

Is Library Anxiety a Real Phenomenon: A Review

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Abstract

This paper was composed with the objective of engaging in an analytical review of literature related to Library Anxiety in students with special emphasis on academic libraries. This paper extensively covers the spectrums of Library Anxiety theory, scales for measuring Library Anxiety, sources of Library Anxiety, impacts of Library Anxiety on students, and ways and means of reducing Library Anxiety. This analytical review points to the fact that Library Anxiety is a common phenomenon among students that adversely influence their ability to utilize information sources and services which affects their academic performance. Suggestions are also made for strategies to reduce students' Library Anxiety levels and uplift their self-confidence, thereby helping them to become effective library users who are free from unpleasant and uneasy feelings.

Keywords: Library Anxiety, Library Anxiety scales, university students, academic libraries.

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Introduction

Library Anxiety is a negative or uncomfortable feeling experienced by library users that obstructs them from the optimization of library services and resources. The term "Library Anxiety" was first coined in 1986 by Constance Mellon, who postulated Library Anxiety as an emotional and psychological discomfort that obstructs users from acceding to the optimum utilization of library resources, paraphernalia, and services. Jiao et.al (1996) highlighted this phenomenon as an uncomfortable feeling or emotional disposition experienced in a library setting that has cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioural ramifications (p.152). They postulate this situation as a common phenomenon that can have a negative impact on students' information-seeking abilities and research-related activities in a library environment, and most students experience it at least in one period of their academic cycle. Although academic libraries aim to provide services and resources for students to facilitate their pursuit of academic success, Library Anxiety has become one of the most significant barriers for them that would suboptimize their abilities to get the maximum benefits of library resources and services (Carlie, 2007). In this context, it is amply evident that to facilitate students on accruing the maximum benefit of an academic library, the phenomenon of Library Anxiety must adequately be grappled by academic librarians.

Since the phenomenon in question is reported as a psychological barrier that hinders the productive employment of library facilities, this paper aims to review literature pertaining to Library Anxiety with a special focus on academic libraries. Accordingly, the review explores Library Anxiety theory, scales for measuring Library Anxiety, sources of Library Anxiety and suggests solutions and make recommendations to reduce Library Anxiety among students.

Methodology

Three databases, including Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Library Literature & Information Science (EBSCOhost), and Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), were employed for fathoming the literature related to Library Anxiety. Prior to the commencement of literature survey, a predetermined criterion was established for the selection of articles with the aim of reaching a better alignment with the focal objective of the review. In this context, being a peer-reviewed article and a study based on academic libraries were recognized as the essential criterion for selecting the articles. In pursuant to the prequalifying criterion, eighteen peer-reviewed journals falling under the predetermined category were scrutinised in this review. The search terms "Library Anxiety" and "Library Anxiety in undergraduates /graduates" were instrumentalized to filter articles from peer-reviewed journals. The nomenclature of “undergraduates and graduates” was purposely employed with the intention of setting the subject boundary within a manageable scope in the light of academic periscope of the study.

The Evolution of the Library Anxiety Theory

Although Mellon coined the term “Library Anxiety” in 1986, obviously, the subject has been documented previously in similar studies conducted before 1986 to investigate the psychological barriers experienced by students when using library resources which in many ways overlaps with the subject of Library Anxiety. However, authors had not used the term “Library Anxiety” to define the situation. Two major studies conducted by [Swope & Katzer \(1972\)](#) and [Koza \(1982\)](#) investigating the psychological barriers in using library resources can be identified as the earliest studies.

[Swope & Katzer \(1972\)](#) highlighted that the level of frustration in using libraries is high for many people, and majority of students were reluctant to ask for information from the library staff. Their study sample consisted of students from the Carnegie Library of Syracuse University. The students in the sample were selected randomly, and the researcher conducted structured questionnaire-based interviews to determine how many students had problems related to library services and usage and of those, how many sought help from a librarian. Their study revealed that 65% of those with information needs did not ask for librarian's help. Further, the researchers discovered that most students felt that their questions or information needs were too simple or too much of a bother for a librarian.

Furthermore, somewhat similar research was conducted by [Koza \(1982\)](#) to examine the psychological barriers between college students and librarians. To explore this phenomenon, he surveyed 1021 undergraduates from Victoria College, Burswood Campus, in Australia. He provided evidence to show that an overwhelming number of students pursuing their undergraduate courses in tertiary educational institutes are found to be unwilling to look for necessary assistance from the staff of reference libraries. The hesitation was primarily caused due to students' belief that their questions were too trivial and insignificant.

