

Studying online from home and social anxiety among university students: The role of societal and interpersonal mattering

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Dec 14, 2021

Revised Jun 13, 2022

Accepted Jul 4, 2022

Keywords:

Interpersonal mattering

Lockdown

Social anxiety

Societal mattering

Study online from home

ABSTRACT

Literature suggested that the enforcement of lockdowns such as the Movement Control Order (MCO) had limited physical social interaction and therefore increased the inclination on social media and other means of digital communication. This shift of social pattern was reported to alter the way young adults develop their mattering, the sense of how much they matter to others. While mattering has been reported as the protective factors against social anxiety, this study aims to investigate the contribution of interpersonal mattering and societal mattering on social anxiety among university students who had to study online from home during the enforcement of the MCO in Malaysia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021. Purposive sampling was conducted to recruit 158 participants (89 females, 69 males) with their ages ranging from 18 to 25 years of age ($M=21.77$, $SD=1.54$) to respond to Mattering to Others Questionnaire, University Mattering Scale, and Social Phobia Inventory. The results of multiple linear regression supported the hypotheses that both types of mattering negatively predict social anxiety, and that interpersonal mattering was no longer a significant predictor when controlling for societal mattering.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studying online from home has been the new norm for many of the undergraduate students in Malaysia during outbreak of the COVID-19 [1]. Apart from the technological and habitual challenges, individuals who had their onsite activities moved online faced the change in social dynamic [2], [3]. The changes of social dynamic amidst the pandemic of COVID-19 were reported to negatively affected mental health issues stemmed from factors such as being away from loved ones, loneliness, misinformation on social media, financial insecurity and stigmatization [4], [5]. In the context of Malaysia, the short notice of the enforcement of the movement control policy deprived certain individuals of means of planning and preparation [6]. Moreover, the enforcement was prolonged into six weeks from the original plan of two weeks. Longer quarantine duration, together with many other factors, were reported to negatively predict the social life experiences of university students [7]. Accordingly, 45% increase of social anxiety cases was reported among university students during the implementation of social restrictions amidst the pandemic [8].

Over the past 20 years, social anxiety has gradually garnered more and more attention, as evidenced by the increased number of empirical studies and theoretical advancements pertaining to the subject [9]. Subsequently, the topic of social anxiety amongst undergraduate students has received considerable attention

in recent years as studies have been conducted in various countries such as Saudi Arabia [10], Iraq [11], and Brazil [12] to name a few. Such studies have reported the prevalence of social anxiety in undergraduates to range from around 25.8% to 36.3%. Azhar, Gill, and Sulaiman [13] reported that over 35% of the applicants of a Master's Program in Universiti Malaya were suffering from social anxiety disorder. Although their findings appeared to be consistent with other studies in different contexts, more studies are required to reaffirm its generalizability in Malaysian context, especially during the prolonged enforcement of the movement control order (MCO). Social anxiety refers to the spectrum of fear, avoidance, and physiological symptoms which accompany social anxiety [14]. Sufferers of social anxiety are excessively conscious of how they present themselves to other people to the point where it can disrupt their daily lives, which may also include the more important aspects of their lives [9], and they tend to have an intense fear of negative evaluation and being perceived as anxious, weak, stupid, boring, or unlikable; therefore, they may prefer to avoid situations such as group outings, public events, or even dinner invitations as it may cause them significant distress [15].

Negative implications of social anxiety have been documented in some of the pre-pandemic studies; socially anxious university students were discovered to be more likely to develop lower self-esteem, body-esteem, and emotional intelligence [16], [17]. Social anxiety was significantly contributed to worrying [11], loneliness [18], [19], body dissatisfaction [12], academic adjustment [20]. Although social anxiety is apparent throughout different age groups, adolescents and young adults are particularly susceptible to social anxiety as this period is considered as the "critical developmental stages", specifically the period where massive change of lifestyle occurred, moving from school to university life, leaving parents' houses, or starting new jobs [9]. The change of lifestyle due to the lockdown can be categorized as a massive change, due to its broad implication in lifestyles and social dynamics [5]. Apart from being locked-down or experiencing changes in the pattern of social life, factors such as world appraisals and self-efficacy [21], as well as specific phobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder [22] have been pointed as predictors of social anxiety. In spite of that, it was argued that mattering should be seen as a protective factor against social anxiety [23].

