

# The Impact of Social Phobia on Assertiveness among Young Adult

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## ABSTRACT

Social phobia is a prevalent psychological concern among young adults and may hinder the development of essential interpersonal skills such as assertiveness. Social phobia comprises several dimensions, namely fear of negative evaluation, avoidance of social situations, and physiological symptoms experienced during social interactions. Assertiveness is particularly important during young adulthood, a developmental stage characterized by increasing academic, social, and occupational demands. This study aimed to examine the impact of social phobia and its dimensions on assertiveness among young adults aged 18 to 25. Guided by Social Learning Theory, a quantitative cross-sectional design was employed. Data were collected from 203 young adults using convenience sampling method. Social phobia was measured using the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN), which assesses fear, avoidance, and physiological dimensions, while assertiveness was assessed using the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS). Descriptive analyses were conducted to determine the levels of social phobia and assertiveness. The results showed that the overall level of social phobia among young adults was moderate ( $M = 1.86$ ), with fear recording the highest mean ( $M = 1.97$ ), followed by avoidance ( $M = 1.90$ ), and physiological symptoms ( $M = 1.69$ ). The overall level of assertiveness was also moderate ( $M = 3.20$ ). Regression analysis indicated that social phobia significantly predicted assertiveness, accounting for 47.8% of the variance. Among its dimensions, avoidance was the strongest predictor, explaining 45.4% of the variance, followed by fear (41.4%) and physiological symptoms (31.0%), indicating that greater social phobia symptoms are associated with reduced assertiveness. These results demonstrate that higher levels of social phobia and its dimensions are associated with lower assertiveness among young adults. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions focusing on reducing social phobia symptoms and strengthening assertiveness to enhance young adults' social functioning, psychological well-being, and adjustment in academic and occupational contexts.

**Keywords:** Social phobia, Assertiveness, Young adults, Social Learning Theory, Social anxiety.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Assertiveness is a human trait that reflects the ability to stand up for oneself while respecting others. It involves expressing feelings, needs, and opinions clearly and respectfully. Assertive individuals communicate effectively, which enhances their understanding in social interactions and improves the quality of their relationships (Parmaksiz & Kiliçarslan, 2020). They set healthy boundaries, manage conflicts better, and can say “no” when necessary, preventing others from overstepping. Parray et al. (2020) note that assertiveness helps especially adolescents build relationships without conflict and supports mental health. By having clear boundaries, assertive individuals can express emotions healthily, enjoy higher self-esteem, maintain better relationships, and achieve overall well-being. Those with high assertiveness can confidently voice their needs in group settings, whereas low assertiveness may cause stress due to difficulty saying no.

Assertiveness is particularly important during young adulthood, a developmental stage requiring independence

and social responsibility. Young adults engage in academic, workplace, and social interactions, including friendships and romantic relationships. Being assertive in this stage supports academic success, improves communication skills, and enhances psychological well-being, allowing individuals to defend their rights and refuse unreasonable requests. Conversely, low assertiveness can lead to poor boundary-setting and internalized frustration. High assertiveness in young adults is associated with better relationship satisfaction and higher self-esteem (Tyagi & Khanam, 2024). Given its importance, it is crucial to understand factors that may shape or affect assertiveness.

Given the importance of assertiveness in navigating social, academic, and professional settings, it is important to consider the psychological factors that might influence assertiveness. One of the factors that might influence assertiveness is social phobia, which may hinder an individual's ability to express themselves well and confidently in social settings. The fear of being judged or rejected, often present in individuals with social phobia, can lead to avoiding communication and having difficulty asserting their personal boundaries. Hence, understanding how social phobia may impact assertiveness is vital to addressing challenges faced by young adults in today's socially demanding world.

Social phobia, also known as Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), involves intense fear of social situations (Uysal et al., 2016). Affected individuals feel anxious or self-conscious when they believe they may be judged by others. This fear can disrupt daily activities such as speaking, attending events, or even making eye contact. Those with social phobia often avoid social situations and struggle to start conversations, particularly with strangers or in large groups. This can lower self-esteem and create negative self-image due to constant worry about others' perceptions. Research shows social phobia impacts multiple life domains and reduces overall well-being (Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). For example, individuals with social phobia are more likely to experience bullying, have fewer friends, and face challenges in forming romantic relationships.

Social phobia often emerges in young adulthood, aligning with Erikson's stage of Intimacy versus Isolation (ages 18–40), as social demands and expectations increase. This study focuses on ages 18–25, an early phase of young adulthood where social participation is expected. Individuals with social phobia may avoid eye contact, hesitate to speak in class or meetings, and shy away from new relationships, limiting opportunities in social, academic, and professional settings. Social phobia during this stage can increase loneliness, depression, and impaired functioning (Pontillo et al., 2017). Additionally, anxious behavior may make individuals more vulnerable to social rejection. Understanding its prevalence and impact on assertiveness is crucial, as assertiveness is key for effective functioning in young adulthood.

Young adulthood is also a time for developing social identity, including relationships, career decisions, and communication skills (Lu, 2022). Those with social phobia and low assertiveness may struggle to cope with social demands. Assertiveness helps young adults express needs, set boundaries, and handle social situations confidently. This study aims to assess levels of assertiveness and social phobia among young adults and explore how assertiveness influences social phobia. This research is important because delays in assertiveness development may affect relationship satisfaction and career achievement.

## **Problem Statement**

Both low and high levels of assertiveness can cause interpersonal difficulties among young adults. Many young adults today struggle with low assertiveness, which can negatively affect their social and emotional functioning (Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024). Individuals with low assertiveness often find it challenging to express their needs, opinions, and feelings, which can lead to unresolved conflicts, low relationship satisfaction, and social tension. For instance, Moss (2021) found that young adults with low assertiveness are more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety, dissatisfaction in relationships, and social withdrawal due to their inability to communicate effectively. Even when they have friends, these individuals tend to internalize frustration and fear rejection, which can worsen their interpersonal experiences and reduce their ability to engage in healthy communication.

