Causes and Reduction Strategies of Research Writing Anxiety among Social Science Undergraduate Students at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, Tanzania

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Abstract: This study examined the causes and reduction strategies of research writing anxiety among social science undergraduate students at The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA) in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. A descriptive research design was adopted to facilitate the collection of quantitative data using a structured close -ended questionnaire. A total of sample size of 168 respondents were determined, using an online sample size calculator. Data was analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 19. The findings exhibit a significant prevalence of anxiety among students caused by several factors such as lack of research writing skills, unfamiliarity with academic conventions, and time constraints. Additionally, the study identified several strategies to reduce research writing anxiety, including dedicating a semester for research, selecting appropriate supervisors, allowing more time for research writing, limiting undergraduate students to writing only a proposal and making research an optional module. In light of the prevalence of anxiety among students, the study recommends that university administrators implement targeted support programs, including writing workshops and counseling services, to help students manage and reduce their anxiety levels effectively*.

Keywords: Anxiety; research writing anxiety; anxiety reduction strategies.

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Introduction

Academic writing can be challenging for both students and young researchers. While young researchers and educators engage in scholarly writing for career advancement, students often write research papers as part of graduation requirements (Mubofu & Mambo, 2022). This process can be stressful for students, affecting them academically and emotionally. Some may develop anxiety issues that affect their well-being and their academic performance (Silva & Brumini, 2019).

Literature has explored students' anxiety in the context of learning and academic writing. Anxiety, in this paper, refers to the anticipation of future threats. However, different people from different organizations use it interchangeably with fear (Crocq, 2022). Hasanah et al. (2020) asserts that anxiety can disrupt students' learning by causing confusion, self-doubt and distorted perception, resulting in chronic tension and difficulty with daily academic tasks.

Academic challenges frequently trigger anxiety in individuals, which can negatively affect students in the classroom (Miri & Joia, 2018). Research-related anxiety appears to be prevalent among students in African countries, affecting their academic research endeavors. For instance, Adekoya and Adekoya (2018) discovered that writing anxiety was a significant challenge among Nigerian undergraduate students. The author suggested that effective peer review and teacher feedback can reduce such anxiety.

Another study by Aloka and Ndunge (2014) sought to establish the relationship between anxiety levels and academic achievement among students in selected secondary schools in Lang'ata District, Kenya. The study suggested that students should take responsibility for seeking anxiety management help from teacher counsellors. The authors made it clear that using teacher counsellors is one of effective strategies to reduce the writing anxiety among students.

Based on the findings of Hasanah et al. (2020) on the prevalence of anxiety-related psychological problems among students during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of online learning, it is clear that research writing anxiety may have been worsened during that period. As a result, schools should acknowledge the increased levels of anxiety experienced by students, particularly when transitioning to online learning environments, and take proactive steps to address the research writing anxiety effectively. Proactive approaches may include specialized support services, such as online writing workshops, virtual peer review sessions and access to online resources to improve research writing skills and reduce anxiety.

Guannan (2018) identified various coping mechanisms to alleviate anxiety and foster English language skills among Chinese students studying abroad, such as cognitive restructuring, social support, self-directed learning, time management, and relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation. The author also noted that cultural and environmental factors can contribute to students' anxiety, as many Chinese students perceived English learning as a challenging task, often exhibiting overt anxiety during classroom activities and exams.

Ho's (2016) study on anxiety causes among Chinese students identified factors such as a lack of English writing proficiency, time constraints, and fear of criticism as contributing to anxiety. This issue also extends to students learning Chinese, especially those pursuing education in institutions where English is the medium of instruction. For instance, English proficiency tests are required to ensure that international students can effectively communicate in an English-speaking academic environment, preventing language barriers from causing anxiety.

Kennedy et al. (2020) conducted a study on research report writing anxiety among graduate students in Nigeria. Their survey of 200 graduate students across five Nigerian universities found that 60% of participants experienced anxiety related to writing research reports. This anxiety stemmed from challenges in time management, writing skills deficits and fear of failure, often leading to procrastination and impeding progress in theses and dissertations.