Although earlier researchers investigated different types of psychological barriers experienced by students in a library environment, [Mellon's \(1986\)](#) study was remarkable as it contributed to the formation of the "Library Anxiety" theory. She explained, "Students become so anxious about having to gather information in a library for their research paper that they are unable to approach the problem logically or effectively" ([Mellon, 1986, p. 138](#)). She conducted a two-year qualitative study to explore students' feelings about using the library by students for their research work, and the study

consisted of 6,000 students. After two years of research, Mellon concluded that “75% to 85% of students in each class described their initial response to the library in terms of fear or anxiety”. Accordingly, students used terms such as “scary,” “overpowering,” “lost,” “helpless,” “confused,” and “fear of the unknown” repeatedly to express their feelings (Mellon, 1986; Gardijan, 2021).

Mellon further elaborated that most students highlighted the fear of “being lost” in the library. According to her, the feeling of being lost was derived from four causes listed below:

- (1) Being overwhelmed with the library’s size.
- (2) Lack of knowledge about the organization of resources.
- (3) Lack of confidence about how to start searching for information.
- (4) Lack of understanding about what to do in the library (Mellon, 1986, p.162).

Although librarians and researchers had observed similar characteristics of anxiety in students when using library resources and services, Mellon’s study is remarkable in this respect since she precisely defined and labelled the term.

Measuring Library Anxiety

Following Mellon’s (1986) research contribution and the coining of the term “Library Anxiety,” there arose a felt logical need for developing an appropriate scale of measurement to quantify the levels of Library Anxiety. Mellon developed the theoretical underpinnings of Library Anxiety based on qualitative research, but no apparatus was proposed for quantifying Library Anxiety appropriately using a reliable measurement scale (Gardijan, 2021). Hence, there was a need to fill the vacuum by developing a quantitative scale to measure Library Anxiety.

As a further development on the subject, Bostick (1992) developed and

validated the Library Anxiety Scale (LAS), the first instrument solely developed to measure Library Anxiety among college students. [Bostick](#) developed LAS as a part of her PhD research. Her research focused on to develop a valid instrument to measure Library Anxiety (p.63). [Bostick](#) highlighted that since Mellon's theory was qualitative, the components cannot be measured individually without using a quantitative scale. As a result, she was able to develop a scale containing 43 measurement variables to gauge Library Anxiety. The measurement apparatus was designed with the inclusion of a voluntary response generating questions that encompass five significant origins of Library Anxiety, and according to the measurement, above average response received for any of the areas related to those five factors denotes a significant degree of Library Anxiety (Table 1).

Following the development of the LAS, many researchers attempted to modify it. Researchers used different versions of the scale to measure Library Anxiety from different academic library perspectives. Accordingly, [Shoham & Mizrachi \(2001\)](#) developed H-LAS by modifying [Bostick's](#) LAS and translating it into Hebrew. They refactored it to have 35 items to capture the cultural mosaic. This refactored scale (H-LAS) consists of seven key factors (Table 1).

Developing modifications to the LAS continued unabated, and [Van Kampen \(2004\)](#) developed the Multidimensional Library Anxiety Scale (MLAS) hinged on [Bostick's](#) scale. MLAS proposed by [Van Kampen](#) encompasses 54 measurement indicators that capture doctoral candidates' degree of Library Anxiety. The measurement comprises six behavioral and attitudinal dimensions focusing on a library's physical space, staff, equipment and comfortability (Table 1). Furthermore, [Świgoń \(2011\)](#) developed a new version labelled as the P-LAS (Polish Library Anxiety Scale) which hinges upon some other specific scales namely [Bostick's](#) LAS, Multidimensional

Library Anxiety Scale (MLAS), Hebrew Library Anxiety Scale (H-LAS). Continuing the same line of thinking, [Song et al. \(2014\)](#) refactored the LAS and developed the C-LAS (Chinese-Library Anxiety Scale), and subsequently, [Doris et al. \(2017\)](#) developed Greek-Library Anxiety Scale (G-LAS) based on the LAS to measure Library Anxiety of Greek students (Gardijan, 2021).