High assertiveness can also create social challenges. Individuals who are overly assertive may be misunderstood, perceived as dominant or insensitive, and sometimes even face social exclusion or strained relationships (Awate & Rukumani, 2021). This indicates that both extremes of assertiveness can create difficulties for young adults

in maintaining harmonious and meaningful social relationships. As young adulthood is a crucial period for developing social skills and emotional maturity, it is important to explore factors that influence assertiveness and help young adults navigate social interactions effectively.

In many Asian contexts, young adults face significant social pressures that may impact their confidence and communication skills (Iqbal & Ajmain, 2018). Social phobia, which is characterized by fear of being judged negatively or embarrassment in social settings, can interfere with personal growth and development. Individuals with social phobia may experience fear in situations like giving presentations in class or speaking in public, limiting their opportunities to engage socially and develop self-confidence. This issue is important to address, as unaddressed social phobia can affect mental health, personal relationships, and overall life opportunities.

Social phobia also impacts professional development, especially in situations that require confidence, such as academic or career-related settings. Research in Malaysia shows that social phobia is prevalent among young adults, affecting 40.5% of secondary school students and 53–56% of university students, with significant impacts on emotions, cognition, academic performance, and social interaction (Dialan & Almigo, 2021; Hood et al., 2021). Avoidance of social situations limits opportunities to learn, interact, and grow socially, which may hinder young adults' overall development and readiness to engage confidently in future professional and personal environments.

Social phobia can directly influence assertiveness because it affects how individuals navigate social interactions. People with social phobia often experience low self-esteem and struggle to communicate confidently, frequently avoiding eye contact, speaking softly or slowly, and feeling uncomfortable in social settings. These behaviors can reinforce social isolation and awkwardness, making it even more challenging to assert themselves (Parmaksiz & Kiliçarslan, 2020). Consequently, young adults with social phobia are more likely to have lower assertiveness and face difficulties in both social and personal development.

However, the relationship between social phobia and assertiveness is not always straightforward. While many studies suggest a strong negative correlation, other factors such as personality traits, cultural background, or support systems may also influence this relationship. This uncertainty emphasizes the need for further research to clarify how social phobia affects assertiveness. Understanding this connection is essential for developing strategies that help young adults build social confidence and navigate interpersonal challenges effectively during this crucial stage of social development.

Studying social phobia and assertiveness among young adults is very crucial because this stage of life involves major social transitions. Furlong (2016) stated that, entering the young adulthood phase, people will face significant life changes such as they have to enter higher education, start a career and find a lifetime partner which requires so much socialisation skills. These transitions require adaptation to new situations which may appear challenging to young adults with social phobia. Considering young adults will be facing new social dynamics and expectations, both in personal and professional context, the ability to assert themselves well is very crucial to establish many opportunities and overall life satisfaction. Social phobia or social anxiety during this stage of life may have long-term consequences on overall well-being.

Although there is much research on social phobia and assertiveness respectively, there is still a lack of studies between social phobia and assertiveness among young adulthood in Malaysia. Past research mostly focused on the assertiveness trait but, social phobia as a potential factor is often overlooked. Social phobia is a common psychological issue that may negatively influence an individual's level of assertiveness, yet its impact on assertive behavior remains underexplored. A deeper understanding of these two variables among young adults is important in order to develop effective interventions and improve social functioning. Therefore, the study of the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adulthood is very crucial to provide a foundation and base that could support the development of interventions to improve young adults' social well-being.

## Research Objectives

Objective 1: To determine the level of social phobia among young adult.

Objective 2: To determine the level of assertiveness among young adult.

Objective 3: To examine the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adult.

### **Significance of Study**

This study contributes to a deeper psychological understanding of the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adults, an area that remains insufficiently examined despite the wide application of social phobia in communication and psychological research (Speed et al., 2017). The findings offer meaningful practical implications for educational institutions, mental health practitioners, parents and guardians, as well as employers and human resource development officers, by providing empirical guidance for the development of preventive strategies, interventions, and supportive environments that aim to reduce social phobia and strengthen assertive communication skills (Abdolghaderi et al., 2021; Swee et al., 2017; Omale & Ojo, 2025). Additionally, this study benefits young adults by increasing awareness of how social phobia may interfere with assertive behavior during critical life transitions, such as movement into higher education and the workforce, which may influence resilience, autonomy, and self-efficacy (Sagone et al., 2020). From a theoretical perspective, the study extends Social Learning Theory by illustrating how anxiety-driven avoidance restricts opportunities for observation, practice, and reinforcement of assertive behaviors, thereby disrupting essential social learning processes (Bandura, 1977; Lewallen & Neece, 2015).

### **Operational Definition**

The dependent variable, social phobia, refers to the level of fear or anxiety experienced by young adults in social situations due to fear of negative evaluation by others. In this study, social phobia is measured using the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) (Turner et al., 1998), a widely used instrument assessing the severity of social anxiety symptoms. It reflects the extent of discomfort and avoidance behaviors in interpersonal situations, indicating the impact of social phobia on functioning in young adulthood.

The independent variable, assertiveness, refers to the ability of young adults to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs in a direct, honest, and respectful manner. Assertiveness is assessed using the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS) (McCormick, 1985), based on the original schedule by Rathus (1973). This measurement captures behavioral tendencies related to assertive communication, providing insight into how individuals engage confidently and appropriately in social interactions.

