

Examining Public Speaking Anxiety and Intervention Strategies in Rural Sarawak: A Community-Based Perspective

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Abstract

Entrepreneurial communities in the rural areas of Sarawak are recognized for their distinctive local products which highlight an imperative need for effective market outreach. Mastery in product presentation is crucial for both face-to-face and digital marketing platforms. This study probes into the widespread phenomenon of public speaking anxiety among these communities particularly in the context of oral product pitching. It examines the repercussions of this anxiety on presentation skills and identifies interventions to ameliorate public speaking shortcomings. Adopting a quantitative research methodology, the study collects data through tailored questionnaires from small business owners in Sri Aman which represent the study's sample. Results indicate that public speaking anxiety is prevalent among these rural entrepreneurs due to cultural barriers and a scarcity of skill-building opportunities. This study is pivotal in highlighting the communicative challenges faced by these populations and offers practical solutions for improving oral communication competencies. The insights gained are instrumental in devising educational initiatives and workshops aimed at equipping local business owners with essential skills. Thus, it would foster local product promotion and contribute to economic development.

Keywords: public speaking anxiety, remedies, pitching, local communities, rural areas

INTRODUCTION

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Public speaking is an essential skill for success in many areas of life, including business, academia, and politics. It has also become an essential tool for advocating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to raise awareness, mobilise resources, build partnerships and influence decision-making within the society. Literature revealed public speaking has contributed significantly to the development of SDGs (Bekteshi & Khaferi, 2020), specifically SDG Goal 4 (Quality Education) which relates to the ability to speak publicly. According to Christy and Mukhaiyar (2021), communication is an important marker of social responsibility including the need to disseminate ideas, opinions and information among individuals. This interactive process requires competency in the target language, by taking into consideration both productive and receptive skills during interaction. While public speaking is undeniably an important

aspect of communication, it is also regarded as an anxiety-inducing forms of communication skill that arises when speaking in front of others which leads to a common phenomenon of anxiety to speak publicly (Gallego, et al., 2020) .

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is defined as a state of uneasiness and apprehension of fear caused by the anticipation of speaking in front of other people (Farhan, 2017). PSA is also known as gloss phobia or the dread of speaking in front of an audience (Dansieh et al., 2021). PSA could be detected in a variety of ways, including shaking, sweating, quick heartbeat, and difficulty breathing. PSA crippled an individual's ability to properly advertise their items to potential consumers. For many individuals, the thought of speaking in front of an audience can trigger intense feelings of anxiety and fear. PSA is reported to be prevalent in 15% to 30% of the general population which has caused interference with activities including work and education (Pull, 2012; Tejwani, Ha, & Isada, 2016). It is a common problem that affects individuals from all walks of life, regardless of their age, gender, or cultural background (Raja, 2017).

The act of speaking publicly encompasses a number of micro-skills from choosing a topic to organising ideas which tends to get even more complex when dealing with different contexts (Nazir et al., 2014; Abdel-Rahman et al., 2016). PSA appears to have negative impacts on an individual's quality of life including the lack of ability to display important skills to perform in a person's career or academic, as well as impair one's performance in conveying information effectively (Griffith & Browsing, 2009). Even when someone has ideas on what is to be said, anxiety will take over the situation as it tampers with the capability of the learners to focus (Suleimenova, 2013).

In the realm of PSA, a pivotal study by Gallego et al. (2020) has significantly contributed to PSA psychological dimensions. This research explored the intricate relationship between PSA, distress tolerance, and psychological flexibility by employing a comprehensive methodological approach that included both questionnaires and behavioural tasks. Through this dual approach, the results indicated that students with heightened levels of PSA often exhibit an increased capacity for distress tolerance. This suggests a complex interplay where the anxiety associated with public speaking could potentially fortify an individual's ability to endure psychological stress.

