

Fear of Evaluation and Communication Apprehension: The Mediating Role of Social Skills Deficits

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the mediating role of social skills deficits in the relationship between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension among university students in Malaysia.

Methods and Materials: A descriptive correlational design was employed, involving a sample of 405 undergraduate students selected using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table. Participants were assessed using three standardized instruments: the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE), the Social Skills Inventory (SSI), and the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). Data analysis included Pearson correlation using SPSS-27 and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS-21 to evaluate direct, indirect, and total effects among the variables. Model fit was assessed using standard indices, including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df .

Findings: Fear of evaluation was positively correlated with both social skills deficits ($r = .48, p < .001$) and communication apprehension ($r = .62, p < .001$), while social skills deficits were also positively associated with communication apprehension ($r = .55, p < .001$). SEM analysis revealed a significant direct effect of fear of evaluation on communication apprehension ($\beta = 0.39, p < .001$) and a significant indirect effect mediated by social skills deficits ($\beta = 0.20, p < .001$), resulting in a substantial total effect ($\beta = 0.59, p < .001$). The model demonstrated excellent fit (CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.045, $\chi^2/df = 1.98$).

Conclusion: The findings underscore the critical role of social skills deficits in amplifying the effects of fear of evaluation on communication apprehension. Interventions targeting both evaluative fears and interpersonal competence are essential to mitigating communicative anxiety in educational settings.

Keywords: Fear of Evaluation; Communication Apprehension; Social Skills Deficits.

1. Introduction

In an era where effective interpersonal communication is deemed a fundamental skill across personal, academic, and professional domains, communication apprehension (CA) remains a significant psychological barrier to social integration and performance. Communication apprehension, broadly defined as an individual's fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with others, has been consistently linked with adverse academic, social, and occupational outcomes (Cong & Li, 2022). Research over the past two decades has advanced our understanding of the antecedents and consequences of communication apprehension, yet the mechanisms through which it develops and persists—particularly within educational and social environments—remain incompletely understood (Curran et al., 2020). Notably, fear of evaluation and deficits in social skills have emerged as two critical psychological variables that may jointly shape an individual's vulnerability to communication apprehension (ErdoĖan, 2023).

Fear of evaluation refers to the persistent concern about being judged negatively or scrutinized by others in social or performance contexts. It has been conceptually and empirically associated with various forms of social anxiety, including communication apprehension (Kaneke, 2024). Within academic and professional environments, individuals who harbor strong fears of evaluation are more likely to avoid speaking tasks, struggle with self-expression, and report physiological symptoms of anxiety when required to participate in oral interactions (Alnaeem, 2021). The avoidance tendencies tied to fear of negative appraisal have been found to influence not only the frequency of communication but also its quality and effectiveness (Violin & Basuki, 2024). In particular, this psychological disposition is exacerbated in high-stakes contexts such as public speaking, language learning, or intercultural settings, where the perceived risk of misjudgment is magnified (Tuncal, 2025).

A growing body of empirical literature supports the notion that fear of evaluation is a potent predictor of communication apprehension across various populations, including second-language learners (Cong & Li, 2022), university students (Endahati, 2023), and administrative professionals (Husin & Khamis, 2024). These findings suggest that evaluative fear plays a pivotal role in predisposing individuals to heightened anxiety during interpersonal exchanges, particularly in educational institutions where communication is a central element of

both performance and social identity. For example, Endahati (2023) reported that English Education Department students in Indonesia who exhibited higher levels of evaluative fear were also significantly more likely to avoid communicative engagement, even in low-pressure academic interactions (Endahati, 2023). Similarly, Husin and Khamis (2024) demonstrated that Malaysian administrative staff who scored high in oral communication apprehension also reported stronger fears of being negatively evaluated, indicating the relevance of this construct within the Malaysian sociocultural context (Husin & Khamis, 2024).

In addition to fear of evaluation, deficits in social skills have emerged as a secondary but powerful influence on communication apprehension. Social skills—comprising verbal fluency, nonverbal sensitivity, emotion regulation, and the ability to initiate and maintain interpersonal interactions—serve as the scaffolding for effective communication. Individuals with poor social skills often lack the confidence and behavioral repertoire necessary for adaptive communication, thereby increasing the likelihood of avoidance and anxiety in social situations (Cletzer, 2023). Social skills deficits have been identified as both a predictor and a consequence of communication anxiety. On one hand, poor social skills can lead to negative communicative experiences and reinforce avoidance behaviors; on the other hand, persistent avoidance can prevent individuals from practicing and improving these skills, creating a vicious cycle of underperformance and apprehension (Rahman et al., 2020).

