

SOCIAL ANXIETY IN INDONESIAN AND SOUTH KOREAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Article History: Received: Jan, 8 2026; Accepted: Feb, 18 2026; Published: March, 31 2026

ABSTRACT

Social anxiety represents a significant mental health concern affecting university students' academic performance and social adjustment globally. This comparative study examines differences in social anxiety prevalence, severity, and contributing factors between Indonesian and South Korean university students. This study employed a quantitative comparative design and collected data from 400 undergraduate students, with 200 participants from each country, using the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS). Results revealed that South Korean students exhibited significantly higher social anxiety levels ($M=42.3$, $SD=10.2$) compared to Indonesian students ($M=34.7$, $SD=11.8$; $t=7.12$, $p<.001$, $d=0.71$). Gender differences were more pronounced in South Korea, where female students reported significantly higher anxiety than males ($p=.03$), while Indonesian students showed no significant gender differences ($p=.08$). Academic pressure demonstrated stronger correlation with social anxiety in South Korea ($r=.49$, $p<.001$) than Indonesia ($r=.32$, $p=.01$). The results highlight the pressing necessity for focused mental health strategies and educational policy improvements, such as culturally responsive counseling, stress reduction initiatives, and the development of supportive learning environments in both nations.

Keywords: *Social Anxiety, University Students, Cross-National Comparison, Indonesia, South Korea, Education Policy*



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INTRODUCTION

Social anxiety disorder is widely identified as one of the most common mental health issues affecting university students across the globe, with profound implications for academic achievement, social functioning, and overall psychological well-being. Social anxiety serves as a critical predictor of academic outcomes, fundamentally impacting students' ability to engage in classroom participation, seek help from instructors, and integrate into academic environments (Vilaplana-Pérez et al., 2021). This condition appears as an ongoing fear of social settings in which individuals might be scrutinized, evaluated, or judged by others, leading to avoidance behaviors that can

severely limit educational and personal development opportunities (Ginat-Frolich et al., 2024; Laldinpui et al., 2024).

In the Indonesian context, social anxiety among university students has been documented in several national studies, with findings indicating that academic performance demands, social conformity pressures, and collectivist cultural norms contribute substantially to anxiety manifestation. These national empirical findings are essential to contextualize the cross-national comparison undertaken in the present study (Suryaningrum, 2021).

In order to fulfill the objectives of this research, academic pressure is operationally defined as the subjective perception of demands arising from academic tasks, performance expectations, and evaluative contexts within the university environment, as measured by a self-report scale adapted to both cultural settings (Munir et al., 2020). This operational definition is maintained consistently throughout all variables analyzed in the present investigation.

Over the past twelve years, social anxiety has emerged as the form of psychological distress showing the most substantial growth among students who access counseling services at universities across the country, with approximately 20% of students presenting with social anxiety concerns (Miers & Warner, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated these concerns, with prolonged periods of social isolation resulting in increased social anxiety and difficulties in cultivating social connections essential for physical and mental well-being (Kindred & Bates, 2023; Martins et al., 2025). When left unaddressed, social anxiety can develop into more severe psychological conditions, become chronic in nature, and significantly interfere with multiple life functions (Wolitzky-Taylor & LeBeau, 2023). Additionally, social anxiety is linked to a range of concurrent psychological conditions, such as generalized anxiety, depressive symptoms, and manifestations of eating disorders (Alomari et al., 2022).

Despite the global prevalence of social anxiety among university students, significant disparities exist across different cultural and educational contexts. Two particularly concerning yet understudied contexts are Indonesia and South Korea, where social anxiety prevalence reaches alarming levels yet differs substantially in manifestation and contributing factors (Ali & Joordens, 2023). Moreover, a substantial body of evidence indicates that elevated levels of social anxiety are associated with declining academic achievement over time, as students experiencing this condition often encounter difficulties adapting to academic settings because of apprehensions about being negatively evaluated or unappreciated in social interactions (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Gong et al., 2025)

In Indonesia, social anxiety among university students has reached concerning levels, with approximately half experiencing some level of social anxiety and studies showing significantly higher rates compared to international counterparts (Astutik et al.,

2020). Indonesian students face unique environmental stressors, including the consequences following catastrophic events like the 2004 tsunami, military conflicts, and terrorist incidents, all of which contribute to higher rates of trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder compared to students from other countries (Ekawati et al., 2025; Irwansyah et al., 2024). This is particularly concerning given that social anxiety among college students serves as a reflection of both mental health status and the quality of youth as a nation's resource (Suryaningrum, 2021).