Additionally, Aurelia (2022) shed light on the prevalence of this phenomenon in the economic and business sectors while Pandit et al (2023) dealt with PSA in depression. Kaur et al (2023) also studied anxiety in the medical field. This finding is crucial as it

emphasises the pervasive nature of PSA across various domains of professional life. Aurelia's work implies that the challenges of public speaking transcend educational boundaries, affecting individuals in diverse fields, including business and economics. This broader impact of PSA highlights its significance as a widespread issue requiring attention across multiple sectors, not just within the context of education

While much research has been conducted on PSA, there has been relatively little attention given to its prevalence and impact in rural areas particularly among the local communities. In these communities, individuals may face unique challenges when it comes to public speaking, such as limited access to resources, socio-economic constraints, and cultural norms that discourage public expression. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of PSA among communities in rural areas, specifically the factors that contribute to PSA in these communities and the possible remedies in mitigating PSA.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a quantitative descriptive approach by employing a modified version of questionnaires originally developed by Aurelia Twinka Nugroho (2022) and Raja (2017). These questionnaires served as the primary instrument for gauging the respondents' levels of PSA specifically in the context of product pitching. They also helped in identifying the underlying factors of this anxiety and potential solutions. The data collection process involved the deployment of the adapted survey which is designed to elicit comprehensive responses through 5-point Likert scale questions. The scales are structured with ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) in ensuring clarity in responses. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section is to assess public speaking anxiety levels while the second section probed into the causes of this anxiety. The final section explored the respondents' perceptions of possible remedies to mitigate this anxiety. The gathered responses were then analysed to ascertain the prevalence and characteristics of PSA among the participants.

The self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the 35 attendees of a three-day community training programme in Sri Aman. They were also owners of small local business enterprises who made up the sample population of the study. One of the main objectives of this programme was to provide ample opportunities in acquiring multiple skills (oral and digital), which can further enhance their business strategies. During one of the slots known as Oral English Communication, they were required to pitch their local products using the oral presentation techniques while using English as their medium of presentation. They were exposed to different techniques of effective Oral

English Communication, specifically pitching skills and presentation skills. The questionnaires were distributed after they had pitched their products to gain immediate and genuine feedback specifically on PSA.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic data indicates that the respondents consist of more female respondents (between 16-25 years old) compared to males. Many of them are self-employed as small scale local entrepreneurs. Their levels of education are mostly secondary schools in which Bahasa Melayu acts as their mother tongue. Their frequencies of speaking in public are between 'rarely' and 'sometimes', while the majority admitted that they frequently used Bahasa Melayu to present orally, compared to any other languages.

Table 1. General perceptions towards public speaking

No	Statement	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Always (%)	Very Frequent (%)
1	I enjoy my public speaking sessions	5.71	14.29	40	17.14	22.9
2	I often speak in front of the public	11.43	37.14	40	5.71	5.71
3	I have great fear of public speaking	5.71	8.57	45.71	25.71	14.29
4	Anxiety frequency during public speaking	8.57	17.14	22.87	25.71	25.71

Generally, many respondents seemed to be 'mostly anxious' (13 respondents with 'very frequent' and 'frequent' and 12 respondents opted 'sometimes' when they presented in front of the public and they also admitted that they had great fear of public speaking. Besides, most of them also lacked ample opportunities to speak publicly and thus, impacted their oral performances and increased their PSA. The study reveals that a significant portion of respondents experience anxiety ranging from occasional to very frequent when presenting in public. This finding is crucial in understanding the psychological barriers many individuals face in oral communication. The fact that 13 respondents reported 'very frequent' or 'frequent' anxiety, with another 12 opting for 'sometimes', illustrates the widespread nature of this issue.

A critical aspect of this study is the identification of a lack of opportunities for public speaking as a contributing factor to increased PSA. This suggests a vicious cycle of anxiety leading to avoidance, which in turn leads to fewer opportunities to develop and hone public speaking skills, further exacerbating the anxiety. This cycle can have profound implications on an individual's professional growth and effectiveness in roles requiring public communication. The universality of this issue is underscored by similar findings across different countries. Studies conducted in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Malaysia highlight that PSA is a global challenge, affecting individuals across different cultures and educational backgrounds. Aryadillah's (2017) research in Indonesia, Raja's (2017) findings in Pakistan, and the study by Milkam and Saidalvi (2018) in Malaysia point to a common thread of the detrimental impact of PSA. The results further resonate the findings of Gallego, et al. (2020) which highlighted public speaking as an anxiety-inducing form of communication leading to the growing prevalence of PSA among individuals.

