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Feeling Socially Anxious at University: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Jennifer Lee
Coventry University

Daniel Waldeck
Coventry University, ac8416@coventry.ac.uk

Andrew Holliman
UCL

Moitree Banerjee
University of Chichester

Ian Tyndall
University of Chichester

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Abstract

For those with feelings of social anxiety, university can present unique challenges. Socially anxious students can face functional impairments such as interpersonal and academic deficits, as well as social maladjustment due to a shift in their social networks. Despite this, there is surprisingly little research exploring their experiences at university using qualitative designs. The present study set out to explore how a small sample of undergraduate students experienced feeling socially anxious at university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight psychology undergraduates and interpretative phenomenological 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.

Keywords

social anxiety, social phobia, university, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, qualitative research methodology

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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Jennifer Lee[1], Daniel Waldeck[1], Andrew J. Holliman[2], Moitree Banerjee[3], and Ian Tyndall[3]

[1]School of Psychological, Social and Behavioural Sciences, Coventry University, England
[2]Department of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education, London, England
[3]Department of Psychology, University of Chichester, England

For those with feelings of social anxiety, university can present unique challenges. Socially anxious students can face functional impairments such as interpersonal and academic deficits, as well as social maladjustment due to a shift in their social networks. Despite this, there is surprisingly little research exploring their experiences at university using qualitative designs. The present study set out to explore how a small sample of undergraduate students experienced feeling socially anxious at university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight psychology undergraduates and interpretative phenomenological 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.

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Introduction

Formerly known as social phobia, social anxiety disorder (SAD) is a marked and consistent fear of social interaction that is non-proportional and accompanied by extreme distress or functional impairment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although SAD is reportedly the third most common psychiatric condition in America (see Kessler et al., 2005), an estimated 50% of sufferers opt to never seek help (Wang et al., 2005). There are also concerns regarding the so-called "hidden population" of sufferers (referred to as "subthreshold SA"), who experience SA, yet do not meet the clinical criteria for a diagnosis of SAD. These individuals, who constitute a far from negligible proportion of social anxiety sufferers (e.g., Fehm et al., 2008), may also encounter significant difficulties in their lives resulting from their anxiety (e.g., Russell & Shaw, 2012). Therefore, further research is warranted that explores the lived experiences of social anxiety among other (somewhat neglected) 'non-clinical' populations (i.e., those with subthreshold SA). The focus of the present paper is one such population, university undergraduate students, where subthreshold SA appears to have a negative impact on psychological wellbeing and academic success.

Social Anxiety among Student Populations

Data suggests a significant prevalence of SA among student populations worldwide. The high-risk period for development of SA is 15-25 years old (Kessler, 2003). Clinically significant levels of SA in university students have been reported as ranging between 10% (Russell & Shaw, 2009) and 22% (Gordon et al., 2012). Yet Ahmad et al. (2017) suggested possible prevalence rates of SA of up to 80% in undergraduates. However, a hidden population of subthreshold social anxiety sufferers may also exist. Stewart and Mandrusiak (2007) tested 178 undergraduates and found clinical levels of SA in both the treatment-seeking students and the remainder who did not seek treatment. In accounting for this finding, Stewart and Mandrusiak (2007) suggested that SA is often de-pathologized as merely shyness or introversion, resulting in fewer sufferers seeking help. Moreover, Russell and Topham (2012) reported that their student sample felt their SA was unrecognised and invisible, and thus acted as a barrier for seeking support. It is well documented that for the general population, SA brings daily functional impairment (e.g., work, social life) which can impact overall quality of life and wellbeing (e.g., Wersebe et al., 2018). However, studying at academic institutions can represent specific challenges for those vulnerable to SA, and we will review some of these now.

Interpersonal Difficulties

University involves a major shift to new social networks, which can result in social maladjustment for those with SA (Campbell et al., 2016). Students often report feeling disabled by their social phobia (e.g., Hakami et al., 2017). More specifically, interpersonal deficits include loneliness (Fernandez-Castelao et al., 2015), fewer friends or low-quality friendships (Soohinda & Sampath, 2016), unhealthy peer relationships (Tillfors & Furmark, 2007), and difficulty making friends (Clarke & Fox, 2017). Undergraduate samples often poorly rate their own behaviours during social interactions as compared to reports of these same behaviours from their conversational partners (e.g., Thompson et al., 2019). This suggests that their own high levels of self-consciousness led to harsher judgments of their own social performance than noted or reported by their social partners in those contexts.

It should be acknowledged that the current literature on interpersonal deficits is predominantly quantitative in nature, relying heavily on self-report scales. Indeed, Kampmann et al. (2018) concluded self-report studies were more effective than other research methods at predicting everyday SA and emotional avoidance. However, responses to self-report instruments are somewhat limited in scope, lack specificity, and do not allow for a more detailed exploration into the nature of the impairments. As such, further investigations are needed to explore how such individuals experience their social anxiety using qualitative methodology.

Academic Difficulties

Several studies suggest that SA has a negative impact on academic achievement (e.g., Akram et al., 2016; Gren-Landell et al., 2009; Shah & Kataria, 2010). Students with social anxiety (SAS) often achieve lower grades than their non-socially anxious peers (e.g., Soohinda & Sampath, 2016) and are less likely to pass exams (Stein & Kean, 2000). Brook and Willoughby (2015) found that those with social anxiety tend to struggle with the structure of the university system, due to a constant cycle of approaching, interacting with and being evaluated by others. Moreover, Gren-Landell et al. (2009) found 91% of SAS from a sample of 2218 experienced academic impairments due to their social fears.

There is relatively little research studying the experience of SAS within academia (i.e., students) using qualitative approaches (Clarke & Fox, 2017; Russell & Topham, 2012). Russell and Topham (2012) deduced that anticipatory anxiety was a key mediating factor in academic engagement, as student's feared failure and social embarrassment. Participants reported frequent cognitive and physical impairments that forced them to leave learning environments such as stuttering or thought blocking. As Russell and Topham (2012) suggested, it is both an excessive attention to their anxiety and fear of negative evaluation that can impair students' academic attainment. Their findings support Clark and Wells' (1995) cognitive model of social phobia that proposes that negative beliefs can materialise into avoidance behaviours.