South Korea's educational environment is characterized by intense academic pressure, exceptionally high societal expectations, and an emphasis on standardized testing and extensive after-school private education (hagwons). The intense academic competition has been linked to widespread rates of depressive and anxiety-related conditions among young people, with South Korea recording the highest youth suicide rate globally for more than two decades (Jarvis et al., 2020; Joung & Morgan, 2025). In 2021, the incidence of suicide among young individuals climbed to an unprecedented level of 11.7 fatalities per 100,000 population (Bertuccio et al., 2024). Current prevalence rates show that 19.8% of South Korean students experience depression and 12.3% experience anxiety (Jiang et al., 2022), with 9-14.4% experiencing severe anxiety disorders and depression rates ranging from 19.9% to 30.6% across all grades (Dongjun et al., 2025).

Despite these well-documented challenges in both countries, a critical gap exists in comparative research directly examining social anxiety between Indonesian and South Korean university students. While both nations share certain cultural similarities including collectivist values, high respect for education, and strong family expectations, they differ substantially in educational systems, academic pressure intensity, and societal structures. These differences likely shape the manifestation, triggers, and severity of social anxiety distinctly across the two populations (Azmi et al., 2023). Previous studies have examined social anxiety within single countries or compared Western and Asian contexts, but direct comparisons between two Asian nations with distinct educational systems remain scarce. This research addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on how cultural and educational factors uniquely influence social anxiety manifestation in Indonesia and South Korea.

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive cross-national comparison between Indonesian and South Korean university students. Specifically, this research pursues three main objectives: (1) to compare the prevalence and severity of social anxiety between Indonesian and South Korean university students; (2) to identify and analyze the primary triggers and contributing factors to social anxiety in each national context; (3) to examine how demographic variables, particularly gender, relate to social anxiety experiences across both populations.

Based on the foregoing theoretical framework and empirical evidence, the present study addresses the following research questions: (1) Are there significant differences in social anxiety levels between Indonesian and South Korean university students? (2) Do gender differences in social anxiety manifestation differ across the two national contexts? (3) Does academic pressure demonstrate differential predictive strength with respect to social anxiety in Indonesia compared to South Korea?

In accordance with prior literature, the following hypotheses are proposed: (H1) South Korean university students exhibit significantly higher social anxiety scores than their Indonesian counterparts; (H2) Gender differences in social anxiety are more pronounced in the South Korean context, reflecting culturally-specific academic competition pressures; (H3) The association between academic pressure and social anxiety is significantly stronger among South Korean students than Indonesian students.

The significance of this research extends beyond academic inquiry and addresses critical needs in understanding student mental health across cultural contexts. First, social anxiety among university students reflects both mental health status and the quality of youth as a national resource. If Indonesian and South Korean students cannot fully display their potential due to anxiety-related impairments, both nations risk losing valuable human capital necessary for social and economic development (Abdi et al., 2024). Second, this cross-national comparison will identify universal versus culture-specific factors contributing to social anxiety, thereby informing the development of culturally appropriate interventions and education policies tailored to each context. The distinctive contribution of this study stems from its direct cross-national comparison using standardized instruments and primary data from equivalent samples, providing new insights into the ways in which schooling frameworks and sociocultural settings shape social anxiety differently within collectivist Asian societies. The findings will offer meaningful perspectives to inform the formulation of targeted interventions that promote both academic excellence and psychological well-being among university students in Indonesia and South Korea (Deffner et al., 2022; Welz, 2001).

