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Second-year blues: a qualitative study exploring themes related to anxiety among second year undergraduate students at a South African university

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have highlighted a significant burden of mental disorders in South African university students; however, few studies have specifically explored the experiences of second-year undergraduate university students. Since the second year of study does not traditionally enjoy comprehensive institutional support when compared to the first, second year students may be at higher risk for mental disorders, including anxiety, consequently leading to poorer academic outcomes. The current research aims to understand feelings of anxiety from second-year students' perspective. It explores themes associated with anxiety and uncovers coping strategies used by students when dealing with feelings of anxiety. Using a qualitative study design, 26 second-year undergraduate students, representing all Faculties within the university, were recruited to participate in semi-structured in-depth interviews as well as focus group discussions. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis guided by the '4 Ps' factor model framework as well as the biopsychosocial framework. We found evidence that second-year students' anxiety arises from a complex interplay of biological predispositions and situational stressors, with some stressors being specific to the second year of study, such as a perceived increase in workload and academic performance pressure. Importantly, the study suggests that anxiety may also develop independently of external factors due to its multifactorial nature. In addition to advocating for programmes that promote positive coping strategies, universities should ensure that support structures are aware of, and able to deliver, the unique support that second-year students may require.

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Introduction

Anxiety is among the most prevalent mental disorders among university students, not only in South Africa (Bantjes et al. 2019; Li et al. 2022; Wagner, Masango, et al. 2024) but also globally (Samuolis et al. 2015; Verger et al. 2010). Estimates suggest a median burden of 32% among this population, with research associating undergraduate studies with a heightened risk of anxiety (Tan et al. 2023). Anxiety, defined as '*a tense unsettling anticipation of a threatening but formless event, a feeling of uneasy suspense*' (Rachman 2013), is thought to be beneficial at moderate levels, especially in

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academic environments, as it can provide motivation to study, which may lead to high academic performance (Hooda 2017). However, it is important to differentiate between productive anxiety, which may enhance motivation and performance, and debilitating anxiety which may lead to poor self-image, self-doubt (Woodgate, Tailor, et al. 2020), emotional, social and physical pain (Woodgate, Tennet, et al., 2020) as well as poor health and academic outcomes, especially when co-occurring with depression (Eisenberg, Golberstein, and Hunt 2009).

Studies have shown that anxiety arises from a complex interplay of factors, including environmental stressors and biological or genetic predispositions (Pine 2007). Environmental triggers, such as traumatic experiences, alongside innate biological vulnerabilities, including genetic factors, can significantly contribute to its development and progression (Kendler et al. 2003). This also suggests that for some individuals, anxiety is an inherent response rooted in the body's physiological and genetic makeups, independent of situational pressures (Pine 2007).

Our current understanding of anxiety in the academic environment is supported by several psychological theories. For instance, academic stress, which is the stress associated with pressure to perform academically, is one of the most common stressors among university students (Beiter et al. 2015) and may be so overpowering that it induces feelings of anxiety (Jones, Park, and Lefevor 2018). The Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) suggests that anxiety can arise from students' appraisals of academic challenges as threatening, while the Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura 1977) suggests that lower confidence in handling academic demands may in fact exacerbate anxiety.

The amount of anxiety emanating from financial stress is also significant (Jones, Park, and Lefevor 2018; Pillay and Ngcobo 2010). University attendance requires substantial financial commitment and, as such, it is not surprising that students, particularly those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, experience anxiety due to financial stress (Eisenberg, Golberstein, and Hunt 2009). Pillay and Ngcobo (2010), whose research targeted students from mainly poor and rural South African communities, found that financial problems were perceived as the leading cause of stress after the fear of failing.

Pressure from family and loved ones is also an important stressor requiring consideration, especially for students who are the first in their family to attend university, commonly referred to first-generation students (Gardner and Holley 2011). These students often receive less support from their families due to family members having little or no experience in university environments (Westbrook and Scott 2012). First-generation students may also feel pressure to succeed due to the sacrifices made by their families for them to attend university (Gardner and Holley 2011; Westbrook and Scott 2012).

Considering these potential stressors, the Resilience Theory highlights the importance of coping skills as protective factors against anxiety (Masten 2001). The theory suggests that resilience can buffer the effects of stress by fostering adaptability and persistence. For students, resilience-building practices, which include developing problem-solving skills, emotional regulation and positive social connections, serve as crucial resources in navigating academic pressures. This theory suggests that resilient individuals are better equipped to recover from setbacks, maintain focus and sustain motivation even in challenging environments.