Recent conceptual frameworks have attempted to integrate these perspectives by positioning social skills as a mediating variable between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension. From this standpoint, fear of evaluation may undermine an individual's willingness to engage in social interactions, which over time erodes social skill development and ultimately results in elevated communication anxiety (Curran & Elwood, 2024). This integrative model is supported by empirical studies that have shown strong associations between fear of negative appraisal, reduced social expressiveness, and heightened CA (Cletzer & Avery, 2022; Violanti et al., 2023). For example, Violanti et al. (2023) found that students experiencing high levels of writing apprehension also reported weak interpersonal communication skills, especially in feedback-related contexts, indicating a possible mediating pathway involving social skills (Violanti et al., 2023). Cletzer and Avery (2022) further emphasized that writing-intensive coursework could trigger both fear of evaluation and

performance anxiety, which interact to diminish students' perceived communicative competence (Cletzer & Avery, 2022).

The interplay among these constructs is particularly important in culturally diverse and linguistically plural settings such as Malaysia, where English oral communication serves as both an academic tool and a social gatekeeper (Jalleh et al., 2021). Prior studies in Malaysian educational institutions have documented elevated levels of communication apprehension among both domestic and international students, often linked with limited exposure to communicative tasks, high evaluative pressures, and limited social support (Husin & Khamis, 2023). Jalleh et al. (2021) observed that Japanese international students participating in language immersion programs in Malaysia frequently cited fear of evaluation and insufficient social adaptation skills as key barriers to effective communication, thereby supporting the theoretical link between fear-based cognitive distortions and deficits in social ability (Jalleh et al., 2021).

Furthermore, emerging research in organizational and counseling contexts adds cross-disciplinary support for the triadic relationship among fear of evaluation, social skills, and communication apprehension. Violin and Basuki (2024) found that counselors who lacked advanced communication skills were more likely to report anxiety during one-on-one sessions, particularly when clients were perceived as judgmental or critical (Violin & Basuki, 2024). Likewise, Kaneko (2024) highlighted that in workplace communication, individuals with lower facilitation skills experienced higher levels of anxiety when required to speak publicly or lead meetings, especially if they anticipated negative evaluation from peers or supervisors (Kaneko, 2024).

Social media use and digital interaction patterns have also been investigated for their relationship with communication behaviors. Larson (2021) explored how social media usage impacts real-world social interaction patterns, reporting that individuals with higher levels of digital engagement—but lower face-to-face interaction—tend to score lower on social skill inventories and higher on communication apprehension scales (Larson, 2021). These findings suggest that deficits in offline social skills may serve as a critical mediator linking psychological vulnerabilities (such as fear of evaluation) to observable communication difficulties.

This study aims to empirically investigate the mediating role of social skills deficits in the relationship between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension among university students in Malaysia.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research employed a descriptive correlational design to examine the relationships among fear of evaluation, social skills deficits, and communication apprehension. The target population consisted of university students in Malaysia. Based on the sample size determination table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample of 405 participants was considered adequate for statistical validity in a large population. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, age groups, and academic disciplines. Inclusion criteria included being enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student and having sufficient proficiency in English to comprehend and respond to the questionnaire. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Communication Apprehension

The dependent variable, communication apprehension, was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24), developed by James C. McCroskey in 1982. This widely used instrument assesses an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others. The PRCA-24 contains 24 items divided into four subscales: group discussion, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking, with six items each. Participants rate their responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater communication apprehension. The total score can range from 24 to 120. The PRCA-24 has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically exceeding 0.90 in various populations. Its construct and criterion-related validity have also been confirmed in multiple studies, establishing its robustness as a reliable tool for assessing communication apprehension across cultural and linguistic contexts.