Safety Behaviors

In line with Clark and Wells' (1995) model assumptions, individuals with SA may employ safety behaviors to reduce anxiety in social encounters at university. Qualitative research has found avoidance is used as a primary coping method, such as self-isolating from peers (Clarke & Fox, 2017) and avoiding lectures (Clarke & Fox, 2017; Russell & Topham, 2012). In group work, individuals with SA may sit with those more confident in doing presentations and do extra preparation work for the presentation to avoid being required to speak on behalf of the group (Russell & Topham, 2012). Moreover, Russell and Topham reported that students would swap modules that included solo presentation assessments even if this penalised their grade for that module or overall degree mark (Russell & Topham, 2012). Those with SA may also focus extensive resources to try and promote a positive image of themselves to others. Indeed, SA students tend to report heavy alcohol consumption (e.g., Villarosa-Hurlocker & Madson, 2020), with 43% displaying clinical levels of alcohol abuse in one study (Richton et al., 2017). Buckner and Heimberg (2016) concluded that coping-motivated alcohol consumption tends to be used to manage social impressions and reduce feelings of anxiety in SAS. However, it is evident that more qualitative naturalistic research is needed to explore everyday safety behaviors in the context of SA at university.

The Present Study

Previous literature has demonstrated that both clinical and subthreshold levels of SA can impair students' general wellbeing, social activities, and academic attainment. However, the data are overwhelmingly quantitative, with methodology consisting mostly of self-report scales. These bring limitations of lacking specificity, and do not allow for a richer understanding of how those with SAS experience their time at university. Furthermore, the limited qualitative research that exists among university students (Clarke & Fox 2017; Hjeltnes et al., 2015; Russell & Topham, 2012) has focused on clinical SA (omitting the hidden population of students who have subclinical levels which can also cause substantial impairment). Moreover, existing qualitative studies have relied largely on thematic analyses, which may not allow sufficient depth to explore lived experience and how SAS make sense of their anxiety. Thus, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was adopted as a methodology for the present study. The research question of this study is 'how do students experience feelings of social anxiety whilst at university?'

Role of the Researchers

The research team comprised five researchers from different academic institutions in the UK (J. Lee, D. Waldeck, A. Holliman, M. Banerjee, and I. Tyndall). The principal researcher (J. Lee) was involved in all aspects of the research, including conceptualisation, data

collection and analysis, and writing up of the present manuscript. D. Waldeck collaborated on the conceptualisation of the research and writing up of the present manuscript. A. Holliman provided feedback on, and made a written contribution to, the present manuscript. M. Banerjee provided added feedback and made a written contribution to the analysis section. I. Tyndall provided feedback on, and made a written contribution to, the present manuscript. D. Waldeck, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Psychology at Coventry University, with expertise in applied psychology and psychological research methods. A. Holliman, Ph.D., is Senior Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education, with expertise in the psychology of education, teaching and learning in higher education, and the development of children's literacy. M. Banerjee, Ph.D. is Head of Psychology at the University of Chichester, with expertise in qualitative research methods and mindfulness. I. Tyndall, Ph.D. is a Reader in Cognitive Psychology at the University of Chichester, with expertise in cognitive psychology and the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy model. J. Lee has a postgraduate degree in Psychology and conducted this research during their studies.

The present research was inspired by J. Lee's lived experience of social anxiety throughout her academic journey. Indeed, J. Lee wanted to explore whether their experience with social anxiety was consistent with other students' experiences. D. Waldeck was the supervisor for J. Lee's project. D. Waldeck's research focuses on perceived rejection (ostracism), of which social anxiety is known to be a significant moderator (e.g., Zadro et al., 2006). D. Waldeck and A. Holliman have both supported students one-to-one with severe social anxiety, so were interested in further exploring how social anxiety affects student's experience at university. This interest is coupled with the intention to tailor delivery or offer additional support to students affected by such experiences in the future. I. Tyndall's doctoral research explored language and cognition processes that underpin the development and maintenance of anxiety and has published work on general anxiety, public speaking anxiety, and ostracism. M. Banerjee's research focuses on mental health, particularly in university population. M. Banerjee was involved in overlooking the analysis and write-up of the data.

To strengthen rigor and minimise bias, reflexivity was used. Authors noted and discussed their reflections and awareness of constructs such as social anxiety and university life and how these influenced analyses. The analysis was reviewed following the "reading," "reflecting," and "questioning." Through actively and consciously constructing the meaning of these concepts, researchers avoided unconscious biases (Smith et al., 2009).

Method

Methodology

The study adopted a critical realist epistemology. In the construction of knowledge, critical realist epistemology admits that although data can reveal something about a participants' "real world," this is not always self-evident and requires subjective interpretation (Willig, 2001, p. 17). Indeed, the participants' subjective perception of the world through their "lens" of social anxiety only provides part of the full story (or truth) behind their experience. To better comprehend the meaning of what participants say requires the researcher to engage in interpretative activity.

Participants and Recruitment

Eight psychology undergraduates were interviewed for this study (Female = 7, Males = 1, average age = 20.25 years). There is no agreed sample size for IPA, although anywhere between two and 25 is recommended (Alase, 2017). Participants were recruited through the

Institutional research participation scheme whereby research credits were offered for taking part. Specifically, an advert was placed on the SONA system where participants could log-in and "opt-in" to studies they chose to participate in. To enable a purposive and homogenous sample, inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced anxiety in social situations whilst at university, however they did not need to be diagnosed with SAD. Ethical approval for this study was received by the Institutional Ethical Committee.

Data Collection

Prior to the interview commencing, participants were asked to read a participant information sheet and sign an informed consent form. Semi-structured interviews took place in interview rooms located within the University building and lasted between 20-40 minutes each. An interview schedule was followed using open ended, non-directive questions with a focus on getting participants to reflect on their experiences of social anxiety. Example questions were: "Can you tell me about the situations at university that make you feel socially anxious?" and "Could you tell me about what happens when you start feeling anxious around people?" non-directive prompts for each question were included, for example, "Could you tell me more about that?," "How did that make you feel?" Upon completion of each interview, participants were given a debriefing sheet. Interviews were audio recorded on a password protected phone and transcribed verbatim. Demographic information was censored, and transcriptions were anonymised using pseudonyms.

