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Perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety Among Young Adults Based on Gender

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ABSTRACT :

The present study examined the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults and investigated gender differences in these variables. A quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research design was adopted. The sample consisted of 309 young adults aged 18–25 years from educational institutions in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, selected through non-probability convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ) and the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS). Pearson's product-moment correlation and independent samples *t*-test were used for data analysis. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety, indicating that higher levels of perseverative thinking were associated with higher levels of social anxiety. Gender differences were not significant for perseverative thinking. However, a significant gender difference was observed in social anxiety, with female participants has higher levels of social anxiety than male participants. The findings highlight the relevance of perseverative thinking in understanding social anxiety among young adults and suggest the importance of considering gender-related factors in the assessment and prevention of social anxiety.

Keywords: Perseverative thinking, social anxiety, gender differences, young adults, repetitive negative thinking

Introduction

Young adulthood is an important developmental period characterised by significant academic, occupational, interpersonal, and social transitions. During this stage, individuals encounter new responsibilities and social expectations while developing greater independence and establishing interpersonal relationships. These transitions may also increase vulnerability to psychological difficulties, particularly those involving negative patterns of thinking and concerns about social evaluation. Understanding cognitive and emotional factors associated with psychological difficulties during young adulthood is therefore important for promoting mental health and well-being.

Perseverative thinking refers to repetitive and persistent negative thinking that is difficult to disengage from and may continue despite its limited usefulness. It can involve recurrent thoughts about past experiences, current concerns, or anticipated future events. Ehrling et al. (2011) conceptualised repetitive negative thinking as a transdiagnostic process characterised by repetitiveness, intrusiveness, difficulty disengaging, perceived unproductiveness, and the tendency to occupy mental capacity. Their development of the Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ) provided a content-independent measure for examining this pattern of thinking across different psychological problems.

Perseverative thinking is particularly relevant to anxiety related difficulties because persistent negative thoughts may maintain emotional distress and increase attention toward perceived threats. In the context of social situations, repetitive negative thinking may involve continued concern about one's behaviour, appearance, performance, or the possibility of being negatively evaluated by others. Research on social anxiety has particularly highlighted post event processing, a form of perseverative negative and self-focused thinking following social-evaluative experiences, as an important cognitive process associated with social anxiety.

Social anxiety refers to fear in social situations in which individuals anticipate scrutiny, negative evaluation, embarrassment, or rejection. Individuals experiencing higher social anxiety may become excessively concerned about how they are perceived by others and may engage in heightened self-focused attention and negative evaluation of their social performance (APA,2022). Cognitive models of social anxiety have identified repetitive processing of social experiences as an important factor in maintaining social fears. Thus, perseverative thinking and social anxiety may be closely interconnected, as persistent negative thinking can reinforce concerns about social evaluation, while socially threatening experiences may in turn trigger further repetitive thinking.

The relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety is particularly relevant during young adulthood, when interpersonal relationships, peer acceptance, academic experiences, and emerging occupational roles become increasingly important. Persistent concerns regarding social

evaluation during this developmental period may interfere with social functioning and psychological well-being.

Gender may also be relevant when examining social anxiety among young adults. Differences in social expectations, interpersonal experiences, emotional expression, and concerns regarding evaluation may contribute to variations in social anxiety between males and females. Examining gender differences can provide a better understanding of how social anxiety is experienced among young adults. However, gender should not be assumed to explain psychological differences on its own, as individual and social factors may also contribute to variations in perseverative thinking and social anxiety.

The present study examines the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults and explores gender differences in these psychological experiences. Understanding this association may contribute to a better understanding of cognitive processes associated with social anxiety and may have implications for early identification and psychological interventions targeting repetitive negative thinking.

Review of literature

Mattioni et al. (2025) proposed an integrative model of perseverative thinking and reported that recurrent stress-related thoughts play a central role in maintaining emotional disorders. Their findings suggested that repetitive negative thinking contributes to heightened threat perception and anxiety responses during social situations, reinforcing socially anxious cognitions and behavioural avoidance.