2.2.2. Fear of Evaluation

To measure fear of evaluation, the study employed the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE), originally developed by Watson and Friend in 1969. This 30-item self-report scale is designed to assess apprehension about others'

evaluations, distress over negative judgments, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself unfavorably. Each item is scored in a true-false format, with higher scores reflecting greater fear of negative evaluation. Some studies also utilize a brief version known as the Brief FNE (BFNE), which consists of 12 items on a 5-point Likert scale. In this study, the original 30-item version was used for comprehensive assessment. The FNE has demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.90$) and strong test-retest reliability. Its validity has been supported through significant correlations with measures of social anxiety, shyness, and interpersonal sensitivity, confirming its appropriateness for research involving evaluative concerns and social functioning.

2.2.3. Social Skills Deficits

The mediating variable, social skills deficits, was assessed using the Social Skills Inventory (SSI) developed by Ronald Riggio in 1989. The SSI is a 90-item self-report questionnaire that evaluates social competencies across both verbal and nonverbal domains. It consists of six subscales: emotional expressivity, emotional sensitivity, emotional control, social expressivity, social sensitivity, and social control. Respondents rate items on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all like me) to 5 (exactly like me). Higher scores indicate stronger social skills, while lower scores suggest greater deficits. The SSI has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency coefficients typically ranging from 0.70 to 0.90 across subscales. Its validity has been confirmed through convergent correlations with related constructs such as empathy, assertiveness, and social anxiety. The SSI is widely regarded as a comprehensive and theoretically

grounded instrument for assessing multidimensional aspects of social skills.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 and AMOS version 21. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics and key variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the relationships between communication apprehension and each of the independent variables (fear of evaluation and social skills deficits). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was then applied to examine the hypothesized mediation model, testing both direct and indirect effects. The model fit was evaluated using standard indices, including the Chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), with established thresholds guiding interpretation.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 405 participants, of whom 225 (55.56%) were female and 180 (44.44%) were male. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 27 years, with a mean age of 21.34 years ($SD = 1.98$). Regarding academic level, 152 participants (37.53%) were first-year students, 109 (26.91%) were in their second year, 87 (21.48%) were third-year students, and 57 (14.07%) were in their final year of study. In terms of field of study, 162 participants (40.00%) were enrolled in social sciences, 131 (32.35%) in natural sciences, and 112 (27.65%) in engineering and technology. All participants were Malaysian nationals and reported English language proficiency sufficient to complete the assessment tools.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Research Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Fear of Evaluation	91.24	12.63
Social Skills Deficits	58.71	10.48
Communication Apprehension	76.52	11.87

Participants reported moderately high levels of fear of evaluation ($M = 91.24$, $SD = 12.63$) and communication apprehension ($M = 76.52$, $SD = 11.87$), while the average score for social skills deficits was slightly above the midpoint of the scale ($M = 58.71$, $SD = 10.48$), indicating

room for improvement in interpersonal functioning (Table 1).

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, the underlying statistical assumptions were tested and confirmed. The normality of distributions was assessed using skewness and kurtosis values for each variable. All skewness values

ranged between -0.68 and 0.41, and kurtosis values ranged from -0.72 to 0.56, indicating acceptable univariate normality. Linearity and homoscedasticity were examined via scatterplots, which showed a consistent linear pattern between predictors and the outcome variable. Multicollinearity was also evaluated using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, all of which were below 2.35,

suggesting no concerns. The Mahalanobis distance test identified no multivariate outliers at $p < .001$. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.874 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 3065.45$, $df = 153$, $p < .001$), confirming sampling adequacy for SEM analysis.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Study Variables (N = 405)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Fear of Evaluation	–		
2. Social Skills Deficits	.48** ($p < .001$)	–	
3. Communication Apprehension	.62** ($p < .001$)	.55** ($p < .001$)	–

All variables were significantly correlated. Fear of evaluation was positively correlated with social skills deficits ($r = .48$, $p < .001$) and communication apprehension ($r = .62$, $p < .001$). Social skills deficits were also positively

correlated with communication apprehension ($r = .55$, $p < .001$), supporting the hypothesis that these variables are interrelated in meaningful ways (Table 2).