Analytical Process

This study adopted an experiential qualitative design using interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). IPA is a methodology that explores the perception of the experiences of the participants. IPA is interpretative as this methodology acknowledges the role of the analyst in making sense of these participants' experiences. Hence, IPA is underpinned by phenomenology, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and idiography to focus on the meaning the participants assign to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009), point out that IPA involves a double hermeneutic; the participant tries to make sense of their personal and social world, and the researcher tries to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their personal and social experiences. Symbolic interactionism concerns how meanings are constructed by individuals within both a personal and a social world (Smith et al., 2009). Idiography focuses on understanding the particular and the unique whilst maintaining the integrity of the person (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

The analysis in this study followed the techniques followed in the traditional IPA (Smith et al., 2009). This included, reading the interview transcripts, identifying themes, grouping these into superordinate themes and sub-themes. Multiple cases were integrated by considering roles, relationships, organisational structures, and systems (Palmer et al., 2010). This was done by exploring positionality and perspective, exploring roles and relationships described and what meanings are attributed to these (Palmer et al., 2010). Care was taken to approach each case with a clear mind so as not to let previous themes influence the analytical process. This is deemed important in respecting the individuality participants' unique experience (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, the superordinate and subthemes for each case were reviewed and edited before deciding on superordinate themes for all eight accounts. This decision was based more on the richness of the data and relevance to the research question rather than prevalence (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Reliability of the Analysis

        All the interviews and the initial analysis was conducted by Lee. Banerjee performed credibility checks (i.e., acting as an additional analytic "auditor," reviewing the data for discrepancies, overstatements, or errors) on the data analysis following recommended best practice guidelines (Elliott et al., 1999). Banerjee also checked whether the extracts supported the developed themes. Banerjee subsequently added analytic commentary to the analysis and included an additional theme identified within the dataset.

Results

        Five superordinate themes of experience of SA at university were identified (see Table 1). Due to the vastness of the data only two themes will be presented: persistent self-consciousness and avoiding reality.

Table 1
Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate themes
Persistent self-consciousness	Patterns of overthinking
	Expecting and fearing judgement
Avoiding reality	Altered self-portrayal
	Self-isolation
Alone in a crowd	
Interpersonal Barriers	Social interaction as compulsory
	Struggles to initiate friendships
	Preference for online communication
	Reliance on Familiarity
Perceived mechanisms of coping with university	

Persistent Self-Consciousness

        The superordinate theme "persistent self-consciousness" reflects the collective experience of participants feeling hyper aware of themselves and their surroundings. These feelings were persistent and present during most of their activities at university. Due to the multitude of experiences, two subordinate themes were created: 'patterns of overthinking' and "expecting and fearing judgment."

Patterns of Overthinking

        Overthinking of both past and future social interactions was closely linked to feelings of self-consciousness in three participants. This typically involved negative thought biases in interpreting their own behaviours during social interactions, and the behaviours of others towards them. The patterns of overthinking displayed can be categorised into catastrophizing, rumination, and personalisation. For Max, a lot of his overthinking was related to social interactions with romantic interests at university.

        ...with girls I'm really bad. That's when the anxiety starts to kick in...
        overthinking starts being like if I say this, she might say that if I say this am I

going to get rejected? So, I'm just constantly in my head being like what if (...) Yeah which is not good, that's what keeps me away... (Max / 20 / Male)

Max appears to struggle constantly with catastrophizing, always anticipating the worst outcome. This appears linked to feelings of self-consciousness, anticipating rejection, and ultimately avoiding romantic interactions. He describes how anxiety "kicks in" immediately, his overthinking an automatic and uncontrollable force exemplifying the lack of control he feels. Overthinking is inherent to his SA and is what "keeps him away," a controlling agent sabotaging potential romantic connection. This rumination of negative outcomes suggests a lack of confidence in his interpersonal abilities. He runs through potential conversations with pre-emptive replies that ultimately end in rejection, "if I say this, she might say that if I say this am I going to get rejected?" This also exemplifies a great mental anguish for Max, his overthinking spiralling him into further self-doubt. Overthinking conversational outcomes was a major source of anxiety for Max. He described a recent interaction with a female friend that he had developed romantic feelings for:

> ...there's a girl I like here it's really hard for me to say hey I like you either it's yes or no, but it's really hard for me to say. I kept saying to myself I'm going to say today... we saw each other, and I didn't say it because I really felt in the moment, but I thought this is not the time. I keep postponing it, but it keeps building up the anxiety I'm like whenever I see her I'm like I'm not being too creepy or being (...) at the same time being socially anxious I am so worried that is going to ruin our friendship... being like oh he likes me I know he likes me but I don't like him. Everything is going to be really awkward. I don't want to ruin my friendship but if I tell her that might be what is going to ruin the friendship so I am hesitating saying what I want to say and keeping it to myself... it is really hard… (Max / 20 / Male)

This quote is a good example of the patterns of overthinking Max displayed, constantly repeating his fears of "ruining the friendship." This is a further example of catastrophizing which again prevents him from pursuing romantic interests, convincing himself that rejection is inevitable. His self-consciousness is evident in his rumination of how he is perceived by others, attempting to steer his image from being "too creepy." This suggests a battle to control aspects of his SA, as overthinking controls much of his life at university. An interesting cycle emerges, where Max's catastrophizing and rumination play a role in "building up the anxiety." In this sense, his experiences of overthinking are heavily linked to self-consciousness through a fear of rejection, and consequently a heightened sense of SA results. His definitive statement of "everything is going to be really awkward" is suggestive that his overthinking has created a reality in which negative social outcomes are inevitable. Max recalls a similar experience more recently at a pub, where he was approached by a girl who appeared interested in him:

> Another example of social anxiety whilst at university I went to a pub once I went outside to smoke, a girl comes up to me and she complimented my jacket and my outfit... and I couldn't say anything…… I just stayed there... I said okay thank you and that was it I couldn't say anything back and she kept on saying those things five or six times and I got scared like okay I get you I'm not really, urm, comfortable with this situation and I was like why have I done that. I could have said the same thing to her like you have something and then move on with the conversation, but it really frightens me. Then she left of course, and I was

like oh okay maybe I did something wrong, and I went back home and reflected on it. (Max / 20 / Male)

Max seems unaware of the perils of his overthinking. Again, he becomes trapped in this cycle of overthinking and is controlled by his SA, feeling he "couldn't say anything." His mention of feeling "scared" and that conversing "frightens me" reflects the trepidation that overthinking controls him with. His explicit mention of his overthinking as "reflecting" further illustrates this control, as he fails to recognise the perils of this catastrophizing for his self-esteem. Max faces this constant internal battle, continuously fearing the worst and preventing him from further pursuing romantic interests.

