

Gender-Based Analysis of Public Speaking Anxiety among University Students

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<https://doi.org/10.24191/gading.v28i1.561>

Received: 27 September 2024

Accepted: 08 January 2025

Date Published Online: 30 April 2025

Abstract: Glossophobia, commonly recognised as the fear of public speaking, is said to surpass even the fear of death for some individuals. Those with acute glossophobia may avoid public speaking opportunities to escape the accompanying surge of adrenaline. Gender differences further complicate the issue, as societal expectations and perceptions can disproportionately impact male and female students' willingness to participate in public speaking. Using MacIntyre's Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Model as a framework, this study aims to analyze gender-based differences in students' perceptions of public speaking and to identify the specific challenges they face while delivering speeches. Thirty undergraduate students, comprising 15 males and 15 females from diploma and bachelor's degree programs who participated in a public speaking competition at a public university, were included in the study. Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents, and data were collected through a questionnaire adopted from recent studies on public speaking. While most students display a positive outlook and interest in public speaking, gender-specific challenges are evident. Female students report lower situational confidence and readiness to communicate, as reflected by only 40% (6 out of 15) strongly agreeing on the benefits of preparation and practice, compared to 46.7% (7 out of 15) of males, despite exhibiting higher motivation, with 46.7% (7 out of 15) strongly agreeing on their motivation and interest in public speaking, compared to 40% (6 out of 15) of males. The findings highlight the need for tailored, gender-sensitive program improvements that consider the factors influencing students' willingness to communicate. Strategies such as gender-specific confidence-building workshops, personalised coaching, and interventions targeting societal perceptions and cultural expectations are recommended. These insights provide a foundation for addressing gender disparities in public speaking anxiety future programmes.

Keywords: Gender study, speech anxiety, public speaking, perception, fear, resolutions

Introduction

Gender is defined as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities of individuals, typically categorised as male or female (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender differences play a significant role in the challenges associated with public speaking, as societal expectations and cultural norms often impose distinct pressures on male and female speakers. Female students, for instance, may face heightened scrutiny regarding their confidence, tone, and demeanour, while male students often feel compelled to project dominance and authority in public

discourse. These gendered expectations can intensify speech anxiety, manifesting in physiological responses such as nervousness, blushing, irregular breathing, rapid heartbeat, and sweating (Burgess, 2013). Some students, particularly females, associate this dread with deficiencies in English language proficiency, fearing that linguistic missteps during presentations could lead to judgment or embarrassment. These anxieties can have detrimental effects, as Farhan (2017) noted, with students experiencing fear and anxiety, often accompanied by nausea and excessive sweating, particularly when required to address an audience.

The acquisition of a second language, particularly English, is indispensable in contemporary times due to its global significance. English is a pivotal medium in international commerce, diplomacy, scientific discourse, and various professions, serving as a common language for both native speakers and those who speak it as an additional language. As Li (2020) stated, "A strong command of English empowers individuals to articulate their thoughts and ideas with clarity and precision, fostering understanding and minimizing misinterpretations." However, gender-specific barriers can exacerbate the challenges of mastering English communication, as societal expectations often impose distinct pressures on male and female students.

In the quest to cultivate articulate English communicators among students, many higher educational institutions have incorporated English Debating and Public Speaking into their extracurricular programs. These initiatives often require students to speak before large audiences (Mostajeran et al., 2020). While such programs have garnered accolades for showcasing students' latent capabilities on a global stage, a significant number of students remain apprehensive about public speaking. Factors such as diminished self-confidence, linguistic challenges, and fear of being judged or humiliated contribute to this aversion (Hamilton, 2020). Gender differences further complicate these issues, as male and female students may perceive and respond to these pressures differently due to societal norms and expectations.

The two most salient factors identified are the lack of robust English oratory skills and diminished self-confidence which are influenced by gender-specific experiences. This research endeavours to elucidate the anxieties students harbour towards public speaking with a focus on how gender shapes their experiences and challenges. It also seeks to identify elements that could bolster students' enthusiasm and affinity for public speaking. The objectives of this research are to evaluate students' gender-specific perceptions and identify their gender-based challenges so that recommendations for improved public speaking programs based on the students' feedback could be provided.