Swalve et al. (2021) explored writing anxiety's impact on academic achievement among undergraduate students in the United States. Their findings indicated that writing anxiety significantly predicted lower academic performance in writing-related courses. While they did not specifically address the need for supervisor support, they suggested that interventions targeting writing anxiety and self-efficacy could enhance students' writing abilities and reduce anxiety. Anxious students may avoid discussing their concerns with supervisors, leading to delays in research project completion. Anxiety can hinder effective communication and support-seeking behavior, complicating interactions with supervisors and hindering progress, which can result in missed deadlines and other adverse outcomes.

Kracker and Wang (2002) investigated about research anxiety and how it affects students' perceptions of research. Students wrote reflective essays after participating in simulated research sessions. In such an attempt, many students experienced tension, anxiety and uncertainty during the research process, which hurt their impressions of research. In their writings, students showed dissatisfaction, perplexity and lack of confidence.

While junior and senior doctorate students experienced similar degrees of research writing anxiety, Lumakang and Miralles (2023) and Ho (2016) found that senior doctorate students showed better self-efficacy in writing research papers in English. Furthermore, PhD students showed lower anxiety than master's students, indicating a correlation between reduced anxiety and prior

academic writing experience. These findings highlight the need for focused assistance and resources to help graduate students to improve their confidence and academic writing abilities, especially those who do not speak English as first language.

Despite numerous studies on writing anxiety across various contexts Guannan, 2018; Hasanah et al., 2020; Kennedy et al., 2020; Osborn et al., 2020; Swalve et al., 2021), significant gaps remain in addressing the persistent issue of research writing anxiety in higher learning institutions, particularly among specific undergraduate student. Most existing studies have not adequately examined unique challenges faced by social science students at institutions like Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy (MNMA), where contextual and cultural factors may influence anxiety levels.

Methodology

Research Design
The study employed a descriptive research design, which is suitable for gathering information about characteristics, opinions and attitudes of a specific population (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). This design allows for the collection of quantitative data through structured questionnaires featuring closed-ended questions. Using this design, the study efficiently captured a snapshot of research writing anxiety among social science students at the MNMA. The descriptive design is appropriate here as it enables an in-depth understanding of the prevalence and factors associated with writing anxiety, enabling the researcher to identify trends and patterns within the population (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Population and Sampling
The target population for this study comprised 296 third-year students enrolled in the Management of Social Development program at The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy in 2022. To determine an appropriate sample size, the study utilized an online sample size calculator, resulting in a calculated sample size of 168 participants. This sample size is deemed sufficient to ensure representativeness and reliability in capturing the research writing anxiety experienced by the students (Creative Research Systems, 2023). The sample size calculator used can be found at https://www.calculator.net/sample-size-calculator.html.

Instruments
The study utilized a structured questionnaire with closed-ended items to collect data from the respondents. This type of questionnaire is usually designed to provide specific response options, making it easier to quantify and analyze the results (Fowler, 2014). The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed via an official WhatsApp group of the respondents. The questionnaire captured the undergraduates' students' perception on research anxiety, investigating the causes as well as proposing strategies that is employed to reduce the anxiety.

Validity and Reliability
Validity and reliability are essential for ensuring that research findings are credible and accurate. To achieve this, the researchers designed the questionnaire based on established literature and expert feedback to ensure content validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A pilot test was conducted to check the clarity and relevance of the questions, allowing for refinements to accurately measure the intended variables (validity) and produce consistent results (reliability). The researchers also used standardized data collection procedures and inter-rater reliability tests were performed to ensure consistent results (Bhandari, 2023).

Statistical Treatment of Data
Data was analyzed using the descriptive statistics. The findings are presented using tables based on the study's central themes.

Ethical Considerations
This study addressed several ethical issues. These include the filling of the consent form by the respondents, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

Results and Discussion
In this section, the study's findings are arranged and explained, guided by the research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the prevalence of research writing anxiety among students in higher education institutions in Tanzania?

