

# The Relationship between Traumatic Experiences, the Prevalence of Social Anxiety and Insecure Attachment among University Students

Aishwenee A.P. Arijina<sup>1</sup>, Wu Wenzhong<sup>2</sup>, Lu Jingyi<sup>3</sup> and Ooi Boon Keat<sup>4,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Education and Social Sciences, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, 40100 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>2</sup>*College of Foreign Studies, Hubei Normal University, No. 11, Cihu Road, 435002 Huangshi City, Hubei Province, China*

<sup>3</sup>*Graduate School of Management (GSM), Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, 40100 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

<sup>4</sup>*School of Education and Social Sciences, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, 40100 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

**Abstract:** University students face unique challenges and are considered a vulnerable population, making it crucial to understand the impact of trauma on their mental health. This study aimed to investigate the associations between traumatic experiences, the prevalence of social anxiety, and insecure attachment among MSU students. The present study adopted a quantitative research approach using the Trauma Screening Questionnaire (TSQ), the DSM-5 Severity Rating of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD-D), moreover, for the purpose of assessing PTSD, the Vulnerable Attachment Styles Questionnaire (VASQ), Social Anxiety Disorder Severity, and Insecure Attachment, respectively. A total of 406 respondents participated in the research. Through descriptive analysis, data were collected using three different assessments, revealing that 67% of the students were identified as having a high risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while 6.9% experienced severe social anxiety, which was relatively low compared to the total number. Additionally, 87% of the students displayed a high level of insecure attachment. In order to test the research hypotheses, Pearson correlation analysis, linear regression analysis and path analysis were conducted in this study. The study's findings demonstrated that there was a significant correlation between traumatic experiences and insecure attachment and a non-significant correlation between traumatic experiences and social anxiety. Additionally, traumatic experiences had a significant positive effect on insecure attachment but did not significantly affect social anxiety. Lastly, traumatic experiences did not significantly affect insecure attachment through social anxiety or traumatic experiences through social anxiety.

**Keywords:** Traumatic experiences, social anxiety, insecure attachment, MSU students, post-traumatic stress disorder.

## INTRODUCTION

Experiences that cause pain on a bodily, emotional, spiritual, or psychic level are classified as traumatic events [1]. People may get extremely afraid or feel physically endangered as a result of these occurrences [2]. People react to trauma in different ways. Some people experience symptoms like intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares, and acute anxiety, which could be signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [2]. It is crucial to remember that not everyone who encounters trauma goes on to acquire PTSD; in fact, some people may just experience momentary distress as a natural response to the traumatic event [3].

However, excessive dread and worry expressed in social circumstances is a common and incapacitating mental health disease known as social anxiety disorder

[4]. Social anxiety disorder (SAD) can have a significant negative impact on students' social functioning if they have experienced DSM trauma in the past. Symptoms of SAD include overwhelming feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame that frequently accompany experiences, which can exacerbate depressive symptoms and further contribute to social withdrawal and isolation [5, 6] found that after a traumatic incident, people with heightened social anxiety vulnerability report higher levels of negative thinking about the event. This negative thinking is linked to the maintenance of social anxiety vulnerability [1] emphasises the need of attending to the particular requirements of students who have experienced trauma by highlighting the necessity of continuous therapy and strong social support for those with PTSD. Comprehending the correlation among traumatic events, social anxiety, and insecure attachment in college students can offer significant perspectives into the particular obstacles they might encounter and direct the creation of suitable remedies and assistance

\*Address correspondence to these authors at the School of Education and Social Sciences, Management and Science University, University Drive, Off Persiaran Olahraga, 40100 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia; E-mail: bkooi@msu.edu.my

programmes. This is even more clear given that several facts have shown how consent in student affairs, particularly with regard to psychosomatic problems resulting from traumatic occurrences, is a problem. [3]. This research focuses on examining the impact of severe traumatic experiences on the prevalence of social anxiety and insecure attachment among a private university student in Malaysia.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

An individual's sense of the ideal balance between closeness and distance between themselves and significant others is the central emphasis of attachment theory, a theory of psychosocial development based on an animal theoretical model [7]. The idea postulates that early attachment experiences to carers have a lasting impact on children's social interactions and adult stress management. It aims to explain the nature of the emotional connection between persons and others [8]. Rich early attachment experiences shape people's internal working models of themselves and other people, and these internal working models have a variety of effects on people's feelings, thoughts, and actions in interpersonal interactions [9]. This theory distinguishes between three types of attachment: chaotic/fear-avoidant, avoidance-distant, and anxiety-apprehensive [10]. An individual suffering from attachment trauma could feel unlovable, broken, or have no one to turn to. People could experience humiliation, inadequacy, or helplessness. Individuals may experience feelings of uneasiness and insecurity, or a sense of alienation from society [11]. This was further supported by [12] findings, which demonstrated that dissociation and problems with emotion regulation, but not emotion regulation as a significant predictor of avoidant attachment, explained the association between childhood experiences and insecure anxiety and avoidant attachment after adjusting for mental health treatment. Meanwhile, [13] study concluded that moderate levels of anxious attachment can reduce trauma-related symptoms in individuals with highly traumatic experiences.

