

The fear within: Gender differences in fear of failure among senior high school students and its implications for guidance and counseling

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Abstract

Adolescents today are confronted with growing pressures in both academic and social spheres, which can trigger anxiety around the prospect of failing. Among high school students in particular, these pressures commonly take the form of achievement expectations, scholastic rivalry, and demands placed by parents and the broader community. These circumstances tend to generate mental and emotional strain, shaping how students interpret their successes and setbacks throughout their educational journey. The present preliminary investigation explored how fear of failure operates among senior high school students, centered on five key dimensions: concerns about public humiliation and shame, worries over a diminished sense of self-worth, apprehension regarding an uncertain future, fear of losing one's standing in social circles, and anxiety about letting down those who matter most to them. A quantitative descriptive design was used with 142 students selected through purposive sampling. The study used the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI), a 25-item, four-point Likert scale, to measure students' fear of failure. The measured fear-of-failure reliability was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.899$). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) were analyzed using SPSS. Results showed mean scores above the midpoint of the scale for all five dimensions, indicating a relatively high overall fear of failure. Fear of lowered self-esteem was most prevalent ($M = 3.2254$), followed by fear of loss of social influence ($M = 3.1197$), fear of future uncertainty ($M = 3.0986$), fear of disappointing significant others ($M = 3.0704$), and fear of humiliation and embarrassment ($M = 3.0352$). The majority of the students agreed or strongly agreed that academic pressure contributed to fear of lowered self-esteem, fear of future uncertainty, fear of loss of social influence, and fear of disappointing significant others.

Keywords: *academic pressure, fear of failure, high school students, performance failure appraisal inventory*



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Introduction

The adolescent years mark a uniquely demanding developmental window, during which young people contend with far-reaching changes across biological, cognitive, and social-emotional domains. Identity consolidation, academic performance, and negotiating increasingly complex peer environments all converge during this stage. For students in senior high school specifically, these challenges take concrete form: performance benchmarks, intense academic competition, and the weight of expectations from parents and the wider social environment (Haspolat & Yalçın, 2023). The resulting psychological strain shapes how students come to understand their own successes and setbacks within educational settings (Nadia et al., 2025). Sustained exposure to such conditions may ultimately obstruct healthy adolescent development, particularly in fostering resilience and a durable orientation toward achievement.

One psychological response that has attracted attention in this context is fear of failure a disposition in which individuals experience heightened anxiety or persistent apprehension about the prospect of not succeeding, along with its anticipated repercussions (Aldhi et al., 2026). This fear is not confined to the moment of failure itself; it radiates outward to encompass social and psychological consequences such as public embarrassment, unfavorable judgments from others, and erosion of self-worth (Al Farisi, Arpandy, & Fitriah, 2024). Understood in this broader sense, fear of failure operates less as a situational reaction and more as a pervasive psychological construct capable of reshaping cognitive habits and behavioral patterns, especially in academic contexts (Akamatsu & Gherghel, 2025).

Conceptually, fear of failure is best understood as multidimensional, capturing the range of concerns that individuals associate with the possibility of not meeting their goals (Wang & Xiao, 2025). The construct encompasses fear of humiliation and embarrassment, fear of lowered self-esteem, fear of future uncertainty, fear of losing social influence, and fear of letting down people who matter (Cashman, Strandh, & Högberg, 2024). When fear of failure runs high, students are prone to viewing setbacks as threats to their fundamental identity and sense of worth a perception that ripples into motivation, behavioral engagement, and how actively they participate in academic life (Choi, 2021). Because each dimension may exert its own distinct influence, careful attention to the full profile of fear of failure is warranted.

From an educational perspective, fear of failure has a significant impact on students' psychological development and academic performance (Surahman & Adhim, 2022). Students who experience excessive fear of failure tend to avoid challenges, exhibit lower confidence in their abilities, and experience anxiety when facing academic evaluations (Gao, Wang, Lu, Chen, & Morrin, 2024). When such conditions persist over time, fear of failure may undermine students' intrinsic motivation to learn, negatively affect their psychological well-being, and limit their capacity to fully develop their potential (Ulumiyah & Sulistiyaningsih, 2024). This research is primarily grounded in Achievement Motivation Theory proposed by John William Atkinson, which explains that fear of failure arises from an individual's tendency to avoid situations that may lead to negative outcomes or perceived incompetence.