Hallion et al. (2022) examined the underlying dimensions of perseverative thought across emotional disorders. The study identified uncontrollability, self-focus, and intolerance of uncertainty as key characteristics associated with anxiety symptoms, including social anxiety. The findings suggested that these dimensions explain why repetitive negative thinking contributes to persistent social fears and avoidance behaviours.

Spinhoven et al. (2018) examined repetitive negative thinking as a mediator between stressful life events and emotional distress. Their findings demonstrated that repetitive negative thinking significantly mediated the relationship between stress and anxiety symptoms, indicating that maladaptive cognitive processes play an important role in the development and maintenance of anxiety-related disorders.

Blackie and Kocovski (2017) investigated post-event processing as a cognitive maintenance mechanism in social anxiety. The study reported that prolonged repetitive review of social interactions increased anticipatory fear, avoidance behaviours, and negative self-evaluation, thereby contributing to the persistence of social anxiety.

McEvoy et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between worry, rumination, and anxiety disorders. The findings demonstrated that repetitive negative thinking was 34 significantly associated with greater severity of social anxiety symptoms, supporting the view that perseverative thinking represents a common cognitive mechanism underlying emotional disorders.

Brozovich and Heimberg (2008) examined post-event processing among individuals with elevated social anxiety and found that repeated negative evaluation of social performance strengthened maladaptive beliefs and increased anticipatory anxiety during subsequent social situations. The study highlighted post-event rumination as an important maintaining factor in social anxiety.

Ehring and Watkins (2008) reviewed evidence on repetitive negative thinking as a transdiagnostic process underlying emotional disorders. Their findings indicated that individuals who frequently engaged in perseverative thinking experienced greater anxiety, emotional distress, and impaired social functioning. The review highlighted perseverative thinking as an important cognitive vulnerability associated with social anxiety.

Harvey et al. (2004) identified perseverative thinking as a transdiagnostic cognitive process underlying several emotional disorders. Their review demonstrated that repetitive negative thinking, particularly worry and rumination, was strongly associated with anxiety disorders, including social anxiety disorder. The authors concluded that targeting perseverative thinking may improve treatment outcomes across multiple psychological conditions.

Overall, the reviewed literature consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety. Repetitive negative thinking, particularly worry and rumination, has been identified as an important cognitive mechanism underlying fear of negative evaluation, anticipatory anxiety, post-event processing, and avoidance behaviours. These findings provide strong empirical support for examining the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults in the present study.

Need and Significance of the study

Young adulthood is a significant developmental period characterized by academic, occupational, interpersonal, and social transitions that may increase vulnerability to psychological difficulties. Perseverative thinking refers to repetitive, persistent, and difficult-to-control negative thinking that may contribute to the maintenance of emotional distress. Social anxiety, characterized by fear or apprehension in social and evaluative situations, can similarly interfere with interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being. Examining the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety is important for understanding cognitive processes that may contribute to social anxiety among young adults. The present study addresses this relationship by examining perseverative thinking in relation to social anxiety using standardized measures.

Gender is also an important consideration in understanding social anxiety and perseverative thinking, as previous research has reported gender-related variations in anxiety and repetitive negative thinking. The present study examines gender differences in both perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults. Understanding these associations and differences may contribute to early identification of cognitive and emotional difficulties and assist psychologists, counsellors, educators, and mental health professionals in developing appropriate preventive and supportive interventions for young adults. The findings may also provide a basis for further research examining perseverative thinking as a potential cognitive factor associated with social anxiety.

Statement of the Problem

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults based on gender differences.

Variables of the study

The present study employs a correlational research design to examine the relationship between Perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety among young adults in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Perseverative Thinking - Perseverative thinking refers to repetitive and persistent negative thinking that is difficult to disengage

Social Anxiety - Social anxiety refers to fear in social situations in which individuals anticipate scrutiny, negative evaluation, embarrassment, or rejection.

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults.
- To examine gender differences in perseverative thinking and Social Anxiety among young adults.

Hypotheses

- *H1*: There will be a significant relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults.
- *H2*: There will be a significant difference in Perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety between male and female young adults.