Literature Review

Public speaking, though universally acknowledged as a critical skill for academic and professional success, is profoundly influenced by cultural and gender norms, which vary significantly across regions. By comparing public speaking experiences in Japan, Germany, and ASEAN countries, including Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, distinct patterns emerge, particularly in how cultural and gender expectations shape students' attitudes, confidence, and preparedness. In Japan, cultural values of "wa" (harmony) prioritise group cohesion over individual expression which create a unique challenge for public speaking. Female students often face heightened societal pressure to conform to norms of modesty and deference which make them more apprehensive about drawing attention to themselves during speeches. On the other hand, male students experience a different form of pressure which is to assertively perform while maintaining collective harmony. This duality reflects Japan's balance between cultural modesty and gendered expectations, where both genders face specific but contrasting challenges in public speaking (Nakamura et al., 2020; Sato, 2023).

In Germany, cultural values of precision, thoroughness, and formality dominate public speaking expectations. German students are trained to focus heavily on content accuracy and structure but these high standards interact differently with gender norms. Male students often feel societal pressure to dominate public discourse confidently which reinforces perceptions of male competence. Conversely, female students may feel compelled to over-prepare in order to counteract biases questioning their authority or expertise. While both genders face the pressure to deliver flawless speeches, cultural

stereotypes make the experience more anxiety-inducing for women, highlighting a stark contrast to Japan where harmony, rather than perfection, is prioritised (Poeschl & Doering, 2015; Lucas, 2015).

ASEAN countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, add another layer of complexity with their emphasis on respect, humility, and social harmony values deeply embedded in their cultural fabric. In Thailand, women face societal expectations of modesty and submission which amplify their public speaking anxiety and self-doubt. The education system which focuses on rote learning and hierarchical relationship offers limited opportunities for students particularly women (Kalra & Siribud, 2020; Boonma & Swatevacharkul, 2020). Similarly, in Indonesia, cultural norms such as politeness and indirect communication inhibit assertiveness with female students often fearing that strong opinions may be perceived as unfeminine or disrespectful. In contrast, male students may experience fewer barriers due to cultural allowances for male assertiveness (Agustin et al., 2022).

Malaysia, with its multicultural landscape, presents a blend of these influences. Malay cultural norms emphasise indirect communication and respect for authority that lead to more reserved public speaking approaches especially among women. While allowing slightly more assertiveness, Chinese and Indian cultural norms still reflect gendered expectations, where men are encouraged to be outspoken, and women are expected to remain modest. This contrasts sharply with Germany's focus on precision and Japan's emphasis on harmony. It reveals how Malaysia's collectivist values shape public speaking anxiety for women who prioritise group harmony over individual expression (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Tee et al., 2020).

Despite these regional differences, a common thread emerges which is that gendered expectations significantly influence public speaking experiences across cultures. Female students in Japan, Germany, and ASEAN countries often face societal biases that discourage assertiveness and competence and lead to higher levels of anxiety and self-doubt. Although generally more confident, male students experience different pressures, such as the expectation to dominate public discourse or deliver flawless speeches. The intersection of cultural norms and gender roles amplifies these challenges by framing public speaking anxiety as both a personal struggle and a societal issue.

Interventions to improve public speaking skills must account for these cultural and gender-specific challenges. For instance, while workshops in Germany might focus on reducing perfectionism and bias against female speakers, programs in Japan and Malaysia could address the societal pressures that discourage women from standing out or being assertive. Peer feedback, supportive mentoring, and opportunities to practice in low-stakes environments can foster confidence across genders. By understanding the unique interplay of culture and gender, educators can develop strategies that challenge the societal norms that perpetuate these disparities. This comparative analysis reflects the importance of culturally sensitive and gender-aware approaches in fostering effective communication and empowering students to overcome public speaking barriers.