Student support programmes in South Africa, much like the rest of the world, disproportionately focus on first-year students (Gahagan and Hunter 2006). The first year of university is typically marked by the challenge of adjusting to a new academic and social environment (Tinto 1993). However, this transition is mitigated by extensive institutional support, including orientation programmes, mentorship initiatives and structured interventions designed to support first-year students and facilitate their integration into university life (Kuh et al. 2006; Masango et al. 2020). Similarly, final-year students encounter distinct stressors, such as pressure to successfully complete their studies and concerns about post-graduation prospects. Yet, much like first-year students, final-year students benefit from reinforced institutional support, including career counselling and graduate transition services, which help ease their progression into the workforce or on to further studies (UP News 2021).

The second year of university study, however, is marked by an intensification of academic pressure coupled with a noticeable decline in targeted institutional support structures (Burick 2019; Graunke and Woosley 2005). This often leaves students struggling with sustained academic challenges without the scaffolding available during their first year. This abrupt cessation of structured support contributes to the unique challenges second-year students face, warranting further exploration of their mental health needs (Burick 2019; Hunter, Tobolowsky, and Gardner 2009).

There is limited research on second-year university students in general, and the impact that the '*second-year slump*' has on students' mental health, including levels of anxiety. The '*Second-year slump*' or *'sophomore slump'* is a term coined by studies from the United States of America (USA) that encompasses the lack of motivation, disengagement and even poor academic performance that second-year students sometimes experience (Burick 2019; Gahagan and Hunter 2006). International evidence suggests that students are likely to change programmes and majors in the second year (Graunke and Woosley 2005; Schaller 2005). Students may also be faced with the possibility of exclusion and may harbour feelings of being 'left behind' as they struggle to cope with their increased academic workload. As a result, the second year has high levels of attrition (Gahagan and Hunter 2006). Work conducted by Burick (2019) on second-year university students revealed that students experienced anxiety emanating mostly from the stressors mentioned above; with feelings of anxiety and hopelessness sometimes leading to episodes of depression requiring medical interventions (Burick 2019).

Previous studies have extensively examined mental health challenges among first-year university students (Bantjes et al. 2019; Burick 2019; Wagner, Wagner, et al., 2024), as this transition period is often marked by significant academic and social adjustments. By the time students reach their final year, it is generally assumed that they have developed greater resilience and coping mechanisms to navigate university life. Additionally, many universities provide career counselling and graduate support services to assist final-year students in preparing for their transition into the workforce or further studies (Vincent and Idahosa 2014). The lack of targeted support for second-year students makes them particularly vulnerable to anxiety, distinguishing their experiences from both first-year students, who receive structured institutional support, and final-year students, who have clearer academic and career trajectories and have often developed greater resilience due to the increased familiarity and extended exposure to the academic and social environments. This study, therefore, focuses on second-year students, as they represent an under-researched yet critical group in need of tailored mental health interventions within South African higher education, addressing a critical gap in research by providing a nuanced understanding of the meaning of anxiety from the students' perspective and by exploring prevalent themes, experiences and coping strategies associated with feelings of anxiety among second-year students.

Conceptual framework

This article is guided by Winters, Hanson, and Stoyanova (2007) biopsychosocial formulation grids based on Barker (1995) and integrates the '4 Ps' factor model framework and the biopsychosocial model (Engel 1980). The '4 Ps' model (Predisposing, Precipitating, Perpetuating and Protective factors) and the biopsychosocial framework (Biological, Psychological and Social domains) are conceptually linked but serve different analytical purposes. The '4 Ps' model helps to categorise factors influencing feelings of anxiety among second-year students, while the biopsychosocial model provides a multidimensional understanding of how these factors interact (Winters, Hanson, and Stoyanova 2007).

The current study is conceptualised on the following factors that borrow from both models: Predisposing factors (4 Ps)/Biological domain (Biopsychosocial model): Genetic or pre-existing vulnerabilities to anxiety. This means that some students enter university with a greater inherent susceptibility to anxiety, independent of environmental triggers.

Precipitating factors (4 Ps)/Psychological and Social domains (Biopsychosocial model): Stressors that trigger feelings of anxiety such as traumatic events. These factors correspond to both psychological (self-perception, self-efficacy) and social (financial strain, family expectations) domains.

