

Gender Differences in Generalized Anxiety Disorder Among Middle-Aged Business Owners

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A common mental illness, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), shows clear gender variations in presentation and severity. Studies on GAD among middle-aged company owners remain few despite their vulnerability to financial uncertainty, market competitiveness, and workload stress. Among 200 middle-aged entrepreneurs (110 men, 90 women) in Ahmedabad, India, this study investigated gender variations in GAD and the relationship between gender and GAD severity. An independent samples t-test using the GAD-7 scale found that male company owners ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 3.75$) reported notably more anxiety than female business owners ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 3.26$), $t(198) = 2.010$, $p = .466$. GAD scores dropped when gender changed from male to female according to a modest but noteworthy negative association ($r = -0.141$, $p = .046$). These results emphasize the importance of focused mental health treatments for company owners; further studies on socioeconomic factors influencing GAD in entrepreneurial environments will help to further this point.

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During the midlife years, the overall quality of life gets impacted when a person's psychological, social, and biological health undergoes significant changes. Hence, midlife is defined as the years between 40 and 55, during which people have a multitude of responsibilities, including parenting, fulfilling societal obligations, working, and caring for loved ones (Willis, Martin, & Rocke, 2010). There are opportunities to succeed and fail throughout this life period when it comes to achieving professional and personal objectives, fulfilling personal obligations, and managing social and familial relationships.

Middle-aged people's psychological well-being is shaped by several elements that interact in a complicated manner: health, family interactions, and job environments. Thus, their mental well-being calls for targeted health interventions and psychoeducation since studies show that NCDs and difficulties with ADLs are major

markers of negative psychological effects in this demographic. (Willis & Martin, 2005). Therefore, a sense of agency, autonomy, and social recognition are important factors vital to preserving mental health during this life stage, all of which are influenced by the quality of an individual's psychosocial work environment (Siegrist, 2005).

Moreover, research has found that strong, healthy family relationships and involvement in significant social networks might help reduce negative psychological effects and increase emotional resilience. (Berkman & Glass, 2000; Haidt & Rodin, 1999). Given the predominance of job and family life in midlife, it is essential to know the factors that support psychological well-being at this stage. This is particularly true in the Indian setting, as changing societal standards, cultural values, and economic pressures influence midlife experiences specifically, therefore influencing the well-being of these people.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Prevalence & Impact

GAD, which is marked by excessive and persistent worry over daily problems including family, finances, health, and future uncertainty, is among the most often occurring and debilitating mental illnesses. (Munir & Takov, 2022). According to the DSM-5, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is defined as excessive anxiety that lasts for at least six months and is accompanied by symptoms that significantly impair social and occupational performance, such as restlessness, exhaustion, trouble focusing, muscular tension, and sleep disruptions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Therefore, knowing the frequency of GAD will help one grasp its social and psychological effects, especially in metropolitan environments with high-stakes responsibilities and commitments that intensify anxiety symptoms.

With a lifetime incidence of 3.7%, a 12-month prevalence of 1.8%, and a 30-day prevalence of 0.8%, research indicates that GAD is a global problem (Jayasankar et al., 2023). But because of systematic mental health disparities, urbanization, and cultural variances, prevalence rates in India differ widely. Weighted GAD prevalence in India was 0.57% by the National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) 2016; rates were higher in metropolitan areas, particularly among married people and those with less education (Jayasankar et al., 2023). Still, stigma, a dearth of mental health services, and socioeconomic constraints help to explain a shockingly 75.7% treatment disparity (Manjunatha et al., 2022). Since untreated anxiety can lead to serious psychological, social, and professional damage, it is imperative to investigate the incidence of GAD among urban business owners to implement early intervention.

Gender Differences in GAD

Given that men and women frequently experience and display worry in different ways, it is critical to acknowledge gender differences in generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Research examining gender specific characteristics, symptom presentation, and severity assist professionals in better understanding how GAD presents itself and shakes treatment plans. Hormone differences and social expectations are among the biological, cultural, and environmental elements influencing these differences; men are more prone to externalize symptoms, whereas women are more likely to internalize them. (Vesga-López et al., 2008).