Young adults are operationally defined as individuals aged 18 to 25 years, representing a transitional life stage characterized by identity exploration, social development, and increasing independence (Higley, 2019; Lawford et al., 2020). This age group is particularly relevant for examining how social phobia and assertiveness interact and influence social functioning during this critical developmental period.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concept of Social Phobia**

Social phobia, or social anxiety disorder, is a persistent and intense fear of social situations due to fear of negative evaluation by others, often leading to avoidance and functional impairments in daily life (DSM-IV to DSM-5 Social Phobia/Social Anxiety Disorder Comparison - DSM-5 Changes, n.d.; Orouji & Saeid, 2022). Factors contributing to social phobia include genetic predisposition, family history of anxiety, past negative experiences such as bullying, overprotective or critical parenting, perfectionism, limited social exposure, and cognitive factors like negative self-evaluation and fear of failure (Akgül & Dirik, 2018; Chiu et al., 2021). These factors can result in avoidance of academic, occupational, and social activities, low self-esteem, chronic stress, difficulties in forming relationships, and reduced assertiveness, thereby limiting individuals' ability to communicate effectively, advocate for themselves, and maintain healthy interpersonal boundaries (Hood et al., 2021; Himle et al., 2020; Yli-Länttä, 2020; Abdolghaderi et al., 2021; Hajure & Abdu, 2020).

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## Concept of Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs clearly and respectfully while maintaining self-respect and consideration for others (American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, 2018; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024), encompassing both behavioral and psychological aspects such as self-confidence, emotional regulation, and self-awareness. It is influenced by personality traits (e.g., extraversion, openness, emotional stability), supportive parenting, communication skills, self-esteem, past social experiences, and the presence of social phobia, which can inhibit assertive behavior through fear of judgment, avoidance, and hesitation in voicing opinions (Myint et al., 2022; Jourshari et al., 2022; Moss, 2021; Vagos & Pereira, 2022). Assertiveness, in turn, impacts interpersonal relationships, emotional well-being, and professional or academic success, as high assertiveness promotes effective communication, self-advocacy, and healthy boundaries, whereas low assertiveness may result in passive communication, internalized frustration, stress, anxiety, and difficulties in navigating life transitions (Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024; Ames et al., 2017).

## Concept of Young Adult

Young adulthood is a transitional stage from adolescence to adulthood, typically ranging from 18 to 25 years old, characterised by self-exploration, identity formation, and increasing social demands (Higley, 2019). According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, this stage involves the task of establishing intimate and meaningful relationships, where failure may result in feelings of isolation and emotional distress (Lawford et al., 2020). During this period, young adults are expected to become financially independent, form relationships, and contribute to society, which requires strong interpersonal skills, particularly assertiveness. However, social phobia is common during young adulthood due to heightened social evaluation in academic, workplace, and peer settings, and it can interfere with assertive communication by causing intense fear of negative judgment (Lu, 2022). Consequently, young adults with social phobia may struggle to express themselves effectively, engage in social interactions, and develop close relationships, highlighting the importance of examining the relationship between social phobia and assertiveness during this developmental stage.

## Models of Social Phobia

Several theoretical models explain the development and maintenance of social phobia. The Cognitive Model (Clark & Wells, 1995) posits that socially anxious individuals form negative beliefs about themselves and excessively monitor their behavior, leading to avoidance behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, over-rehearsing speech, or staying silent, which reinforce anxiety (Leigh & Clark, 2018). The Cognitive-Behavioral Model (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) emphasizes that distorted self-images, rather than actual reactions of others, drive anxiety and limit assertiveness (Heimberg et al., 2014). In contrast, the Social Skills Deficit Model (Libet & Lewinsohn, 1973) suggests that social phobia may stem from genuine deficits in social and communication skills, leading to repeated negative experiences and avoidance (Levitan & Nardi, 2009). Finally, the Evolutionary Model (Gilbert, 2001) explains social phobia as an adaptive response to avoid social rejection or conflict, where submissive behaviors that were once protective now contribute to avoidance and impaired social functioning (Tone et al., 2019).

## Models and Theory of Assertiveness

The development of assertiveness is informed by multiple models and theories. The Assertiveness Training Model (Alberti & Emmons, 1970) advocates for structured practice of verbal and non-verbal communication techniques to enhance confidence and interpersonal effectiveness (Awate & Rukumani, 2021; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024). The Cognitive Behavioral Theory (Beck, 1976) links distorted beliefs about social interactions with avoidance behaviors and anxiety, suggesting that reframing thoughts can improve assertiveness (Romanowska & Dobroczynski, 2020). Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that assertiveness arises from fulfilling basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, promoting confident self-expression. The Humanistic Theory (Rogers, 1961) emphasizes that a supportive environment and positive self-concept empower individuals to communicate authentically, highlighting assertiveness as an outcome of psychological well-being.

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## Level of Social Phobia

Fear of negative evaluation is a major factor contributing to social phobia, particularly among young adults who are navigating academic and social demands. Iqbal and Ajmal (2018) conducted a study among 230 young adults at Bahaudin Zakariya University and found a significant positive correlation between fear of negative evaluation and social phobia. Female students reported higher levels of social anxiety, supporting the notion that females may be more sensitive to peer judgment and social pressures. Similarly, Dialan and Almigo (2021) highlighted that social phobia often begins in childhood, with early signs including shyness, avoidance of social interactions, and heightened self-consciousness. Their qualitative study among female university students in Malaysia revealed common triggers such as classroom presentations and unstructured social settings, often leading to complete avoidance behaviors. These students, despite performing well academically, struggled with participation in discussions and social interactions due to anxiety symptoms like sweating, heart palpitations, and fear of judgment. The study suggested that coping strategies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), counseling, family support, and personal maturity could help manage these symptoms. Hajure and Abdu (2020) further emphasized the consequences of social phobia by showing that students with social anxiety disorder had lower quality of life scores across physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains compared to peers without SAD. Avoidance behaviors, including fear of criticism, social gatherings, and speaking to strangers, were identified as major barriers to assertive responses. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that social phobia is prevalent among young adults, particularly females, and has significant implications for assertiveness, social functioning, and overall psychological well-being.