Perpetuating factors (4 Ps)/Psychological and Social domains (Biopsychosocial model): ongoing situations that sustain feelings of anxiousness longer term. These experiences reinforce cognitive and emotional patterns that heighten anxiety levels.

Protective factors (4 Ps)/Biological, Psychological and Social domains (Biopsychosocial model): Mechanisms reducing the likelihood of anxiety, these cut across the biological (physical well-being), psychological (resilience, self-regulation) and social (peer/family support) domains.

While adapted from clinical formulation concepts, the '4 Ps' factor model is used here in an exploratory and thematic capacity, without diagnostic intent. Furthermore, its application in the current study is situated against a backdrop that acknowledges that the emotional experiences of anxiety are shaped by a multifaceted combination of factors, with a significant biological basis that can lead to its development even without observable external triggers (Kendler et al. 2003; Pine 2007).

Methodology

The study took place in 2019, prior to COVID-19, at a large University situated in Johannesburg, South Africa. In 2019, the university was comprised of five Faculties, with second year undergraduate students comprising 17% ($n = 6\ 998$) of the student population. The study design made use of qualitative research approaches to collect data. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with sampled students.

Study participants

Students were invited to participate in this qualitative study if they were 18 years or older, were registered in 2019 and were students in their second calendar year of an undergraduate degree. A list of students meeting these criteria was received from the university. The lists were stratified by Faculty to ensure all faculties were represented. Participants were primarily recruited via email and telephone, with instances where the participants themselves helped in identifying and recruiting potential participants (snowball sampling).

Data collection

All IDIs and FGDs took place in a private room after receiving written informed consent from the participant. Interviews and group discussions were conducted in English and were audio recorded. All IDIs and FGDs were transcribed soon after the interviews. Questions included how participants' defined anxiety and accounts of their personal experiences with anxiety. IDIs and FGDs continued until data saturation was reached. Data saturation was assessed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Saturation was determined based on two key criteria: (1) the absence of new codes or themes in the final three IDIs and the last FGD, and (2) redundancy in participant responses, where descriptions of anxiety-related experiences, academic stressors and coping strategies became repetitive.

All data collection tools including information sheets, informed consent forms and interview guides were in English, the official language of instruction at the institution. All tools were designed collectively by members of the research team.

Data analysis

A thematic content analysis approach was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. Initially, all transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarisation

with the data. Line-by-line coding was performed on NVivo 12™ (QSR International) using an inductive coding strategy allowing for emergent themes to be captured. Coding on three interview transcripts and one focus group transcript was initially conducted by L.P.M. and independently recorded by F.W. to ensure consistent coding and to reduce subjective bias. The research team maintained detailed analytic memos throughout the coding process, documenting reflections on emerging patterns, potential biases and coding decisions. This process facilitated a transparent, iterative approach to analysis, allowing for continuous refinement of themes while ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than influenced by researcher assumptions. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved collaboratively, culminating in the finalisation of a coding framework. This framework was subsequently applied to code the remaining transcripts. L.P.M. and F.W. iteratively grouped codes into broader categories and themes, ensuring that they captured the breadth and depth of the dataset comprehensively.

Ethical consideration

The study received ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical), Clearance Certificate H18/11/44. Permission was also received from the office of the University Registrar to conduct the study.

Findings

A total of 26 students were successfully recruited to participate in the study. A total of 18 students participated in IDIs, while the two FGDs consisted of three and five participants. No other participants were recruited as saturation was reached. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants and demonstrates that the study participants represented students from diverse backgrounds. More females (54%) than males (46%) participated in the study and 10 of the 11 official South African languages were the home languages of the participants. Study participants represented all Faculties and both undergraduate degree programme types (professional and general academic). Most participants were African, in line with the demographics of the overall undergraduate second-year student population. Half of the participants (50%) were first-generation university students, and 27% of the participants lived in university residences.

Describing being anxious

As a starting point, participants were asked to describe their experiences of being anxious using their own words and drawing from their own experiences. This was undertaken to ensure that both researchers and participants understood this concept of anxiety in the same way and allowed researchers to frame questions using similar language. Participants understood feelings of anxiousness to be a feeling of worry and fear that sometimes culminated in panic attacks.

