



The Impact of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Social Loneliness and Academic Engagement among College Students

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Abstract: The present study examined the impact of fear of negative evaluation on social loneliness and academic engagement among college students. Using a quantitative primary research design, data were collected from 200 undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 18–25 years through standardised measures: the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, UCLA Loneliness Scale–8, and Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–Student Version. Pearson’s correlation and Regression analyses were used for data analysis. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social loneliness, and a significant negative relationship between fear of negative evaluation and academic engagement. Social loneliness was also negatively associated with academic engagement. Further, fear of negative evaluation significantly predicted both social loneliness and academic engagement. The study highlights the role of evaluative fears in influencing college students’ social well-being and academic involvement.

Keywords: *Fear, Negative Evaluation, Social Loneliness, Academic Engagement, College Students*

1. Introduction

The transition to college represents a significant developmental stage marked by increased academic demands, changing social roles, and frequent exposure to evaluative situations. Students are expected to manage academic responsibilities, establish new

relationships, and adapt to competitive environments. While this phase offers opportunities for growth and independence, it also introduces psychological challenges that can affect both social well-being and academic functioning.

One of the key concerns during this period is Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). FNE refers to the apprehension and distress associated with being judged unfavourably by others. It is a central component of social anxiety and is particularly relevant in academic settings where students are evaluated through exams, presentations, and classroom participation. Students with high FNE often engage in excessive self-monitoring, worry about making mistakes, and avoid situations where they may be judged.

The college environment can intensify these fears due to constant social comparison and performance pressure. As a result, students with high FNE may hesitate to participate in discussions, avoid asking questions, and withdraw from group activities. Such avoidance behaviours can reduce academic engagement and limit learning opportunities, ultimately affecting performance and motivation.

FNE also impacts social experiences. Students may avoid interactions, struggle with self-disclosure, and find it difficult to form close relationships, leading to social loneliness. Social loneliness refers to the perceived lack of meaningful and satisfying relationships, rather than simply being alone. It is associated with increased stress, anxiety, depression, and reduced academic motivation.

Academic engagement is a positive and fulfilling state characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption in learning activities. It plays a crucial role in academic success and well-being. However, psychological barriers such as FNE and social loneliness can hinder students' ability to fully engage in their academic work.

Although these variables have been studied separately, limited research has examined their interrelationship. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the impact of fear of negative evaluation on social loneliness and academic engagement among college students, contributing to a better understanding of their academic and social experiences.

2. Review of Literature

Hyseni et al. (2020) examined psychological predictors of academic engagement among university students. The study was conducted on a sample of 410 college students using a quantitative correlational design. Measures of fear of evaluation, loneliness, and academic engagement were administered. Results revealed that fear of evaluation and loneliness were significant negative predictors of academic engagement. Students

experiencing higher psychological distress showed lower involvement in academic activities. The study underscored the need for integrated psychological support interventions in higher education.

Moeller et al. (2020) investigated the indirect effects of social anxiety on academic engagement among college students. The study involved 274 undergraduate students and used a structural equation modeling approach. Measures of social anxiety, loneliness, and academic engagement were administered. Results showed that social anxiety negatively affected academic engagement indirectly through increased loneliness. Students with higher anxiety felt more socially isolated, which reduced their engagement in academic activities. The study highlighted loneliness as a mediating factor between social anxiety and engagement.

Diehl et al. (2018) investigated loneliness and its psychological correlates among university students. The study was conducted on a large sample of 689 college students using a cross-sectional survey design. Measures of loneliness, stress, and psychological well-being were administered. Results indicated that loneliness was significantly associated with higher stress levels and lower psychological well-being. Lonely students reported difficulties adjusting to academic and social demands. The study identified loneliness as a major mental health concern within higher education settings.

McIntyre et al. (2018) investigated loneliness and academic adjustment among university students. The sample consisted of 356 undergraduate students, and a correlational research design was used. Participants completed measures assessing social loneliness, emotional well-being, and academic adjustment. Results showed that students experiencing higher levels of loneliness reported poorer academic adjustment and lower satisfaction with university life. Loneliness was also associated with emotional distress. The study concluded that social loneliness significantly undermines students' ability to adapt academically.

Nowland et al. (2018) examined the relationship between loneliness and cognitive functioning. The study was conducted on a sample of 196 young adults using a cross-sectional research design. Participants completed measures of loneliness and cognitive performance tasks. Results showed that higher loneliness was associated with reduced concentration and poorer cognitive functioning. These cognitive difficulties were found to negatively affect task engagement. The study suggested that loneliness can impair academic functioning by reducing attentional resources.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aim

The aim of the study is to examine the impact of Fear of Negative Evaluation on Social Loneliness and Academic Engagement among college students.