Methodology

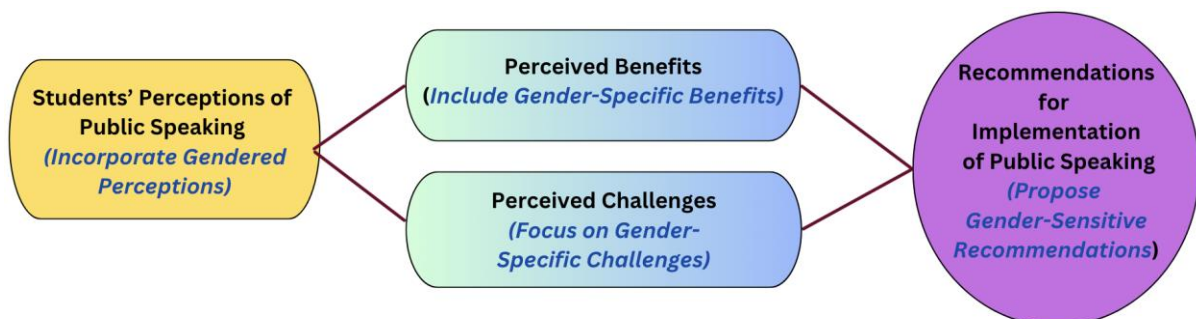


Fig 1: Research Framework

The methodology for this research is grounded in MacIntyre's Willingness to Communicate (WTC) Model, alongside concepts from sociocultural theory and gender studies. WTC Model, developed by MacIntyre et al. (1998), explains how individual, situational, and cultural factors

influence a person's readiness to initiate communication. It integrates two key dimensions which are situational confidence which encompasses preparation and familiarity with the topic, and enduring influences such as personality, cultural norms, and gender roles.

The starting point of the research framework (Figure 1) is "Students' Perceptions of Public Speaking" which serves as the foundation of the study. This component focuses on gathering and analysing students' views, attitudes, and feelings regarding public speaking. Understanding these perceptions is crucial as they can significantly influence a student's ability to engage in public speaking activities. Building on the initial understanding of students' perceptions, the framework then branches into two categories of "Perceived Benefits" and "Perceived Challenges". The "Perceived Benefits" component focuses on the positive outcomes that students believe they can achieve through public speaking. These may include improved verbal communication skills, enhanced self-confidence, and the ability to articulate thoughts and ideas effectively. Conversely, the "Perceived Challenges" component addresses the difficulties and barriers that students encounter when it comes to public speaking. Understanding these challenges is crucial for identifying the obstacles that prevent students from fully participating in public speaking activities and for developing strategies to overcome these barriers. The final component of the framework is the "Recommendations for Implementation of Public Speaking". The goal is to propose practical recommendations that can enhance the effectiveness of public speaking instruction for all students regardless of their gender.