In examining the first research question, which sought to explore the prevalence of research writing anxiety among undergraduate students, the findings indicate a significant level of anxiety within the population. A substantial 72.5% of respondents reported experiencing persistent research writing anxiety, highlighting that this issue is prevalent among students in higher learning institutions. In

contrast, only 20.3% indicated that they were not aware of such anxiety while a smaller proportion, 7.2%, expressed uncertainty about the existence of research anxiety as detailed in Figure 1.
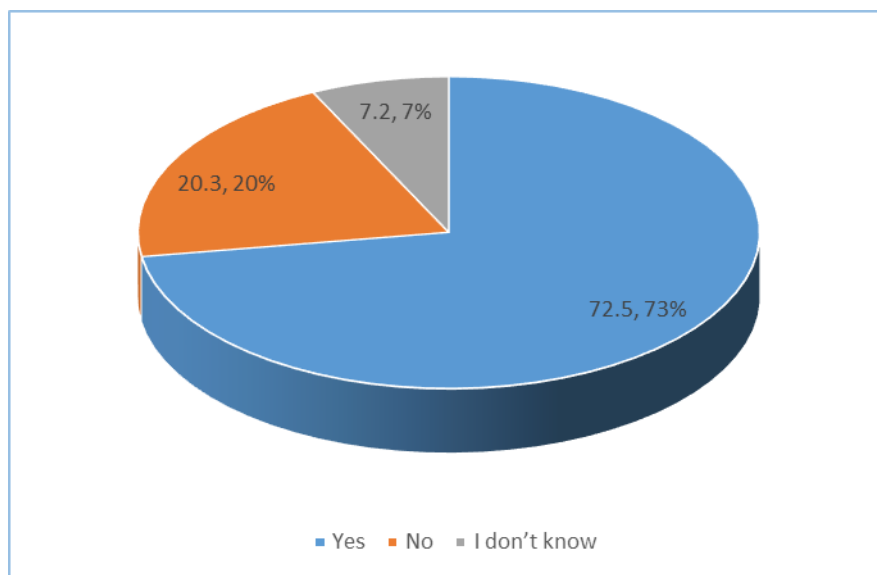

Figure 1; Prevalence of research writing anxiety among students

Table 1: Causes of Student Research Writing Anxiety (N=168)

SN	Potential Causes	f	5
1	Lack of research writing skills	138	82.1
2	Lack of previous experience and knowledge of conventions in academic writing	134	79.8
3	Lack of knowledge on where to start	124	73.8
4	Limited time	122	72.6
5	Fear of supervisors	110	65.5
6	Lack of connection between the theories taught and the practical side of it	105	62.5
7	Language use and coherence and cohesion problem	104	61.9
8	limited literature	102	60.7
9	Cost involved in the proposal and report production	100	59.5
10	Lack of cooperation from supervisors	94	56.0
11	Research writing being a nightmare	76	45.2
12	Harsh language from the supervisors	73	43.5

The findings shown in Figure 1 demonstrate high frequency of research writing anxiety among undergraduate students, as indicated by the 72.5% of the respondents who reported having ongoing anxiety about their academic assignments. This high percentage highlights the fact that anxiety related to research writing is a common problem that has to be addressed in order to enhance students' academic performance and general well-being. These results are consistent with those by Kambuga (2016); Magali (2019) and Marco (2024), which show that anxiety is also common among students.

Research Question 2: What are perceived causes of students' anxiety in research writing?

Table 1 presents the views of students on perceived causes of students' research writing anxiety. The majority of respondents agreed with the first ten items in Table 1 while the majority disagreeing with the last two items. Therefore, the first ten statements in the table are the causes of anxiety.

Lack of Research Writing Skills

Findings in Table 1 reveal that 82.1% of participants identified a lack of research writing skills as a cause of their research anxiety. This is consistent with Guannan (2018), who reported that inadequate writing skills significantly hinder students' confidence and ability to engage in research effectively. Similarly, Ferolino et al. (2022) emphasized that students with strong writing skills are more likely to experience lower levels of anxiety and perform better in their research endeavors. These studies highlight the critical role that writing proficiency plays in alleviating research anxiety. When students lack the necessary writing skills, they may feel overwhelmed by the demands of research tasks, leading to increased stress and diminished academic performance.

