

Digital Dread: The Prevalence of Anxiety Among Middle Eastern University Students

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INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that anxiety is increasing among college students in the United States. Stearns (2022) states that a large percentage of college students have been diagnosed with anxiety and these percentages have increased by more than 50% in recent years, and especially after COVID-19. These high anxiety rates are also evident internationally and particularly, in the Middle East and North Africa given current conflicts that have forced the return of the digital classroom. This study aimed to assess the prevalence of anxiety in the Middle East and North Africa region, specifically the United Arab Emirates. The purpose of our research is to investigate the prevalence of anxiety among university students in the UAE.

Literature Review

- Financial issues, personal problems, gender, and type of college were positive predictors of anxiety among Saudi Arabian students (Amr et al., 2013).
- Similarly, among Egyptian students, being female, having a low socioeconomic status, and a family history of mood disorders were significant predictors of mood disorder symptoms (Mohammed et al., 2022).
- Moreover, and with regards to digital related anxiety, Jordanian University students reported experiencing anxiety about quarantine and shifting to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alqudah et al., 2021).
- Currently, there are no fewer than 4 ongoing conflicts in the MENA region; The Sudan conflict which started on April 15th 2023 (Lewis, 2023), the Israeli-Hamas war that started on October 7th 2023, the Iran-Israeli conflict on April 13, 2024 and the Israeli-Hezbollah in Lebanon on July 28, 2024. All resulted in widespread devastation and destruction of homes, places of worship, educational establishments, and hospitals (Jazeera, 2023a). Additionally, many people (including a significant number of children) were displaced, suffered severe injuries and lost their lives (Jazeera, 2023c).

RESEARCH QUESTION

How prevalent is anxiety among university students in the UAE?

HYPOTHESES

- H1: Students will report high levels of anxiety.
- H2: Students will report poor interpersonal relationships.
- H3: Students whose families immigrated to the UAE will show high rates of anxiety.

METHODS

- Sample A: 148
Freshman - 20.3%, Sophomore, 35.8%, Junior – 16.2%, Senior – 23%.
- Sample B: 327
Freshman – 35.78%, Sophomore – 32.42%, Junior – 18.96%, Senior – 12.84%
- Class: PSY 101, PSY 102.
- Recruited from a university in the UAE.
- Convenience sampling method.

MATERIALS

Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAM-A) (Hamilton, 1959).

The HAM-A measures the severity of anxiety symptoms. It is comprised of 14 items and scored on a 5- point Likert scale ranging from '0: Not present, to '4: Very severe. The HAM-A has a high inter-rater reliability of 0.92.

Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) Questionnaire (Fraley et al., 2011).

The ECR-RS is used to evaluate attachment patterns in interpersonal relationships (mother/father/romantic partner/best friend). It consists of 9 items, which are scored using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from '1: strongly disagree' to '7 strongly agree' with reverse scoring on items 1-4. The ECR-RS has a high test-retest reliability of .80.

The Functional Ideographic Assessment Template (FIAT) (Callaghan, 2006).

The FIAT consists of a 117 items scored on 6-point Likert scale, (-3= Strongly Disagree, -2= Moderately Disagree, -1= Mildly Disagree, 1= Mildly Agree, 2 Moderately Agree, 3= Strongly Agree), with reversed scoring on items 3, 5,13,14,16,17. It measures interpersonal functioning and outlines five key classes of behavior. For this study, we used Class D: Disclosure and Interpersonal Intimacy, which consists of 24 questions. It has a high internal consistency of 0.94.

RESULTS

Sample A:

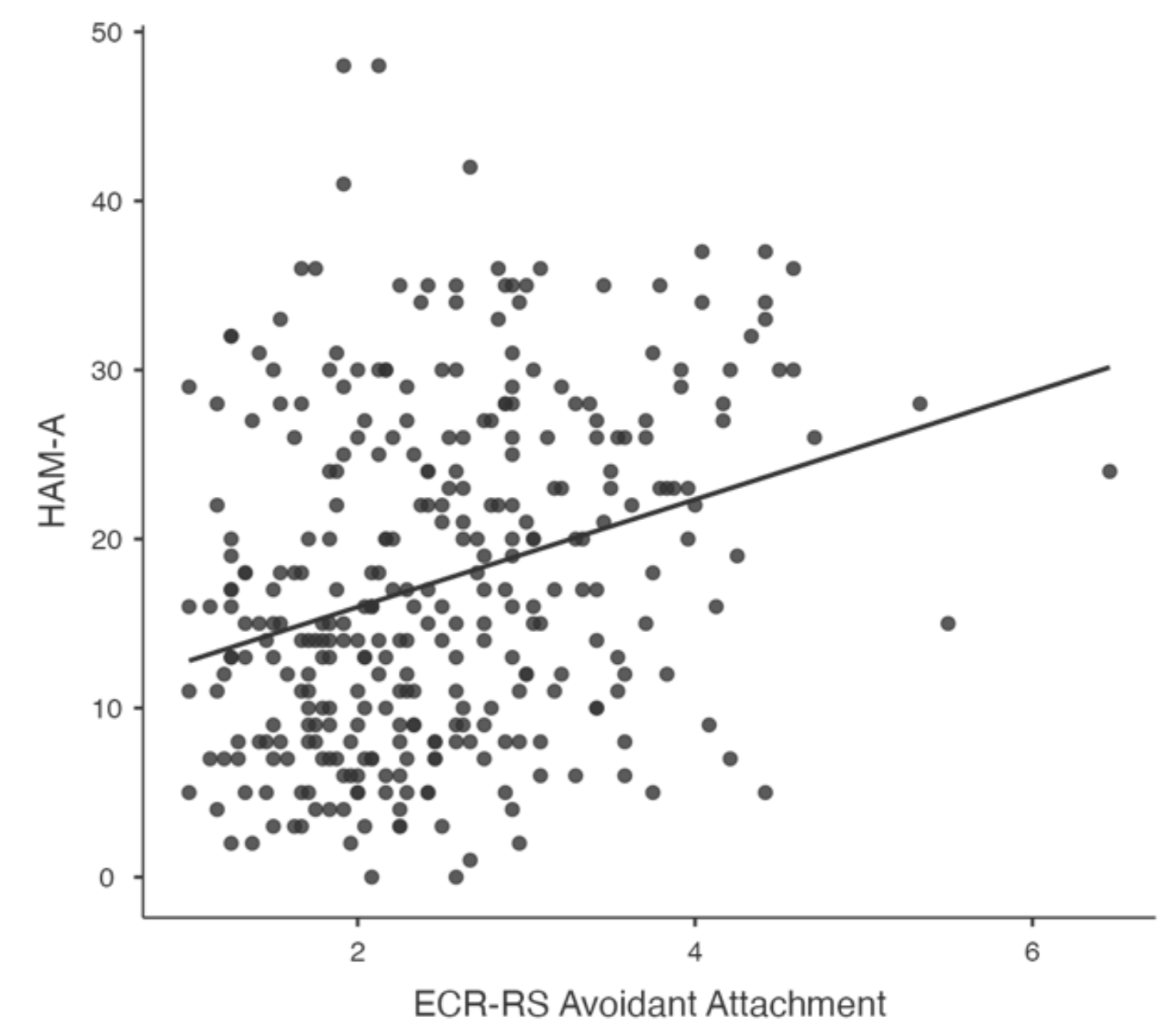
- The mean average for FIAT Interpersonal questionnaire was 75 (M = 75, SD = 10), which is classified as "relatively high intimacy anxiety".

Sample B:

- The mean average for the HAM-A was 17.5 (M = 17.5, SD = 9.86), which is classified as moderate anxiety.
- The mean for attachment-related anxiety from the ECR-RS questionnaire was 2.62 (M = 2.62, SD = 0.777), and mean for attachment-related avoidance was 2.48 (M = 2.48, SD = 0.898).
- A positive correlation was found between the HAM-A scores and ECR-RS Avoidant Attachment scores ($r = .29, p = .001$).

PROCEDURE

- Approved by Institutional Research Committee
- Extra credit for PSY 101 and PSY 102
- Used Sona & Qualtrics platforms to deliver the consent form and study materials
- Minimal to no risks were involved
- Statistical analyses were performed using Jamovi and Excel



CONCLUSIONS

- Results from Sample A revealed that students suffer from relatively high intimacy anxiety. Students from Sample B reported moderate anxiety, and those students with higher anxiety also scored higher in avoidant attachment.
- Findings can help universities gain awareness about the prevalence of anxiety among students - specifically during examination periods.
- Findings can help universities see the need to offer programs to help their students relieve anxiety, improve their interpersonal relationships, and significantly improve their academic performance and well-being.
- We recommend preventive measures to promote student psychological health and well-being - Anxiety Awareness Day. We also recommend that universities advise students of their online or digital policies. Further, we recommend that universities do not automatically jump to online instruction as many students experience anxiety as this is linked not only to current conflict but also to students' less than positive academic experiences during COVID-19.
- Finally, with women reporting more anxiety than men, future studies could replicate this study to decipher if there is a significant relationship between anxiety, gender, quality of interpersonal relationships and academic success.

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