Urban environments intensify these pressures when family responsibilities, financial obligations, and professional competence collide to aggravate mental health problems. To improve mental health outcomes for both sexes in high-stress business settings, researchers and therapists may create more individualized, effective preventive and treatment plans by determining how men and women experience and manage GAD differently.

Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory (1981), for instance, states that individuals absorb society's expectations of gender roles, therefore creating cognitive frameworks-schemas that affect behaviour and self-perceptions. These schemas argue that humans absorb society's norms of gender roles, forming cognitive frameworks that affect behaviour and self-perception, so guiding people to follow society's standards of masculinity and femininity. These schemas direct individuals to adhere to cultural norms of masculinity and femininity, therefore affecting their knowledge handling and relationships in their surroundings (Bem, 1981).

According to this hypothesis, women may internalize feelings and experience more

anxiety; males may be trained to either conceal or externalize emotional pain, which might lead to underreporting or distinct forms of anxiety (McLean & Anderson, 2009). Awareness of these gender-specific cognitive tendencies can help one create targeted therapies that meet the individual experiences and coping mechanisms of men and women with GAD.

Apart from this, studies show that women are more likely to seek help and share anxiety symptoms, in keeping with traditional gender norms that enable emotional expression. Men, on the other hand, could reduce symptoms because of cultural standards of stoicism, therefore producing differences in diagnosis and therapy (Vesga-López et al., 2008).

Secondly, research also shows that women are more likely than men to experience anxiety disorders, including GAD. According to the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, lifetime prevalence rates of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) were 2.8% for men and 5.3% for females, with 12-month prevalence rates of 1.2% and 2.7%. (Vesga-López et al., 2008). In the same vein, Khanna & Jyotsana (2018) examined gender differences in emotional control and self-reported anxiety among Indian patients. Women suffering from GAD expressed more anxiety and less emotional control than men.

India as a Global Business Hub: Rationale

The Indian state, Gujarat's largest city, Ahmedabad, represents entrepreneurship and economic innovation. Gujarat, known for its business acumen, boasts a 1,600-km Arabian Sea shoreline that supports marine trade and industry. The market culture and small businesses of Ahmedabad define its economy. (Imperial Publications, 2022). The third richest state of India generates 25% of

India's milk and cotton and processes 90% of the world's diamonds, largely in Surat. With its textile sector, technological start-ups, and retail companies, Ahmedabad city of India is perfect for single proprietorships and family-owned businesses. Hence, Ahmedabad and its urban business owners must be evaluated for mental health, especially anxiety.

Despite the growing awareness of mental health issues in working populations, there remains a significant gap in research on gender differences in GAD among non-clinical, middle-aged business owners.

A key period of life, middle adulthood is distinguished by changing responsibilities, career peaks, and more psychological weaknesses. Although studies worldwide have mostly concentrated on clinical populations or more general workforce studies, the mental health issues of business owners all around, in industrialized countries like India or emerging economies, deal with greater financial instability, competitiveness, and pressures on their personal lives. However, infrequently investigated are gender-specific variations in anxiety in business environments. This study adds to the body of knowledge worldwide by underlining how gender-based anxiety expressions show among urban company owners and stressing the need for culturally educated, gender-sensitive mental health treatments in economic environments.

Objectives

Hence, this study aimed to examine gender differences in GAD among urban middle-aged businessmen and businesswomen in Ahmedabad, India. We also intend to examine the correlation between gender and GAD scores among urban middle-aged businessmen and businesswomen.

Hypotheses

- H_0 : There will be a significant difference in GAD among urban middle-aged businessmen & businesswomen of Ahmedabad, India.
- H_1 : There will also be no correlation between gender and GAD among urban business owners of Ahmedabad, India.