Lack of Previous Experience and Knowledge of Conventions of Academic Writing

Table 1 further shows that 79.8% of the participants attributed research writing anxiety to lack of prior expertise and familiarity in academic writing. This is consistent with findings by Green and Bowser (2002), who found that students struggled with the technical style needed for activities like literature review and proper source documentation because of their limited past knowledge. In response, Bakla and Karakaş (2022) reported the importance of prior experience and knowledge in academic writing conventions.

Lack of Knowledge on Where to Start

The study's findings indicate that 73.8% of participants attributed their anxiety to lack of knowledge about where to start. This aligns with prior research by Patak and Naim (2012) and Wilang et al. (2018), which identified insufficient research background and uncertainty about methodologies as significant contributors to students' anxiety. These findings indicate that students often feel overwhelmed by the complexities of research processes.

Limited Time

The study findings revealed that limited time contributes significantly to students' research writing anxiety, as reported by 72.6% of respondents. This indicates that social science students in the research area require adequate time to conduct research, which could alleviate or even eliminate their writing anxiety. Similarly, time constraints for undergraduate research students were identified as a contributing factor to writing anxiety in studies conducted by Hasanah (2020) in Indonesia and Ferolino et al. (2022) in the Philippines. These findings underscore the necessity of providing students with sufficient time for their research activities to enhance their writing confidence and overall academic performance.

Fear of supervisors

According to findings in Table 1, it is clear that 65.5% of respondents feared their research supervisors. Similarly, Kennedy *et al.* (2020) discovered that particular supervisors' apathetic attitude toward the supervision of students' research work was a fundamental cause of anxiety in research writing. The authors proposed that direction from supervisors is an appropriate remedy for lowering worrying situations.

Limited Link between Theory and Practice

Limited link between theory and practice was another perceived cause of anxiety in research as revealed by 62.5% of the respondents, who agreed with the statement. This necessitates an immediate examination of the current Curriculum to ensure that the theories taught in class correspond with what is required in the field. For students to perform well in research writing, it is critical that what is taught in class correspond with what is expected to be done during the research writing process.

Language Use, Coherence and Cohesion

The study findings reveal that 61.9% of participants expressed concerns about issues related to language use, coherence and cohesion in their writing. This aligns with previous research indicating that such challenges can significantly contribute to writing anxiety among students. Guannan (2018) found that language proficiency and the ability to maintain coherence and cohesion are critical factors influencing students' confidence in their writing abilities. This implies that addressing language use and enhancing writing skills through targeted support could help alleviate anxiety.

Limited Literature in the Library

In Table 1, 60.7% of the respondents considered limited literature in the library. The findings concur with the study conducted by Bushesha et al. (2012), revealing that most of students in Tanzania lacked literature review abilities, leading to challenges in writing.

Cost Involved in Research

Cost involved in research was stated by 59.5% of the respondents as a cause of anxiety in research writing. Although in Tanzania, students completing research in their last year are generally covered by the Higher Education Students Loan Board, not all students benefit from the fund. Those who do not receive the research funds could be the ones who attributed the factor as a cause of anxiety.

Lack of Cooperation from Supervisors

According to the study's findings, 56.0% of the respondents reported lack of collaboration from their supervisors as a source of anxiety. Cooperation between students and supervisors is vital for one to complete research assignments on time. According to Moskvicheva et al. (2015), students require their supervisors to help them obtain the necessary

information and provide constructive criticism for them to succeed.

Research Question 2: What are proposed reduction strategies of research writing anxiety among social science undergraduate students at the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy?