> '*Anxiety is like a more natural feeling of worriedness, fear, uhmm perhaps like different proportions of . . . like levels of stress, so maybe around the exam time, you are more anxious you don't know how you gonna do in the exam, and then perhaps maybe like during the holidays, you are less anxious, . . . and things like panic, panic-attacks, I think will fall under anxiety*.' IDI 20, Female

The second observation cited by students speaks to cultural and generational differences. Participants believed that anxiety and depression were often not considered legitimate illnesses especially among older people and in African communities.

> '*. . . as a black person you don't go to your parents, saying "ma, I think I am depressed" because it's not a thing, like it's not. anxiety[and depression], is a mental issue that is not recognised especially by us black people, because you know these illnesses are seen as like white people's things, because like I grew up in a township*.' IDI 06, Male

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants.

Participants Demographics (n = 26)	n	%
Sex		
Male	14	54%
Female	12	46%
Age		
18–19	21	81%
≥19	5	19%
Race		
African	23	88%
White	1	4%
Indian	1	4%
Coloured	1	4%
Home language		
Afrikaans	1	4%
English	3	12%
Ndebele	1	4%
Pedi	3	12%
Sesotho	2	8%
Setswana	2	8%
Tsonga/Shangaan	2	8%
Tshivenda	2	8%
Xhosa	2	8%
Zulu	8	31%
First generation status		
First generation students	13	50%
Non-first generation students	11	42%
Unknown	2	8%
Residence status		
University residence	6	23%
Private residence	20	77%
Programme type		
Undergraduate general academic degree (3 year degree)	17	65%
Undergraduate professional degree (≥ 4 year degrees)	9	35%
Faculty		
Commerce Law & Management	7	27%
Engineering and the Built Environment	6	23%
Health Sciences	2	8%
Humanities	7	27%
Science	4	15%

Themes associated with experiences of anxiety

The following themes were identified as the most associated with feelings of anxiety among the study participants:

Fear of academic failure

Participants discussed their fear of failure, which became a dominant and recurring theme in interviews and discussions. Almost all study participants experienced failure for the first time during their first year of study and attributed this to adjusting to the university environment. Participants expressed frustration as they felt that the perceived low marks and failure continued to persist even in their second year of study, despite increased effort and long hours of studying.

> *'. . . here you are being tested, here it's the first time that you realise that failure is real, where you understand that you can fail something' . . . 'I'm in second year but I still struggle when I fail something it's, it just I felt, I thought that it will get better as time goes, but it doesn't, it just hits me the same.'* P2, FGD 02, Female

> *'if you sleep in the library until like 3am in the morning studying and then you still get like 26%, I mean that's really discouraging.'* IDI 06, Male

Increased workload

Participants also believed that the workload increased significantly in their second year of study. Participants reported constantly feeling left behind and overwhelmed by their academic work. As a result, participants prioritised academic work, at times, to the detriment of relationships with those close to them.

> *'I was just having a shock of how can one manage so much work in a week . . . I feel like I'm studying for an exam every week.'* FGD 02, P2, Female

Reduced self-confidence

Participants' academic experience in their second year had implications on other parts of their student life. It affected their self-confidence, as they began to question their academic abilities, whether they belonged in university, and viewed their anxiety as a weakness. Participants reported feeling lonely as they thought no one could relate and therefore avoided sharing their experiences out of fear of being stigmatised.

> *' . . . as we all experience varsity [University] the same way in the sense that all of us have tests and all of us have assignments and . . . when you then show that you cannot cope, then that's where the stigma comes because it's a matter of well, then how did you get into [this university] in the first place.'* IDI 17, Female

Family pressure

Another theme that came out strongly was the expectation from parents and family for the participants to academically excel in university, like they did in high school. Participants did not want to disappoint their parents and families who had high expectations. This pressure added to the feelings of anxiety felt by the participants, especially those that were first generation, as they felt their parents and families did not understand that attaining high marks at a tertiary level was difficult.

> *'I remember last year June, like my school-work, I had passed by 50s, my mom was still mad at me, and be like "you go at [high school] with 90s, now you get 50s, what's this?" Like they don't understand, they don't like understand the difference between high school and varsity.'* IDI 16, Female

Financial worry

Participants highlighted other factors that triggered anxiety, apart from those that were academically related. This was an issue especially for participants from poorer backgrounds, and participants who had siblings also in university or following closely behind. Participants reported that inadequate funding meant that they sometimes did not have sufficient money to buy food and textbooks. Participants also highlighted that some funding was linked to their academic performance, and thus poor performance would mean they would lose their funding, further perpetuating feelings of stress and anxiety.