## Level of Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the ability to express oneself clearly and respectfully while maintaining self-respect and consideration for others. Parray et al. (2020) found that assertiveness positively correlates with self-esteem and academic achievement and negatively correlates with stress among young adults in Kashmir. The study suggested that individuals with higher assertiveness manage stress better, maintain healthier lifestyles, and demonstrate greater resilience, although contextual factors such as political tension and educational opportunities may influence outcomes. Structured interventions such as Assertiveness Training (AT) have been shown to produce significant behavioral improvements, helping students shift from submissive or aggressive tendencies toward assertive behavior. AT sessions typically include practical techniques such as managing criticism, expressing emotions appropriately, practicing assertive rights, and maintaining eye contact (Parray et al., 2020; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024). Jandhyala and Kumar (2024) emphasized that assertiveness is more than a communication style; it is a core psychological skill affecting mental, physical, and social well-being. Their systematic review highlighted that assertive individuals maintain self-respect, manage relationships effectively, and show lower levels of stress, depression, and social anxiety. Moreover, combining AT with interventions like CBT enhances social skills, reduces clinical symptoms, and improves psychological health. These findings underscore that assertiveness is a modifiable skill with significant implications for young adults' personal, social, and academic development.

## Impact of Social Phobia on Assertiveness

Research consistently indicates an inverse relationship between social phobia and assertiveness. Abdolghaderi et al. (2021) reported that social phobia reduces self-expression, leading to social withdrawal and low self-efficacy, yet assertiveness training can mitigate these effects by enhancing self-esteem, promoting healthier social behavior, and reducing avoidance patterns. Similarly, Adiwaty (2025) found that assertive behavior significantly and negatively predicted social anxiety among adolescent bullying victims, supporting the cognitive-behavioral perspective that strong social skills help individuals cope with stressful social situations. Vagos and Pereira (2022) examined socially anxious teenagers approaching young adulthood and found elevated social anxiety coupled with significantly reduced assertive behavior. Their study highlighted that both cognitive distortions and behavioral deficits contribute to avoidance patterns, limiting opportunities for assertive engagement. Taken together, these studies converge on the conclusion that social phobia significantly impairs assertive communication among young adults, both cognitively and behaviorally. They also emphasize the importance of integrating assertiveness training into interventions targeting socially anxious youth, as building assertive skills can enhance social competence, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. The reviewed

literature collectively supports the rationale for the present study, which aims to explore how social phobia affects assertiveness in young adults, providing insights into potential strategies for promoting effective communication and psychological resilience.

### Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>): There is no significant impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adults.

Alternative Hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>): There is no significant impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adults.

### Underpinning Theory

This study is grounded in Albert Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory, which explains that human behavior is shaped through the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behavioural factors, and environmental factors. Behavioural factors refer to observable actions, environmental factors include influences such as family, peers, and social context, while personal factors involve internal processes such as beliefs, emotions, and cognitive abilities (Firmansyah & Saepuloh, 2022). In this study, social phobia is conceptualised as a behavioural factor, as it is expressed through avoidance and anxiety in social situations, whereas assertiveness is considered a personal factor reflecting an individual’s internal capacity to express thoughts, needs, and emotions confidently. Environmental influences further shape both constructs through observational learning and reinforcement.

Social Learning Theory supports this study by explaining how social phobia and assertiveness develop through social experiences. Negative social experiences, such as repeated judgment or rejection, may reinforce anxious and avoidant behaviours, leading to higher levels of social phobia. In contrast, assertiveness is a learned behaviour that develops through exposure to positive role models and supportive environments. Young adults raised in environments that encourage self-expression are more likely to develop stronger assertive skills (Cantero-Sánchez et al., 2021). Therefore, this theory provides a useful framework for understanding how interactions between personal experiences, behavioural responses, and environmental influences shape social phobia and assertiveness during young adulthood.

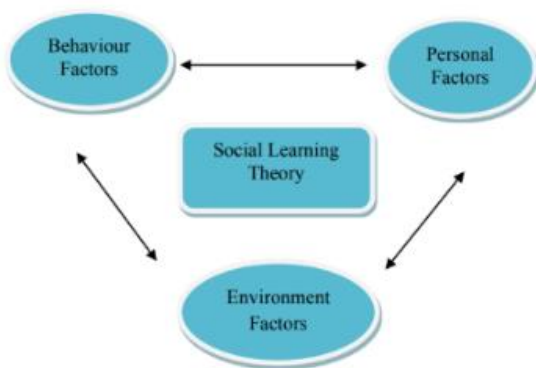


Figure 1 Social Learning Theory Framework

Source: Adapted from Bandura (1977)

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the relationship between social phobia and assertiveness, guided by Social Learning Theory and supported by past literature. Social phobia functions as the independent variable, while assertiveness is the dependent variable. Based on this framework, higher levels of social phobia are expected to negatively influence assertiveness due to avoidance behaviours, limited opportunities for observational learning, and reinforcement of anxious responses in social situations. Accordingly, individuals with social phobia may struggle with self-expression and assertive behaviour because they are less exposed to

positive social models and assertive reinforcement. This framework forms the basis of the study's hypothesis and guides the direction of data collection and analysis by illustrating how social phobia contributes to lower levels of assertiveness among young adults.

