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Exploring undergraduate university students' experiences of anxiety within the South African context: A qualitative study



UNIVERSITY OF THE
WITWATERSRAND,
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A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Educational Psychology) Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. February 2025.

Plagiarism Declaration

I Reratile Ratune, declare that this research report is my unaided work, completed according to the APA 7th edition guidelines. It is submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements of Master of Education in Educational Psychology Degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Signed: 

Date: 02/01/2025

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Thank you to Jesus Christ for the strength to complete the research report. Without his grace, mercy, and favour over me this would not have been possible.

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

GBV Gender-Based Violence

WITS Witwatersrand

CCDU Career and Counselling Development Unit

COVID-19 Corona Virus Disease 2019

LGBTQIA+ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, asexual and non-cisgender

DSM-5 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition

SDG Sustainable Development Goals

PPCT Process-Person-Context-Time

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

University students' mental health contributes to their success within the institution. However, mental health challenges relating to anxiety, have become common amongst university students, as they are faced with a heavy load of coursework, the pressures of meeting academic demands, as well as pursuing and completing a degree that aligns with their desired career paths (Zaman et al., 2010). Within South Africa, these challenges are further exacerbated by socio-economic, financial factors, as well as the lingering effects of historical inequality, and the prevalence of gender-based violence(GBV) within universities. The legacy of Apartheid within South Africa has further led to economic disparities that continue to affect the younger generation, as many South African students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, in which access to financial resources that are needed to access quality education, are limited (Jackson et al., 2010).

Additionally, the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak exacerbated these challenges as many students experienced difficulty in adjusting to the abrupt transition to online learning and adapting to a change in their learning environment (Kanyumba & Shabangu, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened anxiety as it created a barrier to learning, particularly amongst university students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. These students experienced difficulty in securing adequate funding for their university fees, finding adequate accommodation, and ensuring the availability of resources that would aid in their academic success during online learning. Furthermore, adjusting to the university environment while simultaneously forming social connections in a diverse environment heightens anxiety amongst university students, as they are pressured to fit in socially with their peers (Case et al., 2018). Additionally, the structural challenges within a university may exacerbate anxiety, given that higher education institutions are often faced with ongoing protests relating to student funding and financial inequalities within the education system. Such disruptions within higher education increases anxiety amongst university students, as this leads to disruptions and instability in learning and access to on-campus resources (Cini, 2019).

Therefore, it could be said that although higher education institutions present opportunities for growth and development (Rudolph et al., 2024), this context highlights the need to examine anxiety amongst South African university students, and how these unique challenges affect their well-being and academic success.

1.2 Rationale and Problem statement

One could assert that the subject of anxiety is common within society and amongst university students (Leutenberg & Liptak, 2011). Many researchers have made attempts to provide an explanation regarding experiences of anxiety in different situations (Broman, 2019). The research that has been conducted follows quantitative approach and therefore focuses on the extent to which anxiety is associated with other mental health disorders (Hadebe, 2024). Although the phenomenon of anxiety has been extensively researched from a quantitative perspective, it remains a common psychological and physical response that affects a persons' self-concept and is characterised by consciously perceived feelings of tension (Dortuo, 2020). Furthermore, anxiety is an emotional state in which behavioural, physiological reactions and sensations are distinguished by feelings of apprehension, fear, terror, and nervousness, as well as an increased activity of the autonomic nervous system (Viloria et al., 2020). It further arises under specific conditions in which a person interprets a situation or environment as overwhelming and beyond their capacity to cope and control (Taylor, 1995; Grupe & Nitschke, 2013).

Given the history of Apartheid, the environment within higher education learning institutions in South Africa is exposed to ongoing and contentious issues relating to poverty, class disparities, language proficiency and varying socio-economic status (Case et al., 2018). These issues could be considered as anxiety evoking, as they affect a student's sense of belonging and further lead to marginalisation (Case et al., 2018). Furthermore, these issues contribute to difficulty in managing academic pressures and the demands of tertiary education (Pillay et al., 2001). Anxiety, in turn, therefore affects an individual's self-efficacy, which in turn leads to the interference of task performance (Viloria et al., 2020) and this leaves students feeling apprehensive and fearful regarding the risk of failure.

Additionally, COVID-19 became an onset for the increase of anxiety in South African university (Manzini, 2024) students. Many students reported that the change in their learning and living environment contributed to their anxiety, as a result of being exposed to non-

conducive environments (Kanyumba & Shabangu, 2021). Furthermore, transitioning to online learning was seen as a trigger of anxiety, as many students struggled to adjust to online learning. The students' anxieties stemmed from difficulty in using learning platforms and their communication icons, as well as concentrating for long hours during their online lectures (Kanyumba & Shabangu, 2021). Students' anxiety was further related to insufficient access to resources such as Wi-Fi and data. This affected their ability to take part in online lectures and complete their academic work, as students were unable to join their lectures efficiently. Furthermore, social distancing became a source of anxiety for students, as they were unable to socialise with their peers, which left students feeling lonely (Kanyumba & Shabangu, 2021).

In addition, recent reports by the Centre for Career Counselling and Development (CCDU) has highlighted that anxiety is commonly experienced by university students. The reports from the Wits University Career and Counselling Development Unit (CCDU) have shown that there's an increase in students who experience mental health difficulties (Rasoaisi, 2017). Many students within university institutions are exposed to challenges throughout their university careers and experience difficulty in overcoming these challenges. CCDU also mentions that students struggle with poor concentration, learning difficulties, and emotional and financial vulnerability (Rasoaisi, 2017). These challenges negatively affect their psychological well-being, as students may become anxious when experiencing psychological distress. This alters students' behaviour (AlKandari, 2021) as a result of their apprehension and worry.

Furthermore, another contribution to students' source of anxiety relates to the ongoing challenges of GBV (Davids, 2020). Gender-based violence refers to actions that may cause sexual or physical harm and suffering (Bhana et al., 2021) to a person who does not follow gender roles and expectations that are set by society (Davids, 2020). GBV such as incidents of rape, sexual harassment, physical and verbal abuse (Gouws & Kritzinger, 2007) were triggers of anxiety, given that victims who reported their experiences, were not acknowledged by the institutions. Gender-based violence is, therefore, a trigger of anxiety, as it leads to academic difficulties, the inability to concentrate and dropping out of courses (Makhene, 2022) in an attempt to avoid dealing with the traumatic incident.

This study therefore explored students' triggers of anxious experience within a South African university. This was done to provide an understanding of how students' experiences of anxiety affect their engagement and behaviour (Kahu, 2013) at university. Additionally, although anxiety is prevalent amongst university students, there is a paucity in literature surrounding

students' detailed experiences of anxiety. Therefore, given that anxiety may manifest as a result of various lived experiences, such as significant changes relating to increased academic pressure, the social changes of adapting to a new environment and various socio-economic issues, this research will provide an understanding of and identify university students' lived and common experiences of anxiety.

Lastly, in recognising and exploring triggers and experiences of anxiety amongst South African university students, this study aligns with two out of the four the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and objectives outlined by the United Nations. These two goals namely: SDG3 and SDG4 relate to the promotion of good health and well-being, as well as achieving quality education (United Nations, 2015). The third sustainable development goal (SDG3) emphasizes the importance of addressing mental health for all individuals, including the student population, while SDG number four (SDG4) emphasizes providing inclusive and equitable education, by creating educational environments that support the educational and mental health needs of students (United Nations, 2015). Therefore, by understanding and exploring contributing factors that exacerbate university students' anxiety within South Africa, the study aims to contribute to the global objective of ensuring quality education (Mahai, 2014), by highlighting how various factors lead to anxiety and affect student well-being on campus. The study findings further aim to contribute to informing interventions, policies, and resources needed to improve student well-being, which in turn fosters an inclusive academic environment (United Nations, 2015).

1.3. Aim of the study

This qualitative research study aims to explore and understand students' triggers and experiences of anxiety at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits)

1.4. Objectives of the study

A research objective is a specific statement that outlines what the study aims to achieve. It identifies focus areas that will be explored in the research study and further provides direction and determines what the researcher will be investigating (Thomas & Hodges, 2010).

The following research objectives outline the focus of the research study:

- Describe the nature of the participants' experiences of anxiety within a university setting
- Determine the triggers that lead to students experiencing anxiety
- Understand how students manage and cope with their anxious experiences

1.5. Research question

The research questions below guided the will be research study:

Primary Question:

1. What are undergraduate university students' experiences of anxiety in a university setting?

Secondary Questions:

1. What are the triggers of anxiety reported by undergraduate university students?
2. How do undergraduate university students cope and manage their anxiety?

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter (Chapter 1) has highlighted the significance of understanding university students' experiences of anxiety. Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted the need to explore university students' experiences of anxiety, particularly to address the gaps in knowledge with regards to understanding students' triggers of anxiety, and its impact on their well-being, and the coping strategies that students use. Additionally, the above section has identified the increasing prevalence of anxiety in university students (Manzini, 2024) and the necessity for gaining an in-depth understanding of student experiences. This research study, therefore, seeks to provide valuable insights into the nature of anxiety by focusing on students' lived experiences. The chapter below will provide a review of existing literature on university students' experiences of anxiety within higher education, from an international perspective and within the South African context.

1.7. Report overview

This research report comprises five chapters, which are organised as follows: Chapter one includes a brief introduction to the study, the rationale and problem statement, the aim of the study, as well as the objectives of the study and the research question. Chapter two focuses on a review of literature that is related to anxiety, the historical background of anxiety, as well as defining anxiety. Chapter two further focuses on university students' experiences of anxiety in higher education from an international context, the prevalence of anxiety within South Africa, university Students' experiences of anxiety in the context of South African higher education institutions, and the theoretical framework. Chapter three consists of the research methodology, research design, research procedure, the pilot study, participant demographics, sampling and selection of participants, data analysis, ethical considerations as well as the researchers reflexive account, and trustworthiness. Chapter four comprises of the research findings and data analysis followed by chapter five in which the research findings are further discussed in conversation with relevant literature, as well as theoretical underpinnings that support the findings. Chapter five further comprises of the summary of findings, the limitations and strengths and the implications of the study. Lastly chapter five discusses recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Literature Review

This section of the research aims to highlight the development of the understanding of anxiety and to locate the studies on student anxiety within the literature. This section will, therefore, further give an overview of the historical background of anxiety, as well as an overview of international and South African literature about university students' triggers of anxiety and the effect that such experiences have on the students. It is vital that triggers of anxiety be understood, as anxiety is a common phenomenon that occurs in all individuals, for the purpose of mobilising an individual, under worrying situations (Viloria et al., 2020) thus allowing an individual to adequately face or avoid a situation that may be deemed threatening (Birennaum & Pinku, 1997). Therefore, studying triggers of anxious experiences allows for the phenomenon to be viewed and understood from a holistic perspective, whereby the experiences and the emotions that accompany the triggers of anxiety are acknowledged (Kahu, 2013).

2.2. Historical background of Anxiety

In previous years during the Greek era, anxiety was not recognised as a mental disorder, and therefore it was not seen as a treatable condition (Tracy, 2008). Subject to the lack of recognition and understanding of anxiety, it was further believed that anxiety was a condition that primarily affected women. Such beliefs emanated from the Greeks coining the term "hysteria" which is rooted in the Greek term "hysteria"−a term used to refer to the uterus (Tracy, 2008). It was therefore believed that "hysterical" behaviour such as panic caused by anxiety originated from the uterus. In addition, anxiety was further misunderstood and thus referred to as the "Irritable heart syndrome" exhibited by soldiers who displayed shortness of breath and heart palpitations during the Civil War era (Tracy, 2008). Furthermore, the lack of knowledge and understanding of anxiety as a mental disorder, led to stigmatisation of the mental disorder, as many individuals were perceived as "insane." This further led to a misunderstanding in the treatment administered, thus exposing humans to invasive treatments such as electroshock therapy, lobotomization and addictive drug use of Opium, as well as sterilisation (Tracy, 2008).

Although many views and understandings of anxiety were flawed, much of the 20th Century saw an increase in knowledge and understanding of anxiety, as well as the modernisation of treatment of the condition. This therefore led to a better defining and understanding of factors that trigger anxiety.

2.3. Definitions of Anxiety

Anxiety is understood as an alert system that is activated when situations are perceived as dangerous and threatening to an individual (Viloria et al., 2020). Furthermore, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5) defines anxiety as having feelings of apprehension, tension or uneasiness that rises from the anticipation of danger about events or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Additionally, anxiety is further considered as a phenomenon that may occur as psychological or physical condition, that is experienced through the body and affects all individuals (Viloria et al., 2020). It occurs as a response to a circumstance or stimulation, as well as an intrinsic characteristic of an individual (Spielberger, 1966). Spielberger et al. (1971) highlight the existence of trait anxiety, which is referred to as the readiness to respond anxiously to a certain situation. Additionally, state anxiety, is defined as the emotional condition of the human organism (Trujillo-Gutiérrez et al., 2025) and is characterised by an individuals' subjective feelings of tension and apprehension. It is therefore through experiences of anxiety, that self-efficacy is adversely affected (Maeda, 2017) as an individual is unable to meaningfully relate to the world (Lazarus & James, 1972).

2.4. University students' experiences of anxiety in higher education from an international context

This section will explore a wide variety of anxiety triggers, that are identified within international education literature. The triggers range from peer relations, sexual orientation, gender-based violence, academic performance, language proficiency, family conflict, parental support, to COVID-19 and the transition to university.

Anxiety within higher education institutions-like universities-can be triggered by informal social relationships, as students experience pressure in forming relations with their peers, and other social circles within university. Therefore, experiences of anxiety within universities may arise during informal social interactions, as students attempt to present themselves in a

favourable image within social-evaluative situations (Russell & Topham, 2012). Many students experience social apprehension and doubt, in forming social relationships and this arises due to their low self-worth, shame and feelings of incompetence (Russell & Topham, 2012), which leads to pervasive fear and avoidance (Akacan & Secim, 2015) of socially interacting.

Additionally, research by Grinshteyn et al., (2022) found that students at the State University of New York who were part of the LGBTQIA+ community, experienced anxiety as they were viewed as the sexual minority and further experienced stigmatisation, hostility, discrimination and heterosexual harassment from their peers. This in turn led to LGBTQIA+ university students' experiencing anxiety, as the students perceived their social interactions as threatening (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006). In essence these university students reported to experience social anxiety, as they believed that they were incapable of making positive impressions, due to their repeated experiences of discrimination. As such, the anticipated negative regard from other university students in turn heightened their anxiety, as it led to the reinforced feeling and belief that they were devalued and rejected by their peers(Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006) .