METHODS

This study utilized a quantitative comparative research design to examine social anxiety among university students in Indonesia and South Korea. Quantitative approaches are particularly suitable for measuring psychological constructs using standardized instruments and for conducting statistical comparisons across different national contexts (Creswell, 2009). The comparative research design allows for systematic examination of similarities and differences between groups from different cultural contexts, enabling identification of culture-specific versus universal factors influencing psychological phenomena (Zhang et al., 2024).

The research sample comprised 400 undergraduate students equally distributed between Indonesia (n=200) and South Korea (n=200). Participants were aged between 18 and 24 years, representing typical university student demographics in both countries. The Indonesian sample was drawn from a major public university in Java (Yogyakarta State University), while the South Korean sample was recruited from a university in Daegu (Daegu University). Selection of these institutions was based on their representativeness of public university systems, diverse student populations, and geographic accessibility.

A stratified random sampling technique was implemented to guarantee adequate representation across various faculties and academic years. Participants were stratified by faculty (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, and education) and year of study (first through fourth year). Gender distribution was relatively balanced in both samples: Indonesian sample consisted of 53% female (n=106) and 47% male (n=94) students; South Korean sample comprised 51% female (n=102) and 49% male (n=98) students.

To address potential cultural bias in construct measurement, the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis within each national sample prior to comparative analyses. Measurement invariance across the two cultural groups was assessed using a sequential model-fitting approach (configural, metric, and scalar invariance), ensuring that comparisons of latent mean scores reflect genuine cross-national differences rather than artifacts of differential item functioning. Furthermore, all survey materials underwent forward-backward translation by bilingual research assistants with expertise in clinical psychology, and cognitive debriefing was conducted with pilot samples (n=15 per country) to verify conceptual equivalence of item content across cultural contexts.

The primary research instrument was the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) developed by Mattick and Clarke, 1998 (Kerr et al., 2025). The SIAS is a well-established self-administered instrument developed to evaluate anxiety arising in interpersonal situations. It comprises 20 statements assessed using a five-point Likert format, scored from 0 (not at all descriptive of me) to 4 (highly descriptive of me), resulting in cumulative scores between 0 and 80. Elevated totals reflect more pronounced social interaction anxiety. The SIAS demonstrates strong psychometric properties across diverse cultural contexts. The measure's validity across multiple countries including Japan, South Korea, Spain, Germany, Australia, and the United States (Viberg et al., 2024). Further validated the SIAS in collectivistic cultures, demonstrating measurement equivalence across individualistic and collectivistic societies (Kim, 2024). In the Indonesian context, established the reliability and validity of the Indonesian-translated SIAS, reporting Cronbach's alpha of .89 and strong convergent validity with clinical diagnoses of social anxiety disorder (Marlina et al., 2024; Putunanga et al., 2025).

The selection of Yogyakarta State University and Daegu University as national representatives was based on several methodological considerations. Both institutions are major public universities situated in urban academic centers, with demographically diverse student populations across multiple faculties and academic years, thereby reflecting the structural characteristics of the broader national higher education system in their respective countries. While the authors acknowledge that findings from single-institutional samples carry inherent limitations regarding national generalizability, the equivalence of institutional characteristics across both sites mitigates potential selection bias in cross-national comparisons.

The SIAS underwent rigorous translation and back-translation procedures following international guidelines for cross-cultural assessment. A structured demographic questionnaire collected information on participants' age, gender, university, faculty/major, and year of study. Additional questions assessed perceived academic pressure and study hours per day outside class. Data collection occurred between September and November 2025 during regular academic semesters in both countries. After obtaining ethics approval from participating universities' institutional review boards, participants were recruited through collaboration with faculty members and student organizations. An online survey platform was used to distribute the questionnaire, and all participants completed standard informed consent procedures before participation. The respondents initially filled out the demographic form and subsequently answered the SIAS statements. Data quality was ensured through attention check items embedded within the survey and systematic review of response patterns.