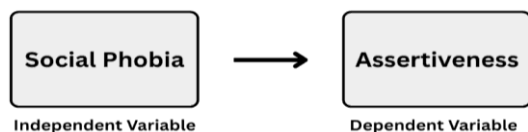


Figure 2 Impact of Social Phobia on Assertiveness Framework

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a hypothesis-testing design to examine the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adults. A cross-sectional approach is used, where data are collected at a single point in time to determine the association between social phobia and assertiveness levels. Additionally, the study incorporates a retrospective-prospective element by asking participants to reflect on previous social situations that may have triggered anxiety while simultaneously assessing their current assertiveness levels. A quantitative approach is adopted to allow numerical measurement of variables and statistical analysis of their relationships, ensuring objectivity. The study uses validated and standardized instruments to measure social phobia and assertiveness, supporting the reliability and consistency of the data collected. This research design allows for a systematic examination of the relationship between social phobia and assertiveness while providing robust and generalizable insights within the target population.

### Population and Sampling

The study population comprised young adults aged 18 to 25, a stage marked by identity formation, social role exploration, and growing interpersonal and professional responsibilities (Scales et al., 2016). Developing assertiveness is crucial for navigating social interactions, setting boundaries, and managing anxiety, yet social phobia may hinder these skills, impacting academic performance, relationships, and psychological well-being. Understanding the link between social phobia and assertiveness can guide early interventions. A minimum sample of 197 participants was determined using G\*Power 3.1.9.7 with a medium effect size ( $r = 0.25$ ),  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power = 0.95 (Faul et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2007). Convenience sampling was employed to efficiently recruit participants representative of the target population.

### Research Instrument

This study used a structured questionnaire to collect data, including demographic information, the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN), and the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS). Demographics such as age and gender ensured participants were within the target young adult range of 18 to 25 years. The SPIN, developed by Connor et al. (2000), measured social phobia symptoms. It has 17 items assessing fear of negative evaluation, avoidance of social situations, and physiological distress. Participants rated items on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (Not at all) to 4 (Extremely). Higher total scores indicate greater social anxiety. Although SPIN allows assessment of three dimensions (fear, avoidance, physiological), this study focused on the overall score. SPIN has shown excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .79 to .97 (Amouzadeh, 2016; Antony et al., 2006). The SRAS, developed by McCormick (1985) based on Rathus (1973), assessed assertiveness. It includes 30 items, some reverse-scored, rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (Very unlike me) to 6 (Very much like me). Higher scores indicate higher assertiveness. While SRAS reliability data is limited, it strongly corresponds to the original RAS (odd-even correlation = .90; total score correlation = .94). The original RAS shows test-retest reliability of .76–.83, split-half reliability of .77, and Cronbach's alpha of .73–.86 (Caballo et al., 2014). Hence, SRAS is considered a valid and reliable measure of assertiveness, especially for young adults.

**Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted with 30 young adults aged 18 to 25 to ensure the clarity and suitability of the questionnaires. The Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS) were tested for internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha. The results showed that the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) demonstrated excellent reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .948, while the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS) also showed excellent reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha of .907. These results suggest that both instruments consistently measure social phobia and assertiveness, respectively, among young adults, and are suitable for use in the main study (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Table 1 Instruments Reliability Analysis

	Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Interpretation of Internal Consistency
SPIN	.948	Excellent
SRAS	.907	Excellent

**Data Analysis**

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS version 29. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were applied based on the research objectives. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the levels of social phobia and assertiveness, while regression analysis was applied to examine the impact of social phobia on assertiveness. The internal consistency of the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS) was assessed. SPIN achieved a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.936, indicating excellent reliability, while SRAS achieved 0.863, indicating very good reliability. These results suggest that both instruments consistently measure their respective constructs. Descriptive analysis was conducted to assess the overall levels of social phobia and assertiveness among young adults. Social phobia scores were categorized as low, moderate, or high, while assertiveness scores were categorized as low, moderate, or high. These analyses provided a general understanding of the prevalence and intensity of social phobia and assertiveness among participants. Before performing regression analysis, basic assumption checks were conducted to ensure the data were suitable for analysis. Simple linear regression was then used to examine whether social phobia significantly predicts assertiveness. The analysis also considered the dimensions of social phobia—fear, avoidance, and physiological symptoms. The strength of the relationship was evaluated using the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), while the direction and significance of the effect were assessed using the standardized beta coefficient ( $\beta$ ) and p-values.

**RESULTS/FINDINGS**

A total of 203 young adults participated in this study by completing the online questionnaire. The demographic information indicates that most participants were female, with 142 respondents (70%) compared to 61 males (30%). In terms of age, the largest proportion of respondents were 22 years old (93 participants, 45.8%), followed by 23 years old (28 participants, 13.8%), 21 years old (22 participants, 10.8%), 24 years old (16 participants, 7.9%), 19 years old (15 participants, 7.4%), 25 years old (12 participants, 5.9%), 20 years old (11 participants, 5.4%), and 18 years old (6 participants, 3%). This indicates that the study sample was primarily composed of female participants in their early twenties, with the age of 22 being the most represented, while the youngest (18) and oldest (25) age groups were least represented.