Furthermore, research conducted amongst female students at the Bahir Dar university, in Ethiopia, revealed that female students reported that experiencing sexual violence led to feeling unsafe and vulnerable. The lack of safety and feeling vulnerable affected their sense of well-being and further hindered their ability to protect their health and to assert their rights In essence, according to Mengistab (2012), the fear of possibly contracting diseases as a result of sexual assault, triggered anxiety among female students, as students reported concerns over their health and had further reported that they felt exploited, worthless and powerless. Additionally, research conducted by Ejakait (2014) at the Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, revealed that psychological and verbal abuse were triggers of anxiety amongst university students. Students attributed their anxiety to being subjected to verbal threats and being shamed by their partners, as well as their peers and lecturers, which in turn left students feeling humiliated (Ejakait, 2014). Furthermore, physical abuse was reported as a trigger of anxiety by students at the university. Many attributed their anxiety to facing punishment, as well as being physically harmed by their partners, and this led to being fearful of their partners (Ejakait, 2014). As such, Gender-based violence, is therefore attributed as a trigger of anxiety amongst university students, as it leads to fear for personal safety, as well as feelings of humiliation and shame.

Furthermore, research states that university students' experiences of anxiety are heightened during the process of oral presentations during lectures. Students are required to display appropriate behavioural changes and are further expected to express themselves, in accordance with the academic expectations of their chosen courses (Akacan & Secim, 2015). As such, many students become doubtful and socially apprehensive, when required to complete oral presentations, as they find public speaking frightening and thus withdraw (Vitasari et al., 2010) from such situations, as well as developing relationships with their lecturers and peers.

Research conducted in India states that students experience anxiety because of their academic performance. Students' triggers of anxiety within India, occurred due to poor study habits, low-achievement motivation, as well as low intelligence and concentration (Rehman, 2016), during the process of test and exam preparation. Therefore, academic performance exacerbates an individuals' anxiety, as the student focuses on the difficulty of the task, their previous experiences of failure, as well as the inability to complete the given task (Viloria et al., 2020). Students' thus experience intrusive thoughts that hinder logical thinking, and impairs their functioning (Rehman, 2016) therefore leading to procrastination and inadequate preparation. Further literature by Matheson (2018) as cited in Keane et al. (2021) states that final year university students attributed their experiences of anxiety, to making decisions about their future goals, the outcome of their academic results, as well as furthering their studies. The uncertainty regarding their future and ability to continue with their studies became a trigger of anxiety for these students, as they found it challenging to uphold their academic performance and to meet academic demands while planning for their future (Keane et al., 2021).

Additionally, students' triggers of anxiety may be attributed to environmental factors relating to educational systems, in which language proficiency affects learner engagement, thus affecting their interaction and educational development. Language proficiency was further identified as a trigger of anxiety among Malaysian university students. English language proficiency and competency (Kamaruddin & Abdullah, 2015) exacerbated students' triggers of anxiety, as students believed that the English language was difficult, thus leading to feelings of worry and apprehension when it came to mastering English, as a second language (Kamaruddin & Abdullah, 2015). As such, difficulty in language acquisition is a trigger of anxiety, as it affected their ability to learn and acquire production of the language, therefore affecting their communication skills (Kamaruddin & Abdullah, 2015).

Further research conducted by Deng et al. (2022) in higher education institutions located in Pakistan revealed that Undergraduate and Postgraduate students attributed their anxiety to family related stress. In essence, it was reported that students' anxiety stemmed from the lack of emotional and academic support from their parents (Deng et al., 2022). The study asserted that these students' family stressors and disruptions resulting from conflict exacerbates their anxiety, given that students experience an increase in worry and emotional fatigue; this, in turn affects their ability to concentrate on their academic responsibilities (Deng et al., 2022). Moreover, the lack of emotional and academic support from parents' triggers anxiety amongst university students, given that a strained parent-child relationship and the lack of a support system leads to feelings of isolation (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023). While Deng et al. (2022) highlight family stress and the lack of family support as a trigger of anxiety amongst university students, Mofatteh (2020) similarly highlights that relocating and starting university was a trigger of anxiety reported by students in United States universities. Many students reported that transitioning and adjusting to a new university exacerbated their anxiety, as they experienced difficulty in adjusting to an unfamiliar environment and expanding their social networks. Additionally, students reported that transitioning to university heightened their anxiety, given that they did not have family and social support, which therefore led to feelings of loneliness (Mofatteh, 2020).

Research conducted by Jehi et al. (2021) has shown that COVID-19 led to a rise in anxiety amongst university students, as the pandemic led to a decrease in social interactions and building social relations amongst students and their peers. Jehi et al. (2021) research findings indicate that attending online lectures during lockdown negatively affected students' mental well-being, as many students were confined to solitary environments without any support from their peers and lecturers, and this in turn exacerbated feelings of loneliness. Further research conducted amongst French university students revealed that financial hardships experienced during the pandemic heightened student anxiety as many were faced with concerns regarding their financial stability and being able to pay their tuition fees. This led to an increase in working university students, who reported higher levels of anxiety, as they reported feeling significant pressure in meeting their occupational responsibilities while attending school and adapting to distance learning (Jehi et al., 2021).

2.5. Prevalence of anxiety in South Africa

Recent studies have revealed that anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon within South Africa. To begin with, research that was done by Craig et al. (2022) postulates that adverse childhood experiences relating to emotional abuse or sexual abuse, emotional neglect, as well as household violence are common factors that have led to experiences of anxiety amongst the South African population. Furthermore, exposure to and witnessing community violence relating to homicide and gang violence, sexual violence, as well as political violence (Sui et al., 2022) within South Africa, has led to experiencing anxiety, given that the exposure to unrelenting danger has led to continuous alert for danger and the fear of being assaulted (Donenberg et al., 2020).

Additionally, it is important to take into consideration South Africa's legacy of Apartheid, as this has had implications on the mental health of the country's population. Various factors of Apartheid, such as the legacy of racial oppression, forced migration, social exclusion, and the ongoing poverty, particularly amongst Black South Africans, continue to be contributing causes of anxiety amongst the South African population, post-apartheid. Research conducted by Jackson et al., (2010) asserts that these lingering effects have contributed to the prevalence of anxiety within South Africa; given the economic disparities, as unemployment and poverty rates continue to increase among Black South Africans, which in turn has led to financial insecurity and a lack of access to adequate resources.

Furthermore, educational inequality is a contributing factor to anxiety amongst the South African population, given that many Black children and adolescents attend schooling within disadvantaged areas, in which schools lack funding and educational resources (de Clercq, 2020). For many people, the inability to access adequate education and funding has led to anxiety. For some, it has led to a decrease in social mobility and the ability to end the cycle of poverty within their families. Furthermore, although the Apartheid regime and its restrictions on Black people's lives and the prohibition of urban migration for housing have been abolished (Mtshali, 2015), housing and spatial segregation and the ramifications of the migration laws persist. Many Black South Africans continue to live in townships and informal settlements and this has contributed to the prevalence of anxiety within South Africa, given that informal settlements and townships are riddled with high levels of violence and crime, which has led to a sense of insecurity. Additionally, poor infrastructure within townships and informal

settlements has further led to anxiety in South Africa, given the limited access to services- and this, in turn, has led to feelings of hopelessness (Mtshali, 2015).

In addition to this, the rise of gender disparities and experiences of GBV within South Africa has given rise to the prevalence of anxiety, particularly in women. As cited in Rikhotso et al. (2023) as well as in Shamu et al. (2019) gender-based violence has exacerbated the presence of anxiety within the country, as it has led to social isolation in that victims have been reported to withdraw from family and community support, as a result of shame and stigma perpetuated by cultural norms and expectations of gender roles. Gender-based violence has further heightened the prevalence of anxiety within South Africa, as it has led to feelings of fear and insecurity, given that many victims and women of South Africa have been reported to be living in fear of violence and the lack of personal and environmental safety (Rikhotso et al., 2023).

Furthermore, it's important to consider South African experiences of COVID-19 and its implications. For many, the outbreak of COVID-19 exacerbated the prevalence of anxiety, as the lockdown regulations amplified experiences of GBV. According to Nguse and Wassenaar (2021), the implementation of a lockdown led to forced confinement and heightened exposure of domestic violence within homes. This, therefore, resulted in an increase in anxiety amongst vulnerable individuals, as it was reported that victims expressed difficulty in escaping their perpetrators and further felt unsafe within their environment (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021). Furthermore, COVID-19 led to a rise in the prevalence of anxiety amongst the South African population as a result of unemployment and reduced incomes, which in turn led to financial instability (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021; Kim et al., 2022).

Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 saw a rise in anxiety amongst the population, as a result of being socially isolated and the lack of receiving social support systems, which further led to feelings of loneliness. Research by Nguse and Wassenaar (2021) further mentions that the overburdened health care system, and limited access to mental health services led to a surge in the prevalence of anxiety within South Africa, given that South Africa's health care system continues to be under strain, given the lack of access to healthcare resources. In essence, the pandemic led to a demand for medical services, and for many people such as those with pre-existing conditions and health workers, and such demands exacerbated anxiety given that much of the population was at risk of not receiving timely treatment (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021). Moreover, the closure of mental health facilities and limited in-person therapy, as well

as the limited access to online therapy, further intensified the prevalence of anxiety, due to the lack of emotional support received during COVID-19 (Kim et al., 2022; Gittings et al., 2021).

The rise of anxiety is therefore driven by a combination of factors relating to the lingering Apartheid effects and the ongoing experiences of GBV. Additionally, the outbreak of COVID-19 saw a rise in anxiety as a result of implementing a lockdown, which led to job loss, financial hardships and difficulty in accessing medical healthcare services. This, in turn, led to feelings of fear, apprehension and doubt amongst the South African population.

2.6. University Students' experiences of anxiety in the context of South African higher education institutions

An interesting research study by Case et al. (2018) reported that university students within South Africa experienced anxiety due to the inability to fit-in socially. This led to students experiencing loneliness, as they found it difficult to cultivate new friendships with peers (Case et al., 2018). The inability to socialise was mentioned as a trigger of anxiety, as students viewed themselves as failing within the social aspect of life (Case et al., 2018) due to their fear of how they may be treated and viewed by other members of their peer group (Finchilescu et al., 2007). Controversially, research further states that students' experiences of anxiety result from being exposed to prestigious universities, as many realise that their economic background is different from that of their peers (Swartz et al., 2017). In essence, poverty and lack of financial funding contribute to students' experience of anxiety within higher education institutions (Mngomezulu et al., 2017) as students are faced with constant apprehension about their family welfare and receiving financial support to successfully complete their studies. Furthermore, the inability to pay for university fees and lack of financial support exacerbates student anxiety, as most South African students are financially excluded from completing their studies (Swartz et al., 2017), thus further leading to isolation and being viewed as an illegitimate student.

For many students, as mentioned by Engelbrecht et al. (2020), the process of transitioning from high school into university was a trigger of anxiety. Furthermore, findings by Engelbrecht et al. (2020) highlight that many university students experience heightened anxiety when adapting to campus life, managing interpersonal relationships, as well as meeting academic demands timeously. In essence, the shift from a structured high school environment to the autonomous and demanding nature of university exacerbates anxiety, given that students are inadequately prepared for the rigorous academic standards and managing heavier workloads (Engelbrecht et al., 2020; Nel et al., 2009). Therefore, the lack of preparation leads to anxiety as students feel

overwhelmed and incapable of bridging the gap between their high school levels of academic success and the academic demands of meeting university expectations (Engelbrecht et al., 2020).

Further research findings by Sennet et al. (2003) state that academic performance was a trigger of anxiety amongst South African university students. Students indicated that they experienced anxiety due to unfamiliarity of key concepts, tools, codes, and conventions that related to knowledge construction of their courses. The inability to grasp academic concepts in relation to course work, is thus a trigger of anxiety in university students, as it leads to undermining one's self-confidence, as well as the possibility of failing their course (Sennet et al., 2003). Additionally, academic performance related to the use of computers, was reported as a trigger of anxiety amongst students. Students reported feeling apprehensive and fearful of utilising computers, as they were unfamiliar with technology (Schlebusch, 2018). The inability to use technology thus exacerbates anxiety amongst students who lacked exposure prior to university, as it leads to feelings of incompetence and comparison to other students, as well as affected the students' academic abilities (Swartz et al., 2017).

According to a study that was done by Bangeni and Kapp (2005) at the University of Cape Town, the inability to speak English was a common trigger of anxiety in Black university students. Students reported that the inability to speak English as a primary language, led to fear in participating in class, as students struggled to understand the lecturer and their peers. As such, many students resorted to remaining silent in class, as they find it difficult to adjust to the language differences (Case et al., 2018). English language competency is key in determining academic success within university, therefore the inability to speak English triggers anxiety in South African university students, as it leads to marginalisation and further affects academic performance of students who experience academic incompetency because of language proficiency.

This anxiety related to language barriers is further compounded by the racial and cultural tensions that are prevalent within South African universities. Research findings by Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) further indicates that the legacy of Apartheid continues to influence Black students within institutions that are predominantly White. In essence historically White institutions have created environments where Black university students continue to feel alienated, as a result of experiencing marginalisation and discrimination. These racial dynamics have led to experiences of anxiety amongst Black university students, as students experience

social exclusion and identity conflicts due to the internalised stereotypes that have been perpetuated by their peers and the institution (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017). For many students, particularly those who experience language barriers, and different socioeconomic backgrounds, anxiety is intensified, as students struggle with fitting into a predominantly White academic environment. Additionally, cultural expectations, particularly for first-generation students further contributes to stress. Research conducted by Bazana and Mogotsi (2017) found that first-generation students experience anxiety, as they feel pressure to succeed academically, for personal achievement and as representatives of their families. Furthermore, these students often struggle to balance academic demands with cultural obligations and the desire to honour their heritage. Therefore, the dual burden of meeting academic demands and cultural expectations, exacerbates anxiety amongst students of first-generation families, as students fear failing and ultimately disappointing their family members (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017).

In addition to racial tensions contributing to university students' experiences of anxiety, research by Cini (2019) has further stipulated that political unrest has contributed to the heightened levels of anxiety, experienced by university students within South Africa. The #FeesMustFall movement in 2015, regarding unaffordable tuition fees heightened students' anxiety, as students expressed concern relating to completing their studies timeously. Timeous completion of studies became a source of anxiety, given that students expressed concerns regarding employment, and alleviating financial uncertainty (Cini, 2019). Additionally, the movement saw a rise in anxiety among students, as a result of being exposed to a volatile environment, in which students were exposed to violent clashes between students and security forces. As such many students attributed their anxiety to the lack of safety (Cini, 2019).

