin, et. al, 2013 report that IHL students from low income families were found to experience higher social anxiety compared to IHL students from high income families. Supporting this was an observation by Sakin Ozen, Ilker Ercan, Emel Irgil & Deniz Sigirli (2010), that family income could affect their learning motivation, and also their ability to pay attention and concentration in learning, and this could lead to academic failure. Therefore university students' low socioeconomic status contributes to high levels of anxiety, and they are therefore in need social support. According to Ying-Keung Kwan (2008), the family socioeconomic factor did not affect the student's life satisfaction compared to the role played by the family structure. He stated

that the family structure of a student living only with a father, without a mother, would cause the student to experience a sense of deprivation in life satisfaction. Accordingly, children who have parents with high levels of income but often could not spend time with them would experience emotional disturbances.

IHL students in this study could also be described as having low or adaptive perfectionism and social anxiety. This finding supports the study of the Ministry of Youth in the Malaysian Youth Index 2015 (IBM'15). The findings of this research also supports the study by the Ministry of Youth that youths in Malaysia still had a high level of psychological wellbeing index, in which the score of no suicidal tendency had an index of 97.86%, the score of youth depression was 79.90%, while the absence of anxiety had a score of 76.18% (The Report on Malaysian Youth Index, Institute for Youth Research and Development Malaysia, 2015).

On the whole, the findings of this study showed that parents' income influences social anxiety but not perfectionism among students in the IHLs. The efforts of the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia in preventing the phenomenon of social anxiety among IHL students from lower income group should be taken seriously by various parties that are closely linked to this group. Appropriate activities that could help economically marginalized youth in IHLs to be healthy in terms of psychological wellbeing should be further enhanced and diversified.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social anxiety among IHL students in Malaysia, while existing, is still manageable and can be improved. Special attention should be given to students from lower SES. Efforts in the form of preventive measures should be intensified, and interventions, according to the level of social anxiety, need to be made available to groups and individuals amongst all IHL students.

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