3.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To examine the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social loneliness among college students.
2. To examine the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and academic engagement among college students.
3. To examine the relationship between social loneliness and academic engagement among college students.
4. To determine whether fear of negative evaluation significantly predicts social loneliness and academic engagement among college students.

3.3 Hypothesis of the Study

The following hypothesis were formulated for the present study:

1. There will be a significant positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social loneliness among college students.
2. There will be a significant negative relationship between fear of negative evaluation and academic engagement among college students.
3. There will be a significant negative relationship between social loneliness and academic engagement among college students.
4. Fear of negative evaluation will significantly predict social loneliness and academic engagement among college students.

3.4 Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative research design. This design was considered appropriate as the study aimed to examine the relationships among fear of negative evaluation, social loneliness, and academic engagement, and to determine the predictive role of fear of negative evaluation on the dependent variables.

3.5 Variables of the Study

The variables included in the study were as follows:

Independent variable: Fear of Negative Evaluation

Dependent Variables: Social Loneliness, Academic Engagement

Controlled variables: Age and Gender

3.6 Sample

The sample for the present study consisted of 200 college students drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Participants were within the age range of 18 to 25 years, representing the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. A convenience sampling technique was used to select participants, as it allowed for easy accessibility and feasibility within the available time and resources.

3.7 Inclusion Criteria

The following criteria were used for participant selection:

1. Students currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate courses
2. Age between 18 and 25 years
3. Willingness to participate voluntarily in the study

3.8 Exclusion Criteria

Participants meeting the following conditions were excluded from the study:

1. Students with self-reported severe psychological or psychiatric conditions
2. Incomplete, inconsistent, or invalid questionnaire responses

3.9 Tools for Data Collection

The following standardised psychological instruments were used for data collection:

Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE-S): An 8-item scale measuring fear of being judged negatively, including apprehension and distress. Uses a Likert scale and shows high reliability ($\alpha = 0.85-0.90$) with good validity in students.

UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS-8): An 8-item scale assessing feelings of loneliness and social isolation. It is brief, reliable ($\alpha = 0.84-0.90$), and valid for measuring loneliness in young adults.

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale – Student Version (UWES-S-9): A 9-item scale measuring academic engagement through vigour, dedication, and absorption. It has high reliability ($\alpha = 0.85-0.92$) and strong validity in student populations.

3.10 Procedure

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The questionnaires were administered either online or offline, depending on accessibility. Participants were instructed to respond honestly and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

3.11 Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analysed using appropriate statistical techniques. The following analyses were employed:

1. Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) to summarise the data
2. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation to examine the relationships among fear of negative evaluation, social loneliness, and academic engagement
3. Regression analysis to determine whether fear of negative evaluation significantly predicts social loneliness and academic engagement

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any stage of the research. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines prescribed by the American Psychological Association (APA).

4. Result

This section presents the statistical analysis and interpretation of the data collected for the present study. The data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to test the stated hypothesis. The results are presented in a systematic manner, followed by appropriate interpretation.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to understand the general characteristics of the variables included in the study, namely Fear of Negative Evaluation, Social Loneliness, and Academic Engagement.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Study Variables

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fear of Negative Evaluation	200	9	39	24.05	4.849
Social Loneliness	200	10	32	20.96	4.075
Academic Engagement	200	20	49	33.88	5.581
Valid N	200				

The mean score of Fear of Negative Evaluation indicates a moderate level of evaluative fear among college students. Social Loneliness scores also reflect a moderate degree of perceived social isolation. Academic Engagement shows a relatively higher mean score, suggesting that despite psychological concerns, students remain moderately engaged in

academic activities. The standard deviation values indicate adequate variability in responses, making the data suitable for further analysis.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationships among Fear of Negative Evaluation, Social Loneliness, and Academic Engagement.

Table 2. *Correlation Matrix among Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Fear of Negative Evaluation	—	.41**	-.30**
2. Social Loneliness		—	-.30**
3. Academic Engagement			—

** $p < 0.01$

The results indicate a significant positive correlation between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Social Loneliness, suggesting that students who fear being judged negatively tend to experience higher levels of loneliness. Fear of Negative Evaluation was found to be significantly negatively correlated with Academic Engagement, indicating that higher evaluative fears are associated with lower academic involvement. Social Loneliness also showed a significant negative correlation with Academic Engagement, suggesting that socially isolated students are less engaged in their academic activities.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was conducted to examine whether Fear of Negative Evaluation significantly predicts Social Loneliness and Academic Engagement.