For other participants, their overthinking was related to negatively interpreting others' thoughts and behaviours towards them. Reema frequently expressed a heightened sense of awareness to others' perceptions of her:

I overthink a lot, like okay what do I talk about next you know all of them kind of things also um if I feel like someone's being a bit cold towards me it brings down my mood (...) if it's someone I socialise with and they're being cold towards me it just brings me down you know… (Reema / 19 / Female)

If I feel like someone is being cold towards me, I feel like I did something wrong. (Reema / 19 / Female)

Yeah, sometimes so like in seminars I can feel like someone is a bit off with me that sort of thing, that can make me feel socially anxious as well. (Reema / 19 / Female)

Reema displays an awareness of her overthinking. Her constant concerns of people being "cold" or "off" is evidently something she worries about frequently. This suggests a personalisation bias, over analysing or misinterpreting others' behaviours and relating them back to herself. Similarly, this represents a lack of self-confidence. Her SA controls her to the extent she lacks a sense of self and is dependent on others' perceptions of her. This is especially prevalent in her mentioning this "brings me down." She uses others' moods towards her as an extension of herself. In this sense university may be a toxic environment for Reema, constantly assessing her peers' behaviours towards her and needing explicit acceptance from others to ease her anxiety.

Isabelle discussed overthinking her verbal communication at university, specifically presenting to the class in a seminar:

We kind of let the other groups go first and whilst they're talking I'll be rehearsing the lines over and over again in my head so I won't even be paying attention to the other groups I'll just be reading my sheet and what I've written down for myself like okay well how can I say this and it actually gets to it and someone else in my group will volunteer and I'm like okay well I've just spent the last ten minutes stressing when I didn't need to cause I'm not even talking now. (Isabelle / 18 / Female)

Isabelle seems distressed at the prospect of a group presentation, writing a script for herself and rehearsing what she needs to say and how to say it. This is suggestive of extreme self-consciousness, overthinking every aspect of her outward appearance. She retreats from the seminar into her own isolated bubble, excessively focused on a presentation which is ultimately

a minor aspect of her day. This is further suggestive of catastrophizing, perhaps she ruminates over the negative consequences of what would happen should she fail to rehearse, such as judgment from others or embarrassment. To further this, she mentions a reliance on scripted conversations again and overthinks what to say to her family and friends:

> Again, with like art society before I walk in and I'm like well what can I talk about this week has something happened or like before a seminar I'm talking to a friend I'm like okay has anything important in my life happened has anything… happened and even with like talking to my parents I'm like well what can I say? Even with appointments I'm like hi my name's [name] and I need a doctor's appointment like all scripted. *laughs* (Isabelle / 18 / Female)

As with her presentation, this overthinking of what she can talk about suggests a desire to control her image. Her desire to discuss "anything important" is suggestive of not wanting to be perceived as boring. Perhaps she is fighting against a lack of control she feels from her SA, wanting to retain control over how she is perceived by others. Of particular interest is her overthinking of social interactions with her family, suggesting her self-consciousness is deep rooted. Clearly overthinking is inherent for Isabelle, from obsessively rehearsing presentations to conversational topics with friends and family. She becomes an actor in her social world, rehearsing her parts for different roles and scenes at university and beyond. Spontaneous interaction is constrained by her overthinking because of deep-rooted SA.

Expecting and Fearing Judgment

Self-consciousness in participants also manifested itself in their fears related to social interactions. In some cases, these fears made them reluctant to socialise with other students at university, or even attend lectures and seminars. Max displayed these fears both in academic and social environments at university:

> I can be in small groups, two or three? That's perfect I can talk I can be myself... when it's like hey let's meet up with other twenty guys it's really hard for me cause everybody's gonna be like look at that weird guy, 'cause he doesn't talk too much.' (Max / 20 / Male)

Max is confident in his expectations. His use of "everybody's gonna be like..." suggests he has convinced himself of the negative judgments people have of him. He displays a preference for socialising with fewer people at university, where he feels "I can talk I can be myself." This suggests that he puts on a mask around larger groups. This may be a defence mechanism against judgment from peers. If he feels they are judging him, they are judging his altered portrayal, so this acts as a barrier to protect his self-esteem. He homogenizes the opinions of others, if everybody will think he is "that weird guy." It may be that he sees large crowds as a wall of fear, unable to recognise individual characters, emotions, or attitudes. He becomes controlled by his anxiety, unable to expand his friendship circle at university for fears of judgment. His fears are something that also hinders him academically. He describes his fear of participating in seminars:

> Like in the class when the teacher asks something I'm usually staring down even if I know the answer, I am being judged by others like oh he's... and everybody looks at you and... I have times where I am just saying it. But if the teacher says

yes and I knew it, I feel like yes, I knew it without making an embarrassment
of myself. (Max / 20 / Male)

Max overthinks his contributions, not wanting to give an answer due to a fear of
judgment or "making an embarrassment" of himself. These fears seem unrelated to being
wrong or right, as he admits that he avoids answering "even if I know the answer." Max is
confirmatory in noting "I am being judged" as opposed to "I feel judged," suggesting he not
only fears judgment, but is convinced of this and subsequently comes to expect it. His
avoidance of eye contact with the teacher and feeling "everybody looks at you" not only
suggests self-consciousness, but again a fear of judgment. As aforementioned, he feels "I can
talk I can be myself" when he is around fewer people and therefore may put on confident facade
around larger groups of unfamiliar peers, such as in a seminar. Perhaps his fears of eye contact
and drawing attention to himself is that he fears people will see through this, leaving him
vulnerable to further judgment.

The fear of judgment also manifested in the difficulty for asking for help in the sample.
Asking for help has often been referred as anxiety-provoking for university students. Becca
describes asking for help as the "hardest thing to do."

Regarding anticipations of judgement from academic staff at the university, Holly
describes a preference for email communication. When asked why, she described her worries
about judgment from academic staff: "Just in case I embarrass myself I suppose or like… what
are they gonna think of me… yeah just that I guess" (Holly / 27 / Female).

Holly displays clear feelings of self-consciousness. Emailing may be a comfort in this
sense, acting as a barrier to protect her from the discomfort of face-to-face interaction. Perhaps
she attempts to regain control over how she is perceived, lessening her fear of being judged by
presenting a more refined and edited version of herself through email than face to face. It is
interesting that she assumes she will "embarrass" herself, as she mentions this again when
discussing how she interacts with academic staff: "...it's not too difficult cause even if you make
a fool of yourself, you're probably not gonna see that lecturer again *laughs*..." (Holly / 27 /
Female).

It is almost as if she expects to embarrass or "make a fool" of herself, indicating self-
consciousness. Again, this reflects her worries about judgment from academic staff. This was
unique to Holly's reflections, as other participants worried more about judgment from peers at
university. As a mature student, it may be that Holly relates more to academic staff than
younger students. She may see staff more as peers than younger undergraduates, as their
opinions of her seem valuable. Evidently, this fear of judgment from staff brings potential
academic disruption from a lack of engagement or experiencing high anxiety when she does
engage with staff.