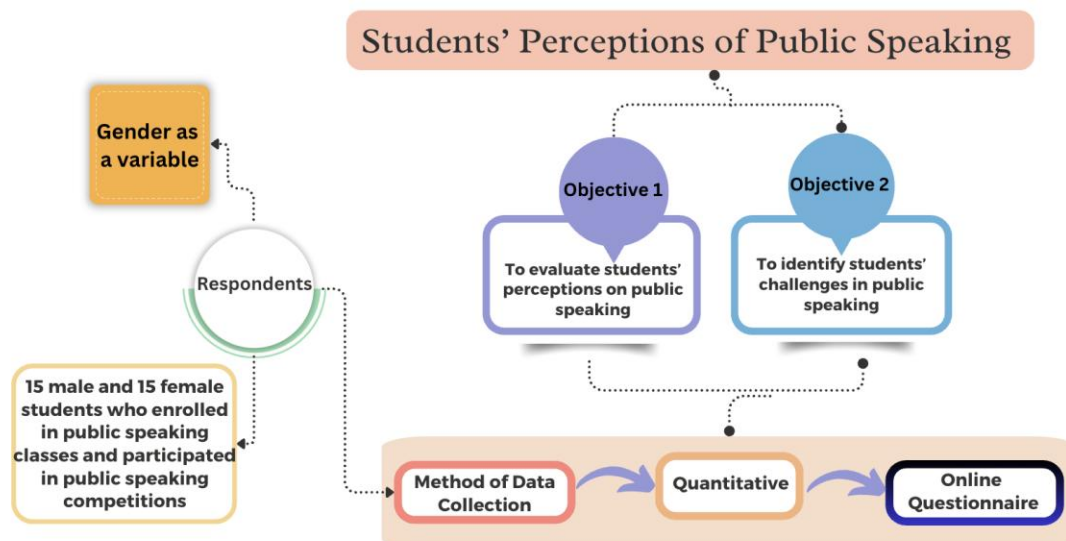


Fig 2: Research Design

The research was driven by two primary objectives to evaluate students' gender-specific perceptions and identify their gender-based challenges so that recommendations for improved public speaking programs based on the students' feedback could be provided. To achieve these objectives, the study opted for an online questionnaire to collect data from the chosen student participants, as this method enables the efficient acquisition of responses. The questions included in the survey were adopted from established studies conducted by Kansil et. al. (2022), Yulianti & Sulistyawati (2021), and Grieve et al. (2021).

The research design (Figure 2) was structured to examine university students' gender-based perceptions of public speaking, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and potential solutions to improve public speaking education. It involved 30 university students (15 male and 15 female) enrolled in public speaking classes and competitions, selected for their relevant experience. The research began with respondent identification, followed by administering an online questionnaire, with data analysed by gender to address the study's objectives of evaluating perceptions and identifying challenges. This approach provides detailed insights into factors influencing public speaking experiences and offers practical recommendations for educational settings.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, the results and discussions are presented based on the graphs shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5.

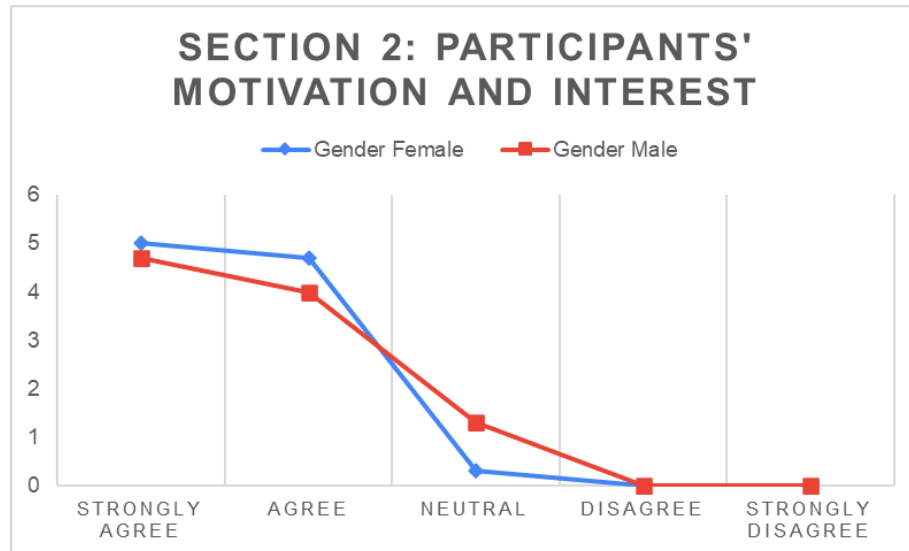


Fig 3: Participants' Motivation and Interest

Figure 3 highlights gender-based differences in students' motivation and interest in public speaking. 33.3% of female participants (5 out of 15) strongly agreed that they were motivated and interested in public speaking, compared to 26.7% of male participants (4 out of 15). This indicates that female students exhibit slightly higher enthusiasm and motivation toward public speaking. Furthermore, 26.7% of both female and male participants (4 out of 15) agreed with the statement, reflecting a similar level of moderate interest in public speaking across genders. However, there is a difference in the proportion of participants who reported being neutral about their motivation and interest. 20% of male participants (3 out of 15) selected "Neutral," compared to 13.3% of female participants (2 out of 15). This suggests that a slightly higher percentage of male students feel uncertain or ambivalent about their motivation and interest in public speaking, compared to their female counterparts.