Mattering refers to one's sense of how much they matter to other people [24]. In the context of this current study, mattering was reported to be a robust factor of social anxiety; the serial mediation of mattering and unconditional self-acceptance fully occurred on the relationship between socially-prescribed perfectionism and social anxiety among university students [25]. The latter work indicated that university students would not likely be socially anxious when they believe that they matter to others. As a construct, mattering can be categorized into two general categories: interpersonal mattering, the psychological inclination to perceive oneself to be important to specific others [26], or societal mattering, the feeling that one makes a difference in a broader sense, such as in a society or in the community at large [27]. Schmidt *et al.* [28] claimed that interpersonal mattering is predominantly influenced by the interaction between specific people whilst societal mattering is primarily influenced by a person's larger social environment.

In their seminal work in re-conceptualizing the division of mattering by previous researchers [26], [27] proposed that interpersonal mattering can be categorized into two forms: how others consider us to have importance for them and how others rely on us for their needs. In the aforementioned concept, importance is formed by the perception of being supported by their close social circle, and it serves as an ego-extension, signifying that a person is part of another person's identity whereby any success or failure experienced by one person is also experienced by the other person [29]. Reliance, on the other hand is our expectation that our significant others would rely on our support. Taniguchi [30] stated the link between both elements and social anxiety by clarifying that the anticipation of receiving and reciprocating friendship support elevated the feelings of unconditional self-acceptance as well as more positive self-concept and perception of agreeableness among close friends, which prevented social anxiety to take place.

Another supporting report by Matera, Bosco, and Meringolo [31] who stated that individual well-being, which is one of the protective factors of social anxiety [25], was significantly predicted by the sense that one matters to their family and close friends. A study in Malaysian context by Kam and Prihadi [32], stated that young adults with higher interpersonal mattering were likely to develop stronger unconditional self-acceptance and upward social comparison, which are included as the onsets of social anxiety [25]. Thus, it is safe to hypothesize a significant direct link between interpersonal mattering and social anxiety.

Jung [29] argued that the understanding and investigation of societal mattering had been inadequate because researchers often overlook societal mattering as it is sometimes referred to as 'general mattering', and therefore, there is no clear framework to describe the link between societal mattering and social anxiety so far. Despite that, Shannon, Flett, and Goldberg [33] noted that mattering in general has been found to negatively correlate with anxiety in younger people. One possible explanation for this association is that the perception of not mattering to others resulted in a feeling of isolation, consequently leading to the social avoidance apparent in social anxiety [23].

Similar to the latter, various other studies had confirmed the link between societal mattering on the onsets of social anxiety. For instance, in younger individuals, a lower perceived societal mattering has been associated with depression [34], whereas higher levels of societal mattering were found to predict students' wellbeing among university students [35]. In the context of Malaysian university students, the protective feature of interpersonal mattering on social anxiety was confirmed in the work of Prihadi *et al.* [36] who reported that the level of societal mattering robustly curbed the level of depression and suicide ideation, which are known as two onsets of the social anxiety [37]. Statistically confirming the link between societal mattering and social anxiety, Flett *et al.* [23] reported that societal mattering explained 39% the variance in social anxiety. While all the studies in this subsection led to the hypothesis that in our context, societal mattering would likely be a significant negative predictor of social anxiety, the question we would like to answer is whether it is stronger or more prevalent than interpersonal mattering.

For more than a decade, it has been documented that feedback from social media is more salient than face-to-face feedback, for instance, cyberbullying through social media predict more severe learned helplessness and longer lasting depression than offline verbal bullying [38], being left behind by 'friends' in social media negatively affected adolescence more significantly than being neglected at school [39] and being 'cancelled' in social media predicts higher financial and opportunity loss to companies [40]. In a more positive perspective, rewarding experiences from social media was hypothesized to produce longer lasting behavioral changes and more meaningful sense of empowerment than its face-to-face counterpart [41], [42]. Such elevation was reported to be caused by everlasting accessibility [43] and anonymity [44] of the social media that often significantly connected to the users' societal mattering [45].

In the context of our study, inclination towards social media is unavoidable during the enforcement of the MCO [5], and such shift altered the way people develop their attitude towards themselves [46], [47] because online social feedback became the main source of self-assessment [48]. In a positive note, social feedback from social media tends to be closer to what had been anticipated by its receivers, as they tend to frame themselves in a manner that best obtains desired responses, and only from the people they want to get the responses from [49], [50]. Numbers of positive social media feedback, such as likes, thumbs, or comments is correlated to improved societal mattering [51], which in turn, reduce the social anxiety.