For Reema, expecting and fearing judgment was her most consistent theme during her
interview. She too displayed a potential for academic disruption, as her fears of judgment
prevent her from interlining in seminars:

...when it comes to class presentations I don't like speaking I don't like putting
up my hand and speaking if it's group work and you're talking to your peers I
will speak but I'm scared to say the wrong answer you feel like an idiot I never
put my hand up first if I see people debating or giving wrong answers I hate
being stupid so I just don't put my hand up. (Reema / 19 / Female)

Reema gives an insight to her inner fears through admitting she is "scared" of saying
the wrong answer, feeling "like an idiot" and "being stupid." Evidently, she lacks confidence
in her abilities to participate in seminars. But deeper than this, she displays a fear of failure.

This fear may be related to judgment from others. She alludes to this earlier in the interview, when she described her feelings during an experience of walking into the wrong seminar room: "Just like everyone's judging me thinking I'm stupid for being in the wrong place" (Reema / 19 / Female).

She describes a clear anticipation of negative judgement for being in the wrong place, even though this was a simple mistake. Again, she mentions people seeing her as "stupid," suggesting she uses the behaviours of others to validate her fear of failure. This may re-affirm Reema's self-consciousness by convincing her to expect and fear judgment. This subsequently controls her daily activities at university, her anxiety persuading her not to engage in seminars.

Self-consciousness was also evident in Becca, who had initial fears of judgment when she first joined her dance society at university. Despite overcoming this, she still experiences feelings of uncertainty:

> ...because I attend dance classes urm sometimes obviously you're supposed to interact with your teacher excetera and I do feel anxious about bringing up my ideas about moving like dancing when I'm not taught to dance? so sometimes I feel like I have these ideas I want to show them but 'm like no I hate myself I can't show anything to anyone urm so this is definitely kind of situation I feel anxious in…(Becca / 23 / Female)

This self-consciousness surrounding her dancing suggests that she expects negative opinions from the group. These fears restrict her creativity, as she feels "anxious about bringing up" her ideas. Her interesting use of "supposed to" interact with her teacher suggests a desire to fit in with norms and conventionality within her dance class. Similarly, to Reema, Becca may experience fear of being wrong, specifically feeling unable to share her ideas as she has not been "taught to dance." This suggests a desire to fit in with norms and conventions as her way of reducing anxiety, by reducing opportunity for judgment from her peers. She displays an internal battle with her SA, wanting to express her true self but is restricted by self-hatred and feeling she "can't show anything to anyone." As well as dance classes at university, a lot of her experiences with feeling judged are during seminars, which is where she socialises with other psychology students the most:

> No actually there were some people that I met that seemed really nice I liked talking to them during seminars, but they all seemed to already been there cliques in their own social groups and I was like aah I don't belong here I don't think they really care about talking to me outside of the seminar group… (Becca / 23 / Female)

Becca displays a strong desire to participate in seminars but is disabled by her SA. She admits her fear that her peers "don't care about talking" to her, suggesting a lack of confidence in herself but also the need for validation from others. It seems Becca needs positive validation for her to be able to speak in seminars. She expresses a desire to be part of a group at university, not only through joining dance society but feeling everybody was in their own "cliques" that she did feel she belonged to. Being part of a group may alleviate Becca's fears of judgment, feeling validated through a sense of belonging and finding people who cared about talking to her.

On the topic of seminars, Mei felt her English skills made her a target for negative judgement from others:

> Yeah, and how to say I'm urm… I have to admit I am a sensitive person and when I am trying to figure out something and if I can't express this fluently, I feel their emotions like "Oh god don't say please say it faster" like that. (Mei / 19 / Female)

She feels when she does participate in seminars, her peers are embarrassed of her for her lack of fluency. Subsequently, this is something she worries about and causes her to withdraw: "Mmm, as I mentioned about in seminars it will influence me that not to exchange my opinions with others" (Mei / 19 / Female).

As this fear of judgment is something she frequently experiences during seminars, this suggests she struggles with constant anxiety around not only what she says but saying it "fluently." Unlike other participants, Mei anticipates the literal thoughts of her peers such as "please say it faster." This literal interpretation of what others are thinking, as well as her admittance of "I feel their emotions" suggests an over analysis of the self. She may put herself in the shoes of her peers, looking at herself from an outsider perspective. In guessing their thoughts and emotions towards her, she sees how they would judge her, and this subsequently influences her "not to exchange my opinions" in seminars.

Shannon discussed her difficulties with making friends at the start of university I to her fears of judgment:

> ...in freshers' week I found it really hard to make friends cause like you speak to people and you get really anxious and you're like… like do they like me? It just like all kind of goes through and I'd just like kind of be like oh no I don't wanna 'o out with them again cause I don't 'now if they actually like me … it's hard to like go out and like make friends when you feel anxious cause you're not really yourself cause you're like reserved and tryna like… keep yourself back a little bit cause you're like conscious of like how they're gonna think of you. (Shannon / 18 / Female)

Shannon displays a clear lack of confidence and an uncertainty of herself. Her constant worries of "do they like me" and "I don't know if they actually like me" suggests a desire for acceptance from her peers is vital for her self-worth. This internal dialogue manifests itself into reality, creating a world of isolation for Shannon as her anxiety convinces her that her fears are true. When she does socialise, she portrays a more "reserved" version of herself, "keeping yourself back a little bit." This is due to a fear of judgment of her true self. Shannon's fears create a vicious cycle, avoiding social events at university through fears of judgment which may ultimately make these fears more prominent as she sinks into self-isolation. In doing this, it may have come across that she herself did not like her peers. In turn they may avoid asking her to future social events. Her fear of judgment is isolating, and evidently damaging to her social experience at university.

Avoiding Reality

The second superordinate theme identified was "Avoiding Reality." Participants discussed a wide variety of coping strategies, most of which involved avoiding the reality of their SA. These were behaviours or patterns of thinking that enabled participants to deal with their anxiety to an extent where they felt more able to function in social environments. Two subordinate themes emerged; "self-isolation" and "altered self-portrayal."