Method

Sample

The research used a quantitative, non-experimental methodology to investigate middle-aged male and female entrepreneurs aged 40 to 60 years in the urban Ahmedabad city of Gujarat, India. A total of 200 non-clinical company owners (N=200) were specifically sought out, both male and female. Participants in single proprietorships (independent business owners) or family-owned enterprises (controlled & managed by the family members) made up the sample. Dividing Ahmedabad city of Gujarat, India, into ten separate legislative zones using a stratified sampling technique ensured varied representation. This method facilitated a more representative population within the city's urban entrepreneurial environment.

Measures

Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale-(GAD-7), (Spitzer et al., 2006): The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale is a self-report instrument for evaluating generalized anxiety symptoms. Each is evaluated on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = hardly at all to 3 = virtually every day); the GAD-7 scale has seven items. Thus, yielding total scores between 0 and 21. The scores are classified as mild (5-9), moderate (10-14), and severe (15-21) anxiety symptoms. Thus, elevated scores signify increased anxiety levels. The GAD-7 exhibits robust psychometric qualities, evidenced by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, signifying good

internal consistency (Spitzer et al., 2006). The test-retest reliability ($r = 0.83$) and good criterion validity, with sensitivity and specificity over 80% for identifying generalized anxiety disorder, have been demonstrated exceptionally. (Groves et al., 2023)

Procedure

Using a standardized, self-report screening questionnaire, urban businessmen and businesswomen in Gujarat, India's Ahmedabad metropolis, were evaluated for mental health concerns. The survey was self-administered with easy informed permission. Therefore, no modification was used.

The survey was kept confidential and advised only as a screening tool rather than a diagnostic tool. As needed for clarity, native language support was provided, and participants with major cognitive disabilities and severe medical conditions were eliminated to ensure the data was accurate. Furthermore, accepted by Karnavati University's ethical committee was the research project.

Results

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 200)

Demographic Variable	Category	N (%)	M (SD)
Gender	Men	110 (55%)	
	Women	90 (45%)	
Type of Business	Family-Owned Business	66 (33%)	
	Sole Proprietorship	134 (67%)	
Age (Years)	40-49	72 (44%)	50.49
	50-60	128 (53%)	(5.74)

N = total sample size; n = number of participants; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; Min = Minimum age; Max = Maximum age.

Table 1 represents the demographic characteristics of the study participants, encompassing gender distribution, business ownership type, and age range. The sample comprised (N = 200) middle-aged business owners, including (n = 110) men and (n = 90) women, from urban Ahmedabad. Of the sample, 33% were involved in family-owned businesses, whereas 67% functioned as sole proprietors. Overall, the ages of the participants varied from 40 to 60 years (M = 50.49, SD = 5.74).

Table 2. Independent Samples t-Test comparing total GAD Scores Between Businessmen & Businesswomen of Ahmedabad.

Total GAD Score	N	Mean	S.D	t-test	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	110	3.50	3.75	2.010	198	.046
Female	90	2.49	3.26	2.038	197.2	0.43

* $p < 0.05$. A statistically significant difference was observed in total GAD scores between businessmen and businesswomen. Equal variances were assumed based on Levene's test ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2 displays the results of the independent samples t-test comparing total GAD scores between businessmen & businesswomen. The study demonstrated a statistically significant difference, $t(198) = 2.010$, $p = .046$, showing that males (M = 3.50, SD = 3.75) displayed elevated GAD scores relative to females (M = 2.49, SD = 3.26).

Hence, the alternative hypothesis, i.e., there will be a significant difference in GAD scores between businessmen and women, is rejected, indicating that gender influences anxiety scores among business owners. The data suggest that businessmen in Ahmedabad exhibit elevated anxiety relative to their female counterparts.

Table 3 illustrates the correlation analysis between male & female business owners'

total GAD scores. The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.141$, $p = .046$) suggests a slight negative association between gender and GAD scores. This indicates that as gender transitions from male (coded as 1) to female (coded as 2), GAD scores generally exhibit a little decline.