Prediction of Social Loneliness

Table 4.3 *Regression Analysis Predicting Social Loneliness*

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	12.596	1.334	9.443	.000
	Fear of Negative Evaluation	.348	.054	.414	.000

Dependent Variable: Social Loneliness

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.414 ^a	.171	.167	3.720

Predictors: (Constant), Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of Negative Evaluation significantly predicted Social Loneliness, accounting for 16.7% of the variance. The positive beta value indicates that as fear of negative evaluation increases, social loneliness also increases. This result suggests that evaluative fears play a substantial role in students' perceptions of social isolation.

Prediction of Academic Engagement

Table 4.4 *Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Engagement*

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	42.112	1.915		21.985	.000
	Fear of Negative Evaluation	-.343	.078	-.298	-4.386	.000

Dependent Variable: Academic Engagement

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.298 ^a	.089	.084	5.341

Predictors: (Constant), Fear of Negative Evaluation

Fear of Negative Evaluation was found to be a significant negative predictor of Academic Engagement, explaining 8.4% of the variance. The negative beta value indicates that students with higher fear of being judged negatively tend to show lower engagement in academic activities. This finding suggests that evaluative anxiety interferes with students' academic involvement.

5. Discussion

The present study was undertaken to examine the impact of fear of negative evaluation on social loneliness and academic engagement among college students. The results obtained from descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis provide meaningful insights into the psychological processes influencing students' social and academic experiences during the college years.

The findings showed a significant positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and social loneliness. This suggests that students who fear being judged negatively are more likely to avoid social interactions, which limits relationship-building and increases feelings of isolation. Regression results further confirmed that fear of negative evaluation is a strong predictor of social loneliness.

A significant negative relationship was also found between fear of negative evaluation and academic engagement. Students with higher evaluative fears tend to participate less in academic activities such as discussions and presentations, leading to lower levels of vigour, dedication, and absorption. Regression analysis supported that fear of negative evaluation negatively predicts academic engagement. Additionally, social loneliness was negatively related to academic engagement. Students who feel socially disconnected often lack motivation and a sense of belonging, which reduces their involvement in academic work. Overall, the findings of the present study demonstrate that fear of negative evaluation not only affects students' social well-being but also has important implications for their academic engagement. The combined results of correlation and regression analyses indicate that fear of negative evaluation is a significant psychological factor influencing both social loneliness and academic engagement among college students. These findings support the need to address evaluative fears in order to promote healthier social adjustment and improved academic functioning.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the impact of fear of negative evaluation on social loneliness and academic engagement among college students. The findings clearly indicate that fear of negative evaluation plays a significant role in shaping students' social and academic experiences during the college years.

The study emphasises that fear of negative evaluation is not merely a social concern but also an important academic issue. Addressing evaluative fears among college students may help reduce feelings of loneliness and enhance academic engagement. By fostering supportive social and academic environments and by providing psychological interventions aimed at reducing fear of negative evaluation, institutions can promote better mental health, stronger social connections, and improved academic outcomes among students.

The present research contributes to the existing body of literature by integrating fear of negative evaluation, social loneliness, and academic engagement within a single framework. It highlights the importance of considering psychological factors when addressing student well-being and academic success in higher education.

6.1 Implications of the Study

Educational Implications

Colleges should create a supportive and non-threatening environment to reduce fear of negative evaluation. Practices like open discussions, constructive feedback, and inclusive teaching can improve students' academic engagement.

Psychological Implications

Mental health professionals should assess fear of negative evaluation during student screenings. Techniques such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, social skills training, and confidence-building can help reduce anxiety and loneliness.

Practical Implications

Activities like peer mentoring, group work, and student support programs can reduce loneliness and increase a sense of belonging, improving overall well-being.

Research Implications

The study offers a base for future research on student engagement. The use of brief and reliable tools allows easy replication across different student groups.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling limits generalisability, as the sample may not represent all college students.

Research Design

The cross-sectional design prevents establishing cause-and-effect relationships and only shows associations at one point in time.

Self-Report Measures

Data may be affected by biases like social desirability or inaccurate self-reporting.

Sample Size

A small sample size may reduce the strength and generalisability of findings.

Limited Variables

The study focused on only three variables, excluding other important factors like self-esteem, stress, and social support.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Larger and Diverse Samples

Future studies should include more participants from varied backgrounds for better generalisation.

Longitudinal Design

Research over time can help understand changes and establish causal relationships.

Additional Variables

Including factors like self-esteem, stress, and coping strategies can give a more complete picture.

Intervention-Based Studies

Future research can test the effectiveness of psychological interventions and counselling programs.

Qualitative or Mixed Methods

Using interviews or mixed approaches can provide deeper insights into students' experiences

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