Self-Isolation

"Self-isolation" was distinct from the theme "loneliness in the midst of plenty," as five participants discussed experiences of deliberate self-isolation related to coping with their anxieties. For Max, this was heavily influenced by feelings of rejection from his peers. This stemmed from an early experience of rejection from a friendship group, which resulted in him learning to accept and feel comfortable with being alone. This has followed him to university, as he isolates himself upon sensing rejection from others, such as his housemates:

> I try to talk with them when we are in the kitchen like small talk… but... I find it difficult to start opening like "hey how was your day," maybe he is kind of like "good," and that's it there is no connection being like I want to talk with you longer (...) I can see that and I'm like okay if he doesn't want to talk then that's okay but when I see that he wants to talk... I'm... being passive aggressive sometimes? And try to be like I don't want to talk with you...I'm not saying that, I'm just showing that I don't want to talk I don't know how to talk about this subject or today. (Max / 20 / Male)

Max presents juxtaposing behaviours. Although he makes attempts at small talk, he seems content with the lack of reciprocity shown by his flatmate, becoming anxious and defensive when this changes. In this sense, initiating conversations may be an attempt to control his image and alleviate his anxiety. If he is seen to try to socialise, it reduces his fears 'f being perceived as "that weird guy" who "doesn't talk too much" as he mentions later in the interview. Furthermore, his use of passive aggression in his responses may be a defence mechanism. If he isolates himself then he cannot be hurt by potential social rejection that he often feels, for example, from his flatmates as he mentions feeling they do not want to talk to him. An experience unique to Max was his use of substances to mitigate his anxiety. He goes outside to designated smoking areas as a strategy for self-isolation when he feels anxious in social situations:

> Usually I'm smoking not everybody smokes in my group of friends so if we are inside and I feel nervous or anything I'm going outside like I'm going for a smoke and then I'm trying to relax and breathe like okay let's calm down take it easy you're not going to die so that's like... either one or two cigarettes back to back thats a bad thing I know but like that's what helps me. It's not a good thing but it helps me. So, smoking. (Max / 20 / Male)

Ironically, smoking allows him some 'breathing space' when he begins to feel socially anxious. It is interesting that Max feels he needs to smoke to be alone, as this suggests he uses this as a cover, so others do not perceive him as socially anxious. Again, he attempts to take back control from his SA. This may be the case particularly as he has a fear of judgment from his peers. He displays an awareness of the negative effects this coping mechanism can have, suggesting in his desperation to control his anxiety he is willing to risk his health.

This physical escapism was also utilised by Shannon. However, for her this often resulted in total avoidance rather than just a few minutes of isolation. She describes avoidance of social situations, both recreational and her university lectures:

> ... I just kind of like for me I'm just like I just wanna get out of that situation so I'll just leave normally… so like… if like if I'm out with people and I'm like

not really feeling it and I start to feel anxious I'll just go home… cause it's like I just don't wanna deal with this right now. (Shannon / 18 / Female)

So, I won't… I'll feel anxious about a situation but I won't like act on it whereas once a month I'd probably be like oh I feel anxious I'm just not gonna do this I'm not going into the next lecture I'm gonna go home um… (Shannon / 18 / Female)

Shannon displays not only physical but emotional avoidance to cope with her SA, not wanting to "deal with" it. She may feel that by physically avoiding the issue, such as an uncomfortable social setting or lecture, she avoids the emotional stress inherent to SA. This is suggestive of avoidance coping, avoiding any thoughts or feelings that might make her uncomfortable or worsen her anxiety. Perhaps her SA is not something she is ready to face, subsequently avoiding reality.

For Mei, self-isolation was the largest theme from her interview. She describes her self-isolation as a defence mechanism from the negativity of others:

Yeah urm… like I don't know studying abroad sometimes you will have homesick? And sometimes you can when you feel like another's feelings if… if someone is unkind for you want to how to say reject outside and reject to go out of your room reject to have a chat with others… like isolate… it sounds like a way of protecting yourself. (Mei / 19 / Female)

Self-isolation is a way of rejecting the realities of her SA by retreating to her room as a safe space. It may be that due to her SA, Mei is particularly sensitive to the behaviours of others and self isolates rather than addressing her sensitivities, again avoiding reality. Mei's behaviour contrasts from other participants in that self-isolation is her only coping strategy for her SA. This self-isolation could also be a result of loneliness, as she notes that studying abroad can make her "homesick." If she feels cut off from the familiarity of her friends and family, this may result in further self-isolation:

Mmm as I mentioned about in seminars it will influence me that not to exchange my opinions with others and I know… how to say like in my past study experience in my home country… it… my teachers they just encourage students to do your own work your own coursework to finish by yourself don't communicate with others so when I come here it's a new system I need to familiar? Familiarise myself… Learn how to cooperate with others and practise the skill that… cooperate with others. (Mei / 19 / Female)

Mei seems to have a strong subconscious desire for familiarity. As she experiences "homesickness" and her schooling experience encouraged her not to "communicate with others," self-isolation is her only coping mechanism as it allows her to avoid her new reality. Isolating herself may be an attempt to find a sense of familiarity in an unfamiliar world.

When asked about how she copes with her SA at university, Isabelle also displayed tendencies to self-isolate:

Erm… I try to stay in my room a lot but also… if there's something on TV I'll try and watch it downstairs with everyone and kind of force myself to cook with everyone force myself to watch TV with everyone erm… I try not to stay in my

room for activities like that but also, we're kind of in the same boat and we all appreciate that we need our own time so. (Isabelle / 18 / Female)

She admits that she likes to be in her room a lot and must "force herself" to socialise with her flatmates, suggesting a preference for being alone rather than feeling lonely. The use of "force" before every social activity suggests an attempt to overcome her SA, conforming to the role of a university student by appearing social and outgoing. Joining the art society at university is described as another attempt to push herself out of self-isolation, however this is often in vain:

Like societies and things I've been trying to push myself trying to go to art society every week doesn't really work out cause I kind of just go sit on my own do my own thing… (Isabelle / 18 / Female)

Similarly, to Max, Isabelle displays conflicting behaviours of joining an art club as an attempt to socialise, but also wanting to sit alone. She gravitates towards her comfort zone of self-isolation, as this is presumably what lessens her anxiety. Again, this seems a form of emotional as well as physical escapism. As aforementioned, this may also be the result of her feeling like an outsider in her society. If she isolates herself, she does not have to deal with painful rejection from others or feelings of extreme anxiety. For Isabelle, isolation is the easiest coping strategy and avoids her dealing with reality.