In their paper Gittings et al. (2021) highlights that COVID-19 led to educational disruptions amongst adolescents attending university. The closing of university in-person attendance, and the transition to remote learning gave rise to anxiety amongst the youth, given the uncertainties of continuing and completing their studies- as many students had limited access to resources for online learning (Gittings et al., 2021). For some, the pandemic led to anxiety, particularly amongst students who were burdened with the responsibility of being breadwinners amongst their families. Loss of work and the lack of financial security, as such led to worry, as students were unable to support their families, and further faced the risk of being financially excluded and thus dropping out from university (Gittings et al., 2021). Gittings et al. (2021) further state that the pandemic increased anxiety amongst the youth, as many experienced challenges

relating to enduring interpersonal conflict within their home environments, as well as living within crowded and multigenerational households. The strained living conditions within their home environments therefore led to anxiety, as students experienced difficulty in concentrating (Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Further research findings by Daniels et al. (2018) at the University of Western Cape, revealed that first-year students attributed their anxiety to being exposed to a high stress environment, as a result of family conflict. Additionally, the study highlighted that the lack of emotional support from parents contributed to students experiencing anxiety (Daniels et al, 2018). Similarly, a study was done at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, illustrated that the lack of parental emotional support, contributed to students experiencing anxiety, as students experienced self-doubt in their ability to perform academically and further experienced a sense of loneliness, given that students lacked guidance from their parents (Zuma, 2020).

Although there is significant research on anxiety and its negative effects, there continues to be a gap within literature regarding university students' lived experiences of anxiety, within the South African context, as well as the influence that experiences of anxiety have on students' emotional well-being. This research therefore seeks to account for the gap, by looking at triggers of anxiety reported by undergraduate university students.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

This section presents the theoretical framework for this study. The theoretical framework within this study will consist of existing theories and models which are used as a foundation that provides a structured approach and a clear understanding of university students experiences of anxiety (Adom et al., 2018). Furthermore, the theoretical framework presented guides the study and links the existing research theories to the research study pertaining to university students and their anxious experiences. As such, a theoretical framework assists in demonstrating how a research study contributes to existing knowledge (Adom et al., 2018). The theoretical framework within this study will be underpinned by the Cognitive theory of anxiety, the Bio-ecological theory, as well as the Psychosocial development theory.

2.7.1. Cognitive theory of anxiety

The cognitive theory of anxiety disorder asserts that the occurrence of anxiety rises in relation to the preoccupation or fixation on the concept of danger, and the perceptual belief in the inability to cope with the postulated danger (Beck et al., 1985; Clark & Beck, 2009). The theory further refers to anxiety as a tense and an emotional state that is characterised by sympathetic symptoms, in which a person may experience chest discomfort, palpitations, or shortness of breath (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994) in the presence of perceived threat.

As such, the feeling of danger is commonly present within anxiety, because of assumptive beliefs and negative automatic thoughts, which often reflect ideas of physical, social, or psychological catastrophes that involve the self (Beck et al., 1985). In essence the overestimation of danger and the belief that one is unable to cope with situations that exacerbate anxiety. This in turn triggers situations whereby danger or threat schemas are activated and lead to selectively screening the received stimuli as danger, while disregarding stimuli that may not be perceived as dangerous to the self (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994; Hirsch & Mathews, 2012). This leads to the distorted and altered interpreted views of reality which is seen as dangerous to the vulnerable self, based on consistent and dysfunctional beliefs (Beck et al., 1985; Ehring, 2014). In this instance when danger appraisals are in activation, anxiety rises therefore causing an impairment in performance and further increasing a sense of vulnerability, which may impact and contribute to the unfavourable responses, in that the individual may react through arbitrary inference, due to the absence of sufficient evidence relating to the anxious event. The anxious individual in essence lacks the ability to evaluate their perceived threats in a realistic manner (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994; Ehring, 2014).

Furthermore, according to the cognitive theory of anxiety, the overestimation of danger leads to systematic errors in processing information and such errors of distortion that occur due to anxiety, thus leading to selective abstraction, in which the individual ruminates on one aspect of a situation, while ignoring relevant features (Yurica & DiTomasso, 2005; Ehring, 2014). It is thus believed that although the assumptions and beliefs may relate to early life experiences, in experiences of generalised anxiety the individual develops negative and positive beliefs in relation to worrying (Songco et al., 2020). In some aspects of the positive beliefs, these derive from early experiences whilst the negative beliefs relating to worry, may develop over an extended period of time (Kreutzer et al., 2018), when the individual is unable to control their worry (Yurica & DiTomasso, 2005; Songco et al., 2020). The individual engages in the process of enlarging or reducing importance of an event, as well as dwelling on and overestimating the

probability of the occurrence of an unfavourable outcome. Furthermore, according to the cognitive theory of anxiety, as posed by Freeman and DiTomasso (1994) anxiety and it's disorders occur due to genetics and hereditary dispositions, in which family history of anxiety disorders contributes to anxiety symptoms a person may show, as a result of the arousal that occurs within the autonomic nervous system (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994). Genetics thus contribute to the manifestation of anxiety amongst individuals, through the biological transmission that occurs through Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA).

The cognitive theory of anxiety further posits that physical diseases may contribute to the manifestation of anxiety, as some illnesses such as hyperthyroidism, caffeine intoxication and Cushing syndrome symptoms may mimic the association of anxiety symptoms (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994). Mental health trauma was further identified as a cause for anxiety and its disorders, in the cognitive theory of anxiety. Furthermore, trauma that occurs during development may increase the occurrence of anxiety, due to an increase in emotional arousal, which leads to the development of a threat schemas. In anxious individuals, it is believed that the threat schemas associates with themes of danger and therefore become activated in instances, whereby an individual is exposed to a similar situation in which the first incident of trauma may have occurred (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994).

In addition to providing an understanding for individuals perceptions and responses to situations, as well as the cognitive distortions that influence an individual's responses to the perceived threat; the theory further highlights various coping strategies (Beck, 1976) that are implemented in coping and managing anxiety. The cognitive theory of anxiety mentions avoidance, a common coping strategy, in which individuals attempt to escape anxiety inducing situations (Schmidt et al., 2024). Furthermore, the theory highlights rumination; the process of repeatedly thinking about an anxiety inducing event, with a focus on a negative outcome (Beck, 1976; Ehring, 2014). Cognitive restructuring is mentioned as a process that involves challenging distorted thoughts that may contribute to anxiety and emotional responses to perceived threats. In essence the theory asserts that reframing thought patterns, alleviates the feeling of anxiety and creates an adaptive mindset (Beck, 1976; Clark & Beck, 2009; Nakao et al., 2021). Additionally, the theory posits behavioural activation, in the form of engaging in rewarding activities as a way of counteracting feelings of anxiety (Clark & Beck, 2009). Furthermore, developing and creating effective problem-solving skills is emphasized as a coping strategy, given that such skills aid in identifying and creating steps that reduce feelings of helplessness and anxiety when encountering situations that may be perceived as threatening

(Beck, 1976; Ihara et al., 2024). Lastly, emotion focused and relaxation strategies, such as controlled breathing, are highlighted as coping strategies used as a means of regulating physiological arousal and symptoms, associated with the perceived threat (Clark & Beck, 2009).

The cognitive theory of anxiety provides a framework for understanding how university students interpret and respond to stressors within the academic and social environment. This study explores how students' overestimation of threat, and their negative thoughts contribute to their experiences of anxiety, especially in situations such as during assessments, exams, and social interactions. The theory further outlines coping mechanisms such as avoidance, cognitive restructuring and rumination, which align with behaviours and coping mechanisms that students may use in anxiety-provoking situations, therefore making this theory beneficial for examining and understanding university students' triggers of anxiety and how they manage it.

2.7.2 Bio-ecological theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory postulates that individuals develop through complex and reciprocal interactions between the person, objects and symbols within the environment, over extended periods of time, therefore contributing to their competence or dysfunction (Olofson, 2017). Additionally, the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, is a central component of this theory, as it provides an explanation of how development occurs within these environments (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). This model stipulates that, proximal processes involve interactions that are reciprocal between an individual and their environment (Millar, 2023). A second component to this model, is the person component, in which an individual's personal characteristics influence a person's development and their social interactions (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017).

Bronfenbrenner further mentions that these processes are influenced by three personal characteristics. These include: demand which encompasses factors such as age, gender and physical characteristics, followed by resources which includes mental and emotional resources such as intelligence, skills and past experiences, material resources which refers to housing, education and responsive caregivers and lastly social and material resources, which involves one's educational background as well as family financial and social status (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Lastly, Bronfenbrenner stipulates that, force is a personal characteristic, which involves motivation, persistence and temperament, and forms part of one's personal

characteristics. Additionally, within this model, Bronfenbrenner highlights context as the third component (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Thus, Bronfenbrenner refers to context as the interconnected environmental systems in which an individual grows up. As with the Bioecological model, Bronfenbrenner divided these environments into five classifications, namely: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem (Olofson, 2017). The Microsystem is referred to as the immediate and face-to-face environment in which the individual is present within their immediate settings. According to Bronfenbrenner, this environment involves family members, one's schooling environment, neighbourhood interactions, as well as healthcare providers (Olofson, 2017).

Furthermore, for Bronfenbrenner, these relationships affect and shape a person's behaviour. Additionally, the Mesosystem refers to the interrelations between various settings in which the individual actively participates (Mulisa, 2019). According to the Bioecological theory, these interrelations involve family and peer group interactions, school and neighbourhood connections, parent-teacher communications. Bronfenbrenner further refers to the exosystem, in which various events that occur, affect the individual although they do not actively participate this includes environments such as parents' workplace, extended family networks, local communities and organisations, as well as social services and support systems (Mulisa, 2019). He further postulates the existence of the Macrosystem, in which socio-economic factors, educational policies, healthcare systems, as well as culture and belief systems influence an individual's development (Mulisa, 2019). Bronfenbrenner lastly refers to the Chronosystem, in which the continuous occurrence of change over time within a person's environment, such as family structure, educational reforms, economic cycles and environmental changes, influence an individual (Mulisa, 2019).

Building onto to chronosystem, the time component of the PPCT model, further expands the concept of the chronosystem environment, by emphasizing time across three levels: micro-time which refers to the frequency of proximal processes during interactions, followed by meso-time which examines the consistency of interactions over time, and lastly the macro-time, which involves historical and generational changes. Therefore, by placing focus on the individual, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory allows for a greater understanding of how various experiences and environmental factors may contribute to an individual's experience of anxiety, as human development and behaviour is influenced by encountering different environments and systems throughout one's lifetime (Olofson, 2017).

The bio-ecological theory highlights university students' anxiety within a multi-layered context of familial, cultural , institutional and social influences. By taking into consideration the interplay between these multilayered systems, this study highlights how the broader environmental and temporal factors influence students triggers and lived experiences of anxiety. The theory therefore allows for a holistic understanding of how external environments and developmental timing contribute to anxiety in the university context.

2.7.3. Psychosocial theory of development

The Psychosocial theory of development by Erikson (1963) outlines eight distinct stages that an individual encounters over their life span. The psychosocial theory of development posits that each stage presents a challenge that an individual is required to successfully resolve in order to reach healthy psychological and social growth (Erikson, 1963; Rorije et al., 2023). As such, the stages of development extend beyond early childhood, given that the theory emphasizes the lifelong nature of development, as well as integration between individual growth and society's influence on a person's growth.

As mentioned by Rorije et al. (2023), the Psychosocial stages of development according to Erikson (1963) begin during the ages of birth to eighteen months. This is a stage at which an infant begins to assess whether they are able to develop trust in their primary caregivers and the outside world. In essence, Erikson (1963) postulates that during this stage, infants depend on their caregivers for consistent comfort and sustenance, which leads to the formation of trust. Contrary to the formation of trust that is created by consistency of comfort, inconsistent and neglectful caregiving leads to feelings of mistrust, and fear in fostering relationships in later life (Rorije et al., 2023). Erikson (1963) further asserts that during the ages of eighteen months to the age of three, children assert their independence through exploration and decision-making. In essence, during this stage, children learn to walk, talk and control their bodily functions and become autonomous (Rorije et al., 2023). Following Erikson's (1963) assumptions, caregiver encouragement during this stage fosters a sense of self-confidence, while criticism and overprotectiveness lead to feelings of shame and doubt. As such, the ability to overcome this stage leads to developing a sense of self and building confidence in one's abilities.

Additionally, Erikson (1963) posits that the pre-school years of childhood are characterised by initiative to explore their environment and engage in imaginative play. From the age of three to five, children assert their power over their world and begin to initiate activities and interactions with their peers. The Psychosocial theory of development further claims that, successfully resolving this stage leads to a sense of initiative and leadership, while feelings of guilt may arise when attempts at independence are met with criticism and guilt, which ultimately leads to repression of one's ambitions and hinders self-assertion and creativity (Rorije et al., 2023). Furthermore, Erikson (1963) affirms that from the age of five to twelve, peer groups and academic success become significant. As such, the ability to successfully develop peer relations and accomplish school goals fosters a sense of industry and further leads to feeling competent, while negative evaluation and failure lead to feelings of inferiority.

Erikson (1963) further highlights that the psychosocial stages of development encompass a pivotal stage during which adolescents progress from childhood into adulthood. From the age of twelve to eighteen, adolescents explore social relationships, different roles, values and beliefs in attempt to establish their identity. The ability to successfully master this stage leads to a reintegrated and strong sense of self, while failure to overcome this stage leads to inability to establish a sense of identity within society, which leads to confusion (Klimstra & van Doeselaar, 2017). Furthermore, Erikson (1963) centres the theory of Psychosocial development on the ability to form meaningful and intimate relationships with others. From the age of eighteen to forty, young adults begin to explore long-term relationships that transcend beyond family members. For Erikson (1963), overcoming this stage successfully results in the ability to form intimate and committed relationships that are based on mutual trust, while in contrast, difficulty in overcoming this stage leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Furthermore, within the Psychosocial stages of development Erikson (1963) presents a stage in adulthood that is focused on establishing one's career. This stage takes place from the age of forty to sixty-five and is further characterised by the desire to contribute to society through creative endeavours and parenting (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). As such, the ability to make valuable contributions to society leads to a sense of generativity, productivity and fulfilment, while the inability to achieve this stage may lead to stagnation as well as dissatisfaction with one's life (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). Lastly, Erikson (1963) postulates that the final stage of Psychosocial development occurs during late adulthood, from the age of sixty-five until death. This stage involves reflecting on one's life as well as assessing accomplishments and failures.