> *'.like also financially, if you are in financial strain, maybe you can't pay for certain things or your bursary pulls out and then you have stress, . . . or you don't have enough money to buy food, 'cause like your bursary has not given enough or maybe NSFAS [National Student Financial Aid Scheme] is not providing enough, so financial reasons could also cause persons mental health to deteriorate'* IDI 06, Male

Feeling physically unsafe

Participants also discussed feelings of anxiety triggered by constantly being on edge due to feeling physically unsafe. Most participants lived off-campus (77%) and commuted daily to campus through Braamfontein, an urban city centre known for high crime activity. Participants described Braamfontein as a non-conducive environment that was dangerous, restrictive and left them feeling paranoid, especially when carrying their laptops.

> *' . . . living in Braamfontein is not the best thing ever . . . its overpopulated . . . , dirty . . . , its noisy . . . , and you get mugged out of nowhere. Those are the environmental factors that could affect the mental health'* IDI 06, Male

Social media

The impact of social media on the mental health of students was also discussed. Participants' views of social media were two-fold. On the one hand, discussions framed social media as a negative tool that promoted self-comparison, which was potentially destructive to self-image and precipitating anxiety.

> *'You kind of sit at home and you like "okay my life is not like this", and you fall prey to that and then you kind of, you kind of compare yourself with that, that's – that's detrimental, nobody in reality is that-that perfect, nobody is'* IDI 02, Female

On the other hand, participants also recognised the value of social media as a positive tool for inspiration, increasing awareness especially of mental disorders mitigating stigma as well as a source of comic relief.

> *'. . . seeing a post about somebody who has had it hard and now they got it all figured out yeah, things like those, or maybe just seeing a meme or a joke, maybe you are stressed, maybe you just laugh a bit, for that moment you forget about your problems.'* IDI 09, Male

Coping strategies

Participants mentioned several positive and negative coping strategies to mitigate feelings of anxiety. Participants reported over-sleeping, crying, talking to someone, exercising, hobbies such as photography, meditation and going to church as activities that improved their state of mind. Other participants used prescribed medicines to alleviate anxiety symptoms, and others used over-the-counter stimulants for concentration when studying for longer periods. Participants also mentioned that the use of alcohol to cope was widespread in the student community and at times led to a dependency on alcohol.

> *'I've always told myself that I don't want to be that person like who, who goes to drink whenever they're stressed . . . . last year I had this friend of mine, he was always drinking . . . and he'll pretend that he's happy and stuff . . . he was going through a lot he even got excluded this year. That's how bad it was.'* FGD 1, P3, Male

Discussion

The findings of this study align with global and South African research on student anxiety, which has been examined in large surveys (Bantjes et al. 2023; Li et al. 2022; Tan et al. 2023). These studies identify academic workload, cultural/social pressures and undergraduate study as important predictors of anxiety (Li et al. 2022; Tan et al. 2023). Our qualitative findings complement this literature by offering deeper insights into how second-year students navigate these stressors and the coping mechanisms they employ. The discussion draws from the interpretative guidance of the 4Ps and the biopsychosocial frameworks to understand themes that predispose, precipitate, perpetuate and protect students from anxiety.

Precipitating factors (4Ps)/Psychological and social domains (biopsychosocial model)

Academic failure and perceived low marks were important triggers or precipitating factors that led to feelings of anxiety. Following failure, or the attainment of what participants perceived as low marks, students had a perpetuating fear of failure. Persistent low marks were associated with anxiety, with this phenomenon being uniquely associated with the second year of study. Students anticipated an improvement in their performance as they believed they had adapted to the university environment, making the lack of progress particularly disheartening. This finding is consistent with the findings of Pillay and Ngcobo (2010) from another South African university, who found that the fear of failure was the most predominant stressor – reported by 93% of their student respondents.

This study highlights that participants had expectations that marks would improve in the second year when they had adjusted to the new environment, but this was not the case. According to international literature, poor academic outcomes are one of the hallmarks of the 'second-year slump', attributing this to the limited student support that might help students in the second year to navigate academic demands (Gahagan and Hunter 2006). In their research, Graunke and Woosley (2005) highlight the need to develop programmes that are appropriate to second-year students, as some interventions that are predictors of success in the first year, may no longer predict success in the second year (Graunke and Woosley 2005).