Having established the causes of writing anxiety, this research question sought to establish the proposed reduction strategies of the research writing anxiety. In this regard, respondents were asked for their opinions about anxiety reduction strategies. Findings from the analysis appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Proposed Research Writing Anxiety Reduction Strategies (N=168)

SN	Variables	F	%
1	Dedicating a Semester for Research	131	78
2	Allow the students to choose the supervisors they want	118	70.2
3	More time should be allocated for research writing	109	64.9
4	Students should only write a proposal at the undergraduate level	99	58.9
5	Research should be an optional module	95	56.5

Dedicating a Semester for Research

The majority of participants (78%) suggested that the second semester of the third year should be dedicated solely to research to alleviate existing research writing anxiety. Currently, third-year students at The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy are required to balance multiple modules alongside their research tasks, which limits the time they can devote to their research projects. Literature supports the idea that focused research time can significantly improve students' writing quality and reduce anxiety (Baker, 2021). While dedicating an entire semester to research may not be a common practice in Tanzanian universities, it is implemented at Mzumbe University, which allows students to concentrate on their research without the pressure of additional coursework (Mzumbe University, 2021). This model highlights the potential benefits of structured research periods and suggests that such an approach could be adapted to other institutions in Tanzania to enhance student outcomes.

Choosing a Supervisor

The second most highly endorsed suggestion was allowing students to choose their research supervisors, supported by 70.2% of respondents. Currently at The Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, the allocation of supervisors is managed by the head of department, leaving students with no option but to accept their assigned supervisors. This practice is in line with the research by Moskvicheva et al. (2015) which highlights the significant impact of student-supervisor relationships on research success, noting that supportive supervisors can motivate students to excel in their projects. Allowing students to choose their supervisors could

foster a more conducive environment for expressing concerns and receiving guidance

More time for Research Writing

The suggestion ranked third in terms of popularity was to increase the time allocated for research writing, with the support of 64.9% of the respondents. This result highlights the significance of dedicating ample time to the process of research writing, which entails thorough literature review, development of concept notes and proposals and reporting of findings. According to research conducted by O'Donnell et al. (2018), providing students with extra time can improve their performance and reduce anxiety, emphasizing the crucial role that effective time management plays in academic achievement.

Students should only write a proposal at the undergraduate level.

The study findings indicate that 58.9% of respondents suggested that proposals should only be written in the third year of the undergraduate program. While this perspective aims to give students more time to attend lectures while focusing on proposal writing, it overlooks the necessity of developing research skills earlier in their academic journey. Research shows that engaging in proposal writing and research activities during the undergraduate years fosters critical thinking and prepares students for advanced studies (Wang & Li, 2022). Furthermore, waiting until the third year may limit students' opportunities to refine their research skills, which are essential for success in master's programs. Thus, while the respondents' suggestion aims to reduce anxiety, the literature supports the importance of early engagement in research writing as a foundation for future academic endeavors.

Research should be an optional module

Among the strategies suggested for reducing research writing anxiety, the least cited yet noteworthy recommendation was to make research an optional module rather than a compulsory one, with 56.5% of respondents supporting this idea. However, this perspective undermines the critical importance of research skills in higher education. Research skills are essential for all students, as they not only enhance academic performance but also prepare students for the demands of postgraduate studies and professional careers (Baker, 2021). Compulsory research training equips undergraduates with foundational skills that are vital for critical thinking and informed decision-making, which are crucial in today's information-driven world (Wiljes & Cimiano, 2019). Therefore, while the suggestion reflects the anxiety students may feel, the literature strongly advocates for integrating research skills into the curriculum as a necessary component of a comprehensive education.

Conclusion and Recommendations
Conclusions

Based on the study results, the researchers draw the following conclusions. First, there is a significant prevalence of research writing anxiety among students in higher education institutions in Tanzania. Common causes of research writing anxiety among social science students include a lack of writing skills, unfamiliarity with academic conventions, inadequate preparation, language barriers and time constraints. Participants suggested several strategies to alleviate research writing anxiety, such as dedicating a semester specifically for research, selecting appropriate supervisors and allowing more time for research writing.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the study give a number of recommendations.

First, University administrators should implement targeted support programs, such as writing workshops and counseling services to help students manage and reduce their anxiety levels. Secondly, educators should address the identified issues by improving academic support services, providing training in research practices and promoting language proficiency programs to better equip students for research writing responsibilities. Finally, faculty members should adopt the highly proposed strategies in their curricula; this will nurture a supportive environment that inspires cooperation and open communication among students and supervisors.

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