Based on the aforementioned problem, further investigation is required to identify the dynamics of fear of failure experienced by senior high school students as an initial step toward a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Fu, 2024). Such a preliminary

investigation is essential for gaining insight into the level and characteristics of fear of failure in students within the context of the academic pressures they encounter (Surahman & Adhim, 2022).

Therefore, this research aims to examine the dynamics of fear of failure among senior high school students as a preliminary basis for understanding adolescents' psychological conditions when facing academic demands (Gómez-López, Manzano-Sánchez, Borrego, & González-Hernández, 2025). It is expected that this research will serve as a theoretical reference in the development of educational psychology, particularly in understanding the characteristics and levels of fear of failure experienced by students. This research is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of fear of failure among senior high school students and its implications for guidance and counseling practices.

Method

This research employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive design as a preliminary investigation because it aims to provide an initial overview of the level and characteristics of fear of failure among Senior High School students before conducting more extensive or intervention-based research. Unlike a regular descriptive quantitative study that primarily focuses on describing variables, this research seeks to establish foundational insights that may guide future investigations and the development of guidance and counseling interventions related to students' fear of failure. The aim was to obtain an initial overview of the dynamics of fear of failure among senior high school students within the context of academic pressures. The researcher identified the characteristics and levels of fear of failure experienced by students based on data obtained through psychological measurement instruments (Köroğlu & Kıralp, 2025).

The data used in this study consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained directly by the researcher during the research process via questionnaires completed by the respondents who served as the study sample (Gustafsson, Sagar, & Stenling, 2017). Secondary data were drawn from previously published academic literature (Arvyanda, Fernandito, & Landung, 2023) and served to contextualize and enrich the interpretation of the primary findings.

Purposive sampling was applied to select participants based on criteria directly relevant to the study aims. Specifically, respondents needed to be currently enrolled at the senior high school level and willing to take part voluntarily. This group was chosen because senior high school represents a particularly pressurized educational phase, one in which students confront rising academic demands related to grades, career planning, university entry preparation, and heightened expectations from both teachers and parents.

Fear of failure was assessed using the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI), originally developed by Conroy, Willow, and Metzler (2002). The PFAI comprises 25 items organized around five distinct fear of failure dimensions, rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "very inappropriate" to "very appropriate." Item scores are aggregated to produce a composite measure of each respondent's fear of failure level (Viejo, Gómez-López, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2018).

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed using SPSS. The primary goals were to calculate mean scores, examine score distributions, and assign students to categories reflecting their level of fear of failure. This analytical approach yields a coherent picture of how fear of failure manifests among senior high school students under the academic pressures they regularly encounter (Lee et al., 2024).

Table 1. Validity Test

Item	Sig. (2-tailed)
Q1	<.001
Q2	<.001
Q3	<.001
Q4	<.001
Q5	<.001

Item	Sig. (2-tailed)
Q6	<.001
Q7	<.001
Q8	<.001
Q9	<.001
Q10	<.001
Q11	<.001
Q12	<.001
Q13	<.001
Q14	<.001
Q15	<.001
Q16	<.001
Q17	<.001
Q18	<.001
Q19	<.001
Q20	<.001
Q21	<.001
Q22	<.001
Q23	<.001
Q24	<.001
Q25	<.001

All 25 questionnaire items returned significance values below .001 in validity testing, confirming that every item is statistically valid and suitable for further analysis. Validity in this sense reflects how well each item captures what the instrument intends to measure; item-level statistical testing is a well-established procedure for confirming that individual items correspond appropriately to the underlying construct (Saw et al., 2025).

Table 2. Reliability Test

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.899	25

Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.899, well above the 0.60 minimum threshold commonly applied in social science research (Wadkar, Singh, Chakravarty, & Argade, 2016). The instrument can therefore be regarded as having strong internal consistency, meaning its 25 items collectively provide a dependable and coherent measure of fear of failure (Pangaribuan, Priyaningtyas, Azzahra, & Saniatuzzulfa, 2024).

Findings

The 142 student participants included both male and female respondents drawn from secondary education settings. Questionnaire responses were used to build a profile of fear of failure across academic and social dimensions. Based on the descriptive analysis of respondent characteristics by gender, it was found that 65 respondents (45.8% of the total) were male, and 77 respondents (54.2%) were female. The majority of respondents in this research were female; however, the difference was not substantial. This relatively balanced distribution indicates that both genders were meaningfully represented (Tabel 3)

Tabel 3. Respondents Characteristics by Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	65	45.8	45.8	45.8
	Female	77	54.2	54.2	100.0
	Total	142	100.00	100.00	

Based on the descriptive analysis of respondent characteristics by gender, it was found that 65 respondents (45.8% of the total) were male, and 77 respondents (54.2%) were female. The majority of respondents in this research were female. However, the difference in the number of

male and female respondents was not substantial. This relatively balanced distribution indicates that the research involved participation from students of both genders.