Disappointment with their academic performance caused participants to be discouraged and harbour feelings of self-doubt. This was understandable as participants had excelled in high school and were experiencing poor academic performance or perceived failure for the first time in university. The Self-Efficacy Theory explains that this lower confidence in their academic abilities likely heightened anxiety (Bandura 1977). These findings are also corroborated by other studies that found that when anxious, young people tend to be self-critical with little self-compassion (Woodgate, Tennet, et al., 2020).

Students also mentioned that the academic workload increased significantly in the second year of study compared to the first. Failing tests and demanding academic workloads, highlighted by the current research, were also included in the top five stressors by 82% and 76% of the students, respectively, in research conducted by Pillay and Ngcobo (2010). This is also explained by the Cognitive Appraisal Theory, where students' perceptions of their workload and accompanying challenges can be seen as key factors influencing their anxiety (Folkman 2013). In the current research, students reported feeling extremely overwhelmed by the second-year workload, likening it to writing an exam every week.

While anxiety was strongly associated with academic difficulties, it is important to acknowledge that some students experiencing high levels of anxiety continue to perform well academically. This aligns with the work of Yerkes and Dodson (1908), which suggests that moderate anxiety can enhance performance by increasing focus and motivation, whereas excessive anxiety can be counterproductive. Additionally, research has shown that anxiety can function as an extrinsic motivator, pushing students to exert more effort and engage in strategic study behaviours to maintain high performance (Keeley, Zayac, and Correia 2008). However, when anxiety becomes overwhelming, it can impair concentration, lead to avoidance behaviours and negatively impact academic outcomes (Putwain and Daly 2014). This highlights the importance of distinguishing between functional and debilitating anxiety when designing student support interventions.

Participants also expressed that the pressure they received from their parents and families also caused them to have feelings of anxiety, especially if they thought that they had attained low marks, perpetuating their anxiety. These sentiments are not unique to the second year of study as similar thoughts have been expressed by South African students in other studies. Research conducted by Zondi (2018), revealed participants' frustration with their families' expectations for them to achieve marks like those achieved in high school. Vincent and Idahosa's (2014) work, focusing on South African graduates, also highlights the pressure that students are under to graduate and not disappoint their families.

Our study reveals a continuum of anxiety-inducing experiences among second-year students. While some participants reported temporary stress and pressure related to exams and heavy workloads, which are characteristic of normal academic stress, other students described persistent anxiety symptoms that extended beyond typical academic pressure. These included recurring fears of failure, avoidance of academic activities and declining self-confidence, indicating a pattern of sustained emotional distress which may be of clinical significance. Such experiences suggest that, for some students, anxiety may become self-perpetuating, influencing both their well-being and academic engagement. These findings align with the Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), which posits that students who perceive academic stressors as

overwhelming or uncontrollable may be more likely to experience heightened and prolonged anxiety responses. Additionally, the Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura 1977) provides a further explanation, suggesting that students with low confidence in their academic abilities may develop persistent anxiety patterns, as repeated academic challenges reinforce negative self-perceptions and avoidance behaviours.

Perpetuating factors (4Ps)/Psychological & social domains (biopsychosocial model)

The study attracted students from various cultural backgrounds, with home language seen as a proxy for cultural background. Participants discussed that Black African families, in particular, did not always understand anxiety or acknowledge it as an illness and, as a result, did not speak about it. This may highlight a cultural difference by race, as well as a generational divide between Black African students and their parents. In his work, Ellis (2003), provides a possible explanation for this when discussing the complex cultural nuances of mental disorders. He highlights that conditions such as anxiety and depression certainly exist in rural Black Africans. However, the way these conditions present and are understood and articulated in African culture, may not always be synonymous with how the current university-going generation or other cultures understand 'anxiety' and 'depression' (Ellis 2003). It is also likely that these cultural complexities are further exacerbated by first-generation status, where families may not fully appreciate the demands of the university (Westbrook and Scott 2012).