Table 2 Demographic Analysis

	Gender		Age							
	Male	Female	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25

<b>Frequency (f)</b>	61	142	6	15	11	22	93	28	16	12
<b>Percentage (%)</b>	30	70	3	7.5	5.4	10.8	45.8	13.8	7.9	5.9

**Objective 1: To determine the level of social phobia among young adult.**

The overall level of social phobia among young adults in this study was moderate, with a mean score of (M = 1.86). Among its dimensions, fear (M = 1.97) recorded the highest mean, indicating that concerns about negative evaluation in social situations were most prominent. Avoidance (M = 1.90) followed closely, suggesting a moderate tendency to withdraw from or limit participation in social activities. Physiological symptoms (M = 1.69) had the lowest mean, reflecting that physical reactions such as nervousness or bodily tension were less pronounced compared to emotional and behavioral aspects. Overall, these findings indicate that young adults experience a noticeable presence of social phobia across emotional, behavioral, and physiological dimensions, with fear being the most dominant aspect and physiological responses the least.

Table 3 Social Phobia Level

	Mean	SD	Level
Social Phobia	1.86	0.85	Moderate
Fear	1.97	0.87	Moderate
Avoidance	1.90	0.98	Moderate
Physiological	1.69	0.93	Moderate

**Objective 2: To determine the level of assertiveness among young adult.**

The overall level of assertiveness among young adults was moderate (M = 3.20), indicating that respondents generally demonstrate an average ability to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs in an appropriate and confident manner. Among the behaviors assessed, the highest mean was observed for seeking clarification when asked to do something (M = 4.35), suggesting that participants tend to assert themselves by ensuring understanding before proceeding. In contrast, the lowest mean was found in expressing disagreement with a famous person in public (M = 2.16), indicating that respondents are less likely to display assertiveness in situations involving authority or public confrontation. Overall, these findings suggest that young adults in this study exhibit moderate assertiveness across various interpersonal situations.

Table 4 Assertiveness Level

	Mean	SD	Level
Assertiveness	3.20	0.85	Moderate

**Objective 3: To examine the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adult.**

Linear regression analyses indicated that social phobia significantly predicts assertiveness among young adults, accounting for 47.8% of the variance (B = -0.512,  $\beta$  = -0.691,  $p < 0.001$ ), meaning higher social phobia is strongly linked to lower assertiveness. Examining its dimensions, avoidance was the strongest predictor, explaining 45.4% of the variance (B = -0.430,  $\beta$  = -0.674,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by fear at 41.4% (B = -0.467,  $\beta$  = -0.643,  $p < 0.001$ ), and physiological symptoms at 31.0% (B = -0.374,  $\beta$  = -0.556,  $p < 0.001$ ). These results highlight that all components of social phobia, fear of social situations, avoidance behaviors, and physiological responses significantly reduce assertiveness among young adults, with avoidance showing the greatest impact.

Table 5 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	p	B	SE B	β	t
Social Phobia	.478	.475	183.75	<0.001	-.512	.038	-.691	-13.56
Fear	.414	.411	141.95	<0.001	-.467	.039	-.643	-11.91
Avoidance	.454	.451	167.18	<0.001	-.430	.033	-.674	-12.93
Physiological	.310	.306	90.15	<0.001	-.374	.039	-.556	-9.50

## DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

### Objective 1: To determine the level of social phobia among young adult.

The findings indicate that the overall mean score for social phobia among young adults was 1.86, reflecting a moderate level of social phobia. This suggests that respondents experience noticeable social anxiety symptoms, though not at a severe level. The highest mean score was reported for the item *“Being embarrassed or looking stupid are among my worst fears,”* indicating that fear of negative evaluation is the most prominent concern among young adults. This finding suggests that individuals are highly sensitive to how they are perceived or judged by others, leading to increased self-consciousness and anxiety in social situations. In contrast, the lowest mean score was found for the item *“Talking to strangers scares me,”* suggesting that interactions with unfamiliar individuals are less distressing than interactions with familiar people. This may be because strangers are perceived as less judgmental and less likely to form lasting evaluations, thereby reducing pressure to manage impressions. Conversely, interactions with familiar individuals may increase anxiety due to greater concern about judgment from people whose opinions are considered more significant.

When examining the dimensions of social phobia, the fear dimension recorded the highest mean of 1.97 indicating that anxiety related to judgment and embarrassment is the most dominant aspect of social phobia among young adults. The avoidance dimension showed a slightly lower mean of 1.90, suggesting that avoidance behaviours vary depending on the perceived level of evaluation in different situations. The physiological dimension recorded the lowest mean of 1.69, indicating that physical anxiety symptoms are present but generally less intense. Overall, these findings highlight that social phobia among young adults is primarily driven by fear of negative evaluation, with moderate avoidance behaviours and less pronounced physiological symptoms.

The present findings are consistent with studies by Iqbal and Ajmal (2018), who reported that fear of negative evaluation is a major contributor to social phobia among young adults, particularly in academic and social contexts. This similarity may be explained by the frequent exposure of young adults to evaluative situations such as presentations, discussions, examinations, and interviews, which heighten concerns about performance and social comparison.

Similarly, Dialan and Almigo (2021) found that Malaysian university students commonly experience anxiety during presentations and public performance situations, which are closely associated with fear of embarrassment. These situations often involve direct observation and formal evaluation, increasing awareness of being judged and intensifying anxiety. In line with the present study, these findings suggest that embarrassment-related fears play a central role in social phobia among young adults.

The findings are also supported by Hajure and Abdu (2020), who reported that social phobia is associated with lower quality of life, particularly in social and psychological domains. Fear of being judged may lead individuals to avoid evaluative situations, limiting social participation and negatively affecting well-being, even when social phobia levels are moderate. However, the present study differs from Yli-Länttä (2020), who found that individuals with social phobia tend to avoid both familiar and unfamiliar people. In contrast, the current findings suggest that young adults may still engage with strangers while experiencing greater anxiety in interactions with familiar peers. This indicates that social anxiety in this sample is more context-specific rather than generalized.

across all social interactions.

