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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EVOLUTION OF ANXIETY IN RELATION TO COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS DURING HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article investigates how college entrance exam-related anxiety evolves throughout high school, especially among public school students. Adolescence is a period of intense emotional change, and the entrance exam becomes a significant stressor, directly impacting young people's psychological well-being. **Objective:** The study aims to describe the progression of anxiety over the three years of high school and to identify social, family, and school-related factors that worsen this emotional condition, highlighting its implications for adolescents' mental health. **Methodology:** This is a bibliographic, descriptive study with a mixed approach. Scientific articles published between 2007 and 2024 were analyzed, sourced from SciELO, PubMed, BVS, and LILACS databases. Keywords such as "Mental Health," "Anxiety," and "Adolescent" were used, with screening based on relevance and critical reading of the selected texts. **Results and Discussion:** The data show that anxiety begins as early as the first year of high school and intensifies in the third year due to pressure from the entrance exam. Factors such as low income, excessive social media use, family pressure, and rigid school methodologies worsen students' emotional state. The culture of meritocracy and lack of institutional emotional support compromise adolescents' mental health and vocational autonomy. **Conclusion:** Anxiety in the pre-entrance exam context is a growing and multifactorial problem. It is essential to promote public policies and pedagogical practices that provide emotional support for students, fostering a healthier and more inclusive educational environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, which is not limited to what we feel (WHO, 2017). Adolescence, covering ages 10 to 19, is typically when individuals undergo mental changes (Pass; Marshall; Reynolds, 2023). Moreover, fragile mental health can be associated with anxiety, which is an uncomfortable emotional state of nervousness and worry, often with less identifiable causes. It is not necessarily tied to the moment of threat and may arise in anticipation, persist for a long time, or appear even without an identifiable threat. Although it is a natural feeling, when experienced frequently, it can be considered a disorder, interfering with daily activities and harming a person's family, social, academic, or professional life (WHO, 2023). Only about one in four people suffering from such

disorders seek help and receive treatment for their condition. It is normal for everyone to experience anxiety at certain times, but those with anxiety disorders face intense and disproportionate fears and worries. These feelings are usually accompanied by physical tension and other symptoms that affect behavior and cognitive abilities. These sensations are difficult to control, cause great distress, and may persist for long periods if not properly treated. Currently, it is estimated that around 4% of the world population suffers from some type of anxiety disorder. In 2019, a total of 301 million people globally were affected by an anxiety disorder, making them the most common among all mental health conditions. Despite the availability of highly effective treatments for anxiety disorders, only a small fraction—about one in four in need (27.6%)—receive any form of intervention. Barriers to treatment include lack of awareness about the treatability of this condition, low investment in mental health services,

shortage of qualified professionals, and social stigma surrounding the issue. There is a clear propensity for the development of anxiety during adolescence. This psychopathology is serious and may trigger or worsen other disorders, whether psychological or not (Souza *et al.*, 2023). Anxiety among adolescents is closely linked to social factors, especially in more vulnerable groups, such as those with lower income. According to Magalhães *et al.* (2021), certain social contexts and experiences increase the likelihood of mental health issues in children and adolescents. These include living in conditions of social vulnerability, facing food insecurity (Slopen *et al.*, 2010), being exposed to violence (Murray; Cerqueira; Kahn, 2013), and perceiving a lack of social support from family and friends (Wight; Botti Cello; Aneshensel, 2006). Sousa *et al.* (2023) add that adolescence can be a time of uncertainty, marked by the transition from childhood to adulthood. During this unstable period, a convergence of situations and experiences may arise, influencing the individual into adulthood (Esteves; Badillo *et al.*, 2021). The present research aims to understand the evolution of anxiety related to the college entrance exam during high school, considering adolescence as a critical period for the development of emotional disorders. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) defines mental health as a state of complete well-being, beyond just the absence of disease. However, social and economic factors such as vulnerability and food insecurity are key determinants in the rise of anxiety among youth (Sousa *et al.*, 2023; Magalhães *et al.*, 2021). Studies indicate that this anxiety can manifest in anticipatory ways and impact academic performance, interfering with students' daily lives (WHO, 2023). This research aims to map the progression of anxiety throughout high school and identify the main factors associated with its aggravation. The scientific impact lies in expanding knowledge about the relationship between mental health and preparation for entrance exams, while the social impact is seen in the potential to implement educational and psychological policies to mitigate the effects of anxiety on students.