Moving further into more sophistication in the model development, [Anwar et al. \(2012\)](#) presented yet another scale (AQAK) using Bostick's Library Anxiety Scale. AQAK includes 40 statements related to the library environments' paradigm changes (Table 1). When developing the scale, they focused on undergraduates of Kuwait University.

After academic scrutiny of the Library Anxiety scales mentioned above, it is obvious that almost all scales are deeply rooted and hinged on Bostick's LAS. However, there are controversies and moot points raised about using the LAS to measure anxiety in technology-based environments. In this regard, [Kwon \(2004, cited in Jan et al., 2016\)](#) reported that “Bostick's Library Anxiety scale was now obsolete and inadequate to measure Library Anxiety in a technological and multicultural environment”. As a result, it is evident from the literature that several efforts have been made to modify the first versions of Bostick's scales, which led to the emergence of updated versions including the MLAS, H-LAS, AQAK, P-LAS, C-LAS, and G-LAS. As the literature review points out, the LAS has been modified into several versions since 1992 to align with the need of socio-cultural differences of communities and concomitant technological advancements.

All the above details boil down to one indisputable conclusion that there is a necessity for an upgraded and culturally appropriate scale for measuring Library Anxiety in different library-specific situations around the world.

Table 1

Different versions of Library Anxiety scales derived from Bostick's LAS (1992)

Modified versions	Measures	Researchers
H-LAS (Hebrew-Library Anxiety Scale)	(1) Staff factor, (2) Knowledge factor, (3) Language factor, (4) Physical comfort factor, (5) Library computer comfort factor, (6) Library policies or hours factor, and (7) Resources factor	Shoham & Mizrachi (2001)
Multidimensional Library Anxiety Scale (MLAS)	(1) Comfort and confidence when using the library, (2) Information search process and general Library Anxiety, (3) Barriers concerning staff, (4) Importance of understanding how to use the library, (5) Comfort level with technology, (6) Comfort level while inside the library building	Van Kampen (2004)
P-LAS (Polish Library Anxiety Scale)	(1) Barriers with staff, (2) Affective barriers, (3) Technological barriers, (4) Library knowledge barriers, (5) Library comfort barriers, and (6) Resources barriers	Świgoń (2011)
AQAK	(1) Information resources, (2) Library staff, (3) User knowledge, (4) Library environment, (5) User education	Anwar et al. (2012)
C-LAS (Chinese-Library Anxiety Scale),	(1) Resources, (2) Retrieval, (3) Regulations, (4) Staff, (5) Knowledge, (6) Comfort, and (7) Affection	Song et al. (2014)
G-LAS (Greek-Library Anxiety Scale)	(1) Barriers with Staff, (2) Affective barriers, (3) Technological barriers, (4) Knowledge of library services barriers, (5) Knowledge of library services barriers, (6) Library comfort barriers, (8) Resources barriers, (8) Rules barriers	Doris et al. (2017)

Sources and Implications of Library Anxiety

Subsequent to the early studies, many researchers further contributed to the body of knowledge relating to Library Anxiety and its impact on students. The first significant study in this respect was carried out by [Mech and Brooks \(1995, cited in Lee, 2011\)](#) by comparing Library Anxiety to general trait anxiety using 153 respondents. They employed the LAS and the study revealed that Library Anxiety is different from trait anxiety. It was followed by a number of research work was conducted by different academicians investigating the reasons for Library Anxiety. In this context, studies conducted by [Jiao & Onwuegbuzie](#) are significant because they have conducted a series of studies in a consistent manner after publishing their first study in 1996. Accordingly, [Cleveland \(2004\)](#) and [Świgoń \(2011\)](#) analyzed how Jiao & Onwuegbuzie consistently utilized Bostick's LAS to quantify and assess different factors associated with Library Anxiety, such as the relationship between Library Anxiety and other psychological characteristics, social interdependence ([Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 2002](#)), perfectionism ([Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1998](#)), and Library Anxiety and study habits ([Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 2000](#)). After a thorough perusal of the series of studies conducted by [Onwuegbuzie & Jiao](#), one can conclude that the main focus has been on a variety of factors that identify factors attributing to Library Anxiety among students.