It is further characterised by seeking coherence and fulfilment, as well as purpose, which leads to a sense of integrity and wisdom (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). However, Erikson (1963) further posits that during this stage, perceiving oneself as unproductive, and incompetent in achieving life goals, as well as feelings of guilt relating to past events, may lead to feelings of despair.

The theory highlights the developmental stages that university students face, thus making it relevant for this study. University students navigate complex decisions regarding their future, intimate relationships and establishing their independence, all of which may trigger anxiety amongst students. The theory therefore highlights how student anxiety is a response to broader developmental transitions. Therefore, understanding students' psychosocial stages, allows for the study to explore how unresolved challenges within these stages can emerge in the form of anxiety, during their university years. The theory therefore aids in providing a deeper insight into university students' emotional struggles.

2.8. Conclusion

In higher education institutions, students' behaviour and experiences of anxiety are triggered and stem from various bioecological systems, in that students are faced with the social pressures of forming relationships with their classmates and within their social circles within the university. Additionally, students' triggers of anxiety may be attributed to family dynamics and financial abilities, in that students may lack financial support from their caregivers, thus exacerbating the possibility of academic exclusion. Although experiences of varying environmental events may trigger students' anxiety, students' ability to cope as well as their cognitive assumptions and beliefs of occurred events further contributes to their experiences of anxiety and the way in which the student makes sense of occurred events.

One could therefore assert that, it is important to take into consideration the multilayered and social environmental influences, relating to issues of Apartheid, inequality and cultural diversity within the South Africa context (Donald et al., 2014). Therefore, by using the abovementioned theories, the theoretical framework provides a holistic approach of understanding anxiety within the South African context. In essence these theories take into consideration cognitive, social, and developmental factors and the immediate and long-term influences that each factor may have on an individual and their wellbeing (Donald et al., 2014) therefore allowing for the aspect of student experiences to be understood from a holistic perspective. Therefore, the Cognitive theory of anxiety, the Bioecological theory, as well as

Erikson's theory on Psychosocial development will be used to further understand South African students' experiences and triggers of anxiety within university.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Methodology

3.1. Research methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study, covering the methodology, research design, research procedure, the pilot study, and participant demographics. Additionally, it discusses the sampling process, selection of participants, data collection methods, data analysis, as well as reflexivity, trustworthiness criteria, and ethical considerations. The purpose is to understand how undergraduate students experience anxiety and how they cope with and manage their anxiety.

3.2. Methodology

Methodology is the process of obtaining, organising and analysing research data in a logical sequence (Polit & Hungler, 2004; Igwenagu, 2016). It encompasses research design, methodological limitations, setting, sample, as well as analysis techniques that are used within the study. It is further understood as a coherent group of interlinked methods, aimed at allowing for the findings and collected data to reflect the research question and the purpose of the study (Henning et al., 2004; Igwenagu, 2016). Qualitative methodology provides ideas and principles that guide how qualitative research is conducted; by taking into consideration the above-mentioned principles, methods and approaches used to understand and explore research phenomena. Additionally, qualitative methodology emphasizes an understanding of human behavior and participants' subjective experiences and further focuses on how they make meaning of these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher has therefore employed a qualitative approach, to explore and describe undergraduate university students' experiences of anxiety. Now that the methodology has been outlined, the following section will provide a detailed description of the research design used to address the research question.

3.3. Research Design

Research design is known as a plan that is implemented within a study and serves as a framework for collecting data (Leedy, 1997; Khanday & Khanam, 2019). It is a plan that is used for identifying and selecting research sites, subjects, and the data collection procedures that are used when answering the research question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Khanday & Khanam, 2019) posed by the researcher. It is thus a strategic framework that assists in executing a research process, which enables the researcher to answer their posed research question, through conducting research that will yield credible results (Durrheim, 2004).

This study used a Qualitative Interpretive Design. This was appropriate to use as this research focused on understanding students' experiences of anxiety from the perspective of Undergraduate university students from Wits University. Qualitative research explores how individuals interpret and understand their own real-life experiences (Cropley, 2019). This research design follows the notion that reality is subjective and is thus used to gain insight and understanding about the constructed realities and interpretations of everyday life (Cropley, 2019). Therefore, data collected in qualitative research uses descriptions which arise from the data collected throughout the research process. Such descriptions provide deep and detailed accounts of the individual's experiences (Flick, 2009). Furthermore, this approach is exploratory and provides the researcher with an in-depth understanding of experiences under study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using a qualitative interpretive research paradigm was thus appropriate for trying to understand experiences such as anxiety (Creswell, 2003). The paradigm accounts for and acknowledges existing universal realities, which are interpreted differently amongst individuals. The qualitative research design will thus allow for an in-depth understanding of experiences of anxiety within university students, as well as provide detailed results and descriptions of subjectivities reported by the individual.

The Phenomenological Research Approach was to look at the nature (essence) of the individual's lived experience to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The application of the phenomenological approach can be conducted through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or Thematic Analysis. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis allows for coding of data before familiarisation of data, whilst Thematic analysis allows for coding of data after familiarisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This research employed a Thematic Analysis, as it was appropriate in that, this research sought to identify, analyse, and report themes as well as describe the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was done by using a rigorous process of coding, reviewing, and refining themes, to reach a

satisfactory thematic map of the data collected in relation to students' experiences, triggers and management of anxiety.

3.4. Research procedure

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the nature of the research, the participants' involvement, ethical aspects of the study, and the purpose for audio recording that took place. Participants were asked to select their own pseudonyms and to sign the informed consent form (Appendix C) as consent to be interviewed and recorded with the audio recorder. The researcher engaged in one-on-one interviews with participants, whereby each participant was asked the semi-structured questions posed by the researcher. Each individual interview was audio recorded, therefore allowing the researcher to engage and be present in conversations with the participants without being distracted by taking notes (Bryman, 2012). An audio recording was beneficial, as it allowed the researcher to transcribe the interviews verbatim, therefore yielding transcripts that reflected the true nature of the interaction between the researcher and participants, as well as the participants' experiences, thus enhancing the study's validity.

3.5. Pilot Study

Piloting is the process whereby the researcher conducts preliminary research before the main study. It allows the researcher to reflect on their research methods, design, and instruments, and further allows the researcher to refine and modify the study accordingly. (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Prior to embarking on this research study, a pilot study was done by the researcher, whereby the research instruments were used on two university students, before embarking on the actual interview process. This was done to determine whether the interview questions were adequately scaffolded and effective in providing relevant information relating to the research question. It was further used to ask pilot participants whether the questioning process was clear and to gain feedback regarding possible areas of improvement. Furthermore, piloting took place for reflecting on how the research instruments were used and to identify possible limitations (Majid et al., 2017) of the research design. It was further used to test whether the

participants' responses, research design, instruments and materials were appropriate and efficient for the analysis and data entry process.

3.6. Participants' Demographics

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Race	Degree of study
Thabi	21	Male	Coloured	Bachelor of Arts film and television
Natasha	21	Female	Black	Bachelor of Arts film and television
Sam	22	Male	Black	Bachelor of Arts(General)
Phoebe	21	Female	Black	Bachelor of Arts(Music)
Tshego	21	Female	Black	Bachelor of Arts (Psychology)
Sima	21	Other(unspecified)	Black	Bachelor of Arts film and television
Lerato	21	Female	Black	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Bobby	26	Male	Black	Bachelor of Arts (General)
Odirile	20	Female	Black	Bachelor of Arts (General)

3.7. Sampling and selection of research participants

A sample is a set of sources from which data is drawn and the process of selecting the sample, is known as sampling (Given, 2008). For this research, the researcher aimed to interview third year full-time Humanities students who were registered during 2022 and were of age 18 and above, thus making them eligible to take part in the study. The process of sampling the participants involved using non-probability convenience-based sampling (Ritchie et al., 2013). This form of sampling was beneficial, as it entails the process of using a target population that is easily accessible to the researcher, based on time and geographical location, as well as participants' willingness to participate in a study (Etikan et al., 2016). The use of convenience-

based sampling was appropriate as the responses given by the participants can be used to represent the university student population; it was further appropriate because Wits students are easier to access in person as well as via e-mail.

Once permission had been granted by the Registrar or the Dean of students, the researcher approached third year Humanities students at the beginning of their lectures to inform them about the study and to invite them to participate. In addition , the researcher sent out an email to invite students to participate and inform them of the research study, its purpose and its aims. This recruitment approach took place to reach a wider and more enriched population as possible. The researcher received emails from the interested participants and thus sent an introductory email with the participants' demographic information form (Appendix B) attached for each participant.

3.8. Data collection and Research instruments

Data collection is defined as a systematic process in which information regarding the variables of interest (Brink et al., 2018) is gathered by the researcher. This is done to answer a stated research question, testing hypotheses as well as evaluating outcomes of the research (Kabir, 2016). The process is therefore done to capture quality evidence, that is translated into a rich data analysis, which in turn allows the researcher to build a convincing and credible answer to the posed research question (Kabir, 2016).

For this research, the researcher collected primary data. Eight semi-structured questions, as shown in the interview schedule in appendix (A) were posed to the participant during a semi-structured interview. This type of interview method was used by the researcher, as a method of data collection, given that semi-structured interviews yield rich and detailed data (Bryman, 2012). This was important in establishing an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and triggers of anxiety from their subjective standpoint. Semi-structured interviews are, therefore, a beneficial method of data collection, as they offer flexibility for both the researcher and participants (Bryman, 2012). Flexibility within the semi-structured interviews was an important factor in this research, as it gave the researcher the freedom to respond to the direction of the participants, as well as probe the participants for clarity in their responses. Using semi-structured interviews further allowed participants a degree of freedom in answering interview questions, therefore allowing them to share detailed accounts of their experiences (Bryman, 2012).

3.9. Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was deemed suitable for this study, as it is a flexible approach to data and can be used within various frameworks, as opposed to being located within an epistemology. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis is flexible in that there is no specific research design associated with thematic analysis, it can thus be used to analyse and collect data in different forms such as case studies, interviews as well as narrative inquiry. It assists in providing a summary of the key features of a data set that is large and allows the researcher to handle the data using a well-structured approach (King, 2004) to produce an organised final report (Nowell et al., 2017), as it provides a structured methodology in which themes can be identified within the data. A realist approach was used for this research, as the research focused on an individual's reported experiences of anxiety. The research therefore utilised the explicit information within the data to report experiences, and meaning, as well as the reality of the participant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the research was focused on semantic themes within data. This was appropriate as the research identified themes within the surface meanings given in the data, rather than seeking interpretations that go beyond what the participant has written (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach, whereby codes and themes arise from the data set was used for this research, to gain an understanding of students' subjective experiences of anxiety.

Braun and Clarke (2006) stipulate that Thematic Analysis follows a process that consists of six steps. This was used within the research, as follows: The researcher ensured familiarisation of the data that was collected, by repeatedly reading the transcribed data, in order to search and identify meanings and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that are associated with students triggers of anxious experiences. After familiarisation had occurred, a list of codes was created and organised into categories, that were developed and found within data. The data was coded through taking notes and using highlighters to mark and indicate themes and patterns which were used throughout the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Identified codes, were matched with data extracts that relate to the specified codes. Once the data had been coded and collated, the codes that were identified and listed, were placed into identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and within this process, each code was written on a separate piece of paper and was given a brief description. It is important to note that some codes created, may have fallen within the main theme while other codes may have formed sub-themes or may be disregarded. After the themes were set and defined, the themes were reviewed and refined by the researcher,

to determine their relevance to the research and whether certain themes could be combined into broader themes. In addition to the creation of thematic descriptions, themes were defined and further refined again, by identifying what each theme was about, and each theme was written using a detailed analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once themes were fully identified and finalised, findings were interpreted and reported in a concise and coherent analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that accounted for data.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are a set of principles that guide the research design and practices of research. Ethical considerations are thus codes of conduct that a researcher adheres to, in order to ensure that the integrity, dignity and human rights of the participants are not violated (Mathers et al., 2000). Researcher's adherence to ethical guidelines is thus an important process of research, as it serves as guidance for studies to be conducted in a way in which the participants' rights, welfare and dignity is protected (Goodwin, 2010). This study has taken into consideration Ethical clearance, 'voluntary participation,' 'Informed consent,' 'Confidentiality,' and 'Potential for harm.'

3.10.1. Ethical clearance and organisational permission

Prior to the process of conducting the interviews with participants from Wits University, the researcher sought permission through a letter (Appendix E) addressed to the Registrar or Dean of students with regards to conducting the study on the university premises and received permission from the Registrar (Appendix F). The researcher applied for ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) andwas granted ethical clearance: ethics protocol number:_ MEDPSYC/22/08____. The researcher only approached participants who expressed interest in taking part in the study, once the researcher had received approval and permission from the university.

3.10.2. Voluntary participation

Voluntary participation is an important component within research ethics, as it serves as evidence that the participants have not been coerced or forced to take part in the study (Bryman, 2012), and that participants further have a clear understanding that there will be no consequences should they decline or withdraw from participating in the research study, at a later stage. The researcher therefore ensured that participants understood that they were willingly and legally participating in the research study and that they were aware of their rights to withdraw at any point, if they wish to do so. Voluntary participation within this study was important as the researcher aimed to collect data from individuals who were interested and willing to take part in this research study, as well as participants who were prepared to freely contribute to the finding, so that the findings of this study reflected their authentic experiences (Shenton, 2004).

3.10.3. Informed Consent

Informed consent was integral within the study, as the researcher needed to ensure that the participants taking part were fully aware of what the research entails, as well as what they could be asked to do during their participation. The researcher therefore adhered to ethical procedures of research protocol (Bryman, 2012) by giving participants an information sheet (Appendix D) outlining the research aims, nature of the study, as well as information regarding their participation. This was done to ensure that the participants understand the contents of the participant information form, as well as to allow them to ask questions or voice concerns before the interviews. The participants were further required to sign an informed consent form (Appendix C) at the beginning of each interview as confirmation that they have consented to being interviewed and that they have been made aware of the study.

3.10.4. Confidentiality

Confidentiality in qualitative research pertains to assuring the participants that their personal information and privacy will be kept confidential. (Kvale, 2007). Privacy and confidentiality were further ensured by the researcher by asking the participants to choose their own pseudonyms, which will be used to refer to the participant throughout the study. This was done to ensure that the identity of each participant was only known to the researcher. Additionally, transcribed interviews were labelled with participants' pseudonyms and were further stored on

a password protected computer folder belonging to the researcher. The researcher's supervisor had access to the transcripts, however, participant confidentiality was not compromised as the participants' real names and identity remained in disguise to the supervisor.