Numerous studies on adult samples have examined the relationship between attachment and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. The results consistently point to a relationship between insecure attachment and elevated symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as a relationship between secure attachment and decreased symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder [14]. According to a study by [15], an anxious attachment style was a major negative

predictor of posttraumatic growth. The study looked at posttraumatic versus insecure attachment from a distinct perspective on post trauma and insecure attachment. Furthermore, compared to other domains of posttraumatic growth, contacts with others were considerably less likely to result in posttraumatic growth for persons with an avoidant attachment style [15]. These results have applications in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of PTSD [16]. Individuals with severe trauma symptoms don't know enough about the illness, especially when it comes to the right therapies [17]. To help people understand when to seek therapy and which therapies to utilise, it is necessary to educate the public about trauma exposure [18]. The more we understand the symptoms and how to treat them, the more those affected and their loved ones will realise they aren't alone and that help is available [18]. Raising trauma awareness and creating effective treatment plans are therefore essential to reducing the effects on learners' social anxiety and attachment styles. The results of this study can help mental health professionals, academic administrators, and legislators create focused interventions and support programmes that will cater to college students' psychological needs and ultimately improve their well-being and interpersonal relationships.

## METHODS

The study employs quantitative research method with cross-sectional survey design that permitted the measurement of the amount to which these variables are associated, as well as the nature of the correlation in the particular time frame. The study utilised social anxiety and insecure attachment as independent variables, drawing from theoretical frameworks and prior research. In contrast, a traumatic experience was the dependent variable. The primary focus of this study was on how trauma experiences directly impacted social anxiety and insecure attachment. Additionally, it has been established how social anxiety and insecure attachment were inter correlated to one with another. The mediating effects social anxiety and insecure attachment were also determined between traumatic experiences with those two variables respectively. In order to investigate the relationships between traumatic events, social anxiety, and insecure attachment, descriptive analyses were performed to look at the incidence rates of traumatic episodes, social anxiety, and insecure attachment. Pearson correlation analysis was also utilised to do this. To ascertain the effects of

traumatic experiences on social anxiety and insecure attachment, statistical analyses such as regression and path analysis were employed.

For this study, the researcher used convenience sampling as the sampling method. The population of the study consists of approximately 14,000 students overall in the campus who are from different faculties and fields of study. The population involved in this study is students who are pursuing higher education in a private university in Malaysia from various education levels. Based on [19] sampling size calculator, the required sample size is 374 respondents for the population stated. This sampling method also follows the sample size determination following Krejcie and Morgan Table [20]. However, convenience sampling was deployed after considering the feasibility in term of time, resources and logistical constraints. Participants were typically selected to those who are convenient to access, such as individuals' willingness, close proximity, and active status as per the current semester. Therefore, this study managed to obtain more than the targeted number and 406 participants who were willing to take part in the study.

Table 1 indicates that three instruments were used to measure social anxiety, insecure attachment, and traumatic experiences, respectively: the Vulnerable Attachment Style Questionnaire (VASQ), DSM-5 Social Anxiety Disorder Severity Scale (SAD-D), and Trauma Screening Questionnaire (TSQ). The scoring and range of each assessment tool are described in detail. The VASQ measures lack of attachment using two variables: insecurity and proximity-seeking.

Combining questions from three separate surveys into a single Google Form. However, the scores will be computed independently in order to examine the results of the variables. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research questionnaire, the researcher would conduct a pilot study. There will be four components to the questionnaire: one for demographics, one for PTSD, one for social anxiety, and one for insecure attachment. The initial metric connected to trauma is the Trauma Screening

Questionnaire (TSQ). It is an evaluation of traumatic event reactions based on self-report. Ten re-experiencing and arousal symptom assessment questions drawn from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are included. It's an easy score to get. Only yes or no answers are accepted for the questions. Six or more affirmative responses, as per the DSM-IV [21], suggest that the respondent is highly likely to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The DSM-5 Social Anxiety Disorder Severity Scale (SAD-D) is the second assessment instrument used in this investigation. This 10-item measure, also known as a social phobia measure, was created especially for people who are 18 years of age and older. Its purpose is to gauge the severity of social anxiety symptoms. The purpose of the examination is to be given to people who have been diagnosed with social anxiety disorder or who show symptoms of social anxiety that are clinically significant as part of their first evaluation before further follow-up sessions. With each item on the scale, students are asked to rank the degree of their social anxiety on a 5-point rating system, with "Never" denoting no social anxiety at all to "All the time." Higher scores indicate more severe symptoms of social anxiety disorder or social phobia. The total score can vary from 0 to 40.