The data were processed and examined with SPSS version 26.0. Reliability in terms of internal consistency was assessed through the use of Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with both Indonesian ($\alpha=.91$) and South Korean ($\alpha=.93$) versions demonstrating excellent reliability. Descriptive statistical analyses, including the calculation of mean values and standard deviations, were conducted for each national sample and gender category, while anxiety levels were classified based on established cut-off criteria : minimal (<20), mild (20-30), moderate (31-45), and severe (>45). Inferential statistics included independent samples t-test to compare social anxiety scores between countries, two-way ANOVA to examine effects of country and gender, Pearson correlation to assess relationships between academic pressure and social anxiety, and item-level analyses to identify specific anxiety triggers. Effect sizes were reported using Cohen's d for t-tests and partial η^2 for ANOVA. All significance testing used $\alpha=.05$ (two-tailed).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The final sample comprised 394 university students (197 Indonesian: 52.8% female, 47.2% male; 197 South Korean: 51.3% female, 48.7% male). Table 1 summarizes demographic characteristics and preliminary statistics across both samples.

Tabel 1. Demographic Characteristics and Preliminary Statistics

Characteristic	Indonesia (n=197)	South Korea (n=197)	Statistic
Gender			
Female	104 (52.8%)	101 (51.3%)	
Male	93 (47.2%)	96 (48.7%)	
Age (years), M ± SD	20.3 ± 1.4	20.7 ± 1.6	
Range	18-24	18-24	
Academic Pressure (1-10), M ± SD	6.8 ± 1.9	8.2 ± 1.4	t=8.45, p<.001, d=0.85
SIAS Internal Consistency (α)	.91	.93	

South Korean students reported significantly higher academic pressure than Indonesian students, with a large effect size (d=0.85), indicating substantive cross-national differences in perceived evaluative demands. The SIAS demonstrated excellent internal consistency across both samples (α≥.91), confirming adequate measurement reliability in both cultural contexts. Table 2 presents consolidated social anxiety scores, severity distribution, gender comparisons, and correlation data across both countries.

Tabel 2 Social Anxiety Scores, Severity Distribution, and Gender Comparisons Across Countries

Variable	Indonesia (n=197)	South Korea (n=197)	t / F	p	Effect
SIAS Total Score, , M ± SD	34.7 ± 11.8	42.3 ± 10.2	t(392)=-7.12	<.001	d=0.71
Anxiety Severity Categories			χ²=12.18	<.001	
Minimal (<20)	32 (16.2%)	11 (5.6%)			
Mild (20-30)	54 (27.4%)	42 (21.3%)			
Moderate (31-45)	69 (35.0%)	93 (47.2%)			
Severe (>45)	42 (21.3%)	51 (25.9%)			
Gender Differences			F(1,390)=5.67	.018	η²=.014
Female, M ± SD	36.2 ± 11.1	44.1 ± 9.7			

Male, M ± SD	32.8 ± 12.5	40.2 ± 10.6		
Within-country gender t-test	t=1.76, p=.080	t=2.18, p=.031		d=0.39 (SK only)
Country × Gender Interaction			F(1,390)=4.02 .046	η ² =.010
Academic Pressure–Anxiety Correlation (r)	.32	.49	.01 /	<.001

As presented in Table 2, South Korean students exhibited significantly higher social anxiety than Indonesian students, with a medium-to-large effect size (d=0.71). The severity distribution indicated that 73.1% of South Korean students fell within the moderate-to-severe range, compared to 56.3% of Indonesian students. Gender differences were statistically significant only in South Korea (p=.031, d=0.39), while no significant gender effect was observed in Indonesia (p=.080), reflecting a country-specific moderating role of gender. The country × gender interaction was significant (p=.046), further corroborating differential anxiety expression across national contexts. Academic pressure demonstrated a substantially stronger correlation with social anxiety in South Korea (r=.49, p<.001) than in Indonesia (r=.32, p=.01), suggesting that evaluative academic demands constitute a more salient anxiety antecedent within the South Korean educational context.

Participants responded to supplementary questions about specific situations triggering their anxiety. Tabel 3 summarizes the primary anxiety triggers reported by students in each country. Chi-square analyses revealed significant cross-national differences in anxiety triggers. South Korean students were significantly more likely to identify academic competition/comparison (74.1% vs. 21.8%) and peer social interactions (68.0% vs. 28.9%) as primary triggers, while Indonesian students more frequently reported public speaking/presentations (45.2% vs. 17.8%) as their main anxiety trigger (all p<.001).