Entrance exam-related anxiety has become an increasing challenge among high school students, particularly in public schools, where socioeconomic and educational issues often heighten this pressure. This study aims to identify and describe the evolution of anxiety in these students, monitoring its levels throughout the three years of high school, describing how it manifests in different stages, and correlating these variations. It is guided by the question: to what extent do public high school students feel anxiety about the entrance exam? The relevance of this research lies in contributing to the understanding of the emotional impact of this selection process and offering support strategies that value mental health within the school environment.

METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive bibliographic study with a mixed approach, and the collected data were used for the development of this scientific article. Data collection was carried out through a bibliographic survey of scientific publications related to the proposed theme, covering the period from 2007 to 2024. The inclusion criteria for content selection were: full-text publications aligned with the theme of the evolution of anxiety related to the college entrance exam during high school, including documents, regulations, health

authority guidelines, scientific articles, and institutional directives published in Portuguese, English, or Spanish. The exclusion criteria included: articles not directly related to the theme, duplicated or incomplete materials, reviews, abstracts, debates, and content not available in full. The literature search was conducted in the following databases: SciELO, PubMed, and BVS. It is worth noting that the LILACS database, accessed through the Virtual Health Library (BVS), was also used. The searches were performed using the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) from the Regional Library of Medicine (BIREME): “Saúde Mental” / “Mental Health”; “Adolescente” / “Teenager” / “Anxiety”; “Ansiedade”, with the use of Boolean operators “AND” and “OR”. The methodology employed in this study began with a careful selection of descriptors from the DeCS, followed by research in indexed databases. Using the main terms and their equivalents, tables were created listing the articles found in each database. Duplicate articles were eliminated, and then titles were screened for relevance. After this step, abstracts were read, followed by full readings of articles that met the established criteria. For data analysis, three thematic axes were defined, built from the specific objectives and formulated as guiding questions. These questions directed the reading and critical analysis of the selected articles, forming the conceptual basis for the discussion and interpretation of the data. The answers obtained provided the theoretical foundation for the construction of the results and the reflections proposed in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social, academic, and psychological factors contribute to this process: Research shows that even first-year high school students exhibit anxiety levels comparable to those in their final year, revealing an early and concerning pattern—even among those taking progressive entrance exams (Soares; Martins, 2010). Literature from as far back as the 1960s and 1970s has explored the effects of entrance exams on stress and anxiety, highlighting symptoms such as restlessness, fear, stress, and concentration difficulties (Karino; Laros, 2014). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those who spend more time in selection processes show greater stress and depressive symptoms (Demenech *et al.*, 2023). Entrance exam pressure is a significant trigger for anxiety disorders, especially among students in preparatory courses, who face intense social, academic, and psychological stressors (Schonhofen, 2020). The third year of high school intensifies this scenario, with anxiety linked to performance pressure and fear of the future (Pelazza, 2019; Cano Acosta, 2024). Adolescents nearing the end of high school experience both physical and emotional transformations that, combined with uncertainties about adult life, contribute to heightened anxiety (Godoy *et al.*, 2007). The logic of individual merit, exacerbated by educational inequalities and fear of failure, worsens students' mental suffering (Gallo-Belluzzo *et al.*, 2017). Entrance exam anxiety is already considered a public health issue, fueled by social pressure, competitiveness, and fear of failure, and it increases as the exam date nears (D'Avila & Soares, 2003; Rocha *et al.*, 2006). The pursuit of success, coupled with inequality and insecurity about the future, deepens the distress—particularly among low-income students (Soares, 2002; Schiessl & Sarriera, 2004). The pandemic has amplified these effects, showing that external factors can worsen pre-existing anxiety conditions (Wang *et*