Apart from the above-mentioned series of studies, several other researchers have conducted parallel research with Jiao & Onwuegbuzie to identify reasons for Library Anxiety in students and their effects ([Wildemuth, 2017](#)). In a nutshell, the main sources of Library Anxiety can be identified as follows:

1. Technical Barriers

Technical barriers can be identified as an obstacle that causes Library Anxiety among students. In particular, [Bostick's \(1992\)](#) findings demonstrate that technological and instrument-driven obstacles inflict more anxiety in graduate students than undergraduates or college students. At the same time, [Jiao & Onwuegnuzie \(2000\)](#) and [Erfanmanesh \(2011\)](#) revealed that students feel anxiety about utilizing library equipment and technical devices. Specifically, Erfanmanesh investigated on Library Anxiety in students at Shiraz University, Iran, and identified an average to a high level of anxiety among the majority (79%) of respondents.

Contrary to the findings of [Jiao & Onwuegnuzie \(2000\)](#) and [Erfanmanesh \(2011\)](#), however, a new study conducted by [Lu & Adkins \(2012\)](#) highlighted that the familiarisation with mechanical tools and resources attributed to the development of a natural tendency among the students to access the library services and technological equipment.

2. Language Barriers

When looking at how language barriers can cause Library Anxiety, [Sinnasamy & Karim \(2016\)](#) highlighted that exposure to a vast number of English-language resources generates anxiety in non-native English speakers when they try to search and retrieve these resources to learn (p.1627). In line with the same results, [Onwuegnuzie & Jiao \(1997\)](#) highlighted that Library Anxiety was very high among young male students whose native language is not English. Also, students' lack of fluency in the English language affects their acceptance of a given task, which can significantly decrease their self-esteem and self-confidence. Accordingly, international students and non-native English speakers experienced a considerable degree of uneasiness if they were not versatile with the way of tracing documents and references using

catalogues or user guides made available by the libraries.

3. Staff and Library instructions

Attitudes of library staff and lack of library instructions might have an impact on Library Anxiety. [Carlie \(2007\)](#) highlighted that “not knowing where to find things in the library, not knowing what to do in the library, and not knowing how to conduct library searches are the underlying sources of students’ fears and anxieties in the library” (p.134) Also, [Bostick \(1992\)](#) revealed that the barriers with the staff were the highest single reported factor that caused anxiety for students.

Similar suggestions were made by [Jan et al. \(2016\)](#) in their study to examine the relationship of Library Anxiety with library use, academic performance, gender, and academic discipline among undergraduates. The sample of the study consisted of 725 undergraduates belonging to several disciplines from different universities in Pakistan. They utilized the AQAK developed by [Anwar et al. \(2012\)](#) to carry out their study. The researchers identified that the lack of information literacy skills caused Library Anxiety that resulted in avoiding the library and non-library use (p.574). Hence, it is evident that a lack of proper instructions and information literacy skills can make students feel anxious about using the academic library.

4. Library space and comfortability

Discussing the library space as a factor to determine the level of library anxiety, [Onwuegbuzie et al. \(2004\)](#) reported that users' "positive or negative first impressions can reduce or increase Library Anxiety." In this context, to mitigate library space-related anxiety, several studies suggested a set of potential strategies in handling Library Anxiety, such as proper maintenance of library equipment, and jargon-free terminology ([Onwuegbuzie et al, 2004](#);

Carlie, 2007).

Considering the factors mentioned above, it is evident that many different sources can contribute to the degree of anxiety in users of a library environment.

Suggestions to Reduce Library Anxiety

The prevalence of Library Anxiety in students hindering their ability to use library resources and services effectively has been highlighted in numerous research findings. Hence, the employment of proper strategies to make students free from being anxious when using library resources or services is crucial. Librarians are not only responsible but also bound by duty to create an end-user-driven and alluring library environment for students through improvement of their skills and self-confidence. Accordingly, the following suggestions are developed for effectively reducing Library Anxiety among students and uplifting their self-confidence when accessing library services.

1. Library Instruction

Library instruction helps students to have a clear understanding of a library and to improve their skills in navigating effectively through library resources to fulfil their information needs. Hence, instructional approaches can be used as a management tool in a significant way in reducing Library Anxiety. Further, the instructional programs and activities such as training sessions, library tours, one-shot instructional sessions, and face-to-face instructions would be effective in developing information literacy skills and competency in the effective navigation of information sources. As [Walsh \(2011\)](#) explained, the conduct of a structured dialogue in-person aimed at providing guidance has shown a tendency to reduce students' hesitation for seeking personal

assistance of library staff.