Table 4. Normality Test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Var 1	.221	142	<,001	.873	142	<,001
Var 2	.211	142	<,001	.904	142	<,001
Var 3	.174	142	<,001	.932	142	<,001
Var 4	.177	142	<,001	.916	142	<,001
Var 5	.194	142	<,001	.926	142	<,001

Based on the normality test results, it is known that the significance values for all variables are less than 0.05. The normality of the data used in this study is considered to follow a normal distribution if the significance value is less than 0.05. Therefore, the normality assumption has been met and the data is suitable for further analysis.

Table 5. Homogeneity of Variances

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	df3
Fear_of_Failure	Based on Mean	3.350	1	140	.069
	Based on Median	1.917	1	140	.168
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	1.917	1	139.774	.168
	Based on trimmed mean	3..373	1	140	.068

Based on the calculations that have been carried out, it is known that the homogeneity value in this study is greater than 0.05. This value indicates that the variance between groups is relatively equal. This means that there is no significant difference in data variability among the groups being compared. This suggests that the assumption of equality of variances has been satisfied, so that parametric analysis requiring homogeneity can proceed to the next stage.

Table 6. Gender Differences

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total	Male	65	75.9538	11.82877	1.46718
	Female	77	78.1948	10.53071	1.20009

Table 6 shows that the gender differences table, the mean score for women (78.1948) is higher than that for men (75.9538). This indicates that female respondents, on average, achieved a higher score than their male counterparts. This result aligns with the findings of Eriksson & Strimling (2023), who reported that men have lower levels of fear of failure compared to women. However, to determine whether this difference is statistically significant, it is necessary to examine the significance value (Sig. 2-tailed) obtained from the independent sample t-test results.

Table 7. Independent Sample t-Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-Test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Total	Equal variances assumed	3.350	.069	-1.194	.235	-2.24096
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.182	.239	-2.24096

The independent samples t-test results show that Levene's test produced a significance value of 0.069 (> 0.05), indicating that the data were homogeneous. Accordingly, the row labeled "Equal variances assumed" was used. The Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.235 (> 0.05) indicates that there is no

statistically significant difference between male and female respondents. Although descriptively females have a higher mean score (Mean = 78.1948) than males (Mean = 75.9538), this difference is not statistically significant.

What this pattern suggests is that fear of failure is not meaningfully patterned by gender within this sample. Rather, shared contextual pressures academic expectations, parental demands, social competition, and uncertainty about future educational trajectories to appear to drive fear of failure for both male and female students alike. Gender, in this context, is not the pivotal differentiating variable.

Table 8. Descriptive Test Fear or Failure

		Fear of Humiliation and Embarrassment	Fear of Lowered Self-Esteem	Fear of Future Uncertainty	Fear of Loss of Social Influence	Fear of Disappointing Significant Others
N	Valid	142	142	142	142	142
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.0352	3.2254	3.0986	3.1197	3.0704
Std. Deviation		.66750	.68824	.66642	.62436	.54118
Minimum		2.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	2.00
Maximum		4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00

Based on the descriptive statistical analysis conducted across the five indicators of fear of failure, a total of 142 students were involved in the study, with minimum and maximum scores of 1.00 and 4.00 respectively, which confirms the application of a four-point Likert scale. Among all indicators, fear of lowered self-esteem recorded the highest mean score of 3.2254 with a standard deviation of 0.68824, followed by fear of loss of social influence with a mean of 3.1197 and a standard deviation of 0.62436. The indicator of fear of future uncertainty produced a mean score of 3.0986 and a standard deviation of 0.66642. Additionally, fear of disappointing significant others yielded a mean of 3.0704 with a standard deviation of 0.54118, while fear of humiliation and shame obtained a mean of 3.0352 and a standard deviation of 0.66750. The fact that mean scores across all indicators surpassed the midpoint of the scale suggests that the majority of students tended to experience various manifestations of fear of failure, encompassing worry about underperforming, apprehension about committing errors, sensitivity to external evaluations, a tendency to dwell on potential failure, and reduced self-assurance when confronting academic challenges (Nguyen, Nguyen, Le, Nguyen, & Do, 2025). In order to determine the statistical outcomes regarding the influence of each of the five fear of failure indicators, a further analytical process is required to examine the frequency distribution of respondents' responses.