On the other hand, the deprivation of interpersonal mattering due to limited face-to-face contact with significant others activated the fear of missing out (FOMO) of social media information, which led to social anxiety [52]. In other words, positive feedback from random individuals might have improved societal mattering [23], [35]–[37], but due to this altered pattern during the MCO, it might not reduce the social anxiety. The aforementioned studies brought us to hypothesize that both interpersonal and societal mattering negatively predict social anxiety; nevertheless, the limitation of personal face-to-face social feedback during the MCO led us to hypothesize that when controlling for each other, societal mattering would likely be the more significant and powerful predictor of social anxiety than interpersonal mattering.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Participants

In order to be eligible for the study, participants were required to meet the criteria of being an undergraduate student in higher education institutions in Malaysia, between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age, and studied fully online during the data collection. Our calculation with G*Power analysis with an effect size of 0.20, alpha value of 0.05 and power of 0.80 indicated that a minimum of 52 participants would be sufficient for this study; nevertheless, we recruited more in order to improve the validity and generalizability of the study. One hundred and fifty-nine undergraduate students were recruited, and the final sample size was reduced to 158 because one participant was omitted for responding with the same score for all 56 items in the study. The participants willingly agreed to participate as they were either approached directly by the researcher or voluntarily agreed to participate by clicking on the link posted on the designated social media accounts such as WhatsApp and Instagram. The participants' ages ranged averaged 21.77, SD=1.54. The number of female participants slightly outnumbered the number of male participants, with 89 participants (56.3%) being female and 69 participants (43.7%) being male.

2.2. Materials

All the scales used in this current study have been cleared by the ethic review board of our university, clearance number E202104/001. After clicking the link, they have been provided, the participants were brought to the informed consent form to indicate their agreement to participate in the study. Afterwards, they were brought to the demographic form where participants were asked to provide information regarding their age, gender, as well as their nationality. Subsequently, the main scales of our study were provided to the participants.

Interpersonal mattering was measured by the total score on the mattering to others questionnaire (MTOQ) whereby a higher total score indicates higher interpersonal mattering [26]. The MTOQ consists of a total of 11 items and the responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, where participants were asked to rate how much they agree with the statements, with 1 being 'Not Much' and 5 being 'A Lot'. The items on the MTOQ pertained to the way the participants perceive their friends' feelings about the participants themselves.

Societal mattering was gauged by the total score on the university mattering scale (UMS), whereby a higher total score indicates higher societal mattering [53]. The UMS was chosen for this study because the participants were all undergraduate students. It consists of 24 items. The responses on the UMS were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, with some of the items were reverse-scored.

The dependent variable of social anxiety is measured by social phobia inventory (SPIN), whereby a higher total score indicates greater social anxiety [14]. It consists of 17 items, where participants were asked to rate how frequently they experienced anxiety related to the statements in the past week. Their responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the scales were tested for reliability and the results reported that the MTOQ (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.92$), UMS (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.93$), SPIN (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.93$) all demonstrated good reliability. The statistical analysis was performed with the use of IBM Statistics version 22. The mean and standard deviation of the participants' scores on each of the SPIN ($M=56.13$, $SD=14.90$), MTOQ ($M=34.94$, $SD=8.54$), and the UMS ($M=70.26$, $SD=16.97$). Normality of the data distribution was tested in order to make sure that multiple regression is the appropriate method to test the hypothesis, and the results are depicted in Table 1.

The values of the kurtosis and skewness in Table 1 indicated that the data was distributed normally, and thus the multiple regression is considered appropriate to analyze the data. Furthermore, multicollinearity test was conducted between the two predictors, and it was evident that interpersonal mattering and societal mattering are not significantly correlated to one another ($VIF=1.42$) as the VIF value did not exceed 10 and the Tolerance value was greater than 0.20. Sequentially, multiple regression analysis was conducted, and the coefficients of each model were depicted in Table 2. The first model of the Table 2 shows that interpersonal mattering as a model was a significant predictor of social anxiety, nevertheless when the score of the societal mattering was controlled for (Model 2), it was evident that interpersonal mattering is no longer a significant predictor. In other words, the sense of societal mattering was a robust and significant suppressor of social anxiety among our participants.

Table 1. Normality of the data distribution

	Interpersonal mattering	Societal mattering	Social anxiety
N valid	158	158	158
N missing	0	0	0
Skewness	-.272	-.402	.016
Std. error of skewness	.193	.193	.193
Kurtosis	-.076	-.269	-.706
Std. error of kurtosis	.384	.384	.384