Escapism was frequently used as a coping mechanism for SA around university for Becca. Becca's social avoidance strategies were unique, in that they are solely emotional/mental rather than physical:

And also, I guess that's why I'm also an escapist person so I would have whole world in my head and stuff so I would always think about those things when trying to ignore the upsetting parts so that would be my escape. (Becca / 23 / Female)

I was anxious just completely shut myself off from the real life and I just escape to movies and games and stuff… (Becca / 23 / Female)

Urm… so escapism is one I started to think about like stories I like characters I like games I like…and just kind of not think about the situation that is happening around me… (Becca / 23 / Female)

Arguably, this presents a more extreme form of social avoidance. Becca's mental escapism represents an avoidance of emotional processing of her anxiety. She does show an awareness of this, "ignore the upsetting parts' and 'not think about the situation." This is suggestive that even though SA is something she experienced since early adolescence; it is not something she is ready to deal with. Perhaps Becca's world in her head involves a version of herself without SA, who can be confident and sociable. The "characters I like" may be alternate versions of herself or represent a self she desires to be. Like Mei, this isolation gives her a sense of familiarity that she finds comfort in, as she has been an "escapist person" since early adolescence. This mental escapism represents for her an idealised world, alleviating her SA through not dealing with her SA in the real world.

Altered Self-Portrayal

All participants described methods of coping with and alleviating their SA. For those who did not utilise physical or emotional avoidance behaviours, altering their demeanour seemed vital in facilitating a sense of normality and coping with university. For Alesha, she described using a confident facade in social situations at university:

> I think that's like… how do I say it… like a barrier? Like I said I'm still waiting for that day when I can wake up and it's like I don't care anymore super confident you know but I think it's just my way of not letting things get to me. (Alesha / 18 / Female)

> So, like people looking at me they might be judging me but if I put on this confidence, it helps me not be as bothered by what they might think… yeah. (Alesha / 18 / Female)

In this sense, she is hiding her SA by using a feigned confidence to help cope with her life at university. This is furthered by her still waiting for when she can "wake up and it's like I don't care anymore," suggesting she cares deeply about others' judgments of her and uses confidence to combat this anxiety. It is interesting that this contrasts with other physical and emotional avoidance, as she uses a confident facade as a "barrier" to face her anxiety head on. This act of confidence may be her way of creating an alternate sense of self who absorbs her fears and anxieties, protecting her true self from emotional trauma and hence avoiding reality:

Holly alters her self-portrayal to hide her SA when communicating with others.

> Yeah so I just sort of try to stay as calm as I can and I probably talk a little bit more or go off topic when I'm trying to emphasise or I struggle with eye contact as well that makes me feel nervous so if I am feeling nervous I'll over emphasise making eye contact to make the person think I'm not nervous but yeah I think that's about it really. (Holly / 27 / Female)

Like Alesha, these subtle changes in her behaviour seem to be a way of her portraying confidence, Holly will "overemphasise making eye contact" and "talk a little bit more." However, this does not seem to be with a goal of creating a barrier or blocking her anxiety. This suggests an attempt to manipulate the perceptions of others, to "make the person think I'm not nervous." Holly can avoid the reality of her SA by presenting an alternate version of herself, controlling how her peers at university see her.

Similarly, when asked how he copes with his anxiety at university, Max described using humour to put on a confident façade: "I don't know making jokes and sarcasm. That's the best defence mechanism when it comes to social anxiety. Jokes and sarcasm. Just that" (Max / 20 / Male).

He uses humour as a "defence mechanism" to portray a more confident self. As with Alesha, this confident demeanour may act as a barrier or "defence" to the negative opinions of others. This may also be a further attempt by Max to regain control of his SA, to fit in with his university peers and control their perceptions of him. It is interesting that he mentions 'jokes and sarcasm' twice and ends with "just that," suggesting humour is something he heavily relies on when creating this altered self-portrayal. As with Alesha and Holly, he avoids the reality of his anxiety by putting on an act of a more confident and socially competent Max. This is further evidenced in his use of alcohol in social environments, which he needs to be able to open up to people:

Yeah in certain situations if I'm with my friends from [country in Europe] I know how to be the talkative guy if it's in [town in England] in some instances I need alcohol to say some things so like "Hey...I really appreciate you talking with me and being my friend," otherwise I can't say that… (Max / 20 / Male)

That's with alcohol everything is with alcohol because in a social environment that's what brings people together to a certain point. (Max / 20 / Male)

Like humor, Max appears to use alcohol as a tool to portray an altered self. As he claims alcohol "brings people together," he may use this not only to become more confident and open, but to fit in at university. This is made evident by him becoming dependent on it in "certain situations" when he is not with his friends from home. Interestingly he alludes to having two versions of himself, "the talkative guy" when he is around his friends from home but becoming shy and less confident at university. His suggestion that he "needs" alcohol "otherwise I can't say that" suggests a heavy dependence to socially interact. This fits with his dependence on humour, painting a picture of Max being dependent on humour and alcohol to facilitate his confident university persona.

Discussion

The present study set out to explore how a small sample of undergraduates experienced feelings of SA whilst at university. Analysis revealed five superordinate themes capturing the widespread and varied experiences of participants, two of which were presented in the results section: "Persistent self-consciousness" (comprising "patterns of overthinking" and "expecting and fearing judgment") and Avoiding Reality (including "altered self-portrayal" and "self-isolation"). These findings will now be discussed in turn.

Persistent Self-Consciousness

Patterns of Overthinking

The subordinate theme "patterns of overthinking" exemplified the anticipatory and post-event processing experienced by participants. Specifically, these patterns of overthinking included catastrophizing, rumination, and personalization. This is consistent with Clark and Wells' (1995) model of SA, as these cognitive biases maintain the cycle of SA. Participants' poor self-image "kick-started" this process, leading to increased perceptions of social danger and heightened self-consciousness. These social dangers included interpersonal rejection as well as negative opinions and attitudes from others.

The most prominent effect of overthinking appeared to be the impact on interpersonal relationships, with most participants forming very few or no meaningful relationships at university. Anticipatory and post-event processing prevented participants from conversing or made social interactions difficult, as well as their "sociometer" creating false positive social threats. Participants' frequent post-event processing of social interactions reflects findings of poor self-performance ratings following social interaction (e.g., Thompson et al., 2019). Subsequently, it may be that this excessive rumination of past interactions can damage future relationships by reinstating their social fears, as well as contributing to a negative self-image. More specifically, Max's inability to form romantic connections due to his catastrophizing is not uncommon amongst SAS (Juretić, 2018). His fears of rejection from admitting his romantic feelings to a girl at university ultimately resulted in emotional suppression, consistent with

Juretić (2018). As this was unique to Max, more qualitative research into the effects of SA on romantic relationships in student populations is needed.