3.10.5. Potential for harm

Given that the study is interested in participants' experiences of anxiety, the researcher anticipated that the interview questions may elicit an emotional response from participants. Therefore, as part of a contingency plan, the researcher planned to make referrals to the Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) for counselling services to address participants' issues that may arise, however, no referrals were made as none of the participants showed signs of emotional distress or discomfort. Each participant was given the contact details of the counselling services (Appendix G) to allow the participants to contact CCDU privately after the interview if the need arose for counselling services.

3.11 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is referred to as the researcher's capacity to reflect on the research process, the methods employed, their values and their biases (Bryman, 2012). Reflexivity also entails the researcher's engagement with how they influence their study, as well as practicing sensitivity to their own social and cultural context (Bryman, 2012). It is thus an important aspect of research, as reflexivity highlights that researchers are not objective and form part of the research during the process of enquiring knowledge (Berger, 2015). As a researcher I must remain cognizant of my own emotions, as well as social position throughout the process of analysing the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As a student who has gone through the university process, it is important to ensure that I don't let my own experiences of anxiety and biases affect the responses from participants, the data analysis and data collection process.

3.12. Trustworthiness

Bryman (2012) defines the aspect of trustworthiness in research, as the criterion that assists in assessing and establishing the quality of qualitative research to ensure that research findings are trustworthy (Given, 2008). Qualitative research has become valued throughout research literature, therefore, for it to be deemed credible and trustworthy, the researcher should state their research process and justify their chosen research and analysis methods (Braun & Clarke,

2006). Furthermore, the research conducted should provide evidence of consistent and precise data analysis, by recording the data, and disclosing the method of analysis, to allow the researcher and reader to determine the credibility of the research. In addition to this, the process of using triangulation is important in determining trustworthiness and validity. The researcher used multiple methods and theories to answer the posed research question (Noble & Heale, 2019). Therefore, trustworthiness was ensured through conducting semi-structured interviews within the pilot study using two participant students, as well as in the actual research study with the volunteering participants. Additionally, the researcher ensured trustworthiness, through using and applying various theoretical frameworks in the research study to analyse and understand the phenomenon.

To ensure that credibility and trustworthiness was achieved, the researcher took into consideration credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data scripts, by re-reading and ensuring that the identified themes were relevant (Nowell et al., 2017) and in congruence with the findings and the reality of the participants (Shenton, 2004). To further ensure credibility, the researcher used the questions in the interview schedule found in Appendix (A) to ask questions that are relevant to the research question (Mashabile, 2023), and, in turn, reflect the participants' lived experiences of anxiety.

Transferability in qualitative research pertains to whether the research findings can be applied in other contexts and populations (Bryman, 2012). Researchers who undertake qualitative studies are therefore encouraged to provide rich accounts and descriptions of the phenomenon (Du Plessis, 2008), and findings as well as the context in which it is investigated. This ensured that readers were able to understand the study and make comparisons to other contexts and research reports, in which the same phenomenon occurs (Bryman, 2012). To ensure transferability, the researcher provided detailed descriptions of the sample selection process (Hadebe, 2024), sample characteristics, as well as detailed descriptions of the data and findings. This was done to ensure sufficient provision of information to future researchers who may be interested in exploring the research (Willig, 2021) topic within different contexts.

Dependability in qualitative research is the extent to which future researchers can replicate the study. This is made possible through studies which provide detailed explanations of the research design, methods, and processes (Shenton, 2004). This study ensured dependability by

providing detailed information of the research design as well as the research method process (Burke & Soffa, 2018) and how these will be executed.

Confirmability is concerned with the researcher's ability to ensure that their own values and personal inclinations have not influenced how the study is conducted (Burke & Soffa, 2018). In addition, confirmability refers to ensuring that the findings within the study result from participants' experiences rather than the researchers' preferences (Shenton, 2004). The researcher, therefore, ensured confirmability by documenting the findings in a way that reflects participants' true experiences and perspectives rather than being influenced by the researcher's own preferences. This was done by acknowledging the researcher's predispositions and by reflecting on the research process in the form of maintaining a reflective journal, which documented the researchers' methodological decisions, the reasons for employing the methodical approaches, and the rationale (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.13. Conclusion

In conclusion, the methodology used in this research study provided a framework for exploring undergraduate university students' experiences of anxiety. Furthermore, using a qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth and rich collection of data that reflects university students' experiences of anxiety. By using a phenomenological approach, this allowed for the study to explore and understand the meanings that students ascribe to their lived experiences of anxiety, which aligns with the aim of understanding students' experiences of anxiety from their subjective perspective. The semi-structured interviews further supported the research aims as they provided a flexible and consistent method of data collection, while encouraging participants to share detailed narratives. The use of thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns across the students' accounts, in turn allowing for a coherent understanding of common and varying experiences. Overall, using the chosen qualitative methodology allowed for the development of meaningful insights and a coherent analysis of the data and research findings that will be discussed further in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR

Research findings and discussion

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings from the thematic analysis that was conducted based on the semi-structured interview questionnaire with Wits university students, regarding their triggers and experiences of anxiety. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using semantic themes. The themes that emerged from the data spanned three main themes: Social (un)familiarity, Academic pressure and Social Wellbeing. Although the three main themes were useful in documenting the experiences of anxiety among students, it should be noted that many of the experiences and sub-themes created may overlap and intersect into various main themes. The emerging themes and their sub-themes and codes will be presented in this chapter using a table (figure 4.1.2) and diagrams (figure 4.1.3,4.1.4. and 4.1.5)to illustrate each theme and sub-theme in order of priority under each theme. The sequence and size of the circles in figures 4.1.3 to 4.1.5, indicates the dominance of each sub-theme within the themes.

Figure 4.1.2 Table showing main themes, sub-themes and codes

Themes	Sub themes	Codes
1. Academic Pressure	1.1 Weighted workload	*"The workload of my of the degree."* *"When things start to pile up a lot."* *"I have a lot of work that I need to do."*
	1.2 Academic uncertainty	*"I need to do well so I can apply for honours."*

	1.3 Academic ineptitude	*"When you going to write an exam and not knowing what may happen in the near future."* *"Do I really know what's going on and am I going to be able to pass the module...."* *"l am writing a test, and I haven't studied to the best of my abilities."*
	1.4 Dual responsibility	*"I work for my mom's company…the workload and needing to make time for everything."*
2. Social (un)familiarity	1.5 Social apprehension	*"a lot of times like meeting new people."* *"I have to go talk to people. I have to get my head in the right space to go."*
	1.6 Unpredictable interactions	*"I'm afraid that somebody will come tap me on the back to tell me that I'm doing something wrong."* *"It's usually a fear of new spaces I'm not used to, not knowing the people in that space"*
	1.7 Self-identification among peers	*"I had to like figure out what I actually liked as an individual."*

3. Social wellbeing	1.8 Adjusting to a new Environment 1.9 Environmental stress	*"I moved from Pretoria to Joburg. It was a lot of change in one go."* *"because of all the problems at home."*

Figure 4.1.3 Thematic map: Academic Pressure and emerging sub-themes

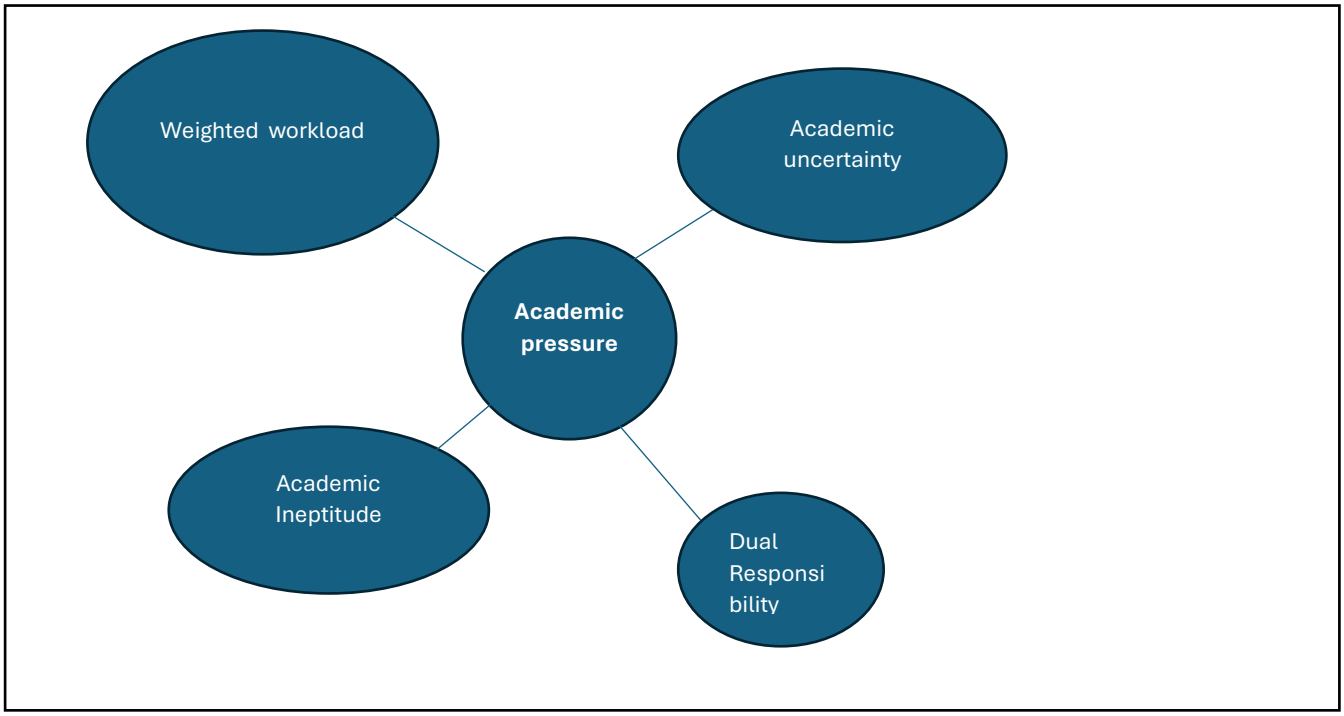


Figure 4.1.4 Thematic map: Social (un)familiarity and emerging sub-themes

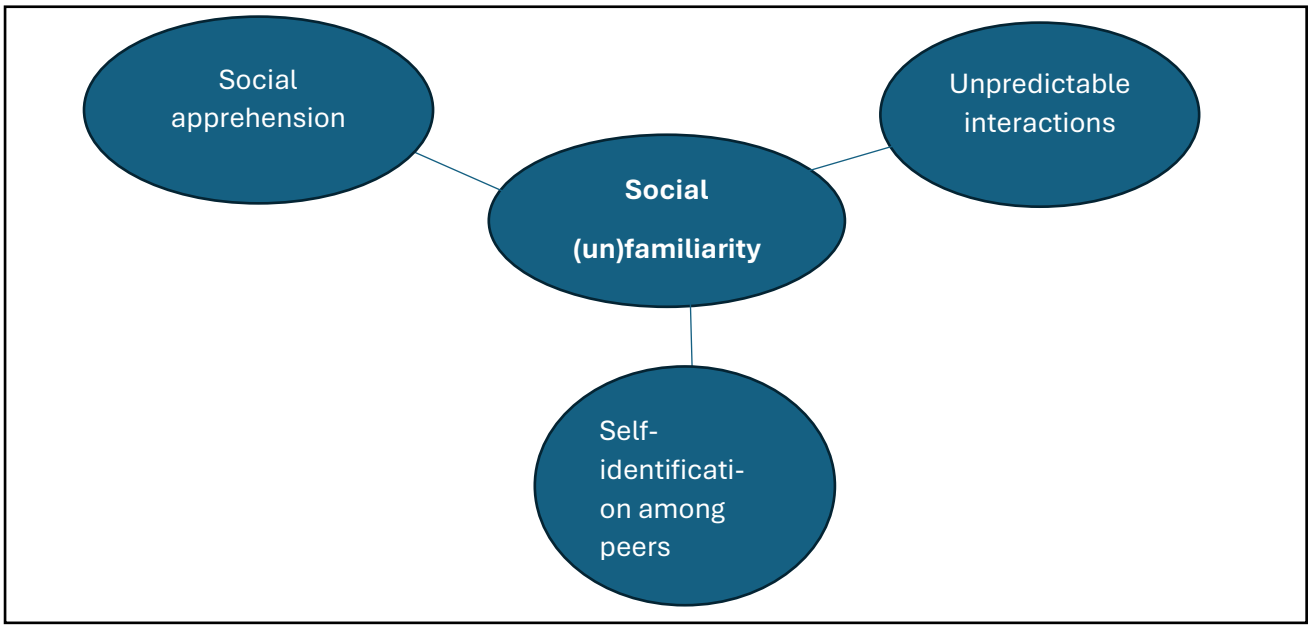
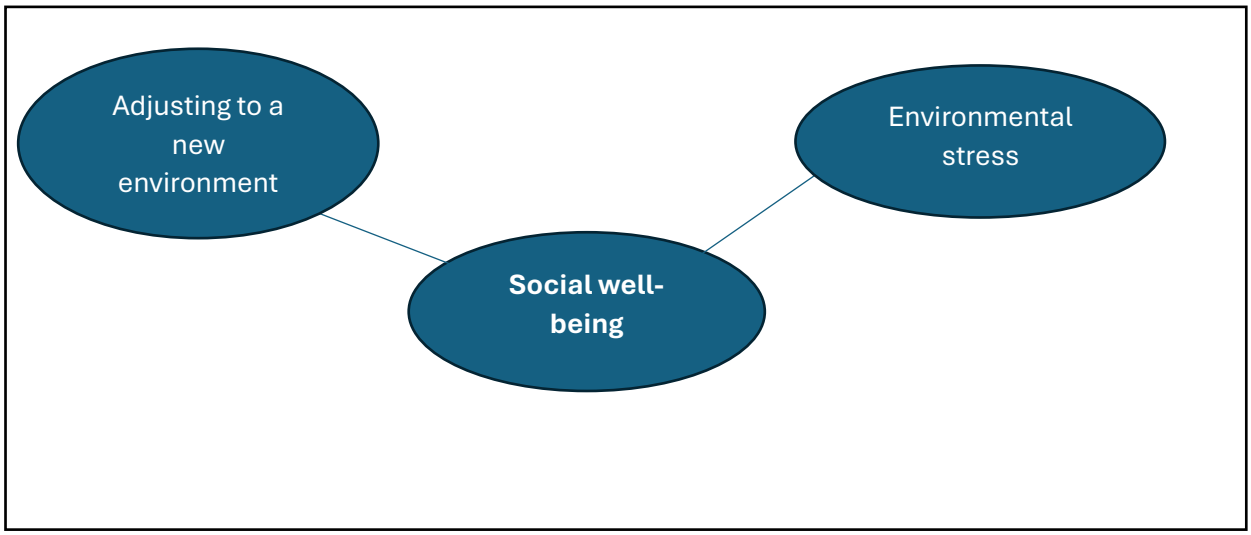


Figure 4.1.5 Thematic map: Social well-being and emerging sub-themes.