Table 3

Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Index	Value	Threshold Criteria
Chi-Square (χ^2)	142.35	–
Degrees of Freedom	72	–
χ^2/df	1.98	< 3.00 (good fit)
GFI	0.94	≥ 0.90 (acceptable)
AGFI	0.91	≥ 0.90 (acceptable)
CFI	0.96	≥ 0.95 (excellent)
RMSEA	0.045	< 0.08 (acceptable)
TLI	0.95	≥ 0.95 (excellent)

The structural model exhibited a good fit to the data. The χ^2/df ratio was 1.98, below the recommended threshold of 3.00. Other indices, including CFI (0.96), TLI (0.95), GFI

(0.94), and AGFI (0.91), met or exceeded acceptable values. RMSEA was also within acceptable range (0.045), confirming strong model validity (Table 3).

Table 4

Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects Among Variables in the Structural Model

Path	b	S.E.	Beta	p
Fear of Evaluation → Social Skills Deficits	0.52	0.07	0.48	< .001
Social Skills Deficits → Communication Apprehension	0.46	0.06	0.41	< .001
Fear of Evaluation → Communication Apprehension (Direct)	0.38	0.08	0.39	< .001
Fear of Evaluation → Communication Apprehension (Indirect via SSD)	0.24	0.05	0.20	< .001
Total Effect (Fear of Evaluation → Communication Apprehension)	0.62	–	0.59	< .001

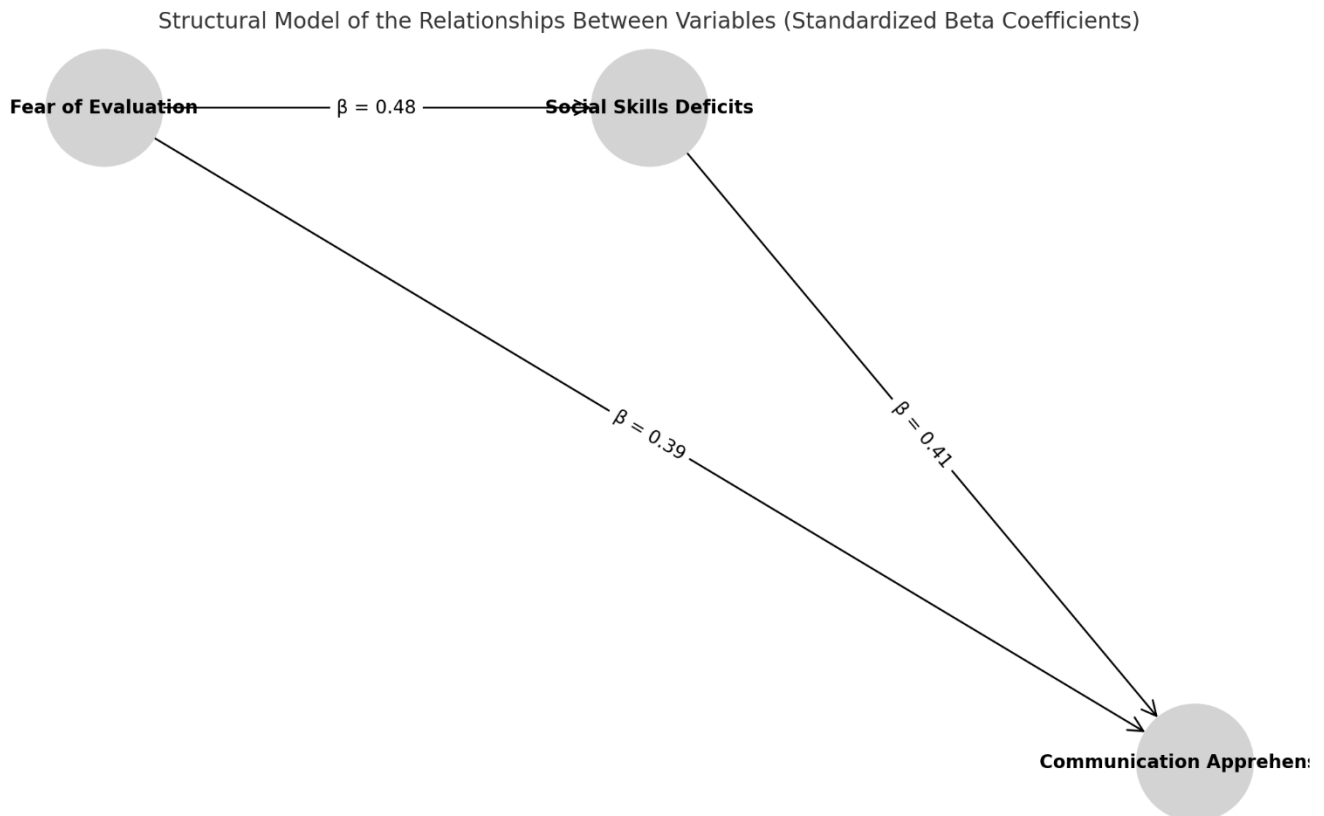
The structural model revealed that fear of evaluation significantly predicted social skills deficits ($b = 0.52$, $\beta = 0.48$, $p < .001$), which in turn significantly predicted communication apprehension ($b = 0.46$, $\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$).