Expecting and Fearing Judgment

"Expecting and fearing judgement" was experienced by all participants. Again, experiences were consistent with Clark and Wells' (1995) cognitive model, as participants' self-image created fears of judgment and devaluation. This theme also reflects Leary and Jongman-Sereno's (2014) sociometer, as participants' fears of judgment were persistent and often unfounded. As a major contributor to self-consciousness in most participants, these fears were consistent with literature on commonly feared situations for students. This included attending social events, interactions with strangers and class participation as they all involve potential social evaluation from others. Indeed, asking for support from staff for some participants was difficult due to these fears, consistent with Mesa et al.'s (2014) findings. Both participants' fears of judgment during class participations and of interacting with academic staff appeared to create a toxic situation whereby potential academic failure became more likely. This is in line with Brook and Willoughby's (2015) conclusion that SA students struggle with the constant cycle of interaction and evaluation.

Interestingly, participants displayed conflicting attitudes towards seminars. For some, these were often more intimidating due to close group work where they felt judged. Brook and Willoughby (2015) noted that SAS struggle with the structure of university which is consistent with participant experiences of fearing both crowded environments such as lectures, but also more intimate settings such as seminars where approaching, interacting, and being evaluated by others is more likely. Again, participants displayed potential for academic disengagement. This apprehension of judgment in lectures and seminars materialized into a preoccupation with these feelings, causing withdrawal. The negative implication is that participants' social fears have the potential to cause impairments in capacity to succeed academically at university through their fears of participating in academic activities (e.g., Gren-Landell et al., 2009).

Avoiding Reality

Altered Self-Portrayal

"Altered self-portrayal" fits into Clark and Wells' (1995) outline of safety behaviours to combat perceived social danger, specifically impression management. Alcohol use was mentioned by Max to reduce his anxiety and to portray an alternate version of himself, more confident and talkative. Although sparse in the present study, this is consistent with prior findings into SAS and alcohol (e.g., Buckner & Heimberg, 2016; Villarosa-Hurlocker et al., 2020).

Self-Isolation

"Self-isolation" is consistent with Clark and Wells' (1995) outline of safety behaviours but specifically operates as a behavioural avoidance strategy (Clark & Wells, 1995; Picirillo et al., 2016), with both academic and interpersonal repercussions for participants. Participants described having few or no meaningful relationships at university, consistent with avoidance strategies resulting in fewer friendships in SAS. Like Chow et al. (2017), self-isolation often resulted from negative social experiences such as rejection, a safety behaviour to simultaneously reduce anxiety and avoid further negative encounters.

A key underlying issue of potential academic disengagement was apparent. Participants' self-isolation caused reductions in academic engagement on days when their SA worsened. Their avoidance of crowded environments such as lectures may also increase the likelihood of poor academic achievement (e.g., Akram et al., 2016). Again, participants' experiences support both Clarke and Fox's (2017) findings that social avoidance is a primary coping method in students, and Russell and Topham (2012)'s description of students leaving academic environments as the social anxiety becomes overwhelming. Interestingly, Becca was the only participant to mention mental escapism as a coping strategy through retreating to her own world with movies and video games (e.g., Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Such coping strategies (i.e., experiential avoidance; Hayes et al., 2006) have been shown ironically to increase levels of social anxiety, leading to more avoidance, and then higher social anxiety and so on (e.g., Asher et al., 2021).

Implications

The present study has some important implications. Firstly, these findings are important within the discussion of how SA is recognised within universities. Russell and Topham (2012) found students were reluctant to seek help as SA was unrecognised and invisible. It seems that Universities can become "toxic environments" (Russell & Shaw, 2009, p. 205), where students experience distress from the conflict of a desire to experience university and achieve success but find the environment distressing due to the overarching focus on social activities, particularly on large campuses (Shah & Kataria, 2010). Effective strategies for supporting undergraduates with SA could include support groups or peer mentoring to create a community who can share their experiences and worries.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations of the present study. First, the sample, while homogenous (as appropriate, for IPA), did not adequately represent males ($n = 1$, in the present study): this is problematic given the documented sex differences that have been observed when it comes to the expression of social anxiety (e.g., Jalnapurkar et al., 2018). Relatedly, the findings may not capture adequately, the SA experiences of other student groups. For example, discussions of the association between alcohol consumption and social anxiety in the present paper, may be less applicable to students who are not permitted to consume alcohol for religious or other moral beliefs. It is important, therefore, for future research to explore SA among other demographic groups that may not have been adequately captured in the present paper, to further explore possible idiographic gender, social, cultural, economic, and sexual orientation nuances in how SA is experienced, and the impact of SA, at university. Finally, one construct ripe for exploration with an IPA approach is the potential role of social comparison in negative emotions and the lived experience of those who struggle with social anxiety daily. Indeed, Goodman et al. (2021, p. 485) found, in one of two experiential sampling studies, that students with SA who reported higher levels of negative emotions "…draw potentially problematic social comparisons throughout their daily lives, characterized by relatively unfavorable and unstable self-views" and that when they do this "…they are especially fearful of others' social evaluations".

Overall, the present study found participants experienced feelings of SA that were persistent and disruptive to their lives at university. Their social fears created difficulty in social and academic contexts, often resulting in negative self-concepts and generally poor emotional experiences. Findings are largely consistent with previous theory and research, not only in student populations but with SA generally. This includes interpersonal deficits, potential

academic disruption, safety behaviours to reduce anxiety, and excessive anticipatory and post-event processing. It is interesting that even though participants were not screened for clinical levels of SA, their self-reported experiences still largely mirrored Clark and Wells' (1995) cognitive model of SA. This suggests that subclinical, undiagnosed, or even moderate feelings of social anxiety can result in functional impairments for students at university. However, further research is required to address the gap in qualitative research into SAS. Additionally, the nature and detail of safety behaviours employed by those with SA require further investigation not only in student populations, but those with SA generally.

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Author Note

Jennifer Lee has a postgraduate degree in Psychology and conducted this research during their studies.

Daniel Waldeck, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in Psychology at Coventry University, with expertise in applied psychology and psychological research methods. Please direct correspondence to ac8416@coventry.ac.uk.

Andrew Holliman, Ph.D., is Senior Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education, with expertise in the psychology of education, teaching and learning in higher education, and the development of children's literacy.

Moitree Banerjee, Ph.D., is Head of Psychology at the University of Chichester, with expertise in qualitative research methods and mindfulness.

Ian Tyndall, Ph.D., is a Reader in Psychology at the University of Chichester, with expertise in cognitive psychology and the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy model.

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