When it comes to disagreement, only 6.7% of male participants (1 out of 15) disagreed with the statement, while none of the female participants expressed disagreement. Additionally, neither gender selected the "Strongly Disagree" category, indicating that strong negative sentiments toward public speaking are rare among both male and female students. Overall, the graph reflects that female participants tend to demonstrate stronger motivation and interest in public speaking, as indicated by their higher representation in the "Strongly Agree" category and complete absence in the disagreement categories. In contrast, male participants exhibit a slightly more varied perception, with a small portion showing neutrality or disagreement. These trends may be influenced by gender-specific societal and cultural expectations, where females may feel the need to perform well in public speaking to challenge stereotypes, while males may feel ambivalent due to external pressures to excel in public discourse.

Figure 3 contradicts the findings of Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), Taly et al. (2020), and Azman (2016), which reported a decline in interest in public speaking due to gender dynamics and reliance on traditional rote memorization methods. The decline was particularly evident in environments emphasizing outdated, non-interactive teaching practices. In contrast, this study highlights the impact of a more engaging educational approach, incorporating interactive learning, peer collaboration, and digital tools, which significantly boost students' motivation to participate in public speaking, particularly among female participants.

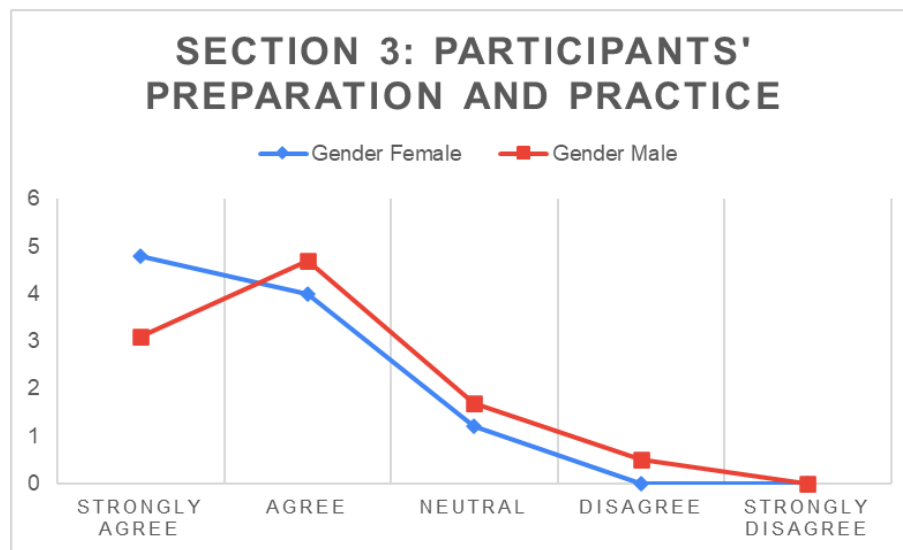


Fig 4: Participants' Preparation and Practice

Figure 4 reveals gender-based differences in how male and female students perceive their preparation and practice for public speaking. 40% of female participants (6 out of 15) strongly agreed that they felt prepared and benefitted from their practice compared to only 20% of male participants (3 out of 15). This suggests that female students may place greater value on their preparation efforts or perceive their practice sessions as more effective in building their confidence. In contrast, 40% of male participants (6 out of 15) agreed with the statement, surpassing the 26.7% of female participants (4 out of 15) who selected this option. This trend indicates that male students may feel moderately prepared and confident but are less inclined to express strong agreement about their readiness compared to their female counterparts. The proportion of participants who selected "Neutral" further underscores gendered differences. 26.7% of male participants (4 out of 15) reported being neutral about their preparation and practice, compared to 20% of female participants (3 out of 15). This suggests that a slightly higher percentage of male students may feel uncertain or ambivalent about their preparation and practice compared to females. The findings contradict Treffers-Daller et al. (2022) and Gass & Selinker (2008) who argued that the cognitive load of mastering public speaking in English could diminish students' enthusiasm or confidence in participating in such competitions. The absence of strong disagreement from both genders suggests that public speaking competitions are generally perceived positively by students, albeit with varying levels of intensity. The higher proportion of strong agreement among female students highlights the critical role these competitions play in enhancing their public speaking skills and confidence.