Predisposing factors (4Ps)/Biological domain (biopsychosocial model)

Not all themes related to anxiety were academically related. Another theme to emerge was financial stress as a cause of anxiety. Financial difficulties faced by university students have been highlighted in several studies due to the considerable cost of attending university (Beiter et al. 2015). These findings were consistent with findings from other studies, where financial stress was associated with increased levels of anxiety and even poor academic outcomes (Jones, Park, and Lefevor 2018; Madzhie 2015; Zondi 2018). In South Africa, one of the most financially unequal societies in the world, financial stresses are likely to be magnified.

The study participants also mentioned that the long-term stress of living in an environment where they feel unsafe had a negative impact on their mental health. In his paper, Edwards (2006) highlights the high levels of traumatic events that students in Gauteng (the province where this research took place) are exposed to. These events include high levels of sexual assault, injury and violent crimes. This exposure can lead to a significant burden of post-traumatic stress disorder, which can negatively impact on wellbeing and often goes untreated.

Participants' views on how social media impacts on mental wellbeing were mixed, with participants highlighting both the positive and negative impacts of social media. This was in line with findings from Best, Manktelow, and Taylor (2014) whose review of how social media affects adolescents' wellbeing found that the use of social media was both potentially beneficial as users reported a sense of belonging, as well as possibly detrimental due to exposure to cyber bullying as well as increased risk of self-isolation and depression.

Protective factors (4Ps)/Biological, psychological and social domains (biopsychosocial model)

The Resilience Theory clarifies the role of coping strategies, suggesting that students who engage in resilience-building practices can better manage academic and social stressors (Masten 2001). Participants employed a number of coping strategies, with some being positive and others negative. Positive coping strategies such as optimism and peer and family connectedness have been associated with reduced levels of anxiety (Dooley, Fitzgerald, and Giollabhui 2015). Some students mentioned positive coping strategies which included exercise and hobbies such as photography. Other students sought professional help and received

prescriptions for medicines. These strategies alleviated feelings of anxiety and were likely protective. Students also mentioned the abuse of alcohol as well as over-the-counter medicines to deal with feelings of anxiety. Risky behaviours such as substance abuse are known to have more negative effects (Dooley, Fitzgerald, and Giollabhui 2015), likely perpetuating feelings of anxiety.

Limitations

This qualitative inquiry on the meaning, themes and coping strategies related to anxiety among second-year students is one of the first studies to address this topic in South Africa and was carried out at a large, urban South African university. As with all research, limitations do exist. The research was based at one university; therefore, findings may not be reflective of all South African second-year student experiences. Furthermore, this study uses a qualitative approach to gain insight into students' subjective experiences of anxiety, rather than to quantify or identify causal factors. With a sample size of 26, the findings are intended to provide depth rather than broad generalisability and should be interpreted as exploratory insights rather than definitive conclusions on anxiety causation. Finally, the sample introduced a diverse racial group representation, with African students comprising 88%, and smaller representation from White, Indian and Coloured groups. This distribution reflects the university's demographics but limits the scope for nuanced insights from smaller racial groups.

Conclusions

This study highlights the urgent need for universities to design targeted interventions that cater to the specific needs of second-year students. Programmes addressing sustained academic challenges, financial anxieties and diminished institutional support should be prioritised. The themes related to anxiety among this group of study participants were multifaceted, cutting across all '4 P's, although the framework of precipitating, perpetuating, predisposing and protective factors, derived from clinical settings, is here applied in a non-clinical and exploratory manner, acknowledging the thematic and interpretative nature of this qualitative study.

The study is further strengthened by psychological theory that suggest that students' interpretations, confidence levels and resilience significantly shape their experiences of anxiety. The perceived increase in workload in the second year, together with pressure for marks to improve as students integrate into the university environment were key findings of this research. Failure and perceived low marks were precipitating factors of anxiety, as they impacted on student self-confidence, causing a perpetuating fear that it might happen again and anxiety on how friends and family may respond.

In-line with findings from other studies, financial difficulty was identified as a predisposing factor and an important factor associated with students' anxiety. This was in addition to other non-academic stressors such as safety aspects of the physical environment, as well as stress introduced by social media.

This research also provided insights on positive coping strategies including exercise and seeking professional help. While this study reaffirms known factors affecting student anxiety, it also highlights unique insights into second-year student challenges in the South African context. It encourages institutions to consider implementing programmes where discussions on mental health can take place, and positive coping strategies can be promoted. Furthermore, student support services need to be equipped to support second-year students, who may fall outside of the traditional university experience and support programmes.

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