Research Methodology

This section presents the systematic framework adopted for conducting the present study. It describes the research design, population, sample selection, inclusion and exclusion criteria, tools used for data collection, data collection procedure, and statistical techniques employed to examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults. The study follows a quantitative approach using a correlational research design to examine the association between the selected psychological variables and gender differences in perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults.

Research Design

The present study follows a descriptive quantitative, non-experimental, correlational research design. The design was used to examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults and to examine gender differences. No manipulation of the study variables was involved.

Population and Sample

The study included 309 young adults aged 18–25 years. Participants were selected using a non-probability convenience sampling technique from educational institutions in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Participants were required to be between 18 and 25 years of age, enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programmes, willing to participate voluntarily, and able to complete all study questionnaires. From the 309 participants, 102 were male and 207 were female.

Inclusion Criteria

The participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Young adults aged between 18 and 25 years.

- Educational Status: Individuals enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate educational programmes.
- Participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and provided informed consent.
- Participants who completed all the study questionnaires.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded from the study based on the following criteria:

- Individuals below 18 years or above 25 years of age.
- Participants who were not enrolled in any educational institution at the time of data collection.
- Participants who did not provide informed consent for participation.
- Questionnaires with incomplete, inconsistent, or missing responses, which could affect the accuracy of the data analysis.

Tools

The following tools were used for collecting data from the participants:

1. Personal Data Sheet
2. Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ)
3. Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS)

Personal Data Sheet

A personal data sheet developed by the investigator was used to collect socio-demographic information of the participants. The questionnaire gathered basic personal details including marital status, socioeconomic status, number of children, occupational details, and other relevant demographic characteristics. The demographic information was collected to describe the characteristics of the sample and provide a better understanding of the participants included in the study.

Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ)

Perseverative thinking was assessed using the Perseverative Thinking Questionnaire (PTQ) developed by Ehrling et al. (2011). The PTQ is a content-independent measure designed to assess repetitive negative thinking. It was used in the present study to obtain an overall measure of perseverative thinking.

Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS)

Social anxiety was assessed using the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS) developed by Mattick and Clarke (1998). The scale was used to assess anxiety experienced in social interaction situations.

Data Collection Procedure

Permission was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and informed consent was obtained. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used only for research purposes. The questionnaires were administered in paper and pencil and online formats, and participants completed the measures under the supervision of the researcher. The completed responses were scored according to the prescribed scoring procedures and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Statistical Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product moment correlation, and an independent-samples *t* test. Pearson's product moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety. Independent samples *t* tests were conducted to examine gender differences in perseverative thinking and social anxiety.

Pearson product-moment Correlation

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is used to examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety.

Independent Sample *t*-test

The independent samples t-test is used to examine the gender differences in perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults.

Result and Discussion

Result Analysis

Relationship between Perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety

Table 1

Pearson correlation between Perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety

Variables	Perseverative Thinking	Social Anxiety
Perseverative Thinking	-	-
Social Anxiety	.298**	-

Note: $P < .01$

A Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults. The results indicated a significant positive correlation between perseverative thinking and social anxiety, $r = .298$, $p < .001$. This indicates that higher levels of perseverative thinking were associated with higher levels of social anxiety among young adults. Therefore, the first hypothesis stating that there would be a significant relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults was supported.

Gender Differences in Perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety Among Young Adults

Table 2

Independent sample t- test in perseverative Thinking and Social Anxiety based on Gender

Variables	Male (S.D)	Female (S.D)	t	p
Perseverative Thinking	10.96	12.09	-1.82	.070
Social Anxiety	11.99	12.51	-3.26	.001**

Note: $p < 0.1$

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender differences in perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults. The results showed that the difference in perseverative thinking between male and female participants was not statistically significant, t value is -1.82 , $p = .070$. Female participants, $SD = 12.09$ reported slightly higher levels of perseverative thinking than male participants $SD = 10.96$. However, the difference did not reach statistical significance.