When it comes to disagreement, 13.3% of male participants (2 out of 15) disagreed with the statement, compared to 6.7% of female participants (1 out of 15). This indicates that a small portion of male students feels less prepared or does not recognize the benefits of their practice, whereas female participants show greater confidence overall. Notably, neither gender selected "Strongly Disagree," reflecting a general absence of strongly negative sentiments regarding preparation and practice. Overall, the graph reveals that female participants tend to express stronger confidence in their preparation and practice, as evidenced by the higher proportion selecting "Strongly Agree." In contrast, male participants are more evenly distributed across "Agree," "Neutral," and "Disagree," indicating a broader range of perceptions about their readiness. These differences may reflect varying levels of emphasis placed on preparation or societal expectations influencing how male and female students evaluate their efforts.

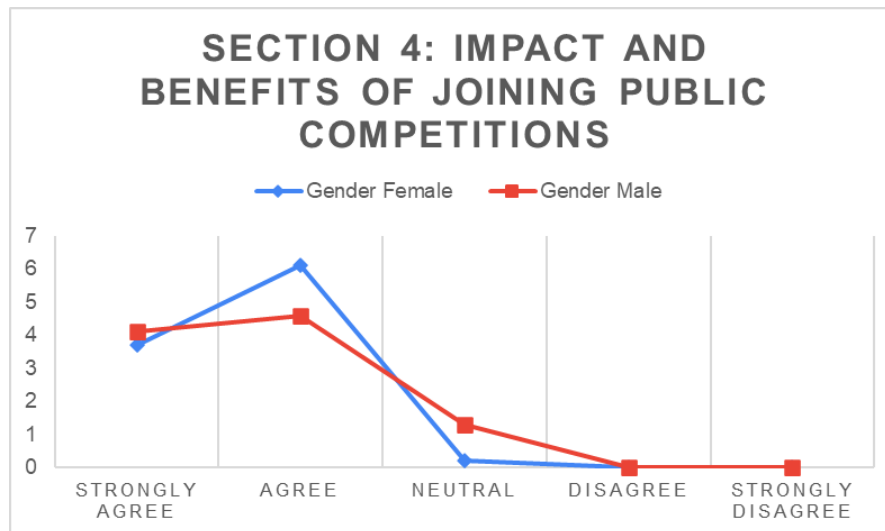


Fig 5: Impact and Benefit of Joining Public Speaking

Figure 5 suggests gender-based differences in how male and female participants perceive the benefits of engaging in public speaking competitions. 40% of female participants (6 out of 15) strongly agreed that public speaking competitions have a positive impact and offer substantial benefits, compared to 26.7% of male participants (4 out of 15). This indicates that female students place slightly higher value on these competitions, possibly viewing them as opportunities to overcome societal challenges or build their confidence in public speaking. In the “Agree” category, 40% of male participants (6 out of 15) expressed agreement, compared to 33.3% of female participants (5 out of 15). This suggests that while male students acknowledge the benefits of public speaking competitions, they may not perceive them as critically important as their female counterparts. It aligns with the findings of Agustin et al. (2022) that suggested gender can significantly influence students’ perceptions of public speaking and the importance they place on such skills. Neutral responses were equally distributed, with 20% of both male and female participants (3 out of 15) selecting this category. This indicates that a segment of students, regardless of gender, remains uncertain or indifferent about the benefits of public speaking competitions. This neutrality could stem from limited direct experience with such competitions or mixed feelings about their relevance in academic or professional contexts.