According to undergraduate university students at the University of Witwatersrand, experiences of anxiety are attributed to various factors. The triggers of anxiety that were referred to by students included Academic pressure, Social (un)familiarity and Social well-being.

4.2. Academic pressure

Academic pressure appeared to be a common trigger of anxiety amongst many students reflecting on their experiences of anxiety. Within this theme, four sub-themes emerged. The first sub-theme weighted workload, followed by the second sub-theme Academic ineptitude, the third sub-theme Academic uncertainty and the fourth sub-theme dual responsibility.

4.2.1. Weighted workload

Throughout the interviews, there was a high prevalence of experiencing anxiety related to keeping up with the workload. For example, in the extract below, a 21-year-old male student named Thabi describes how keeping up with workload of his degree is "Stressful."

> *"The workload of my degree is pretty, it's pretty hectic. And yeah, it's stressful. It's like a lot of stuff to keep on top of, you know what I mean? Yeah, there'll be a lot of*

assignments at once. And then it'll also coincide with exams….I supress like a lot in the moment when I am anxious, sometimes I do breathing techniques, I find those very helpful, helps me centre myself, sometimes I journal."(Thabi)

In the extract below, a 21-year-old female participant named Natasha describes how the workload of her course led to her feeling "more anxious."

"Um, I think if it's like school related. I think that's just when things start to pile up a lot… there isn't an exact interval of when I do it, but like, usually more into the semester, I tend to become a lot more anxious. Sometimes I cry or like not speak for like the next 30 minutes." (Natasha)

Phoebe, a 21-year-old female mentioned that her experience and trigger of anxiety was attributed to having "a lot of work" which led to her "feeling anxious".

"When I'm overworking myself. I have a lot of work that I need to do and that's why I'm feeling anxious…I try by all means to avoid situations that get me in that state. Because the longer you're in it, it's just a hole that digs itself" (Phoebe).

The students' made reference to experiencing difficulty in keeping up with the workload of their courses. This confirms how a heavy load of coursework, as well as academic demands of their degree (Zaman et al., 2010) can be a trigger of anxiety for students.

4.2.2. Academic uncertainty

Another subtheme that emerged relating to Academic Pressure was students' academic uncertainty. In the excerpt below, 20-year-old Odirile's trigger of anxiety related to having expectations and hopes of continuing with her academic studies and meeting academic requirements for getting accepted into her desired academic course:

"I think mainly it was the fact that I need to do well so I can apply for Honours, because I know it's a very limited number of students that they take for Honours Psychology, and also so that I can get funding. I know there's a certain average that you should have and also just besides funding, depending on which institution I want to apply to you have to have a certain average I know UCT they're looking for like 75 and above that's all I know. It's a lot to think about it…. I don't have a specific coping mechanism that's one thing that I struggled with the most. I procrastinate a lot. Normally I try to I talk to my mom or a friend who I know can help me calm down or I just sometimes I just stop what I'm doing

and try to calm myself either by just sitting, just not having anything in front of me not being stimulated by anything and trying to think of something else." (Odirile)

Another participant, 21-year-old Lerato attributed her anxiety to writing exams and not knowing the outcome of her results and her future.

"When you going to write an exam and you worry or are fearing and then not knowing what may happen in the near future… when I'm anxious I take a nap and then, like, I'll wake up and face it." (Lerato)

As confirmed by (Mofatteh, 2020) literature studies relating to uncertainty about the future for many students exacerbates anxiety. Furthermore, as stated by Matheson (2018) in Keane et al. (2021) the uncertainty of continuing their postgraduate education, is a trigger for anxiety amongst some university students. In these instances, both participants have attributed their triggers of anxiety to being uncertain regarding the outcome of their academic results and their future.

4.2.3. Academic Ineptitude

Within the data, one participant experienced a sense of lacking the ability and academics skills in completing her academic work. In the extract below, 21-year-old Tshego attributed her experience of anxiety to feelings of incompetency and questioning if she will "be able to pass the module".

"Let's just say during exam season and the first weeks of school when school opens, I'm just like oh do I really know what's going on and am I going to be able to pass the module...."(Tshego)

Tshego later added that:

" During if I have a submission to make and I have no idea on how to go about it or l am writing a test, and I haven't studied to the best of my abilities…when I'm anxious I just breathe in and out slowly manage my breathing and that's really just about it." (Tshego)

In this instance, the student's experience of anxiety was attributed to fear of their inability to uphold their academic performance (Hassel & Ridout, 2018) and the lack of familiarity with a topic that the participant may be tested on.

4.2.4. Dual responsibility

Another sub-theme that emerged was Dual Responsibility. This was related to finding a balance in maintaining and upholding work responsibilities as well as academic responsibilities. In the excerpt below Thabi a 21-year-old male, further mentions how working for his mother and finding time to complete his academic work is "anxiety inducing."

> *" I work for my mom's company. So, it's not so much the individual assignments for work or for school. It's sort of like just the workload and needing to make time for everything and that can be quite stressful and anxiety inducing."* (Thabi)

In the above excerpt, the student attributes their trigger of anxiety to finding a balance and making time to fulfil their academic work demands and occupational duties, this in turn confirms that students attribute their experiences of anxiety to fulfilling their work tasks, while attending to their academic responsibilities (Jehi et al., 2021).

4.3. Social (Un)familiarity

With regards to theme two, identified in the data, it became evident that students' accounts of experiences that trigger their anxiety, pertained to socialising and adjusting to new social environments that they may be unfamiliar with.

4.3.1. Social apprehension

The process of socialising with peers and forming friendships is a trigger of anxiety for some students, such as the students in the excerpts below. Thabi later added that socialising and meeting new people was "anxiety inducing" for him:

> *"I have pretty bad social anxiety. So, a lot of times like meeting new people, induces a lot of anxiety for me and especially when I was starting off at Wits, and I really struggled to make friends but say like the first year and a half as a student."* (Thabi)

This student attributed his trigger of anxiety, socialising, which confirms, that university students trigger of anxiety, are exacerbated by transitioning from high school into university and the responsibility of forming interpersonal relationships (Engelbrecht et al., 2020). As such for Thabi, the inability to socialise with their peers (Case et al., 2018) leads to anxiety.

In the excerpt below, Phoebe further attributed her experience of anxiety to performing in front of others:

> *" It's just sometimes it's like, I have to go talk to people. You know, and I don't mind it. It's just I have to get my head in the right space to go it's not it's not a problem or like I don't want to do it or scared of doing it….sometimes it's just you know, you're in a social situation like the one I'm going to now I'm so freaking nervous, I have to sing in front of these people, I'm not that good. I wish someone else would take my place or sing for me"* (Phoebe)

In this story, the student's trigger of anxiety lies in having to socialise with others, as well as performing in front of people. In this instance, the student's anxiety may further be attributed to viewing herself as incompetent (Russell & Topham, 2012) while performing in a social space.

4.3.2. Unpredictable interactions

One participant, Sima relayed a story of experiencing anxiety while being in public spaces alone, which led to the student isolating themselves, as being in public spaces led to feelings of being "afraid" and feeling "fear."

> *" I really feel like that happens a lot. When maybe let's say I'm alone in public... Like, I don't like looking back when I'm walking...I never want to see what's going on...So I think when I'm alone, walking alone, or just like existing alone, I do feel like I'm afraid that somebody will come tap me on the back to tell me that I'm doing something wrong . Which is never really the case because it's like maybe I'll cut it short. Like I'll be like, okay, let me go back into my room…. I think I cope with sound, like to do a soundscape, like a support; it's been helpful like outside of like journaling and praying, it feels like a map to the emotions"* (Sima)

In the excerpt above 21-year-old Sima, attributes their experience of anxiety to being alone in public and potentially facing judgement and being critiqued by other people. This confirms that students attribute their triggers of anxiety to engaging in informal interactions with surrounding peers, while attempting to present themselves in a favourable image (Russell & Topham, 2012).

Bobby, a 26-year-old male student, expressed that his experience of anxiety was attributed to being in spaces with large crowds, as well as being in spaces that he was unfamiliar with.

> *" I think just in those moments where like, I'm around a lot of people….just keep keeping to myself because I have all I need at my place. So, I don't find the need to go like outside and do much outside…It's usually a fear of new spaces I'm not used to, not knowing the people in that space and automatically being uncomfortable… I usually I take deep breaths and yeah, I'll try and just like go back somewhere when it's my space and just get myself back in order."* (Bobby)

When Bobby spoke about his experience, he attributed his experience of anxiety to socialising and being in unfamiliar places. For Bobby, being in unfamiliar places and interacting with people he did not know led to feelings of "fear" and being "uncomfortable" which led to the need to isolate himself. Bobby's experiences of anxiety are thus attributed to socially interacting and the lack of familiarity with his social surroundings (Akacan & Secim, 2015).

4.3.3. Self-identification among peers

One participant further spoke about difficulties in socialising with peers while maintaining their identity. 21-year-old Natasha later reported that her anxiety stemmed from trying to uphold her identity, while having to interact with peers and form friendships during her first year.

> *" It was like a lot of new people, like in freshers specifically, I started to become socially anxious. I had to like figure out what I actually liked as an individual as opposed to like what people around me like, yeah, so sort of like having to adjust yeah, having to adjust but then doing that by yourself when everyone else has kind of like found like, cliques and stuff. It was difficult."* (Natasha)

This particular student speaks of anxiety relating to the inability to associate with peers and fit into social groups that peers have formed based on their similarities. For Natasha, difficulty in finding commonality within social circles, while maintaining her true identity (Erikson, 1963) may trigger her' anxiety, as she experienced difficulty fitting, in as well as cultivating friendships with peers (Case et al., 2018).

4.4. Social well-being

The third emerging theme "Social well-being" which can be understood as having meaningful and healthy relationships, as well as authentic interactions with others. Social well-being entails interactions within one's community while navigating conflict, communication and setting boundaries (Teghe & Rendell, 2005). Within this theme, students attributed their experiences of anxiety to experiencing change within their social setting, as well as experiencing difficulties within their home environment.

4.4.1. Adjusting to a new environment

Changes to an environment proved to be a trigger of anxiety for student due to relocating and having to adjust to a new social setting. In the excerpt below 21-year-old Natasha also attributed her experience of anxiety to adjusting to a new environment.

> *"I've experienced it a lot more regarding like academic stuff, like social settings especially because I moved from Pretoria to Joburg. It was a lot of change in one go, I thought I had things figured out, but things took a turn, and I just felt like I didn't really have as much of like a good footing as I thought I did."* (Natasha)

This confirms that anxiety among some students may be exacerbated by relocating as well as adjusting to a new environment and lifestyle (Mofatteh, 2020).

4.4.2. Environmental stress

In the excerpt below, 22-year-old Sam mentions that his experience of anxiety relates to tension within his environmental surroundings at home, which ultimately led to him failing and being academically excluded:

> *"Because of all the problems at home. So of course, when there are problems at home, I couldn't cope here at school it was like when there's a disturbance and then I fail and then they tell you that you are academically excluded and financially excluded, I started spending time with my friends….I didn't talk with my mom, I usually tell her, I didn't tell her because it was gonna stress. If she's stressed and I'm stressed it doesn't help."* (Sam)

This student attributes his anxiety to failing, as he was unable to cope academically due to challenges experienced at home. Failure to uphold his academic performance, further led to the student experiencing anxiety due to facing academic exclusion and financial exclusion. This therefore confirms that low achievement, as well as the inability to concentrate (Rehman, 2016)

and cope academically exacerbates anxiety among students. Additionally, the student attributes his anxiety to experiencing environmental *"problems at home"* which confirms Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory, which stipulates that various experiences within one's immediate environment may influence behaviour (Olofson, 2017) and exacerbate anxiety. Furthermore, for this student facing financial exclusion, was a trigger of anxiety, which confirms that, lack of financial support, and the inability to pay for their university fees exacerbates anxiety, as students are unable to complete their studies (Swartz et al., 2017).

4.5. Discussion

The study aimed to explore undergraduate university students triggers and experiences of anxiety, in South Africa. The study was located in a qualitative interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data (Bryman, 2012) from Third year Humanities students from the University of Witwatersrand. The explorative research questions that the study set out to answer are as follows: What are undergraduate university students' experiences of anxiety? To elaborate and provide an in-depth analysis, two secondary questions emanating from the primary question are; 1) What triggers of anxiety are reported by undergraduate university students, and 2) How do university students manage and cope with anxiety?

The discussion section aims to explore how the emerged findings from the interviews, answer the above research questions and how they relate to existing literature and can be explained by the theoretical framework identified in chapter two. Therefore, the discussion that follows will explore undergraduate university students' experiences of anxiety, in terms of the pressure of keeping up with the academic workload, dealing with uncertainty relating to the future, as well as dual responsibilities. Social (un)familiarity, particularly socialising with peers, and maintaining one's self-identity within social circles will also be discussed. Thereafter, Social well-being, in relation to changes in a person's social setting and adjusting to a new environment, along with environmental stress will be explored.

4.5.1. Academic pressure

The findings in this study correlate with the findings of literature relating to students experiencing academic pressure as a trigger of anxiety. The participants' triggers of anxiety are similar to Zaman et al. (2010) paper in that students in this research study reported that their anxiety was attributed to keeping up with the academic demands and workload of their coursework.

For the participants that were interviewed, anxiety related to academic demands and keeping up with the workload, which led to feelings of stress. Thabi mentioned *"The workload of my degree,"* while Natasha stated, *"when things start to pile up"* and Phoebe reflected on having *"a lot of work that I need to do."* These responses may suggest that these participants perceived keeping up with the workload as overwhelming, and thus difficult to cope with.