Table 2. Factors that contribute towards public speaking anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1	I am lacking confidence in public speaking	2.86	31.43	12	22.86	30.85
2	Big audience size makes me nervous	2.86	17.14	17.14	37.14	25.72
3	I am afraid of audience' perceptions towards my presentations	2.86	22.86	14.29	45.71	14.28
4	I am afraid of making mistakes during my presentations	11.42	11.42	17.14	37.14	22.88
5	Using raised platform during public speaking is making me anxious	2.86	25.71	28.57	28.57	14.29
6	I am afraid other people will laugh at me in front of other people	11.42	22.86	17.14	25.71	22.87
7	I am lacking public speaking skills	8.57	14.29	22.86	28.57	22.71
8	I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings	17.14	17.14	20	28.57	17.15
9	I am usually worried about what kind of impressions I make when I present in front of people	2.86	25.71	22.86	28.57	20
10	I have negative thoughts that lead to fear of public speaking.	11.42	17.14	37.14	14.29	20.01

Table 2 indicates that among the highest factors that contribute to respondents' PSA are 'afraid of the audience' perceptions', 'fear of big audience', lacking of presentation skills and fear of showing their shortcomings to the audience' (with more than half of the respondents). This finding resonates with the study conducted by

Badrasawi, Solihu and Ahmad (2020) who mentioned that students fear receiving the feedback on their weaknesses because of the mistakes they made. A primary concern among respondents is the fear of how the audience perceives them. This fear is closely tied to the anxiety of receiving feedback, particularly negative feedback, on their performance.

The study by Badrasawi, Solihu, and Ahmad (2020) echoes this finding which highlights that respondents are particularly fearful of feedback that point to their mistakes. This fear can be debilitating as it may lead individuals to avoid situations where they might receive such feedback. Unfortunately, this further limits their opportunities to improve and gain confidence. Another significant factor is the fear of speaking before large audiences. The size of the audience appears to directly influence the level of anxiety experienced by the speakers. A larger audience can intensify the fear of negative judgement and amplify the pressure to perform well which increases PSA (Dansieh et al., 2021).

Additionally, the lack of presentation skills is identified as a crucial contributor to PSA. This lack includes the technical aspects of presenting and the ability to engage and communicate effectively with an audience. The absence of these skills can lead to a lack of confidence in one's ability to deliver a successful presentation, thereby heightening anxiety. Closely related to the above factors is the fear of revealing personal shortcomings to the audience. This fear encompasses concerns about showing vulnerability, inadequacy, or lack of expertise in the subject matter. It reflects a deeper anxiety about personal evaluation and judgement by others.

An interesting dimension of the study is the focus on language proficiency, particularly in suburban settings. The research highlights that poor self-confidence in using English significantly affects the ability to pitch products effectively. Sara (2015) emphasises that many individuals in suburban areas lack access to adequate English language resources, including books and language programs. This limited access exacerbates their anxiety about speaking English fluently and increases self-consciousness about making mistakes.

Table 3. Possible remedies to overcome public speaking anxiety

No	Statement	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
1	My fear of public speaking can be overcome by using some strategies and seeking some professional help	34.29	17.14	25.71	11.43	11.43
2	Participating in public speaking activities more will help me perform better in presentations	31.43	14.29	28.57	17.14	8.57
3	Doing relaxation exercises (self-talk, breathing exercise) reduce my fear of public speaking	37.14	17.14	20	14.29	11.43
4	Practising my speech will improve my confidence level	25.71	25.71	17.14	14.29	17.14
5	Encouragement from family members and friends help me a lot	22.86	22.86	20	17.14	17.14
6	Joining an active public speaking forum will improve my presentation skills	28.57	14.29	31.43	14.29	11.42
7	Encouragement from the audience can improve my presentation	20	20	28.57	20	11.43
8	Joining public speaking competition will boost my motivation to speak in public	28.57	22.86	20	20	8.57
9	Receiving constructive feedback from the audience will make me believe in my ability	28.57	17.14	22.86	22.86	8.57
10	Thinking that public speaking presentations are entertaining will help	34.29	20	8.57	22.86	14.29