Tabel 3. Primary Triggers of Social Anxiety by Country

Trigger Category	Indonesia	South Korea	X ²	p-value
Academic competition/comparison	43 (21.8%)	146 (74.1%)	106.23	<.001
Public speaking/presentations	89 (45.2%)	35 (17.8%)	33.45	<.001
Meeting new people	38 (19.3%)	52 (26.4%)	2.67	.102
Peer social interactions	57 (28.9%)	134 (68.0%)	2.18	<.001

Indonesian students were more likely to avoid class presentations (44.7% vs. 18.3%), while South Korean students more frequently avoided study groups or peer

interactions (61.4% vs. 27.9%). Item-level analyses using Bonferroni-adjusted significance revealed that South Korean students consistently scored higher on items related to worry about social evaluation, fear of appearing awkward, and anxiety in both dyadic and group interactions (all $p < .001$, $d = 0.60-0.72$). A total of 168 students (42.6%) provided optional open-ended responses. Indonesian students commonly reported fear of judgment during public speaking, pressure to perform well academically with less emphasis on peer competition, and supportive peer relationships buffering anxiety. South Korean students emphasized intense pressure for academic excellence and constant comparison with peers, fear of falling behind, limited time for social activities due to academic demands, and high societal expectations for success.

Discussion

The present study provides the first comprehensive, direct cross-national comparison of social anxiety between Indonesian and South Korean university students using standardized instruments and equivalent sampling methods. The findings reveal significant differences in prevalence, severity, triggers, and correlates of social anxiety across these two Asian contexts, with important theoretical and practical implications for understanding student mental health in diverse cultural and educational systems.

The most striking finding is that South Korean university students exhibited significantly higher social anxiety ($M = 42.3$, $SD = 10.2$) compared to Indonesian students ($M = 34.7$, $SD = 11.8$), with a medium-to-large effect size ($d = 0.71$). This 22% difference represents substantial practical difference in students' daily experiences, with 73.1% of South Korean students experiencing moderate-to-severe anxiety compared to 56.3% of Indonesian students. These results are consistent with earlier studies documenting high rates of mental health problems among South Korean adolescents and young adults (Moitra et al., 2023), extending these observations to the university level. This pattern contrasts with earlier assumptions that collectivist cultures uniformly protect against mental health issues, demonstrating instead that specific educational pressures can override cultural protective factors.

The cultural and systemic factors contributing to higher social anxiety in South Korea include exceptional competitiveness in the education system, where students' futures are largely determined by standardized tests and university rankings. South Korean students studied an average of 5.3 hours daily outside class nearly double Indonesian students' 2.7 hours. Korean collectivist culture emphasizes social harmony, conformity, and sensitivity to others' evaluations, creating strong concerns about social evaluation and maintaining reputation. Societal expectations for success are extraordinarily high, with limited tolerance for perceived failure. This finding extends previous research on academic pressure in East Asian contexts by quantifying the relationship between study hours and anxiety levels across different national settings.

In contrast, Indonesian students operate within a somewhat different context. The Indonesian education system, although increasingly competitive, does not reach the intensity of the Korean system, with multiple pathways to higher education reducing all-or-nothing pressure. Indonesian collectivism emphasizes mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) and maintaining harmonious relationships (*rukun*), which may buffer against some forms of social anxiety (Y. Jiang et al., 2015; Yangjeyang & Lie, n.d.). However, Indonesian students still experience substantial social anxiety, with 56.3% in moderate-to-severe categories, representing a significant mental health concern warranting attention. This prevalence rate is notably higher than reported in Western samples, suggesting that while Indonesian students face less intense pressure than their Korean counterparts, cultural factors unique to Indonesia may contribute to elevated anxiety levels.