The findings can be explained using the Cognitive Model of Social Phobia proposed by Clark and Wells (1995). According to this model, individuals with social phobia focus excessively on internal thoughts and negative beliefs about being judged, which heightens self-consciousness and anxiety. This aligns with the present findings, where fear of embarrassment emerged as the most prominent aspect of social phobia. Concerns about making mistakes or appearing incompetent may increase perceived threat in social situations, reinforcing fear and avoidance behaviours among young adults.

Based on these findings, early identification and preventive interventions are recommended to address moderate levels of social phobia among young adults. Educational institutions may implement psychoeducational programs focusing on reducing fear of negative evaluation through self-confidence building, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping strategies. Providing supportive environments that encourage gradual exposure to evaluative situations, such as class discussions or presentations, may also help reduce anxiety related to embarrassment. These suggestions are supported by Abdolghaderi et al. (2021), who found that psychoeducational and assertiveness-based interventions effectively reduce social anxiety symptoms. Similarly, Jandhyala and Kumar (2024) reported that interventions targeting social confidence and communication skills improve psychological well-being, while Dialan and Almigo (2021) emphasized the importance of early intervention in educational settings to prevent the escalation of social phobia.

### **Objective 2: To determine the level of assertiveness among young adult.**

The findings indicate that the overall mean score for assertiveness among young adults was 3.20, reflecting a moderate level of assertiveness. This suggests that young adults are generally able to express their thoughts and needs, although this ability varies across situations. The highest mean score was recorded for the item *“When I am asked to do something, I always want to know why,”* indicating that young adults are comfortable seeking clarification and understanding the reasons behind requests. This may reflect generational characteristics, particularly among Gen Z, who tend to value transparency, autonomy, and informed decision-making. In contrast, the lowest mean score was found for the item *“If a famous person were talking in a crowd and I thought he or she was wrong, I would get up and say what I thought,”* suggesting reluctance to challenge authority figures or speak up in public and evaluative situations. This may be due to feelings of intimidation, power imbalance, and fear of negative social judgment. This moderate level of assertiveness may also be explained by the cultural context of ASEAN societies, which are predominantly collectivistic according to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory. In collectivist cultures, maintaining social harmony, respecting authority, and avoiding confrontation are often prioritised over direct self-expression, particularly in public or evaluative situations. As a result, young adults may demonstrate assertiveness in low-risk interpersonal contexts but remain cautious or restrained when expressing disagreement toward authority figures or individuals of higher social status (Hofstede, 2011). Overall, the moderate level of assertiveness indicates that while young adults are capable of expressing themselves in everyday or low-risk situations, they may struggle in contexts involving authority, social status, or evaluation.

The highest mean score item reflects young adults’ willingness to seek clarification, which is consistent with Parray et al. (2020), who found that assertiveness is positively associated with self-esteem among young adults. Individuals with higher self-esteem are more confident in asking questions and expressing their needs without excessive fear of negative consequences. The present finding suggests that young adults demonstrate assertive behaviour in situations that allow respectful self-expression and low social risk. Conversely, the lowest mean score item indicates lower assertiveness in situations involving authority figures or public disagreement. This aligns with Jandhyala and Kumar (2024), who reported that lower assertiveness is associated with difficulties in maintaining self-respect and managing interpersonal relationships. Hesitation to express disagreement in high-risk social contexts may reflect fear of judgment and reduced confidence in protecting one’s self-respect.

However, previous studies reporting higher levels of assertiveness contrast with the moderate level found in the present study. This difference may be explained by the presence of structured interventions in prior research. For example, Parray et al. (2020) and Jandhyala and Kumar (2024) examined participants who underwent assertiveness training or structured psychological interventions, which significantly enhanced assertive

behaviour. In contrast, the current study assessed assertiveness in a natural, non-intervention context, suggesting that assertiveness among young adults may remain situationally limited without targeted training.

The findings can be explained using Cognitive Behavioural Theory (Beck, 1976), which posits that thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are interconnected (Romanowska & Dobroczyński, 2020). Young adults were more assertive in low-risk situations, such as seeking clarification, where perceived threat and negative thoughts were minimal. In contrast, lower assertiveness in challenging authority reflects heightened negative thoughts, such as fear of criticism or rejection, leading to anxiety and behavioural inhibition. Thus, assertiveness varies depending on perceived social risk, supporting the assumptions of Cognitive Behavioural Theory.

Based on these findings, developing assertiveness in young adults should focus on building confidence in evaluative or social situations. Supporting assertiveness requires efforts from families, communities, and structured programs. Families and guardians can provide emotional support, model assertive behaviors, and encourage open communication, helping young adults express their opinions and build self-worth. Community organizations, NGOs, and counseling centers can offer social skills workshops, group counseling, or public speaking clubs, giving opportunities to practice communication and coping strategies in real-life settings. Peer groups and mentoring programs also help by offering feedback, normalizing social fears, and improving interpersonal skills through collaboration. Research supports these strategies: Parray et al. (2020) found assertiveness training boosts communication and confidence; Jandhyala and Kumar (2024) reported improvements in self-esteem and interpersonal functioning; and Abdolghaderi et al. (2021) observed reduced social anxiety and better public communication. Together, these findings show that targeted interventions can effectively enhance young adults' confidence, social competence, and psychological well-being.

### **Objective 3: To examine the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adult.**

The findings indicate that social phobia significantly affects assertiveness among young adults. Overall social phobia explained approximately 47.8% of the variance in assertiveness, demonstrating a strong negative effect ( $\beta = -.691$ ). Among the dimensions, avoidance accounted for about 45.4% of the variance and had a slightly stronger predictive effect ( $\beta = -.674$ ) than fear, which explained 41.4% of the variance ( $\beta = -.643$ ). Physiological symptoms also influenced assertiveness, but to a lesser extent, explaining around 31.0% of the variance ( $\beta = -.556$ ). These results clearly highlight that while all dimensions of social phobia negatively impact assertiveness, avoidance and fear are the most influential predictors, with avoidance showing the strongest behavioural effect.