Additionally, the direct path from fear of evaluation to communication apprehension remained significant ($b = 0.38$, $\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$), while the indirect path through social skills deficits also showed a meaningful mediating

effect ($b = 0.24$, $\beta = 0.20$, $p < .001$). The total effect of fear of evaluation on communication apprehension (direct + indirect) was substantial ($\beta = 0.59$) (Table 4).

Figure 1

Model with Beta Coefficients



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the hypothesized model in which social skills deficits mediate the relationship between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension among Malaysian university students. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension, while social skills deficits were also significantly related to both constructs. The structural equation modeling (SEM) further confirmed that fear of evaluation had a direct effect on communication apprehension and an indirect effect mediated by social skills deficits. These results underscore the critical role that interpersonal competence plays in moderating the psychological impact of evaluative fears on communicative behavior.

The strong direct relationship observed between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension is consistent with previous studies suggesting that individuals who are highly sensitive to others' judgments are more likely to experience anxiety in communicative contexts (Cong & Li, 2022; Kaneko, 2024). This pattern reflects the cognitive-behavioral framework wherein the anticipation of negative appraisal activates avoidance behaviors and physiological arousal, which subsequently manifest as communication apprehension. The findings echo those of Endahati (2023), who found that students in English language programs with high levels of evaluative fear often displayed reluctance to participate in oral tasks and reported self-perceived communication deficits (Endahati, 2023). Likewise, in the Malaysian context, Husin and Khamis (2024) observed that administrative staff who feared negative judgment from peers and supervisors experienced higher levels of oral

communication apprehension, even when language proficiency was not a barrier (Husin & Khamis, 2024). These parallel findings across educational and workplace settings suggest that fear of evaluation is a pervasive and stable predictor of communication avoidance across diverse social roles.

The present study also identified social skills deficits as a significant partial mediator in the relationship between fear of evaluation and communication apprehension. This aligns with the theoretical model proposed by Curran and Elwood (2024), which posits that social skill deficits may develop as a consequence of chronic evaluative fears, further reinforcing avoidance behaviors and communicative anxiety (Curran & Elwood, 2024). In other words, individuals with high fear of evaluation may be less likely to engage in social interactions, thereby missing opportunities to practice and refine essential social competencies. Over time, these deficits become entrenched, exacerbating the individual's vulnerability to communication apprehension. The findings from this study support this dynamic by demonstrating that a substantial portion of the effect of evaluative fear on communication apprehension is transmitted through impaired social skills.

Empirical support for this mediating mechanism is evident in a growing number of studies. For instance, Kovan (2023) found that social skills significantly mediated the association between emotional stressors and communication difficulties in romantic relationships, reinforcing the notion that interpersonal skill deficits are not only outcomes but also mediators of anxiety-related experiences (Kovan, 2023). Similarly, Violin and Basuki (2024) emphasized that deficits in communication skills were common among counseling professionals with high apprehension, suggesting that the lack of interpersonal fluency intensified anxiety when faced with emotionally demanding interactions (Violin & Basuki, 2024). These findings are further supported by research in academic settings, where Cletzer and Avery (2022) demonstrated that reduced writing confidence and oral expressiveness among students were linked with both fear of evaluation and limited engagement in class discussions, indicating the mediating influence of social functioning (Cletzer & Avery, 2022).

An additional consideration is the sociocultural environment of the study. The sample comprised Malaysian university students, a population that frequently engages with multicultural, multilingual educational settings where the stakes of peer and instructor evaluation may be amplified (Jalleh et al., 2021). This environment may intensify the

perceived consequences of communicative performance, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, thereby increasing the salience of evaluative fear. Loureiro et al. (2020) found significant gender-based differences in communication apprehension in university settings, suggesting that both sociocultural and individual factors can shape one's communicative confidence (Loureiro et al., 2020). In this study, although gender differences were not the primary focus, the broader sociolinguistic landscape in Malaysia may have played a critical role in shaping participants' perceptions of judgment, performance, and communicative success.