The Vulnerable Attachment Style Questionnaire (VASQ) is the third tool used to examine insecure attachment in subjects. This self-report measure is intended to assess adult attachment styles, with a special emphasis on vulnerable attachment types and their possible link with psychopathology, including severe depression, which has long been a source of worry in attachment theory. The VASQ measures lack of attachment using two variables. The first aspect is insecurity, which includes sentiments and actions linked with discomfort or obstacles to intimacy, such as distrust, hurt, or rage when disappointed. The second aspect is proximity-seeking, which reflects reliance on others or a need for intimacy (for example, feeling melancholy when by themselves experiencing anxiety when significant ones are gone). For this research, 12 items from the second factor will be utilized, and

**Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha of the Instruments**

Research Instruments	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Trauma screening questionnaire (TSQ)	10	0.773
DSM-5 Social Anxiety Disorder Severity Scale (SAD-D)	10	0.863
Vulnerable Attachment Style Questionnaire (VASQ)	12	0.824

reverse scoring will be applied to certain items as necessary.

## RESULTS

The study of population characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, education, income, and occupation, is referred to as demographic. In order to obtain information and insights about various groups of people and their behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes, it entails gathering and evaluating data on these aspects. Public policy development, market research, and the social sciences all make extensive use of demographic data.

406 presently enrolled students at Shah Alam's Management and Science University participated in the study. The age distribution of the participants was as follows: 18–20 years old (31%; n=126), 21–23 years old (49.3%; n=200), and 24–26 years old (19.7%; n=80). The majority of the participants were female (54.4%; n=221).

With a Pearson correlation value of 0.037, the study discovered a somewhat insignificant weak relationship between the occurrence of social anxiety and traumatic experiences. Nonetheless, the p-value of 0.453 suggests that there is not statistical significance in this association, implying that the observed link most likely occurred by accident. On the other hand, the study showed a slight significant positive correlation with Pearson correlation value of 0.161 between traumatic experiences and insecure attachment, which is statistically significant at a very low significance threshold of 0.001. The relationship is noteworthy even though the with minimal correlation value. Therefore, this observed correlation between the variables is considered worthy of further investigation or consideration. These results shed light on the intricate interplay between these variables and provide valuable insights into the potential impact on the psychological well-being and inter personal relationships of the students.

Table 3 demonstrates that there is no association between traumatic events and social anxiety, with the

**Table 2 Respondent Demographic Background**

Demographic Item (N=406)		Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	221	54.4
	Male	185	45.6
Age	18-20	126	31.0
	21-23	200	49.3
	24-26	80	19.7
Race	Malay	181	44.6
	Indian	141	34.7
	Chinese	64	15.8
	Other	20	4.9

**Table 3: Pearson Relationships Among Insecure Attachment, Social Anxiety, and Traumatic Experiences.**

Independent variable	Dependent Variables	r	p
Traumatic experiences	Social anxiety	0.037	0.453
	Insecure attachment	0.161**	0.001

\*\*correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 4: Linear Regression Analysis**

Variables	Unstandardised coefficient		Standardised coefficient	t	p
	B	Standard Error	Beta		
Traumatic experiences → Social anxiety	0.158	0.210	0.037	0.751	0.453
Traumatic experiences → Insecure attachment	0.664	0.203	0.161	3.268	0.001**

regression coefficient between the two variables being 0.037 ( $t=0.751$ ,  $p=0.453>0.05$ ). Relative to insecure attachment, the regression coefficient value between traumatic experiences and insecure attachment is 0.161 ( $t=3.268$ ,  $p=0.001<0.01$ ), suggesting that there is a substantial positive association between the two. Consequently, while traumatic events had no effect on social anxiety, they do have a significant favourable effect on insecure attachment.

As shown in Figure 1, Traumatic experiences has a significant positive influence relationship, with Insecure attachment, while Traumatic experiences has no influence relationship with Social anxiety.