al., 2022). During the pandemic, fear of failure, social isolation, and interruption of in-person classes heightened anxiety among test-takers (Wu *et al.*, 2022). This context aggravated an already troubling scenario, increasing stress and uncertainty about educational futures. Students with higher self-esteem showed less anxiety, highlighting the role of individual psychological factors in coping with pressure (Sari *et al.*, 2018). Academic and family pressure intensified anxiety symptoms and compromised adolescent well-being (Pienyu *et al.*, 2024). Those attending preparatory courses had higher levels of depression and anxiety, suggesting that intensive test preparation increases psychological distress (Sharma *et al.*, 2021). Precarious socioeconomic conditions negatively affect the psychological and personality development of test-takers, increasing the risk of mental disorders (Md.Reza-A Rabby *et al.*, 2023). Unfavorable social interactions feed fear of exposure and contribute to the development of social anxiety over time (Tamang & Bhandari, 2025). Anxiety and depression are the most common mental disorders among adolescents, with a marked increase during the pandemic, especially among children and youth (Yin; Baixo; Mishu, 2025). School bullying affects 41% of youth in Western countries and is directly linked to emotional harm such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances (Li *et al.*, 2025). During the pandemic, approximately 47% of the population experienced mild to moderate symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, showing the magnitude of the issue (Vancampfort, 2024).

How family pressure and social media influence emotional well-being among entrance exam candidates: Fear of failing the entrance exam, coupled with family and social pressure, is a central factor in triggering anxiety among students, potentially leading to psychophysiological disorders and even depression (Soares; Martins, 2010). The competitive environment and constant expectation of success reinforce this issue, making the entrance exam an intense source of stress (Karino; Laros, 2014). Experiences such as parental separation also contribute to generalized anxiety disorders, affecting social relationships, health, and academic performance (Grillo; Silva, 2004). Children exposed to authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles exhibit more depressive and anxious symptoms, negatively impacting school performance (Hutz; Bardagir, 2006). In Chilean education, the demand for excellence and social pressure hinder socialization and increase stress and anxiety levels among youth (Quaresma, 2015).

Excessive use of social media among adolescents is a growing concern for health professionals, as it intensifies social comparison and contributes to anxiety, depression, and academic decline (Vieira *et al.*, 2022). Studies in Peru indicate that the demand for university admission and pursuit of high performance increase student anxiety (Iraola-Real; Matos; Gargurevich, 2022). Family and social media pressures are key factors in creating emotional vulnerabilities (Teixeira, 2018), and the family environment plays a crucial role in youth mental health—with social media intensifying these effects (Lemes, 2018). Parental expectations, often misaligned with the reality of the education system, can lead to severe anxiety and even suicidal thoughts (Manrique, 2018; Chávez *et al.*, 2017). The entrance exam imposes intense emotional strain, with physical and psychological manifestations of anxiety (Paulino *et al.*, 2018).

Family and social demands increase self-pressure among youth, damaging their self-esteem and well-being (Gallo-Belluzzo *et al.*, 2017). The emotional burden of entrance exams—marked by internal and external demands—generates feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and doubt (D'Avila & Soares, 2003; Levenfus, 1993). Constant pressure to meet expectations and success standards negatively impacts professional decision-making autonomy and intensifies anxiety symptoms (Callais *et al.*, 2006). Parental expectations regarding success can lead to career-choice doubts and heightened anxiety among adolescents (Soares, 2002; Bacchetto, 2003). Constant social media comparison and academic achievement posts also contribute to increased anxiety (Yatkin *et al.*, 2023). Perceived parental pressure is one of the most significant factors in rising adolescent anxiety levels (Pienyu *et al.*, 2024). Interestingly, even emotional family support—generally seen as protective—can raise test-related anxiety by transferring parental insecurities or reinforcing high expectations (Antonelli-Ponti *et al.*, 2021). Family influence in career decisions may cause internal conflict when adolescents don't feel free to choose based on their interests, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and fear of disappointing their parents (Sassi, n.d.). Social factors such as being female, low income, non-traditional family structures, role overload, and a family history of mental illness also contribute to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Jatobá; Bastos, 2007). Family dysfunction combined with parental anxiety and depression can even lead to school refusal (Tekin; Aydin, 2022).