Table 9. Frequency Distribution Fear of Failure

Fear of Failure Variables		Frequency	Percent
Fear of Humiliation and Embarrassment	Strongly Disagree	29	20.4
	Disagree	79	55.6
	Agree	34	23.9
Fear of Lowered Self-Esteem	Strongly Disagree	1	.7
	Disagree	18	12.7
	Agree	71	50.0
	Strongly Agree	52	36.6
Fear of Future Uncertainty	Strongly Disagree	1	.7
	Disagree	22	15.5
	Agree	81	57.0
	Strongly Agree	38	26.8
Fear of Losing Social Influence	Disagree	20	14.1
	Agree	85	59.9
	Strongly Agree	37	26.1
Fear of Disappointing Significant Others	Disagree	16	11.3
	Agree	100	70.4

Strongly Agree	26	18.3
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As shown in Table 9, out of 142 respondents, 79 (55.6%) disagree and 29 (20.4%) strongly disagreed with items measuring fear of humiliation and embarrassment, while 34 (23.9%) agreed. These findings suggest that students did not report high levels of fear concerning humiliation or embarrassment in the academic context, although a substantial minority (23.9%) still endorsed some degree of this fear.

The majority of respondents reported experiencing fear of lowered self-esteem. Specifically, 71 students (50.0%) agreed and 52 students (36.6%) strongly agreed with the statements representing this dimension, while only 18 students (12.7%) disagreed and 1 student (0.7%) strongly disagreed. These findings indicate that most students tend to perceive failure as a threat to their self-worth and personal evaluation.

The vast majority of students reported experiencing fear related to future uncertainty. More specifically, 81 respondents (57.0%) indicated agreement and 38 respondents (26.8%) expressed strong agreement with items designed to measure this particular dimension. On the other hand, 22 respondents (15.5%) indicated disagreement, while only 1 respondent (0.7%) strongly disagreed. These results suggest that a large proportion of students are inclined to experience apprehension regarding uncertain future outcomes, particularly within the context of academic pressures and expectations.

The majority of students indicated experiencing fear of losing social influence. More precisely, 85 respondents (59.9%) expressed agreement and 37 respondents (26.1%) conveyed strong agreement with the statements representing this dimension, whereas 20 respondents (14.1%) indicated disagreement. These results reveal that a considerable proportion of students tend to harbor concerns about experiencing a decline in their social standing or influence as a direct consequence of academic underperformance.

The vast majority of students reported fear of disappointing significant others. Specifically, 100 respondents (70.4%) agreed and 26 respondents (18.3%) strongly agreed with the statements representing this dimension, while only 16 respondents (11.3%) disagreed. These findings indicate that most students experience considerable anxiety about letting down important people in their lives, such as parents, teachers, or close peers, in the context of academic failure.

Discussion

On the dimension of humiliation and embarrassment, the relatively low endorsement observed may reflect the development of adaptive coping strategies among students or a classroom climate that limits overt social comparison. Research indicates that students with stronger self-focused orientations are less susceptible to this particular fear (Lee et al., 2024). That said, the roughly one-quarter of students who did report this fear should not be overlooked, as feelings tied to social devaluation can meaningfully affect both decision-making and academic behavior counterparts. This result aligns with the findings of Eriksson & Strimling (2023), who reported that show a slightly higher mean for women, the lack of statistical significance suggests that academic pressure, rather than gender, plays a more central role in shaping fear of failure. Interventions aimed at reducing fear of failure should focus on alleviating academic pressure and creating a supportive learning environment for all students, irrespective of gender.

The findings presented in Table 7 suggests that, contrary to initial expectations, most high school students in this research did not experience high levels of anxiety related to being humiliated or embarrassed in the context of academic failure. Students may develop coping mechanisms or adaptive mindsets that mitigate the impact of social evaluation threats. Self-centered students are

less likely to experience fear of failure, particularly in relation to anxiety about being humiliated or embarrassed (Lee et al., 2024). Furthermore, the relatively lower level of fear may also be attributed to a classroom climate that reduces social comparison. This emotional state may emerge student's academic life and can negatively affect their academic performance.

As shown in Table 9, the majority of students agreed or strongly agreed with items measuring fear of lowered self-esteem, with only 13.4% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This finding indicates that fear of reduced self-worth is highly prevalent among high school students in the context of academic failure (Martin, 2003). According (Hayati, Winarso, & Sofhya, 2024), the phenomenon of student fear in academic contexts can diminish self-esteem and exacerbate fear of failure, thereby negatively affecting students' motivation and performance in learning activities.