As such, given that they interpreted and evaluated the workload as overwhelming and threatening, these students found themselves avoiding the anxiety-inducing situation, by supressing their feelings, and withdrawing from the situation, by remaining silent. This stands in line with assertions of the Cognitive theory of anxiety; that anxiety arises when an individual perceives a situation as threatening (Beck et al.,1985; Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994) and beyond their ability to cope, therefore, given that keeping up with the academic pressure and workload is perceived as threatening, unmanageable and overwhelming and therefore, the students avoided the anxiety inducing situations (Schmidt et al., 2024) as a means of coping with the perceived threat (Beck et al.,1985; Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994).

Furthermore, although, most of the students' emphasized avoidance as their coping strategy, Thabi demonstrated an attempt to reframe his experience, as he states: "*sometimes I do breathing techniques, I find those very helpful, helps me centre myself."* The use of breathing techniques as employed by the student, highlights efforts to use relaxation as a coping strategy (Clark & Beck, 2009) to manage his anxiety and regulate physiological responses. Furthermore, journaling as a coping strategy as mentioned by Thabi, illustrates cognitive restructuring, and the likely attempt to potentially reflect on his thoughts, and reframe his perception and thoughts of the workload, that was perceived as overwhelming.

Matheson (2018) as cited in Keane et al. (2021) explained that final-year students attributed their anxiety to uncertainties relating to their academic results and their future, as students were required to make decisions about their future goals and continuation of their education. For Odirile, this was experienced in that she attributed her anxiety to furthering her education in

postgraduate studies, while Lerato attributed her anxiety to anticipating the outcome of her future. As such facing academic uncertainty, with regards to furthering their studies was an attribute of anxiety, as students were left feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of making life decisions. Students in turn opted to avoid the sources that trigger their anxiety, by procrastinating and also taking a nap; perhaps as a form of avoiding a situation that the student may have deemed as threatening (Birennaum & Pinku, 1997) and unmanageable. This confirms assertions made by Hirsch and Mathews (2012) as well as Freeman and DiTomasso (1994) state that anxiety arises as a result of distorted thoughts and the fixation on the perceived danger, as well as the belief that one is unable to cope with the perceived threat. In this context, the difficulty in dealing with academic uncertainty may trigger anxiety as students perceive the situation as threatening and anticipate a negative outcome. Consequently, in attempt to cope with their anxiety students avoid the perceived threat (Schmidt et al., 2024).

While avoidance of the perceived threat became a coping strategy amongst these university students, one participant, Odirile affirms Clark and Beck (2009) assertions regarding behavioural activation and cognitive restructuring as coping strategies. By resorting to receiving emotional support through socialising with family and friends, this reflects the participant's conscious effort in seeking relationships, that foster emotional safety and stability, as a means of coping and countering the thoughts that exacerbate her anxiety. Additionally, Lerato highlights the use of cognitive restructuring and problem-solving (Beck, 1976) as coping strategies. The intent to *"wake up and face it"* illustrates cognitive restructuring and problem-solving, in that the student reflects a shift in her perspective of the perceived threat and an attempt to regain control over a situation that she had initially perceived as threatening.

Furthermore, students that were interviewed came to realise that their source of anxiety came from doubting their ability to gain the knowledge and skills (Mashabile, 2023) required to excel within their course, as well as the lack of preparation for exams. Tshego questioned, *"am I going to be able to pass the module?"* and further states " *I am writing a test, and I haven't studied to the best of my abilities"* thus indicating that she may be doubtful in her own ability to uphold her academic performance (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). As such for this student, underperformance, the lack of preparation for a test and the questioning of her ability to *"pass"* reflects the perception of the situation as threatening, given that she may anticipate academic failure (Hassel & Ridout, 2018) and this in turn exacerbates Tshego's anxiety (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994). Furthermore, the students perceived lack of control over the outcome of her academic efforts, as well as the focus on her shortcomings and her fear of potentially failing

leads to anxiety, given that student catastrophises the outcome, by focusing on a negative outcome and further viewing herself as being unable to manage and meet academic demands. This aligns with Freeman & DiTomasso (1994) as well as by Clark & Beck (2009) who assert that anxiety is exacerbated by catastrophising, fixating on the possibility of a negative outcome and the distorted perceptions of a stimuli that an individual may view as threatening. Tshego mentioned "*I just breathe in and out slowly manage my breathing"* thus indicating that she used emotion-focused techniques as a coping strategy (Clark & Beck, 2009), in dealing with her anxiety and regulating her physiological responses.

As mentioned by Jehi et al. (2021) fulfilling multiple duties relating to occupational and academic demands leads to anxiety. Thabi also stated " *I work for my mom's company…it's sort of like just the workload and needing to make time for everything."* Indicating that he experienced difficulty in allocating his time fairly and adhering to the responsibilities of his occupational and academic tasks (Jehi et al., 2021). For this student, the complex interactions between their personal, social and institutional environment exacerbates their anxiety. Using Bronfenbrenner's assertions as cited in Olofson (2017) this confirms that difficulty in balancing occupational and academic demands triggers anxiety. In essence the individual may find it challenging to integrate the demands of their occupation and academic expectations (Deng, et al., 2022) while fulfilling both duties timeously.

4.5.2. Social (Un)familiarity

In addition to facing academic pressure, and meeting academic demands, students' experiences of anxiety were attributed to navigating social situations while on campus. For some of the students that were interviewed, having to assert themselves and navigate social spaces with people they are unfamiliar with, meant having difficulty with fitting in and potentially facing judgement from other students, and this in turn left students feeling apprehensive and incompetent in their social abilities. These findings echo studies by Case et al. (2018) and Russell & Topham (2012).

Thabi, mentioned that his anxiety was attributed to *"meeting new people… especially when I was starting off at Wits"* because he *"struggled to make friends in the first year and a half."* This confirms the assertions, that the process of transitioning from high school into university and the responsibility of forming interpersonal relationships, as well as experiencing difficulty socialising with peers (Case et al., 2018; Engelbrecht et al., 2020) may exacerbate anxiety. Furthermore, Thabi's response highlights that for him *"meeting new people"* is perceived as

threatening, given that he had difficulty in cultivating interpersonal relationships, as Thabi indicates that he has *"bad social anxiety."* This may indicate a perceived inability to cope and manage the demands of socially interacting (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994). Additionally, as mentioned by Erikson (1963) forming a cohesive sense of one's identity, while attempting to create meaningful relationships and adapting to new roles plays a crucial role in adolescence. Therefore, for Thabi the difficulty in cultivating interpersonal relationships and socialising with peers, may lead to feelings of loneliness and difficulty in adapting to a new environment thus heightening his anxiety.

Phoebe further attributed her anxiety to talking to people and attending social situations in which she is required to perform. For Phoebe having to *"sing in front of these people"* is perceived as threatening (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994), given that it leads to feelings of nervousness and doubt in her abilities, as she views herself as *"not that good."* In essence Phoebe's response highlights and affirms the assertion that catastrophising and anticipating a negative outcome heightens anxiety (Clark & Beck, 2009). Given that Phoebe views talking to people and performing in front of others as anxiety inducing, she further states; *"I wish someone else would take my place or sing for me"* which indicates the desire to avoid the situation she perceives as threatening. This affirms cognitive theory assertions that avoidance is used as a coping strategy to minimise anxiety exacerbated by a perceived threat (Schmidt et al.,2024).

Bobby reported experiencing anxiety, relating to being out in "*new spaces"* and "*not knowing the people."* while Sima reported being "*alone in public"* and potentially being approached as anxiety inducing. Their anxiety was due to lack of familiarity with their social surroundings (Akacan & Secim, 2015) as well as the fear of being told they are *"doing something wrong,"* as mentioned by Sima. This indicates fear of being criticised and being viewed in an unfavourable image (Russell & Topham, 2012). In essence feeling and the perception that one is unable to cope with the perceived threat (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994) of being in a social space, and potentially facing judgement heightened their anxiety . As mentioned by Erikson (1963) forming an identity and developing meaningful relationships forms an important part of adolescence, however, for these students the fear of being in unfamiliar spaces, as well as facing criticism, unacceptance within social settings and the inability to meet societal standards, may challenge the formation of intimate social relationships given that the student isolated themselves (Erikson, 1963; Klimstra & van Doeselaar, 2017) from social environments.

This is further congruent with Bronfenbrenner's claims as cited in Olofson (2017) that human development is influenced by interactions within various environmental systems. Therefore, for the students that were interviewed, the inability to adhere to societal standards and expectations, as well as expecting to face potential judgment exacerbated their anxiety. Bobby further mentioned *"keeping to myself"* while Sima mentioned "*going back into my room"* as coping strategies, which highlights that these students resorted to isolating themselves. This indicates avoidance of the social situation, which the students perceived as threatening to the self, which confirms the cognitive theory of anxiety assertions that avoidance is a coping strategy used in situations that an individual perceives as threatening (Schmidt et al.,2024). However, it should be further highlighted that both participants mentioned engaging in additional coping strategies relating to listening to taking deep breaths, sound scaping and prayer, both of which align with emotion focused coping strategies (Clark & Beck, 2009 ; Ihara et al., 2024) that are used as a means regulating one's emotions. Additionally, coping strategies such as journaling and sound scaping as mentioned by Sima, highlights using cognitive restructuring (Clark & Beck, 2009) as a coping mechanism, in that it may encourage externalising and reflecting on one's own anxious thoughts and emotions experienced.

Additionally, difficulty in socialising while maintaining one's identity exacerbated anxiety in Natasha. Similar findings were highlighted by Case et al. (2018) wherein it was reported that university students attributed their experiences of anxiety to experiencing difficulty in cultivating friendships and fitting in, while staying true to their identity.

This aligns with Erikson's theory regarding the adolescent stage of Identity versus Role Confusion. The ability to master this stage leads to establishing a sense of identity and core values, while the inability to overcome this stage results in identity confusion and uncertainty regarding one's role in society (Klimstra & van Doeselaar, 2017). Furthermore, as suggested by Erikson (1963) mastery of the Intimacy versus Isolation stage within adolescence leads to forming meaningful relationships that transcend beyond family, which in turn drives a sense of belonging and intimacy. However, the inability to form intimate social relationships leads to feelings of isolation. In this case, the student's inability to establish and maintain their true identity (Erikson, 1963) while forming social relationships and cultivating friendships, may have exacerbated the participant's anxiety. This was likely due to the difficulty in finding commonalities, that would allow for their acceptance into social groups. In essence, it is the desire for social acceptance, and the inability to resolve the conflict between their identity, as well as adhering to the expectations of social environments that leads to the student

experiencing heightened anxiety, as students experience difficulty in establishing a sense of belonging.

4.5.3. Social Wellbeing

Regarding the social wellbeing of university students, findings indicated that students experience anxiety as a result of social and environmental changes. Participants that were interviewed reported experiencing difficulty with relocating. This was because students found it difficult to adjust and adapt to their new lifestyle and environment. For Natasha who states: *"I moved from Pretoria to Joburg"* the transition to a new location was thus a source of anxiety, as she mentions that she "*didn't really have as much of like a good footing…"* which indicates that difficulties in adapting to the new environment and finding stability were perceived as threatening. Similarly, environmental stress, such as disruptions within the home environment became a source of anxiety for Sam. This was because dealing with environmental stress, relating to family conflict led to the perception and belief in the inability to cope academically, at university, which in turn ultimately led to failure and academic exclusion.

As explained by Rehman, (2016) difficulty coping and maintaining one's academic performance, may trigger anxiety as students face potential exclusion due to failure. Additionally, further confirmed by literature, interactions and disruptions within one's immediate environment, may cause anxiety as well as influence a person's behaviour (Olofson, 2017; Deng et al., 2022). As a form of counteracting his anxiety, Sam resorted to spending time with friends, which affirms the assertion that engaging in rewarding activities, such as socialising with peers, is a coping strategy that provides social and emotional support and further assists in counteracting negative thoughts that exacerbate anxiety (Ihara, et al., 2024).

4.5.4. Conclusion

In conclusion the section above explored the findings that emerged and how they relate to existing literature. The study has further explored the triggers and experiences of anxiety amongst undergraduate university students and therefore highlights how perceptions of failure and upholding academic demands reinforce anxiety and contribute to feeling inadequate. Furthermore, multifaceted sources of anxiety relating to academic pressure and balancing occupational and academic responsibilities (Jehi et al., 2021) exacerbate anxiety as students find it challenging to manage multiple responsibilities. Additionally, grappling with decisions about future career prospects and decisions to further one's studies heightens anxiety amongst

students. Social interactions further play a role, in that the need to maintain one's identity, while navigating social circles compounds feelings of anxiety, given the potential judgment (Russell & Topham, 2012) students may face.

Lastly, adapting to new environments while attempting to form personal relationships (Mofatteh, 2020) as well as experiencing environmental stress in one's immediate environment, emphasizes how environmental factors influence students' emotional health. Notably, the students' coping strategies, highlight the importance of cognitive processes in managing anxiety. In essence, viewing a situation as stressful or threatening, influences emotional and behavioural responses and in turn may lead to negative interpretations of a situation thus leading to avoidance behaviours. Although students highlighted various coping strategies in managing their anxiety, avoidance which is identified as behavioural symptom of anxiety in the DSM-5 (Amercican Psychiatric Association, 2013) emerged as a common coping response for many of the students who perceived these situations as threatening (Beck et al., 1985) and beyond their control. It should further be noted that thought process such as catastrophic thinking may heighten anxiety, whereas cognitive restructuring, may reduce anxiety. This highlights that cognitive appraisals and meaning making contribute in students' ability to cope with anxiety-inducing situations.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary of findings and conclusion

5.1. Introduction

The aim of this research study was to explore how students experience, what they understand of its triggers and how they cope within a university setting. The primary question that this study posed is what are university students' experiences of anxiety? followed by the secondary questions: what are undergraduate university students' triggers of anxiety and how do undergraduate university students cope and manage their anxiety? To answer these questions, qualitative interpretivist design, was used to explore university students' experiences of anxiety. Non-probability convenience-based sampling was employed as a method to select participants, and a total of nine Third-year Wits Humanities students took part in the study's data collection. Data was collected through the process of conducting individual semi-structured interviews and a demographic questionnaire. After using thematic analysis for analysing the data and discussing the findings in the chapter above, the current chapter gives a summary of the study, and describes the contributions made by this research. Additionally, the chapter identifies the implications and study limitations and further outlines future research recommendations.

5.2. Summary of findings

This study is situated within the context of South Africa, at the University of the Witwatersrand. The study explored experiences and triggers of anxiety at undergraduate level, among the Third-year humanities students, as well as how they cope and manage their anxiety. The findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with Third- year Wits Humanities students, revealed three main themes. These themes include 'Academic pressure,' 'Social (Un)familiarity' and 'Social Well-being.'