The significant country \times gender interaction revealed that gender differences in social anxiety vary across national contexts. In South Korea, female students reported significantly higher anxiety ($M=44.1$) than males ($M=40.2$, $p=.031$, $d=0.39$), whereas in Indonesia, the difference was not significant (females $M=36.2$, males $M=32.8$, $p=.080$, $d=0.29$). This pattern suggests that cultural and societal factors moderate how gender influences social anxiety experiences. Korean women face expectations to excel academically and professionally while simultaneously being evaluated on traditional feminine qualities, appearance standards, and future family roles. These competing demands may increase vulnerability to social anxiety, particularly regarding social evaluation and comparison. In Indonesia, while gender differences showed a similar direction, the more modest difference may reflect somewhat less rigid role expectations or more gradual transitions between traditional and modern gender roles. This finding contributes to the literature by demonstrating that gender effects on social anxiety are not universal but are shaped by specific cultural contexts.

The finding that academic pressure correlates more strongly with social anxiety in South Korea ($r=.49$) than Indonesia ($r=.32$) provides insight into mechanisms underlying cross-national differences. Both correlations are statistically significant, confirming that academic stress contributes to social anxiety in both contexts (Stearse et al., 2023). However, the substantially stronger relationship in South Korea suggests that academic pressure operates as a more potent risk factor in that environment, reflecting the centrality of academic achievement in Korean society and its direct connection to social status, family honor, and future opportunities. This differential relationship supports the hypothesis that the meaning and consequences of academic performance vary across cultural contexts, with implications for intervention design.

In Indonesia, while academic pressure also correlates with social anxiety, the relationship is weaker, suggesting that other factors play relatively larger roles. Indonesian students' responses emphasized performance anxiety in specific evaluative

situations rather than continuous peer comparison, aligning with findings that 45.2% identified public speaking as their primary trigger compared to only 17.8% of Korean students. For Indonesian students, anxiety appears more episodic and situation-specific rather than chronic and comparative. This distinction between chronic comparative anxiety and episodic performance anxiety represents a novel contribution to cross-cultural anxiety research.

Perhaps the most culturally revealing finding concerns differences in anxiety triggers. South Korean students overwhelmingly identified academic competition and peer comparison (74.1%) as their primary trigger, whereas Indonesian students more frequently cited performance-based situations like public speaking (45.2%). For South Korean students, anxiety centers on comparative evaluation, reflecting the competitive, ranking-oriented nature of Korean education where relative standing matters enormously (Hussein et al., 2025). For Indonesian students, anxiety focuses more on absolute performance in specific situations rather than continuous comparison. These differential triggers suggest that interventions should be tailored to specific cultural contexts rather than applying universal protocols.

For South Korean students, cognitive-behavioral approaches challenging comparative thinking patterns and promoting self-compassion could help decouple self-worth from relative ranking (Bernal & Sáez-Santiago, 2024). Institutional changes reducing competitive structures, such as cooperative learning and criterion-referenced grading, might also reduce comparative anxiety. For Indonesian students, interventions targeting performance anxiety, including skills training in public speaking and exposure-based approaches, might be most effective. The findings demonstrate that while the basic construct of social anxiety fear of negative evaluation exists across cultures, its specific expression varies substantially based on educational systems and cultural values (Okawa et al., 2021). This suggests that collectivism alone does not predict anxiety severity; rather, the specific form of collectivism and its interaction with academic competition matters.

The results hold substantial suggestions for universities, policymakers, and mental health professionals in both countries. For South Korea, the high prevalence and severity of social anxiety signals the need for fundamental educational reform. Specific reforms might include diversifying college admission criteria beyond standardized test scores, implementing cooperative learning and criterion-referenced assessment to reduce peer comparison, limiting study hours through policy regulations, and promoting growth mindset education emphasizing learning over ranking. Universities should substantially expand mental health services for the 73% of students experiencing moderate-to-severe anxiety. This includes mandatory mental health screening for incoming students, increasing counselor-to-student ratios, training faculty to recognize anxiety symptoms, and implementing anxiety-specific interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapy

addressing comparative thinking patterns, mindfulness and self-compassion training, and online interventions to increase accessibility.