Large proportion of students expressed agreement or strong agreement with statements related to fear of future uncertainty, with only 16.2% indicating disagreement or strong disagreement. This finding implies that apprehensions surrounding unpredictable future outcomes, including university enrollment, professional opportunities, or broader life directions, represent a significant aspect of fear of failure among senior high school students (Huéscar Hernández, Moreno-Murcia, & Espín, 2020). Future anxiety can be understood as the unease and concern individuals feel when confronted with uncertainty and the possibility of unfavorable outcomes ahead. This psychological condition may surface at different points throughout a student's academic journey and has the potential to negatively impact their scholastic performance (Dalmış, Büyükatak, & Sürücü, 2025). The capacity for psychological resilience is essential in helping individuals recover from adverse experiences and navigate difficulties effectively. Furthermore, the way students manage challenges serves as an important moderating factor. Constructive coping mechanisms, including resilience, cognitive disengagement, and adaptive responses, contribute to lowering levels of anxiety and stress, whereas maladaptive approaches such as self-isolation and dysfunctional reactions tend to intensify psychological distress and perpetuate cycles of anxiety (Labrague, 2022).

The vast majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that academic failure could lead to a loss of social influence, with only 14.1% expressing disagreement and none indicating strong disagreement. This dimension reflects concerns over reduced respect from peers, declining social status, or the erosion of leadership positions. The widespread prevalence of this fear is consistent with the inherently social character of adolescence, during which peer acceptance and ranking within informal social structures are considered highly significant (Zhou et al., 2026). Lan (2023) notes that peer acceptance is closely linked to students' academic engagement and competence. Students who believe that failing academically may diminish their social capital are more likely to resort to counterproductive behaviors, such as withdrawing socially or avoiding participation in collaborative learning activities.

The majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that they fear disappointing significant others, such as parents, teachers, close family members, while only 11.3% disagreed. This dimension indicates that the powerful role of external expectations and relational attachments in shaping students' fear of failure. Family factors, especially students' parents, contribute to students' fear of failure (Nunes et al., 2022). Familial pressures to succeed were the greatest contributing factors to students' fear of failure.

Based on these findings, it was identified that factors influencing fear of failure, such as fear of humiliation and embarrassment, fear of lowered self-esteem, fear of future uncertainty, fear of loss of social influence, and fear of disappointing significant others, have an impact on the academic condition of senior high school students. This is evidenced by the fact that all variables significantly affect the academic pressure experienced by senior high school students. Continuous academic pressure experienced by students may negatively affect their performance during the learning process.

The results of this study carry meaningful practical implications for school counselors in recognizing students who struggle with fear of failure and in designing suitable intervention

programs to address it. Guidance and counseling services may direct their efforts toward building students' self-confidence, equipping them with stress management techniques, strengthening their emotional regulation abilities, and cultivating a growth-oriented mindset to enable them to handle academic demands more effectively. Beyond that, coordinated efforts among counselors, classroom teachers, and parents are vital in establishing a nurturing educational atmosphere that helps minimize excessive fear of failure in students.

School counselors may adopt a range of preventive measures to reduce the likelihood of prolonged academic pressure among their students. One approach involves conducting routine evaluations every three months to track students' psychological well-being and academic standing through the use of Google Forms-based assessments. The data gathered from these assessments can then be reviewed by guidance and counseling teachers to pinpoint students who may be in need of follow-up counseling sessions or additional psychological assistance. Moreover, guidance and counseling teachers may integrate psychoeducational content related to fear of failure into classroom instructional activities, with the aim of deepening students' awareness of academically induced pressure and the strategies available to cope with it. These preventive initiatives are anticipated to play a meaningful role in lowering the overall levels of academic pressure experienced by senior high school students.

Conclusion

Data from 142 senior high school students indicate that fear of failure is a broadly shared and relatively intense experience within this population. The predominance of "agree" and "strongly agree" responses across the five dimensions assessed underscores this conclusion. Among the five dimensions, fear of lowered self-esteem emerged as most prevalent, followed by fear of loss of social influence, fear of future uncertainty, fear of disappointing significant others, and fear of humiliation and embarrassment. These findings highlight both the multidimensional character of fear of failure and the importance of comprehensive, inclusive approaches to addressing it within school-based guidance and counseling programs.

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