How teaching methodologies and performance pressure affect students' mental health during exam preparation: A comparison between public and private school students revealed lower well-being among the former, influenced by difficulty achieving goals like university admission (Hutz; Bardagir, 2006). Rigid methodologies and intense academic demands contribute to increased emotional stress among students (Teixeira, 2018; Lemes, 2018). Pre-university academies and prep courses adopt demanding, competitive approaches, fostering environments that amplify self-comparison and emotional suffering (Chávez *et al.*, 2017; Manrique, 2018). A performance-only focus reinforces a competitive logic and ignores the emotional needs of entrance exam candidates, increasing anxiety and mental exhaustion (Gallo-Belluzzo *et al.*, 2017). The lack of institutional support and excessive emphasis on outcomes drive many students to give up before the exam (Bianchetti, 1996; Miguez, 2004).

Education models based solely on grades and rankings generate high stress and overlook strategies that promote mental health (Yatkin *et al.*, 2023). Students with higher self-esteem tend to show less test anxiety, suggesting that individual factors also influence academic experience (Sari *et al.*, 2018). Self-care practices, such as meditation and goal-setting, have proven effective in managing school-related stress (Iyer *et al.*, 2024). Medical students reported intense anxiety and disturbances like nightmares, affecting cognitive performance and test results (Arnulf *et al.*, 2014). Two hypotheses explain the impact of elevated anxiety: one supports cognitive anticipation due to high baseline anxiety (Knott & Trint, 1967), while the other suggests distraction by self-focused thoughts (Tecece, 1971; 1972) (Hongxia *et al.*, 2015). A study with Chinese students during exam season revealed high levels of stress and anxiety, reinforcing how selection processes affect mental health (Duan *et al.*, 2013).

Therapeutic approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) have shown effectiveness in reducing anxiety (Uysal *et al.*, 2023). Performance pressure leaves a significant mark on adolescents' lives, with symptoms like insomnia, chest pain, and trembling under stress (Pelazza *et al.*, 2019). Perceived family support is crucial: adolescents with little support show more anxiety, depression, and self-harming behavior, whereas supportive families foster resilience and coping strategies (Santana *et al.*, 2023). The emphasis on academic performance increases anxiety, impairs decision-making, and hinders adolescents' emotional and vocational development (Sassi, n.d.).

Academic pressure, especially during exams and heavy workloads, is directly linked to anxious and depressive symptoms (Stear *et al.*, 2023). Youth depression, in turn, is associated with long-term damage to social, academic, occupational, and interpersonal functioning, exposing the harmful effects of performance-centered methodologies (Thapar *et al.*, 2022). A school environment that prioritizes results while neglecting necessary emotional support worsens students' mental suffering. The lack of educational policies that integrate emotional health into the teaching process increases adolescent vulnerability. Thus, it becomes evident that the current educational system—based on rigid goals—exact a high toll on entrance exam candidates' mental health.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data analyzed, it is clear that anxiety related to college entrance exams is an increasingly prevalent reality among high school students in public schools. Social, academic, and psychological factors work in conjunction to intensify students' emotional distress, especially during high-pressure moments such as the final year of high school. However, signs of anxiety emerge early on, revealing a concerning scenario even among students who are still far from taking the exam. Family pressure, excessive use of social media, and fear of failure amplify self-imposed pressure and significantly impact adolescents' emotional well-being. Moreover, teaching methodologies and education environments focused solely on performance reinforce competitiveness and overlook the importance of mental health care. The performance-driven model, when combined with a lack of emotional support and social inequality, contributes to worsening anxiety levels, damaging self-esteem and vocational decision-making. Therefore, it is essential to rethink school practices and public policies to value emotional support and holistic development, fostering a more equitable, empathetic, and healthy educational environment.

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