Table 3. Correlation Between Gender and Total GAD Scores

Correlation			
		Total GAD Score	Gender
Total GAD Score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.141*
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>		.046
	<i>N</i>	200	200
Gender	Pearson Correlation	-.141*	1
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	.046	
	<i>N</i>	200	200

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

Thus, the weak correlation indicates that the association between gender and GAD is not robust, however, it is statistically significant ($p < .05$), resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis, i.e., there will be no significant relationship between gender and GAD scores. Hence, this outcome indicates that businessmen generally report elevated GAD scores relative to businesswomen but with a minor effect size.

Discussion

In this study, we examined gender differences in GAD among middle-aged, urban Ahmedabad businessmen and women and explored the relationship between gender and GAD scores among this population.

Hence, the findings indicated that male business owners exhibited higher Generalized Anxiety scores compared to

female business owners in Ahmedabad City. However, no cause-and-effect relationship was identified, and only association was found. Therefore, the Gender Role Strain Paradigm, put forward by Joseph H. Pleck in 1981, offers one reason why businessmen seem to have higher GAD scores than businesswomen.

According to this hypothesis, males globally are subjected to strict demands of emotional control, domination, and financial success by conventional masculine standards. Men may suffer psychologically when their expectations are too high or unfulfilling. Usually in charge of making decisions, taking risks, and maintaining financial stability, businesspeople are the ones under great stress in entrepreneurial environments; this may lead to anxiety.

Men are also often discouraged from acknowledging their emotional suffering, which leads to the internalization of anxiety symptoms, unlike women, who might have more socially acceptable coping mechanisms, including emotional expressiveness and social support seeking. (Mahalik et al., 2003). This is because men are frequently discouraged from recognizing emotional turmoil, resulting in the internalization of anxiety manifestations. On the other hand, women may adopt emotionally oriented coping strategies such as expressing emotions and asking for social support, which could help to lower anxiety (Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002)

These findings coincide with various earlier studies that have explored gender inequalities in anxiety disorders among the working population. Vesga-López et al. (2008) observed that males with GAD had a greater frequency of concurrent drug use problems and exhibited a lower willingness to seek treatment, which may worsen their anxiety symptoms. McLean & Anderson (2009) highlighted that women are more ready

to reveal and seek aid for anxiety, while males typically turn to avoidant coping mechanisms that may result in extended mental anguish.

India's entrepreneurial sector, deeply rooted in its historical and economic evolution, presents unique psychological challenges for urban business owners. Entrepreneurs often grapple with financial uncertainties, intense market competition, and rapid technological changes—factors that are known to heighten anxiety, particularly symptoms associated with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). In sectors like textile manufacturing and real estate, business owners are frequently burdened by economic fluctuations, shifting regulatory policies, and escalating operational expenses.

Hence, these ongoing pressures can lead to chronic stress and anxiety related to performance. In cities like Ahmedabad, where urban expansion and corporate expenditures are rising swiftly, businesses face constant pressure to adapt, innovate, and remain financially viable. Moreover, there is an increasing psychological vulnerability of entrepreneurs in such high-demand environments because of the absence of organized mental health support (GEM, 2022).

Technology also causes great anxiety, particularly for middle-aged business owners trying to incorporate artificial intelligence, e-commerce, and automation into their companies. Financial stability and mental health are often compromised due to Succession planning in family firms, which is a major cause of anxiety as leadership transfers may inspire internal conflict (Beaulieu et al., 1989). During the adaptation to digital transformations, decision fatigue and obsolescence anxiety surface, leading to more stress and uncertainty (Bowen et al., 2009). Moreover, male entrepreneurs face great social pressure to run their businesses and carry out their financial obligations.

Unlike female entrepreneurs, who often have established mentoring and support systems, male firm owners might experience emotional isolation and suppressed stress, hence raising their anxiety levels (Richardson et al., 2004; Agbenyegah, 2013).

