




Evaluation of Social Phobia among Syrian Refugees' Youth in Jordan

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Abstract

Social phobia is one of the most common anxiety disorders in youth yet still under-recognized and undertreated. This study purposed to evaluate the level of social phobia and examine correlating selected socio-demographic factors (age, gender, marital status, working status, and educational level) among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan. A cross-sectional, descriptive correlation design was selected to carry out this study. The convenience sample composed of 290 youth aged 15–25 years were recruited from Amman and Mafraq cities. The data was collected using a questionnaire which consists of socio-demographic data and social phobia scale. The findings found that the participants had a high level of social phobia. There was a correlation between social phobia and age ($r = 0.64$; $p < 0.001$), educational level ($r = -0.23$; $p < 0.001$), and gender ($r = -0.14$; $p < 0.05$). The youth being males, elder youth (>19–25 years), and having low educational level had a higher level of social phobia. Age was the main significant predictor of social phobia. The current findings confirm the necessity of developing social and psychological strategies and interventions to minimize this problem among youth affected by social phobia.

Keywords Refugees · Social phobia · Socio-demographic · Youth

Introduction

Social phobia (SP) or social anxiety is one of the most common anxiety disorders in adolescents and youth yet still under-recognized and undertreated [1]. The SP is recognized as a chronic and debilitating condition [2], which is characterized by noticeable intensive fear of social or performance-based where being scrutinized or evaluated by others. This evaluation

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could result from social interactions (e.g., doing a conversation), being observed by others (e.g., during eating or working), or performing a job in front of others (e.g., public speaking) [3]. Anyhow, according to DSM-5, social phobia is defined as fear associated with talking or performing in public places [4].

The youth is defined as those persons aged 15 and 24 years [5]. It is a period of stress and outburst during which the child's personality is changed, and a new one is shaped almost suddenly [6]. The youth use their emotions to express the frustrations they face as a result of these changes. Examples of these emotions include, hatred, fear, anger, love, pleasure, shame, and others. Also, they have mood swings (they feel happy at one moment and upset at another moment) [6].

Literature have documented differences in the prevalence of social phobia related to age and country. In U.S, the studies found that social phobia usually occurs among adolescents in early to middle stages particularly in the ages between 10 and 17 years [7], with a prevalence rate of 10% -15% [8]. On the contrary, the prevalence of social anxiety was 4.0% among Turkish adolescents [9] and 3% among Finnish adolescents [10].

Concerning Syrian refugees, reports indicate that around 5,568,620 registered refugees have flared-up their homes since the civil war in March 2011 [11]. The majority of those refugees have escaped to neighboring countries, such as Jordan. There are about 659,673 Syrian refugees in Jordan, of whom 533,825 live in Jordanian communities outside camps [12]. Those refugees are distributed on the Jordan Governorates as follows: 29.5% in Amman Governorate, 24.8% in Mafraq Governorate, 20.6% in Irbid Governorate, and 14.6% in Zarqa Governorate [12]. The Syrian refugee population in Jordan form about 10% of the total Jordanian population. A total of 48% of Syrian refugee youth in Jordan are unemployed and are at higher risk of hurtful or exploitative labor. Also, there is a type of gender issues among these refugees, whereas the significant challenges encounter girls involve, increased restricted mobility and compulsory or early marriage [13].

Research has shown that environmental factors play a significant role in developing of social phobia [1]. Those refugees especially the youth suffer from problems in dealing with the acute stressors of war, in addition, they confront post-migration challenges including, marginalization, acculturation issues, socio-economic problems, and cultural bereavement [14], which negatively affect their health and well-being.

Particularly, it is demonstrated that refugees especially the youth experience many physical and psychological health problems, including depression, anxiety, social phobia, and post-traumatic stress disorder [15, 16]. Additionally, refugee adolescents are vulnerable to the impacts of pre-migration, especially exposure to trauma [17]. These refugees' who are unaccompanied or separated are more likely to have psychological and social risks including impairment in functional performance, educational achievement, social relationships and interactions, occupation, and quality of life [18].

Many factors could play a protective role in enhancing psychological and social health such as, family coherence and support, personal factors (e.g., adaptation and self-esteem), and environmental factors (e.g., culture, ethnic group loyalty, and peer and social support) [17, 19].

Previous studies have proven a relationship between social phobia and socio-demographic factors (e.g., gender, age, marital status, working status, and educational level). Most studies have reported that girls are more likely to suffer from social anxiety than boys [20–22]. Other studies found a relationship between social phobia, educational level [23, 24], and working status [24]. Previous studies found that age is positively correlated with social phobia [25, 26]. Another study in U.S found that no significant relationship exists between social phobia and marital status [27].