Another relevant finding is the robust total effect of fear of evaluation on communication apprehension, even after accounting for social skills. While mediation was partial, indicating that social skills explain part—but not all—of the variance, the persistent direct effect highlights the enduring impact of cognitive-emotional vulnerabilities. This aligns with findings by Curran et al. (2020), who reported that mother–child communication apprehension in adolescence was directly associated with young adults' self-esteem and depressive symptoms, even after controlling for interpersonal competencies (Curran et al., 2020). The implication is that while social skills training may be effective in alleviating some of the communicative anxiety, interventions should also address the underlying evaluative beliefs that fuel these fears.

Moreover, the relevance of communication apprehension as a barrier to participation and achievement continues to be documented across educational levels. Cletzer (2023) emphasized the challenges that writing-intensive classrooms pose for students with high communication anxiety, noting that the interplay of cognitive avoidance, emotional dysregulation, and weak social skills reduces students' academic engagement and peer collaboration (Cletzer, 2023). Similarly, Violanti et al. (2023) documented that students who received affirming messages from instructors experienced reduced writing and oral apprehension, suggesting that external feedback can mitigate some of the internal fears associated with evaluation (Violanti et al., 2023). These studies suggest that educator-driven strategies and classroom climate are crucial in reducing fear-based communication barriers.

The present study also contributes to the literature on educational psychology by offering practical implications for intervention. The findings support an integrative approach to reducing communication apprehension, emphasizing the need to address both cognitive-affective

vulnerabilities (such as fear of evaluation) and behavioral competencies (such as social skills). As illustrated in the research by Rahman et al. (2020), language instructors who focused on both socio-communicative and ethical-sociability skills were more successful in helping students develop communicative confidence (Rahman et al., 2020). This dual focus can be particularly useful in ESL and international contexts, where students' communicative challenges are often compounded by cultural and linguistic differences (Tuncal, 2025).

The strong alignment of this study's findings with the theoretical framework proposed by Kaneko (2024) is also noteworthy. Kaneko observed that individuals with higher workplace rank and facilitation skills reported lower communication apprehension, particularly in evaluative scenarios, suggesting that both internal skills and social positioning can buffer against anxiety (Kaneko, 2024). Although this study was conducted in an educational setting, the parallels highlight that the dynamics of evaluation, skill, and apprehension may operate similarly across both academic and professional contexts.

In sum, this study advances the understanding of how fear of evaluation influences communication apprehension by identifying social skills deficits as a significant mediating mechanism. It underscores the importance of addressing both cognitive and behavioral factors in any comprehensive effort to reduce communication anxiety, especially in multicultural academic environments.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias, especially in culturally sensitive constructs like fear of evaluation and communication skills. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to draw causal inferences between variables. While SEM offers a sophisticated approach to testing mediation, longitudinal designs would be better suited to confirm directional pathways. Third, the sample was drawn exclusively from Malaysian universities, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Factors such as linguistic background, academic discipline, and prior communicative experiences were not analyzed in depth, which could further inform the observed relationships.

Future research should explore these relationships using longitudinal or experimental designs to determine causality

more robustly. Additionally, incorporating behavioral assessments of social skills rather than relying solely on self-report instruments could strengthen the construct validity of future studies. Expanding the sample to include international students or participants from other linguistic backgrounds would also help evaluate the cross-cultural applicability of the model. Further, investigating additional mediating or moderating variables—such as personality traits, academic stress, or digital communication habits—could offer a more comprehensive understanding of communication apprehension and its antecedents.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that intervention programs aimed at reducing communication apprehension should adopt a dual-focus strategy: addressing both fear of evaluation through cognitive-behavioral techniques and enhancing social communication skills through structured interpersonal training. Educators and university counselors should consider creating low-stakes speaking opportunities and positive feedback environments to gradually reduce evaluative pressure. Curriculum designers may also benefit from integrating soft skills development into academic programs, especially in contexts where students are expected to communicate in a second or foreign language. Such integrative approaches can foster more inclusive, confident, and communicatively competent student communities.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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