These findings echo patterns observed in earlier studies, which have shown that male entrepreneurs, especially in the Indian business context, are particularly vulnerable to anxiety stemming from financial risks and societal pressure to succeed (Chaudhuri, Sasidharan, & Rajesh, 2018). In the current study, a modest but statistically significant negative correlation was observed between gender and levels of generalized anxiety ($r = -0.141$, $p = .046$), indicating that male participants reported more pronounced symptoms of anxiety than their female counterparts. One possible explanation for this lies in traditional gender roles, where men are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability or seeking emotional support.

Eagly's Social Role Theory (1987) helps contextualize this pattern by suggesting that men typically lean toward problem-focused coping strategies. While such strategies may be useful in structured environments, they can become counterproductive when applied to unpredictable and uncontrollable business conditions (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Given the unique pressures faced by male business owners in rapidly developing cities like Ahmedabad, there is a pressing need for mental health services that are both accessible and tailored to the psychological needs of this demographic.

Urban businesspeople with stress and GAD require coordinated mental health therapies that include psychoeducation, diagnostic testing, and scientifically proven treatments. By retaining their mental processes to be less negative and more adaptable, Cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) can help entrepreneurs with

generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) (Newman et al., 2013). Butler et al. (2006) state that anxiety and decision fatigue in high-stress workers may be reduced through CBT.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs also help high-pressure company owners. Emotional control, resilience, and cognitive flexibility are improved by meditation and mindfulness programs. (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009). Entrepreneurs tend to neglect early anxiety symptoms, thus, regular diagnostic examinations using standardized instruments like the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale are necessary (Spitzer et al., 2006).

Programs for corporate leadership and workplace wellness involving mental health checkups assist in normalizing receiving treatment. Business owners will discover effective stress management methods to lessen anxiety's detrimental consequences on their personal and professional well-being (Beshai et al., 2016).

Strengths and Limitations

There remains a notable gap in research concerning Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) among urban businessmen in Ahmedabad and, more broadly, across India. This study aims to bridge that gap by focusing on a largely overlooked demographic—middle-aged male entrepreneurs—who face distinct psychological stressors tied to financial obligations, business continuity, and succession planning.

While prior investigations have largely concentrated on corporate employees or younger start-up founders, this cohort plays a critical role in sustaining economic balance, shaping workplace culture, and influencing employment trends and long-term development.

However, the use of purely quantitative methodology may have limited the depth of insight into the complex psychosocial challenges and coping mechanisms experienced by these individuals. A mixed-methods design could have offered a more comprehensive understanding by capturing the nuanced, lived realities and resilience strategies of business owners.

Furthermore, gender in this study was assessed through a binary lens (male/female) without accounting for deeper dimensions such as gender identity, expressions of masculinity, or femininity. Including such variables might have enriched the analysis, offering a more layered understanding of how anxiety manifests across different gender-related experiences.

Moreover, tracking anxiety fluctuations within the same cohort could have been more useful, i.e., a longitudinal design, since a one-time data method poses difficulties in seeing the applicability of the study's relevance.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Among middle-aged company owners, males exhibit higher levels of GAD compared to women. Professional pressures, coping mechanisms, and cultural standards all help to shape this difference. Therefore, it is crucial to implement therapies that consider gender. In this demographics mental health, the attention can be focused on its workplace wellness and long-term economic viability.

It will be beneficial for future studies to investigate the many cultural, occupational, and socioeconomic aspects that impact GAD in various Asian economies and sectors. Early interventions and referrals to mental health services are enhanced through regular screening and diagnostic technology in longitudinal research. The consequences of this study can be applied globally; as business owners continue facing psychological and financial constraints,

mental health is an economic requirement on a worldwide level. Learning to manage anxiety in middle age is essential. Hence, this calls for creating economic, psychological, and social resilience in a growing society that is becoming more and more erratic.

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