However, there is a lack of studies related to social phobia among Syrian refugee youth regionally. Thus, exploring this issue is significant. This study is a pioneer in determining this problem among this cohort. It provides baseline data about the level and correlating factors of social phobia, which would enhance healthcare professionals' awareness of this problems and, hence, have its positive social and mental-health impact on the youth. Moreover, social workers and counselors could use the results of this study to plan and develop health programs directed to this target group. In addition, awareness campaigns should be directed to the community about the complexities of this issue. Therefore, this study purposed to evaluate the level of social phobia and examine correlating selected socio-demographic factors (age, gender, marital status, working status, and educational level) among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan. The following research questions are addressed in this study:

- 1- What is the level of social phobia among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan?
- 2- What is the relationship between selected socio-demographic characteristics and social phobia among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan?
- 3- Are there any differences in social phobia level according to selected socio-demographic characteristics among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan?
- 4- What are the predictors of social phobia among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan?

The study has the following hypothesis: there is a relationship between selected socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, marital status, working status, and educational level) and social phobia among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan.

Methods

Design, Setting, Population, and Sample

This study utilized a cross-sectional, descriptive correlational design. As for the sample selection, the largest cities that include the highest number of Syrian refugees in Jordan were selected. Thus, the recruited sample was selected from Amman and Mafrq cities.

This study used non-probability sampling methods. A convenience sample because the Syrian refugees' youth were not residing in a specific area or camps in the selected cities. They also experience the same situations and conditions with respect to their environmental factors (i.e. cultural, economic, and migration), which makes the sample homogenous.

The G* Power (3.0.10) software program was utilized to estimate the sample size; the parameters were set at the following levels, effect size (0.10), power (0.95), with a significance criterion at 0.05, with five predictors. The required sample size was 204, but to avoid withdrawal problem and incompleteness of the questionnaires, the sample was raised to 300 subjects.

The inclusion criteria were: (a) Syrian refugees' youth age between 15 and 25 years, who are classified according to United Nations [5]; (b) willingness to engage in the study; and (c) literacy: ability to read and write. On the contrary, those who self-reported any mental/psychological or cognitive problems and those who could not communicate were excluded from the study to avoid any adverse effects of these problems on the study findings.

Study Measurements

A structured self-reported questionnaire was utilized to collect data in the current study. It includes two measures explained below:

- *Socio-demographic data* that were developed by the researcher based on the existing literature. It includes age, gender, marital status, working status, and educational level. Accordingly, the youth are categorized into two groups: 15–19 years (younger youth) and > 19–25 years (older youth).
- *Social Phobia Scale*, which was developed by Raulin and Wee [28] to assess the social phobia level among people aged 12 years and above. It includes 36 items containing negative and positive statements with ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ responses, in which seven items need reversed coding. This scale was calculated using the total mean score and scored as follows: 0–0.33 indicates low social phobia, 0.34–0.66 reflects moderate social phobia, and 0.67–1.0 indicates high social phobia. The Arabic version of this scale was used [29]. This version had good psychometric properties, in which the internal reliability measured using a Cronbach’s alpha was 0.92 [29].

Ethical Considerations

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the AL-Zaytoonah University of Jordan. Also, a written informed consent was obtained from participants aged 18 years and more, while the consent for those participants aged less than 18 years was obtained from their guardians. This consent form included a statement that the participation is voluntary, and that participants can withdraw at any time without any harm. Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained through each step in the current study.

Procedure of Data Collection

The data collection was performed during the period from November 2019 to January 2020. Two researchers contacted officials of Syrian communities to facilitate the process of data collection and explained the purpose of this study and the eligibility criteria to them. Those officials approached potential participants from the youth who clarified to them the aim of this study prior asking them to participate in this study. The youth who met the inclusion criteria and accepted to be part in this study were given envelopes containing the questionnaires to put the filled questionnaire inside. Further, the questionnaires were distributed and collected on the same day.

Statistical Analysis

The analysis was performed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (version 23.0, IBM SPSS Corp., Armonk, NY) [30]. The data entry was double-checked to avert data entry errors. Then, the tendency measure, minimum, maximum, and frequency measures were obtained to screen data for any outliers or missing data. The frequencies and percentages of the socio-demographic characteristics, mean, standard deviation, and range for social phobia level were calculated. For examining the correlation between

selected socio-demographic factors and social phobia, the point-biserial correlation was used. The t- test for independent samples was used for comparison between two groups and the ANOVA test for comparison between more than two groups. The multiple linear regression was used to determine the predictors for social phobia. The level of significance was at ≤ 0.05 .