Facing academic pressure entails much commitment and consistency, as university students experience a sense of stress and feeling overwhelmed, when dealing with the heavy workload and academic demands of their chosen course. Additionally, academic uncertainty seemed to be a trigger of anxiety amongst students, as some students' experience uncertainty relating to the outcome of their exam results. Furthermore, university students are faced with the pressure of making decisions (Boadu et al., 2022) with regards to their life goals as well as furthering

their studies and meeting academic requirements for the desired postgraduate studies, that they wish to pursue. In addition to this academic ineptitude, which is characterised by feelings of incompetency, was a trigger of anxiety, as university students questioned their ability to gain the knowledge and skills (Mashabile, 2023) of the degree they have chosen. Participants additionally expressed that the dual responsibility of attending to both academic and occupational demands was a source of anxiety. Students were met with the expectation of upholding their academic responsibilities, while simultaneously upholding their occupational expectations and responsibilities and this ultimately led to students experiencing difficulty in dividing their time fairly to both responsibilities.

Furthermore, student life at university, entails socialising, as well as forming social connections with peers. The second theme 'social (un)familiarity' demonstrated that socialising with others, was a trigger of anxiety amongst students, when required to navigate social spaces within the university, with people they were unfamiliar with. In addition to this, the thought of being in a social space, and being criticised when interacting with others was a trigger of anxiety for some students, as they were unable to present themselves in a favourable image. Moreover, students attributed their anxiety to finding themselves and their identity, while attempting to form social relationships with peers with differing interests. For students within late phase of adolescence, the inability to socially fit-in and form a social identity while staying true to their values may trigger anxiety.

Lastly findings under the theme 'Social well-being' indicated that students attributed their anxiety, to the process of relocating as they experienced difficulty in adjusting to a new environment and lifestyle. Additionally, some students' experienced anxiety relating to disruptions within their home environment, as this caused difficulties in being able to cope with their academic work and upholding their academic performance. This in turn led to the fear of failing and facing academic exclusion. These findings and the themes that were identified within the data have shown that anxiety often arises due to students' perceptions and understanding of events and situations. In essence, the findings have revealed that students perceived their situations as dangerous and threatening, which thus exacerbated their anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed. The findings also show that for many students who perceived the situations as threatening, the process of managing and coping with their anxiety mostly involved avoiding the source that they perceived a threatening and in turn triggered their anxiety. The findings further show that, while avoidance emerged as a dominant coping strategy, students further referenced using other coping strategies, alongside avoidance.

These included employing problem-solving, using behavioural activation and cognitive restructuring (Clark & Beck, 2009; Ihara, et al., 2024). This therefore suggests that students' coping strategies are multifaceted and may further depend on the students' perceptions of events and situations, and their ability to cope.

5.3. Strengths and limitations of the study

In highlighting the limitations of this study, it would be beneficial to note that the study focused on Undergraduate university students, with a particular focus on Third year Humanities students. This was based on the understanding that Third year students have undergone two years of academic experience, which provides them with a comprehensive perspective on the development and management of anxiety. Furthermore, although the study may not broadly encompass the entire population of Undergraduate students, it is worth highlighting that first-year university students may experience different triggers, in comparison to third-year university students. Although this allowed for in-depth accounts of their experiences to be collected, the sample is not as representative as it would have been, if participants were from different faculties and years of their registration.

Additionally, the participants consist of mostly Black South African students, and mostly females, given that mostly female students expressed interest in taking part in the study. This means that the sample ratio is not representative of all South African races and genders.

Furthermore, it should be noted that conducting interviews via Zoom, proved to be challenging, as some participants experienced a disturbance in their network connections, which made it difficult to note participants' reactions. However, conducting in-person interviews served as an opportunity for the researcher to build rapport with the participants. Conducting interviews in-person also allowed the researcher to clarify misunderstandings and to further probe and encourage participants to provide detailed and elaborative answers.

5.4. Implications of this study

This study highlights various implications, particularly within the context of South African higher education institutions. Notably, the study highlights that anxiety contributes to shaping university students' academic experiences and their well-being. The findings within this study could further contribute to informing universities about the importance of being aware of

students' experiencing psychological challenges, due to issues relating to poverty, socio-economic inequality, as well as academic pressure.

Furthermore, as noted existing research studies are primarily quantitative and often link anxiety to other mental health disorders. Therefore, by exploring university students' lived experiences of anxiety, this study may encourage a shift toward qualitative research in the study of student anxiety. In essence, the study could provide insight into how anxiety may manifest in students' behaviour and how it affects how they cope with academic demands and their social surroundings.

Understanding students triggers of anxiety and how students cope, could lead to implementing a holistic intervention approach and support structures that address mental health within universities. Lastly, by recognising anxiety as a potential barrier to student success, and implementing holistic interventions within higher education institutions, could encourage a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, to improve student engagement, academic performance and retaining students.

5.5. Recommendations for future research

Given the small sample size, future research could expand the study to include participants from different faculties, to ascertain whether experiences and triggers of anxiety within university students are attributed to similar factors. This may allow future research to establish ways to implement additional solutions to aid in alleviating university students' experiences and triggers of anxiety.

Furthermore, as much as a faculty comparative study can be useful, a national multi-institutional study can be used to determine how the different university and faculty context affects students. The findings of such studies can reveal the nature of support resources needed to alleviate anxiety among the students.

Based on current findings, future research could also investigate the effectiveness of structured support interventions that are aimed student anxiety relating academic demands at university. Research could further investigate the influence of social identity development on anxiety and further examine the role of relocation and environmental stressors. Future research could also investigate residential support services, and their effectiveness in helping relocated students with adjusting socially and academically to a new university environment.

Additionally, further research could expand to include participants from different races, cultures and contexts, to include a more diverse sample. Moreover, the process of conducting interviews and recruiting participants revealed that the female participants were more forthcoming, and willing to participate, in comparison to the male students. Therefore, further research could focus on males' experiences and triggers of anxiety, as well as the cultural factors and context that contribute to their experiences. This would allow for an in-depth understanding of their experiences, as well as give an understanding of how the complexities of gender, culture and background, may influence experiences and coping mechanisms of anxiety. Lastly, current research relating to the influence of parent emotional well-being, and attachment styles, as well as its impact on students' reliance on their parents for emotional support, as a coping strategy, is relatively limited and underexplored within South Africa. This therefore highlights, the need for further studies in understanding the effect of parents' emotional well-being, and attachment styles, and how this influences student reliance on parental support.

5.6. Conclusion

The findings of this research report, highlight that anxiety is a common physio-psychological experience that university students attribute to a variety of factors. Therefore, from the findings of this research report, it can be asserted that students attribute their experiences of anxiety to experiencing academic pressure relating to managing the academic workload, ensuring academic success, as well as navigating the university environment while forming and maintaining their social relationships. Although students' expressed awareness of experiences that trigger their anxiety as well as different coping mechanism, the findings also highlight the need for developing more effective coping strategies as these contribute to supporting the emotional well-being (Kayiş &Akacaoğlu, 2022), the academic success of university students, and their ability to successfully navigate situations that may lead to experiencing anxiety. In addressing the mental health needs of university students, and developing effective coping strategies, this aligns with the United Nations SDG goals three and four, regarding the promotion of good health and well-being, as well as ensuring quality education, to foster supportive learning environments, driving academic success amongst the student population.

Appendices:

Appendix A: Interview questions

I would like to ask you a few questions:

1. Do you know what anxiety is, and have you ever experienced anxiety?

2. What was the cause/trigger of your anxiety?
3. Which of the following anxiety symptoms do you experience?
   3.1 Sense of impending danger or doom
   3.2 Restlessness or tense
   3.3 Increased heart rate
   3.4 Rapid breathing(hyperventilating)
   3.5 Sweating
   3.6 Trembling
   3.7 other

4. How do you cope or manage your anxiety?
5. How often do you have these anxiety experiences?
6. When was the onset of these anxiety symptoms?
7. What kind of support have reached out to?
8. What kind intervention have you received within the university?

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Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Instruction: Please answer the below questions, as honestly as possible. Where necessary, please tick next to the box that best describes you.

Questions:

How old are you?

Are you Male or Female or other?

Male: ☐ Female: ☐ Other: (Please specify) ☐

What is your race?

Black: ☐ White: ☐ Coloured: ☐ Indian: ☐ Other (Please specify) ☐

What degree are/were you studying?

What year of study are you in this year?

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Appendix C: Consent form

Exploring university students' experiences of anxiety within the South African context: A qualitative study**: Name of Researcher: Reratile Ratune**

I, …….., agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is all about. YES NO

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used). YES NO

I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report YES NO

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded YES NO

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on YES NO

…… (signature)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

…….…… (signature)

…….. (name of researcher/person seeking consent)

……..……. (date)

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Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet

Good day

My name is Reratile Ratune I am a Masters student in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr S'mangele Mayisela. I am conducting a research study about university students triggers and experiences of anxiety. The study title is Exploring university students' triggers and experiences of anxiety within the South African context: A qualitative study

I am inviting you to take part in an interview whereby you will be required to answer three questions related to your experiences of anxiety within university. If you decide to take part, your part in this research study will last about 20 minutes. The interview will take place virtually on zoom or in-person at a mutually convenient time and place.

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview, in order to capture and transcribe the true nature of your response. The audio data will be transcribed and stored on a password protected computer for the duration of my studies, but the raw interviews will be deleted after my two year studies. Only Reratile Ratune and my supervisor will have access to this data. During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you, including your age, field of study or study majors, gender and race.

The interview will be confidential. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers and my supervisor may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights if you choose to not participate. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything and you will not be paid for being in this research study.

Due to the nature of the study, there is low risk of experiencing distress when talking about your anxious experiences. Should you feel distressed during or after your participation, I will provide details of support services that you can contact. Counselling Career Development Unit (CCDU) provides free of charge services and can be contacted on (011) 717 9140.

This research study will be written up as a research report. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you via your student e-mail. If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0)11-717-1408, email: hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,

Reratile Ratune

Researcher:

Supervisor:

Dr. Simangele Mayisela

Wits email: Simangele.mayisela@wits.ac.za

Contact details: Reratile Ratune.

Wits phone number: 011 717 4529

Email: 1439666@students.wits.ac.za.

Phone number: 0732739742

Appendix E: Letter to Registrar

17/03/2022

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Permission to conduct research among the students at the University of Witwatersrand.

My name is Reratile Ratune
I am a full-time student studying for a Masters in Educational Psychology in the Humanities Faculty, at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am seeking permission to do research at Witwatersrand University.

As part of the requirements to complete my studies, I have to conduct research with the approval of the University Human Research Ethics Committee. I am hereby requesting permission to recruit participants through the university's electronic mailing system and in-person to take part in a research project I am conducting. I am conducting a qualitative research study titled "Exploring university students triggers and experiences of anxiety, within the South African context." The aim of my study is to explore and understand university students triggers and experiences of anxiety within the South African context, as there hasn't been adequate research conducted, in relation to university students triggers and experiences of anxiety, from a qualitative perspective.

The research will entail collecting data from third year humanities, who attend at the University of Witwatersrand and are of the age 18 and above.
The risk associated with this study is low, as no physical or psychological harm will be inflicted on the participants. However, it is possible that some participants may feel uncomfortable or emotionally unsettled during the interview process. If emotional distress is displayed by participant, I will stop the interview process and assist the participant in calming them down. If necessary a referral to Careers and Counselling Development Unit (CCDU) will be made, so as to provide the participants with counselling services and emotional support.

Prior to each interview, I will explain to the participants that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any point in the study. Participants will further be informed that their responses will be tape recorded. They will be informed about the nature of the study and procedures of the research and will be asked to sign a consent form and to give verbal consent, to ensure that they understand the nature of their involvement and their agreement to participate.

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Participants will be informed that their responses will be treated confidentially, and that identities will be anonymous throughout the process of conducting the study as well during the process of analyzing data resulting from the study.

The results will be communicated through conducting a research report, and thereafter, once the study has been conducted and the report has been compiled, all the research data will be deleted and destroyed.

I therefore request permission in writing to conduct my research at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as is convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Reratile Ratune
Contact details: 0732739742
Email: 1439666@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor
Dr. S'mangele Mayisela (PhD)
Contact details: 011 717 4529
Email: Simangele.mayisela@wits.co.za

Appendix F: University Permission Letter

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY REGISTRAR

Reratile Ratune

Student Number (1439666)

Master of Education (in Educational Psychology)
School of Human and Community Development

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

"Exploring university student's triggers and experiences of anxiety within the university context: a qualitative study."

This letter serves to confirm that the above project has received permission to be conducted on University premises, and/or involving staff and/or students of the University as research participants. In undertaking this research, you agree to abide by all University regulations for conducting research on campus and to respect participants' rights to withdraw from participation at any time.

If you are conducting research on certain student cohorts, year groups or courses within specific Schools and within the teaching term, permission must be sought from Heads of School or individual academics.

Ethical clearance has been obtained. (Protocol number: MEDPSYC/22/08) Research Expiration: (31 December 2024)

Nicoleen Potgieter

University Deputy Registrar

Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050, South Africa | **T** +27 11 717 1204/8 | **E** nicoleen.potgieter@wits.ac.za | www.wits.ac.za

Appendix G: CCDU Permission letter

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | CCDU COUNSELLING AND CAREERS DEVELOPMENT UNIT

2 August 2022

Good day

Please note that CCDU is open Monday to Friday, from 8am – 16h30pm.

Any Wits student requiring emotional/psychological support or counselling may be referred to the unit for therapeutic services.

The first step is for the student to voluntarily either come through to the unit on West campus, or to the Wits School of Education office, or to email info.ccdu@wits.ac.za for assistance.
There are therapists available daily to see students who walk in, and to respond to students who email.

The second step involves a referral for therapy (group or individual), or any other appropriate referral that may be needed, once the student is seen for this initial intake consultation.

In addition, students may be referred to the Wits Student Crisis Line for any after hours assistance:

- Students needing after-hours support can have a phone session with a registered psychologist/ social worker/counsellor by phoning the **Wits crisis line on 0800 111 331** (toll-free; 24/7).

- Another option is the Wits Student Crisis Counselling App, which provides confidential crisis counselling and/or support through live on-line and texting crisis support/counselling 24/7/365. From your smartphone search for ICAS On-the-Go on the Google Play Store. Fill in the form to register. Your company code is WIT001. Once registered, you can sign in and proceed as prompted.

Kind regards
CCDU Therapeutic Services Team

Private Bag 3, WITS 2050, South Africa | www.wits.ac.za
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