A statistically significant gender difference was found in social anxiety, t value is -3.26 , p value is $.001$. Female participants $SD = 12.51$, reported significantly higher levels of social anxiety than male participants $SD = 11.99$. Thus, there was a significant mean difference among gender differences in social anxiety.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety indicating that young adults who reported higher levels of perseverative thinking also tended to report higher levels of social anxiety. This finding suggests that persistent and repetitive negative thinking may be associated with greater concerns and apprehension in social situations. Perseverative thinking may contribute to the maintenance of social anxiety by repeatedly focusing attention on negative thoughts, potential threats, and concerns related to social experiences. In the context of social anxiety, repetitive thinking may also involve continued concern about social situations and negative evaluation, which can intensify anxious responses. The finding is consistent with the conceptualization of perseverative thinking as a transdiagnostic cognitive process that may be relevant across different forms of emotional distress. Thus, the significant association observed in the present study highlights the importance of considering repetitive negative thinking when understanding social anxiety among young adults.

The study also examined gender differences in perseverative thinking and social anxiety. The findings showed that there was no significant gender difference in perseverative thinking, although female participants reported slightly higher mean scores than male participants. This suggests that, within the present sample, perseverative thinking may not differ substantially according to gender. In contrast, a significant gender difference was observed in social anxiety, with female participants reporting higher levels of social anxiety than male participants, t value is -3.26 , $p = .001$. This finding indicates that female young adults in the present sample experienced greater social anxiety than their male counterparts. The difference may reflect variations in social expectations, concerns regarding interpersonal evaluation, and experiences within social contexts. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that although perseverative thinking and social anxiety are positively associated, their patterns across gender are not identical. The absence of a significant gender difference in perseverative thinking alongside a significant difference in social anxiety suggests that factors beyond perseverative thinking may contribute to gender differences in social anxiety. Overall, the findings support the relevance of examining both cognitive processes and demographic factors when understanding social anxiety among young adults.

Implication of the study

The findings of the present study have implications for psychological assessment, prevention, and intervention among young adults. The significant positive relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety suggests that repetitive negative thinking may be an important cognitive factor to consider when assessing social anxiety. Mental health professionals, psychologists, and counsellors may benefit from assessing persistent repetitive thinking patterns alongside social anxiety symptoms. Interventions that focus on identifying and managing unhelpful repetitive thinking may also be considered as part of preventive and supportive approaches for young adults experiencing social anxiety.

The significant gender difference observed in social anxiety, with female participants reporting higher levels than male participants, further highlights the importance of considering gender-related factors when understanding social anxiety among young adults. Educational institutions and mental health professionals may use these findings to strengthen awareness, early identification, and supportive mental health programmes targeting social anxiety. However, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the present sample and correlational research design and should not be taken as evidence of a causal relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety.

Future Research Directions

Future research could examine the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety using larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalisability of findings. Studies may also include participants from different geographical regions, educational backgrounds, and age groups to determine whether the observed patterns remain consistent across populations. Longitudinal research could further examine how perseverative thinking and social anxiety develop and change over time and clarify the temporal relationship between these variables. Future studies may also investigate other psychological factors that could influence this relationship, such as emotion regulation, rumination, self-esteem, intolerance of uncertainty, or coping strategies.

Further research could examine gender differences using more balanced and diverse samples and explore the factors that may contribute to higher levels of social anxiety among female young adults. Intervention-based studies could also investigate whether reducing perseverative thinking leads to improvements in social anxiety. Such research would provide stronger evidence regarding the potential role of perseverative thinking as a target for psychological interventions and contribute to the development of more focused preventive and therapeutic approaches for young adults.

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety among young adults, along with gender differences in these variables. The findings demonstrated a significant positive relationship between perseverative thinking and social anxiety, suggesting that higher levels of perseverative thinking were associated with greater social anxiety. A significant gender difference was also observed in social anxiety, with female participants reporting higher levels than male participants, whereas no significant gender difference was found in perseverative thinking. These findings highlight the relevance of repetitive negative thinking in understanding social anxiety among young adults and indicate the importance of considering gender when examining social anxiety. Overall, the study contributes to a better understanding of the cognitive and demographic factors associated with social anxiety and may inform future research and preventive psychological interventions for young adults.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for psychological research. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Anonymity was maintained by ensuring that no identifying information was recorded on the questionnaires. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and the data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.

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