Results

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to Syrian refugees' youth. The response rate was 97.3%, with 292 questionnaires returned. Two questionnaires were not completely filled; therefore, they were excluded from the study.

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the youth. A total of 290 participants were included in the study and the majority of them (54.5%) were aged between >19 and 25 years. More than half of them (53.1%) were males. Around 72.0% of the participants were single and 42.8% of the study sample were students. Concerning the educational level, 46.9% of the participants had a bachelor degree. Further details are depicted in Table 1. In regard to social phobia level, the mean was 0.78 (SD = 0.13), which reflects a high level of social phobia.

Table 2 shows that social phobia had a negative relationship with gender ($r = -0.14$; $p < 0.05$) and educational level ($r = -0.23$; $p < 0.001$). On the contrary, there was a positive relationship between social phobia and age ($r = 0.64$; $p < 0.001$).

Also, regarding the differences in social phobia according to selected socio-demographic characteristics, the findings showed that there was a significant difference in the social phobia level according to age ($t = -14.146$; $p < 0.001$), in which the total mean for participants aged >19–25 years was higher than those aged 15–19 years ($M = 0.69$ (0.09 SD); $M = 0.85$ (0.10 SD), respectively). A significant difference was also demonstrated in social phobia level according to gender ($t = 2.367$; $p < 0.05$), in which males were more likely to suffer from social phobia than their counterparts ($M = 0.79$ (0.14 SD); $M = 0.75$ (0.12 SD), respectively). The difference was likely significant in social phobia according to educational level

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics and social phobia level of the study sample ($N = 290$)

Characteristic	Categories/Number		Percentage (%)
Age	15–19 years	(132)	45.5
	> 19–25 years	(158)	54.5
Gender	Male	(154)	53.1
	Female	(136)	46.9
Marital status	Single	(208)	71.7
	Married	(82)	28.3
Working status	Student	(124)	42.8
	Employed	(116)	40.0
	Unemployed	(50)	17.2
Educational level	Less than secondary	(64)	22.1
	Secondary	(66)	22.8
	Diploma	(24)	8.3
	Bachelor	(136)	46.9
Social phobia level	Mean=	0.78	
	Standard deviation=	0.13	
	Range=	0.5–1.0	

Table 2 Correlating selected socio-demographic factors with social phobia

Socio-demographic factors	Social phobia	
	r. p.b	p value
Gender	−0.14*	0.02
Marital	−0.02	0.729
Age	0.64**	< 0.001
Work	−0.15	0.796
Educational level	−0.23**	< 0.001

r. p.b.: point-biserial correlation

*. Correlation is significant at the ≤ 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the ≤ 0.001 level (2-tailed).

($F = 5.164$; $p < 0.01$), whereas those with an educational level below the secondary had the highest mean ($M = 0.82$ (0.13 SD) compared to other levels of education (Table 3).

Regarding predictors of social phobia, as explained in Table 4, the variables that entered the model as predictors of social phobia were age, gender, and educational level. The full model that involved all predictors of social phobia was statistically significant ($F_{(3, 286)} = 68.92$; $p < 0.001$; $R = 0.65$; $R^2 = 0.42$; *adjusted* $R^2 = 0.41$). This result indicates that 48.0% of the variance in social phobia was illustrated by the whole model. The findings showed that the age was the main significant factor of social phobia ($B = 0.16$; $p < 0.001$).

Table 3 Social phobia according to socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics	Social phobia		
	M (SD)	t-test	p value
Age		−15.146**	< 0.001
15–19 years	0.69 (0.09)		
> 19–25 years	0.85 (0.10)		
Gender		2.367*	0.019
Male	0.79 (0.50)		
Female	0.75 (0.45)		
Marital status		0.347	0.729
Single	0.78 (0.14)		
Married	0.77 (0.12)		
Working status	M (SD)	F	p value
Student	0.77 (0.11)	0.379	0.685
Employed	0.78 (0.14)		
Unemployed	0.79 (0.14)		
Educational level		5.164**	0.002
Less than secondary	0.82 (0.13)		
Secondary	0.79 (0.11)		
Diploma	0.77 (0.13)		
Bachelor	0.75 (0.13)		

M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation; CI: Confidence Interval

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 Predictors of social phobia: Standard Multiple Linear Regression

Predictor	b	β	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i> value	CI 95% lower-upper
Age	0.16	0.61	13.44**	< 0.001	0.139–0.186
Gender	- 0.01	- 0.02	- 0.26	0.793	-0.029 - 0.022
Educational level	- 0.01	- 0.09	- 1.88	0.061	-0.020 - 0.000

b, unadjusted regression slope coefficient; β , adjusted regression slope coefficient; CI: Confidence Interval

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

The present study aimed to evaluate the social phobia level and examine correlating selected socio-demographic factors (age, gender, marital status, working status, and educational level) among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan. It adds to the existing body of knowledge by focusing on the social phobia and the importance of socio-demographic factors for youth. The study showed a high level of social phobia and a correlation with social phobia, age, educational level, and gender. However, age was the most significant predictor of social phobia.