These findings suggest that behavioural avoidance has the most direct impact on assertive behaviour because it limits real-life opportunities for young adults to practice expressing themselves in social situations. Fear, although present at higher average levels, primarily represents an internal anticipation of negative evaluation or embarrassment, which may not consistently prevent individuals from engaging socially. Physiological symptoms, such as trembling, sweating, or increased heart rate, act as internal signals of anxiety but do not always stop young adults from attempting assertive actions. Consequently, avoidance behaviour emerges as a more immediate barrier to assertiveness, as it directly reduces social engagement and practical experience.

The present study's results are consistent with prior research showing that social anxiety negatively influences assertiveness. Studies by Vagos and Pereira (2022), Abdolghaderi et al. (2021), and Adiawaty (2025) reported that socially anxious individuals often withdraw or suppress their opinions, needs, and feelings, supporting the current study's evidence that avoidance and fear are key barriers to assertive behaviour. Importantly, unlike earlier studies focusing primarily on adolescents or specific at-risk groups, this study demonstrates that the negative impact of social phobia persists into young adulthood, a critical developmental stage characterized by increased social, academic, and occupational demands.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a useful framework for understanding these findings, emphasizing the interaction of personal factors, behavioural responses, and environmental influences. Avoidance behaviours directly reduce opportunities to practice assertiveness, fear shapes internal expectations regarding social evaluation, and physiological symptoms act as cues indicating anxiety. Together, these factors illustrate how repeated negative social experiences and learned avoidance patterns can inhibit the development of assertive skills over time.

Practically, the findings suggest that interventions aiming to enhance assertiveness should focus on reducing behavioural avoidance. Gradual and structured exposure to social situations, combined with opportunities to express opinions, set boundaries, and respond assertively, can help young adults overcome withdrawal tendencies and reinforce confident social engagement. Previous research supports this approach, showing that targeting avoidance behaviour significantly improves interpersonal functioning and assertive communication (Abdolghaderi et al., 2021; Vagos & Pereira, 2022; Jandhyala & Kumar, 2024). By addressing the most influential behavioural factors, interventions can effectively diminish the negative impact of social phobia on assertiveness and support the development of healthier social competence in young adults.

### **Limitations**

This study provides important insights into how social phobia impacts assertiveness among young adults, highlighting the relevance of its fear, avoidance, and physiological dimensions. However, there are a few limitations in this study and of the limitation is the use of self-report measures to assess assertiveness. Participants' responses may reflect how they perceive their own assertiveness rather than how they actually behave in real-life situations. For example, someone might report speaking up confidently in surveys but hesitate to disagree with a teacher or supervisor. Assertiveness can change depending on the situation, social roles, or perceived consequences, and responses may also be affected by social desirability or limited self-awareness. Therefore, the results may not fully represent participants' actual assertive behaviour.

Another limitation is the generalizability of the findings. The sample mainly consisted of young adults from similar educational backgrounds, particularly university students, who may share similar social expectations and learning environments. Social phobia and assertiveness are influenced by cultural, social, and environmental factors (Kapoor et al., 2020). For instance, students in academic settings may avoid conflict out of politeness, while young adults in workplaces may need to assert themselves more often. This means the results may not apply to all young adults, especially those from different cultural, educational, or occupational backgrounds.

Finally, there is some overlap between social phobia and low assertiveness, which can make it difficult to clearly distinguish the two (Vagos & Pereira, 2022). Avoiding social situations, feeling uncomfortable, or worrying about negative evaluation are features of both social phobia and low assertiveness. This similarity could exaggerate the observed relationship between social phobia and assertiveness, so the findings should be interpreted with caution.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Future research should use behavioural or observational assessments of assertiveness in addition to self-report measures. Assertiveness can vary across situations, and relying solely on self-reports may not capture real-life behaviour. Methods such as scenario-based tasks, role-plays, peer or supervisor ratings, and direct observation can provide a more objective assessment (Gome et al., 2019). Using multiple assessment methods would reduce self-report bias and improve the accuracy of findings.

To improve generalizability, studies should include participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, educational levels, and occupational settings. Social phobia and assertiveness are influenced by cultural norms, social roles, and environmental expectations, which can differ across academic, workplace, and community contexts (Mohammadi et al., 2019). Cross-cultural and context-diverse sampling would help researchers understand how different environments shape the relationship between social phobia and assertiveness.

Finally, future research should refine measurement models to clearly distinguish social phobia from assertiveness. Since symptoms of social anxiety can overlap with behaviours linked to low assertiveness, advanced statistical techniques such as factor analysis or structural equation modelling can help verify whether items truly measure separate constructs (Henseler, 2017). By doing so, researchers can avoid inflated correlations and gain a more precise understanding of how social phobia affects assertiveness.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the impact of social phobia on assertiveness among young adults aged 18 to 25, guided by Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Data from 203 participants using the Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN) and

the Simple Version of the Rathus Assertiveness Schedule (SRAS) revealed that both social phobia and assertiveness levels were moderate. Among social phobia dimensions, fear of negative evaluation was most prominent, while avoidance showed the strongest negative association with assertiveness, indicating that behavioural withdrawal limits assertive behaviour more than fear alone. Overall, higher social anxiety corresponded with lower assertiveness, highlighting how restricted social experiences hinder the development of assertive skills. This study contributes empirical evidence on the underexplored relationship between social phobia and assertiveness in young adults, offering insights for future interventions to enhance social functioning and confidence.

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