**4.4. Path Analysis**

Table 5 indicates that when social anxiety affects insecure attachment, this path did not show significance ( $z=0.254$ ,  $p=0.800>0.05$ ), indicating that there was no association between social anxiety and insecure attachment. The effect of traumatic experiences on insecure attachment had a standardised path coefficient value of 0.159 $>0$ , and this path was significant at the 0.01 level ( $z=3.249$ ,  $p=0.001<0.01$ ), indicating that there was a significant

positive effect for traumatic experiences on insecure attachment. When insecure attachment was related to social anxiety, this path does not exhibit significance ( $z=1.287$ ,  $p=0.198>0.05$ ), suggesting that insecure attachment is not impacted on this path. It indicated that there was no significant relationship between traumatic experiences and social anxiety ( $z=0.063$ ,  $p=0.949>0.05$ ), indicating that there was no relationship between traumatic experiences and social anxiety. Anxiety and connection were not significant.

As seen in Figure 2, although Traumatic experiences alone had no significant effect on Social anxiety, but had a significant effect on insecure attachment. Therefore, Traumatic experiences through Insecure attachment did not have a significant effect on Social anxiety. Also according to Sobel test value and the p-values in Table 5 and Figure 2, traumatic experiences shows a direct effect on insecure attachment but had no significant indirect effect when the social anxiety was presence. This shows social anxiety should not be part in the relationship between traumatic experiences and insecure attachment whereby traumatic experiences could cause insecurity in an individual but not certain would contribute to the

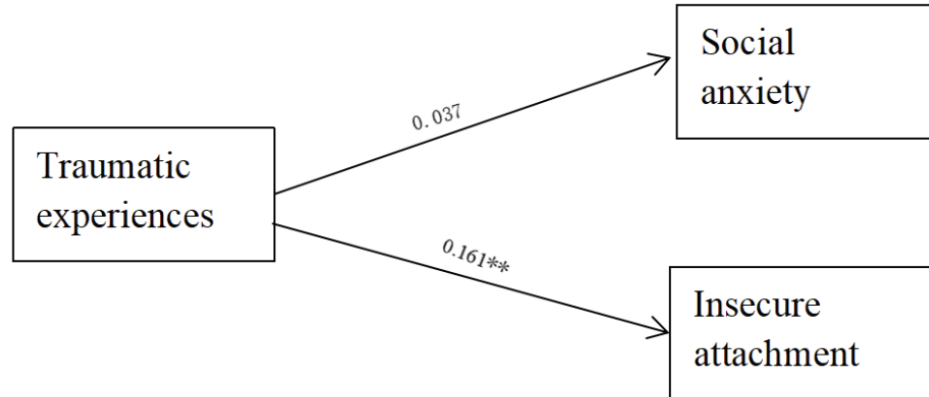
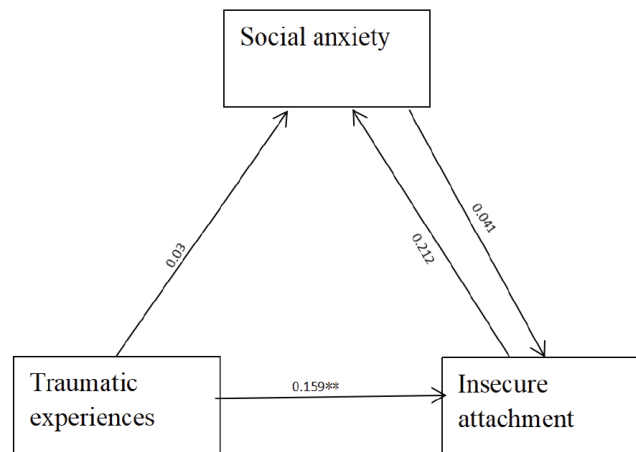


Figure 1: Direct relationship graph of variables.

Table 5: Path Analysis between Traumatic Experiences, Social Anxiety and Insecure Attachment

Variables	Standardised path coefficients	Unstandardised path coefficients	SE Standard Error	z (CR) Critical ratios	p Significant value
TE→IA	0.159	0.657	0.202	3.249	0.001
TE→SA	0.003	0.015	0.232	0.063	0.949
IA→SA	0.212	0.216	0.168	1.287	0.198
SA→IA	0.041	0.040	0.157	0.254	0.800
TE→IA→SA	Sobel Test Value		0.6678		0.504
TE→SA→IA			0.0129		0.989

Note: TE-Traumatic experiences, SA-Social anxiety and IA-Insecure attachment.



**Figure 2:** The Mediating Effects between the Variables.

social anxiety. In addition, Table 2 and 3 also show that Traumatic experiences did not have a significant effect relationship and impact specifically on social anxiety.