Our study demonstrated that the Syrian refugees' youth had a high level of social phobia. A previous study conducted among young people aged 16–29 years in different seven countries found that the prevalence of social phobia or social anxiety was 36%, and the high prevalence was among people in Asian countries [23]. Armed conflicts and war have a destructive effect on the social, political, and economic domains of societies, which restricts the providing of basic services, forces immigration flows, and exposes affected societies to risks of morbidity and mortality [31]. Moreover, these conflicts have negative consequences on the affected people, especially the youth. They may become aggressive and violent or they experience psychological and social symptoms such as social phobia or anxiety, which exist at higher levels [32].

The study findings indicated that age had a positive relationship with social phobia, in which those older youth were more likely to experience social phobia compared to those from the younger age group. This finding is inconsistent with previous studies findings demonstrated that younger adolescents and youth were more likely to have social phobia than older youth [25, 26]. This inconsistency may be interpreted as Syrian refugees older youth suffer from many issues and challenges related to war conflicts and immigration, which could influence their social interaction and relationships and cause many social and psychological problems such as social phobia or anxiety. Furthermore, age was the most significant predictor of social phobia, which should be taken into consideration during developing interventions and strategies to deal with such problem.

This study showed that gender had a negative relationship with social phobia level. The male youth had a higher risk of social phobia than females. This result is supported by the previous study findings [33]. Gender differences exist, however, these study findings are inconsistent with previous studies found that females experienced social phobia more than males did [21, 22, 34–37]. On the other hand, other studies found that there were no differences between males and females in the social phobia levels [23, 38–41]. All previous research studied the youth and adolescents who did not expose to immigration and war conflicts. On the contrary, our study result could be influenced by the war and its negative consequences of the war on the youth especially males who are

at high risk of recruitment and association with armed groups. Therefore, their participation in such conflicts leads to significant and negative effects on physical and psychological health status. These negative effects are also related to increased behaviors of hostility in urban or overcrowded areas, which lead to compulsory immigration. As a result, the youth males suffer from other effects including, poverty, unemployment, breakdown of families, and fear about their girls from exposure to violence [42]. Furthermore, they could have other roles and norms resulting from immigration and cultural differences.

Furthermore, a negative relationship was found between social phobia and educational level, in which those youth with educational levels below secondary education had a higher level of social phobia. This finding is consistent with previous evidence which have shown that the youth who completed secondary education had lower level of social phobia compared to those who did not complete secondary education [23]. This result could be related to the significant role of education in minimizing social phobia. Those educated youth have high self-esteem and ability to cope with life changes [43]. Thus, it is necessary to encourage the youth with low education for constructive self-talk and training on social skills in a relaxed setting. In addition, providing a friendly and permissive environment and making some adjustments would be helpful to assist youth who suffer from social phobia.

Although this study is one of the first studies about social phobia among Syrian refugees' youth in Jordan, it provides a significant figure about this issue among those refugees. However, there are many limitations relating to the sample convenience, which could limit the generalization of the findings. Further, the design was cross-sectional, which does not examine the cause and effect of the study variables. In addition, the data were collected using self-reported questionnaire, which might be exposed to reporter bias.

Conclusion

This study highlighted that the majority of Syrian refugees' youth reported social phobia. Thus, Syrian refugee youth are in need of mental health modalities and treatment. The findings highlight the importance of considering the refugees' youth correlating factors with social phobia, their needs and treatment, and their resilience for better health status and life. The current study could assist healthcare professionals including, counselors and social workers develop interventions and strategies that can help in optimizing the refugees' youth adaptation to their new situations and, hence, in minimizing social phobia.

Future studies could be implemented to investigate the effect of therapeutic modalities on reducing the level of social phobia among refugees' youth.

Data Availability (Data Transparency) Not applicable.

Code Availability (Software Application or Custom Code) Not applicable.

Authors' Contributions **Reham Aburoomi:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing.

Malakeh Z Malak: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Data curation, Software, Validation, Writing-original draft, Writing-review & editing.

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Declarations

Disclosure Statement No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee (Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan with reference number 3/180/2019–2020).

Consent to Participate (Include Appropriate Consent Statements) Each participant provided informed consent before beginning the study.

Consent for Publication (Consent Statement Regarding Publishing an individual's Data or Image) Not applicable.

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