Minimal disagreement was observed, with only 6.7% of female participants (1 out of 15) disagreeing and no male participants expressing disagreement. The absence of strong disagreement across both genders suggests that public speaking competitions are generally well-received, though the degree of positive perception varies slightly between genders. Figure 5 shows that female participants are more likely to strongly recognize the benefits of public speaking competitions, which may reflect their desire to use these opportunities to enhance their skills and overcome societal barriers. In contrast, male participants tend to agree with the benefits but may view these competitions as less critical to their success, possibly due to higher confidence levels or differing priorities.

Marinho et al. (2017) reported that 89.3% of undergraduate students expressed interest in classes aimed at improving public speaking skills. While no significant gender differences were observed, male participants were noted to perceive themselves as slightly more prepared for public speaking, which De Paola et al. (2021) attributed to higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. In contrast, Erdiana et al. (2019) found that female students tend to outperform their male counterparts, despite similar levels of overall skill. The low levels of disagreement reported indicate that these programs are generally effective and engaging for students. Incorporating a curriculum specifically designed to enhance public speaking skills could further improve self-efficacy and performance across genders (Zhang et al., 2020; Gallo, 2014).

Table 1: Reliability Index

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
.922	34

The reliability index provided by Cronbach's Alpha in Table 1 indicates an excellent level of internal consistency for the 34-item scale, with a value of 0.922. The score highlights the items are accurate to measure the same construct which ensures that the instrument is dependable. The high Cronbach's Alpha value also reflects the robustness of the scale.

Recommendations

To address the gender-specific challenges identified in the study, it is recommended that workshops be organised to educate students about the unique obstacles faced by each gender, alongside the common issues related to public speaking anxiety. Recognising and normalising anxiety as a shared experience can reduce stigma and foster open communication. Given that female students often report higher levels of anxiety, targeted support should be prioritised. This could include mentorship programs pairing experienced and confident speakers with less confident individuals to focus on improving speech writing and delivery skills while addressing gender-specific concerns.

Creating safe and supportive environments, such as peer-to-peer sessions or small practice groups, can be particularly beneficial for female students who may feel more anxious in traditional public speaking settings. These spaces allow students to gradually build confidence without the pressure of a large audience. Additionally, public speaking classes or seminars should incorporate techniques specifically aimed at reducing anxiety, such as breathing exercises, visualisation, and positive self-talk. These strategies can help students, particularly those with higher anxiety levels, manage the stress of public speaking and perform more effectively in competitive or formal environments.

To further address gender differences, research-based interventions should guide the development of tailored strategies. For example, recognising that females may experience heightened anxiety in response to negative evaluations can inform the creation of supportive peer networks. Emphasising the value of every voice, regardless of gender, is essential to fostering inclusivity. Encouraging participation from all genders in public speaking events and showcasing successful female speakers as role models can inspire confidence in female students and challenge traditional gender norms. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can create a more equitable and supportive environment for all students. Reducing gender-specific barriers to public speaking will not only enhance individual confidence and skills but also promote a culture that values diverse perspectives and contributions in public discourse.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal the significant influence of cultural norms, gender roles, and educational practices on university students' perceptions of public speaking. Gender differences emerge as a critical factor, with male students often displaying greater confidence in their preparation, while female students experience heightened levels of anxiety, largely shaped by societal expectations of modesty and deference. These gendered experiences highlight the necessity of addressing specific challenges faced by both male and female students to create a more equitable learning environment. By integrating gender-sensitive approaches, educators can promote inclusivity and empower all students to develop their public speaking skills, ultimately reducing barriers and enhancing overall performance. This research emphasises the importance of acknowledging gender as a key dimension in understanding and improving public speaking education.

Suggestions for Future Research

Since this study only involved a limited number of respondents, future studies should continue to explore these dynamics with a focus on larger numbers of respondents and interventions that enhance self-efficacy and reduce anxiety. Therefore, it would ensure that all students, regardless of gender, can fully realize their potential as effective communicators in a globalised world.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors confirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Special thanks to all authors for their contributions throughout administration, conceptualization, methodology, and write-up process until the completion of the article.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to all students who participated in this study.

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