## DISCUSSION

The current study looks into the connection between the respondents' insecure attachment, social anxiety, and traumatic experiences. The results demonstrate that 67% of the students had a high probability of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 6.9% had significant social anxiety, and 87% had a high degree of insecure attachment. The greater number of students displaying a high risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) implies that a sizeable section of the student body may have experienced traumatic events, which can have a substantial effect on their psychological health. A number of reasons, including individual differences in temperament, socialisation, experiences, or coping methods used by students to control their anxiety in social situations, may contribute to the smaller percentage of students having severe social anxiety. The high degree of insecure attachment among the university students could be caused by a number of things, such as interactions with others, family dynamics, and early experiences.

The results of the tests utilising Pearson's correlation indicated that there was no meaningful linear association between social anxiety and traumatic experiences. While social anxiety was not found to be correlated with traumatic experiences in this study, [22] found that one-third of the participants in the social anxiety group had clinically significant symptoms of traumatic stress disorder or met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder as a coping mechanism for dealing with traumatic experiences following their most

severe social trauma. Additionally, this study used linear regression analysis to examine further and discovered that traumatic experiences had no discernible impact on social anxiety. This shows that while traumatic experiences could contribute to the development of social anxiety, other factors, such as cognitive biases, might be more important in explaining the emergence of social anxiety symptoms among students. Nonetheless, there is a strong beneficial link discovered between insecure attachment and traumatic experiences. Furthermore, this study discovered that traumatic events significantly improved insecure attachment. This suggests that the degree of insecure attachment rises in tandem with traumatic experiences. Similar results were observed in the study conducted by [23], which discovered that insecure attachment may have a connection between various traumatic experiences and adverse effects. [24] study provided a detailed analysis of the effects of traumatic experiences on insecure attachment, concluding that such experiences had a large positive impact on insecure attachment, in addition to a considerable negative impact's study also discovered that attachment insecurity mediated the relationship between childhood trauma and PTSD symptoms. It used traumatic experiences to explain attachment styles, with neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse predicting secure attachment in a significantly negative way and insecure attachment styles in a significantly positive way [25]. According to attachment theory, a person's attachment style and ensuing interpersonal interactions are shaped by their early experiences with carers. Insecure attachment patterns can result from traumatic experiences like abuse or neglect that interfere with the development of secure attachment ties [26].

Furthermore, this study found that while traumatic experiences have a significant positive impact on insecure attachment, they do not influence social anxiety through insecure attachment, nor do traumatic experiences influence social anxiety through insecure attachment. This was discovered using path analysis. The impact of trauma on relationship patterns and interpersonal trust is one explanation for the established results. People's sense of safety and security in relationships can be disrupted by traumatic experiences such as abuse, neglect, or loss [27]. Anxiety, avoidance, or ambivalence that result from insecure attachment styles may be adaptive reactions to the perceived threat and unpredictability of interpersonal interactions [28]. The effect of trauma-related symptoms on attachment dynamics is another aspect to take into account. Traumatic experiences frequently result in a variety of emotional and behavioural symptoms that obstruct the establishment of secure attachments and promote the emergence of insecure attachment styles. Traumatized individuals may have trouble trusting others and are more likely to exhibit attachment patterns linked to avoidance or anxiety [29].

The results point to a high frequency of traumatic events and insecure attachment, as well as a complicated interaction and reciprocal relationship between trauma, social anxiety, and attachment. The results of the study indicate that more research is necessary to determine the causes that lead to the development of social anxiety symptoms in this students group, as the non-significant influence and association between trauma and social anxiety contradict preconceived notions. The attachment theory is supported by the strong link and influence between trauma and insecure attachment, which also emphasises the possible effects of trauma on the development of attachment.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the correlations and effects between traumatic experiences, social anxiety, and insecure attachment among university students. The study's findings demonstrated a high frequency of both insecure attachment and traumatic events, but no meaningful relationships or consequences were discovered between traumatic experiences and social anxiety. More research is needed to determine the causal and temporal relationships between these variables. The significance of this study is that it can help relevant organisations to adopt targeted mental health interventions and support services to create a

supportive environment that is conducive to fostering resilience and positive mental health outcomes. Mental health practitioners can also benefit from the findings of the study to develop evidence-based interventions and treatment plans. Ultimately, this research contributes to enhanced mental health support and improved overall well-being of individuals within and outside of the university.

This study adds a great deal to our existing understanding of the subject and offers insightful information that will be helpful to researchers, mental health professionals, and anybody else who wants to know more about how to effectively treat attachment disorders and the psychological effects of trauma. The results open our eyes to new angles and expand our comprehension of the complex relationships between these variables, opening the door to more effective intervention plans and therapies.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No interest was declared.

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It was a cross-sectional study designed to recruit more than 406 university students for a quantitative survey.

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