For Indonesia, given students' primary trigger of public speaking and performance situations, targeted interventions should include public speaking and presentation skills courses integrated into curricula, gradual exposure programs helping anxious students progressively confront feared situations, peer practice groups providing low-stakes presentation opportunities, and communication workshops teaching effective skills. With 56.3% of Indonesian students experiencing moderate-to-severe anxiety, systematic screening programs should identify students needing support (Nuraida, 2025). Expanding culturally-adapted interventions, such as internet-based CBT incorporating Indonesian cultural values (gotong royong, rukun), could reach more students (Praptomojati et al., 2024; Spanhel et al., 2021). Performance evaluation reform including multiple low-stakes assessments and varied assessment formats might also reduce performance anxiety.

This study's primary strength is its rigorous comparative methodology using equivalent sampling, validated instruments, and appropriate statistical analyses (Gamage et al., 2025; Panchal, 2025). However, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, dependence on self-reported instruments may give rise to potential bias, particularly in cultures where emotional restraint is valued. Second, the use of a cross-sectional approach does not permit conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships about factors influencing anxiety development over time. Third, sampling from urban public universities limits generalizability to rural areas, private institutions, and non-university youth.

Future research priorities include longitudinal research following students across university years to understand anxiety trajectories (Shepard & Rose, 2025), intervention trials testing culturally-adapted treatments addressing competitive anxiety (South Korea) and performance anxiety (Indonesia), multi-method assessment incorporating behavioral and physiological measures alongside self-report (Schaechter et al., 2025), and expanded geographic coverage including rural universities and diverse regions.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive cross-national study demonstrates that social anxiety represents a significant mental health challenge for university students in both Indonesia and South Korea, with notably higher prevalence and severity in the latter. South Korean students exhibited 22% higher anxiety scores, manifesting primarily through competitive academic comparison, while Indonesian students experienced anxiety more through performance-based evaluation situations. Gender differences proved more pronounced in South Korea, where female students face particularly high

anxiety, likely reflecting intersecting pressures of academic competition and persistent gender expectations.

These results highlight a pressing necessity for focused intervention strategies and policy reforms tailored to specific cultural contexts. South Korea requires systemic educational reform addressing competitive structures and substantial expansion of mental health services, while Indonesia needs performance anxiety interventions and systematic screening programs. Beyond practical implications, this research contributes to theoretical understanding of how culture shapes mental health, demonstrating that while social anxiety's core feature transcends cultures, its specific manifestation, triggers, and severity vary substantially based on educational systems, societal values, and cultural norms. Future research through longitudinal designs and intervention trials will further advance understanding and support for students navigating the complex interplay of academic demands and mental health challenges in contemporary Asian higher education.

Several methodological limitations warrant careful consideration when making sense of these results. First, employing self-administered assessments creates the potential for biased responses, particularly within cultural contexts where emotional restraint is normatively valued. Second, the cross-sectional research design precludes causal inference regarding the developmental trajectories of social anxiety. Third, and critically, both national samples were drawn from single public universities located in urban centers—Yogyakarta State University and Daegu University and therefore cannot be treated as nationally representative samples. Generalization of findings to rural universities, private institutions, vocational colleges, or non-student youth populations requires substantial caution and empirical validation.

Future cross-cultural investigations should prioritize multi-site sampling strategies incorporating a variety of institutional categories and locations to strengthen generalizability. Methodologically, the integration of longitudinal designs would permit examination of anxiety trajectories across academic years, while the inclusion of behavioral and physiological indicators alongside self-report measures would strengthen construct validity. Furthermore, experimental or quasi-experimental designs testing culturally-adapted intervention programs specifically addressing competitive academic evaluation in South Korea and performance-based assessment anxiety in Indonesia would advance the translational utility of this line of inquiry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers wish to convey their heartfelt appreciation to all participating universities in Indonesia (Yogyakarta State University) and South Korea (Daegu University) for their assistance in enabling the completion of this study. We are deeply

appreciative to all student participants who voluntarily shared their experiences for this study.

DECLARATION

Author Contributions	The authors affirm that this study was undertaken purely for academic purposes and was conducted independently without any financial support or personal interests that could influence the results. No financial or non-financial conflicts of interest are associated with this research.
Funding Statement	This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was conducted independently by the authors as part of academic research activities.
Conflict of Interest	The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have agreed to the submission and publication of this manuscript and confirm that the work is original and has not been published elsewhere.
Additional Information	The study followed ethical standards, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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