Moving further into a deeper exploration of the subject, [Cleveland \(2001\)](#) conducted a study to determine “whether Library Anxiety is reduced by bibliographic instructions or computer-assisted instructions” (p.15). The study revealed that students who attended bibliographic instruction sessions conducted by the library indicated a lower level of Library Anxiety compared with a control group, which did not participate in either bibliographic instruction or a computer-based tutorial conducted by librarians (p.26). Hence, it is suggested that librarians should incorporate both computer-assisted instruction and person-to-person instruction to assist students in utilizing library resources.

2. Positive Interaction with Librarians

The way librarians interact with students can be a factor that increases or decrease anxiety in students using libraries. As [Bostick \(1992\)](#) highlighted, “Barriers with staff – the librarian is also perceived as too busy to provide assistance in using the library” (p. 84) can increase Library Anxiety of students to a higher level. Librarians need to maintain clear and effective two-way communication with their users. In particular, reference librarians need to use strategies to encourage students to ask questions and seek help through the reference desk in finding the information needed for their academic activities. The other aspect of the phenomenon is, despite engaging in activities leading to a higher level of motivation of the library users, the necessity of advancing the quality of library services. This can be accomplished by organizing library staff empowerment programs such as participation in scholarly seminars, workshops to enhance professional career development to a significant magnitude. A supplementary strategy would be, to build up the capacity of library staff enabling them to serve the library clientele in a fuller and more

soothing environment. This would benefit both service providers and users by way of reaching a higher level of job satisfaction and user satisfaction respectively.

3. Clear Signage and Welcoming Environment

Clear signage can be identified as a powerful visual tool that provides users with effective guidelines to navigate the library system. As [Luca & Narayan \(2016\)](#) highlighted, “Signage can welcome, guide, instruct, and delight users, helping them navigate the complex information world of any library.” This signifies that clear, readable, and updated signage is the key to providing a sustainable library experience. Further, the physical environment of a library, such as space arrangement, shelf arrangement, lighting, location of reference or information desk, reading rooms, etc., can have an impact, positive or negative on students’ Library Anxiety levels (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2004; Carlie, 2007; Gardijan, 2021). Arranging the library environment as a more user-friendly and well-guided place is a crucial factor that goes a long way in improving the users' self-confidence to use library services and resources.

In addition, it is important to focus on and monitor how students access information via the library website. In some instances, there may be students who are anxious because they cannot access databases or don't have adequate skills to perform information searching tasks. Librarians should continuously monitor feedbacks from students and attempt to improve students’ skills and self-confidence and to help develop themselves as effective users of information.

Future Research

Future studies can be directed toward discovering how new technological advancements can be instrumentalized in the library, for

producing mitigating effects on the degree of students' Library Anxiety. It would be prudent to explore how students interact with reference librarians within the context of technological advancements in the process of being involved with their academic endeavors. Another interesting dimension for further investigation is to focus research attention on examining the difference in degrees of Library Anxiety when undergraduates interact with librarians in-person and online. A further intriguing and interesting phenomenon would arise if the research field were extended to ascertain whether Library Anxiety of students is subjected to a significant aberration when the gender identification of the student differs from that of the service provider. Furthermore, if researchers could invent a novel LAS that is capable of capturing Library Anxiety in techno-savvy library environments, then it could be considered as another breakthrough in the paradigms of Library Anxiety.

Conclusions

It is evident that Library Anxiety is a real phenomenon that generates an uneasiness or uncomfortable state of mind in the users of library services when accessing information. Students are influenced by anxiety primarily due to a multiplicity of factors encompassing technical barriers with staff, language incompetency, ambiguous library instructions, ideological setbacks, and information illiteracy.

This review examined Library Anxiety theory that impinges on how the parameters can be measured, sources of Library Anxiety, and how the phenomenon affects student behavior and finally forwarded a set of lucid suggestions on how to minimize Library Anxiety that is bound to cohabit as a negative entropy in the mind of an enthusiastic learner. Furthermore, the review ventures on exploring how librarians can play a positive role in

transforming their libraries into more user-friendly, collegial, and comfortable social entities that make the learner's task more enjoyable. In the context of the facts summed up in this article, the most plausible conclusion one can reach is that, since Library Anxiety is a real phenomenon, librarians should develop a set of management strategies and constantly monitor students' feedback to make libraries more user-friendly and anxious-free places for students.

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