Table 2. Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. error	beta		
1	(Constant)	72.350	4.841		14.945	.000
	Interpersonal mattering	-.464	.135	-.266	-3.448	.001
2	(Constant)	84.020	5.161		16.279	.000
	Interpersonal mattering	-.075	.150	-.043	-.500	.618
	Societal mattering	-.360	.076	-.409	-4.747	.000

a. Dependent variable: Social anxiety

3.1. Discussion

Our hypothesis was supported by the results of the analyses. During the implementation of MCO, university students who must study online from home would likely have less social anxiety when they believe that they matter to general society; on the other hand, the sense that they matter to their significant others did not play any role in reducing their social anxiety. Our finding that the societal mattering

significantly protected locked-down individuals from social anxiety is consistent to other studies in the context of Malaysian MCO, which involving factors or onsets of social anxiety, such as social comparison [51], and subjective well-being [35]. Furthermore, it was also consistent to studies in different geographical contexts but about the same time frame [2], [5], [33]. The similarity of our findings to theirs could be explained as the results of the similar use of measurements, both the MTOQ that we used in this study and the general mattering scale they used were similarly designed to gauge societal mattering, and that in our context, the data collection took place during the MCO, where most individuals tend to have similarly low level of interpersonal mattering despite the varying levels of social anxiety.

Nevertheless, our results that interpersonal mattering did not significantly protect individuals from social anxiety contradicted the findings of some previous studies. The difference of our results from several works before the pandemic [23], [30], [33] could be explained by the difference in social dynamics back then. Before the pandemic, the face-to-face social feedback, that elevated interpersonal mattering was more prominent or at least similarly prominent than the online social feedback that elevated societal mattering. The difference between our findings and the findings of other studies that were conducted in the pandemic norm such as the works of Matera [31] as well as Kam and Prihadi [32], was more likely because the societal mattering was not included in their study; because mattering was only measured through interpersonal mattering, their results were actually similar to ours before controlling for societal mattering.

This result was inconsistent with the theoretical basis discussed earlier [30]. On the other hand, the second hypothesis, which is “societal mattering predicts social anxiety in undergraduate students” was supported and is consistent with past literature [23]. However, both interpersonal mattering and societal mattering were found to be negatively and significantly correlated with social anxiety, indicating that lower levels of interpersonal mattering and societal mattering are correlated with higher social anxiety as has been indicated in past research [23]. However, the overall model used in the current study was only able to explain 18.9% of the variance in social anxiety as opposed to 39% of the variance in social anxiety [23].

3.2. Practical implication

It has been reported that social anxiety might disrupt the overall quality of life among university students, and our findings indicated that elevating societal mattering might reduce the potential of experiencing social anxiety. Therefore, strategies can be made around improving societal mattering among the students, such as encouraging them to be involved in a group decision making, or acknowledge their contribution in their respective institutions. It is also important to make them feel that their aspirations are heard and followed-up in order to improve their sense of societal mattering to their respective universities.

3.3. Limitation and suggestion

The researchers realize that the study was not without limit. First of all, the data was collected during the second MCO, where our participants might have already developed better anticipation than when they were exposed to the first MCO, most of them had been studying from home for almost a year when the data was collected. This situation limits the generalizability of our results and findings. Second, the implication of the MCO in Malaysia was kept being prolonged, and the new daily cases of COVID-19 infection was getting higher every single day during the data collection time. This situation might have led to higher level of anxiety, that might be misinterpreted by our participants as social anxiety when they provided their data to our surveys; therefore, our data of social anxiety might not be as pure as when it is collected during the non-pandemic situation.

As such, the pandemic severity levels in Malaysia could have acted as a moderator variable in the study and potentially explain the relationship between mattering and social anxiety. As the current study did not account for these circumstances, future studies during pandemics should account for pandemic severity and ensure that is statistically controlled for before proceeding with the interpretation of the results. Additionally, our results might not fully picture the societal mattering among our participants as the current study only measured one particular type of societal mattering, which is university mattering, while there are many types of communities which a person can be part of and identify with. In general, individuals may have differing levels of societal mattering for different communities they involve themselves in. Thereby, it is highly suggested for the future study to involve more than one societal mattering scale or to design a more ubiquitous measure for societal mattering.

Finally, as the study employed a non-experimental correlational research design, causal inferences are unable to be drawn from our results. Although the relationship between societal mattering and social anxiety was found to be significant, it is not possible to infer that having lower societal mattering will conclusively cause greater social anxiety. Thus, it is suggested again for the future research to conduct longitudinal or experimental studies to better understand the magnitude of the relationship between the two types of mattering and social anxiety.

4. CONCLUSION

To reiterate, the study was conducted for the purpose of examining the role of interpersonal mattering and societal mattering on social anxiety. It was discovered that interpersonal mattering did not significantly predict social anxiety after controlling for societal mattering. Our findings indicate that promoting a culture of mattering within universities may be helpful for students to feel less socially anxious and to encourage their participation in university activities. The study also provides possible directions for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of this paper is supported by the funding from the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, Indonesia.

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