The study's findings, as outlined in Table 3, suggest several plausible remedies to alleviate PSA. The prominent recommendations include seeking professional help and enhancing presentation skills, engaging in more public speaking activities and active forums, and practising relaxation exercises before presentations. One of the key recommendations is seeking professional help to enhance presentation skills. This approach involves various methods, such as mentoring from experienced speakers, watching online videos from presentation experts, and attending public speaking courses or seminars. These resources can provide speakers with the guidance and skills needed to navigate the challenges of public speaking more confidently. Professional guidance can offer personalized feedback and strategies tailored to individual needs, significantly improving oral communication skills.

Another effective remedy is increased participation in public speaking activities and active forums. Engaging more frequently in public speaking situations can gradually reduce anxiety through exposure and practice. These activities provide a platform for speakers to practice, receive feedback, and gain confidence in their abilities. Active participation in forums and speaking events can also help individuals accustomed to

different speaking environments and audience dynamics. The practice of relaxation exercises before presentations is also highlighted as a beneficial strategy. According to German (2017), techniques such as self-talk and breathing exercises can significantly enhance communication skills by reducing nervousness and increasing focus. These exercises help in managing the physiological symptoms of anxiety, thereby enabling speakers to approach their presentations with a calmer and more composed mindset.

The study also emphasizes the potential role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and relevant government agencies in facilitating public speaking skill development. These organizations can offer opportunities for local entrepreneurs and speakers to develop their public speaking abilities. By providing crucial criticism, coaching, and resources, these institutions can assist individuals in overcoming their PSA and improving their delivery. The recommendations suggest a multi-faceted approach to tackling PSA, combining skill enhancement, increased practice, and relaxation techniques. Educational institutions, professional trainers, and support organizations can play a crucial role in implementing these strategies. They can offer workshops, training sessions, and supportive environments where individuals can learn and practice effective communication skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study on PSA provides critical insights into a challenge that is prevalent across various demographics and geographical regions. The impacts of PSA are far-reaching and revealed it stems from a variety of sources including fear of audience's judgement, lack of presentation skills, and language proficiency concerns Christy and Mukhaiyar (2021), especially in rural areas. These factors contribute to a cycle of avoidance and underperformance which highlight the need for effective interventions. Based on the study's findings, individuals should seek professional help to enhance their presentation skills. This could include mentorship programs, attending public speaking workshops, and utilizing online resources. Furthermore, professional guidance can provide personalized strategies and feedback to improve performance. Engaging more in public speaking activities and active forums can significantly reduce anxiety through exposure and practice. Thus, educational institutions and workplaces should create opportunities for individuals to speak in public settings, thereby building their confidence and skills (Aurelia, 2022).

Practicing relaxation exercises, such as deep breathing and positive self-talk, can also be effective strategies to manage the physiological symptoms of anxiety. These techniques should be promoted as part of public speaking training. Non-governmental organizations and relevant government bodies can play a pivotal role in providing resources and platforms for public speaking skill development. They can offer training programs, constructive feedback, and support for local communities, especially in areas with limited access to language resources. By designing and implementing such interventions, individuals may cope more effectively with their anxiety to speak publicly while increasing distress tolerance at the same time.

In conclusion, the study on PSA underlines the significance of addressing this common yet often overlooked issue. The implications of PSA extend beyond individual performance, affecting personal and professional growth. The recommended strategies highlight a holistic approach, addressing both the psychological and skill-based aspects of public speaking. By implementing these recommendations, individuals can transform their experience of public speaking from a source of anxiety to an opportunity for empowerment and success. It is essential to foster environments that support and encourage the development of effective communication skills, recognizing that the ability to speak confidently in public is the key to broader societal progress.

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Conflict of interest

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