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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Facing the virtual panel: Anxiety experiences of ESL engineering undergraduates in online mock interviews

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Abstract – Job interviews, formal conversations between job applicants and company representatives, which assess suitability of applicants for the company and vice versa, are one of the first hurdles to getting employed. Oftentimes, the number of applicants outnumber the vacancies available. To ensure students excel in interviews to even be considered for the position, mock interviews are conducted to enable them to experience the interview process similar to actual interviews. However, are the anxiety levels similar? This concurrent triangulation mixed method research study focuses on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' anxiety during online mock-job interviews. This study measures the interview anxiety levels among ESL learners; particularly engineering undergraduates in an English proficiency course at a public university in Malaysia. This research adapted McCarthy and Goffin's (2004) Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI) questionnaire with additional open-ended questions and distributed it online to 91 engineering undergraduates. The results of the study show that most students experienced moderately low anxiety in all five (5) domains of anxiety measured which were Communication, Appearance, Social, Performance and Behavioural. Of all the items in all the domains, the highest mean score was recorded for one of the items under behavioural anxiety domain in which students' mouth get dry during the online mock job interviews. Analysis from open-ended questions also disclosed that some students did experience nervousness and exhibited anxiety symptoms such as stuttering when answering the questions and having sweaty palms during the interviews. The study provides valuable insights into the interview anxiety experienced by ESL learners and its relevance to job search processes. It signifies the importance of developing interventions and support mechanisms to reduce interview anxiety among ESL learners and thus enhance employability success rate.

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1. Introduction

Most prior research in speaking skills seems to agree that speaking involves a set of skills that mirrors the complexities and ambiguities of language as a medium of communication (Goh, 2017; Khanh, 2021). Speaking is not only dynamic and interactive, but it also involves continuous and progressive influence over cognitive and social contributing factors (Burns, 2019). As such, speaking is never an easy task and requires great effort, especially from learners, to achieve a successful mastery of speaking skills. This explains why the instructional practices for spoken L2 English at many tertiary institutions concentrate on operationalizing the concept of communicative competence, whereby the students act as language users instead of language learners (Chau, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Thus, students are often placed in a learning structure that encourages collaborative work among them. To complete a task, they must engage in meaningful interactions to train them to use appropriate and accurate English for effective communication in various social situations. A wide range of communication skills, such as negotiating, giving suggestions, and presenting ideas, are deemed critical in preparing these students for their future careers (Adem & Berkessa, 2022; Khamis & Wahi,2021). With these communication skills learned, students are expected to apply them effectively in different settings, including during interview sessions. To ensure the effectiveness of communication skills during an interview, interviewing skills are taught in English classes related to workplace communication. This is because interview skills are among the important skills needed by undergraduate students before they enter the professional world (Nair & Fahimirad, 2019). Interview skills cover not only content in terms of how best to answer interview questions but also language use, nonverbal communication, and delivery (Dai, 2023). To assist students in applying these skills, lessons and modules provide the necessary input (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). After input is given, students practice to become familiar with interview assessments. Mock interviews are designed to give students experience not only with language use but also with the real interview process. According to Reddan (2008), mock interviews help students experience similar settings to real interviews.

Within the framework of communicative language teaching (CLT), online mock job interviews are a pedagogically sound practice because they give ESL students the opportunity to engage in real-world professional communication-like interactions. Mock job interview techniques are stressed in workplace-oriented English courses because they are crucial

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for graduates' employability and smooth transition into the workforce (Nair & Fahimirad, 2019). Thus, online mock job interviews are considered a performance-based evaluation which prioritize practical application over mere memorization that include the integration of linguistic competence, pragmatic awareness, discourse management, and interactional skills, in which these assessments are more closely aligned with real-world applications (Shi et al., 2024, Dai, 2023). By putting ESL students in simulated but authentic interview scenarios where they must negotiate meaning, manage turn-taking, and react impulsively to online interviewer prompts, online mock interviews promote meaningful communication. Furthermore, online mock interviews support reflective and interactive learning processes that are essential to communicative pedagogy. ESL learners participate in repeated rehearsals that acquaint them with interview discourse, evaluation criteria, and professional interactional norms after receiving structured instructional input through lessons and modules (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). In a supportive learning environment, online mock interview simulations allow students to experience situations that closely resemble actual interviews. As a result, online mock interviews serve as communicative practice areas that improve ESL students' confidence, interactional skills, and preparedness for professional communication in digitally mediated contexts (Reddan, 2008).

1.1 Anxiety

Anxiety is "a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125). It is a normal human reaction to many stressful events in life and can manifest in physical symptoms such as a rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, and dizziness (Horenstein & Richard, 2020). However, when it becomes overwhelming, anxiety can interfere with individuals' daily activities and prevent them from enjoying their day-to-day life. In the context of second language learning, anxiety is frequently discussed in the literature as one of the determinants of L2 learning success or failure. MacIntyre (1998) labeled this target language anxiety as "the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language" (p. 27). There are three types of anxiety as identified by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991): trait anxiety, state anxiety, and situation-specific anxiety. Trait anxiety is a personality trait, often genetically influenced, whereby a person tends to feel anxious across many situations (Scovel, 1978). It is often considered a permanent and stable psychological characteristic that may affect individuals' emotional experiences on a regular basis (Spielberger, 1972, 1996). According to Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), trait anxiety can emerge in every language learner as they gradually develop their individual personality throughout the learning process. This anxiety can bring either positive or negative consequences to language learning, depending on how learners regulate and transform their emotions throughout the learning process (Yasuda, 2018). For example, Huang (2018) studied the relationships between anxieties and second/foreign language speaking performance and found that trait anxiety is a significant contributor to other types of anxiety (i.e., state and situation-specific anxiety). Huang reported that the higher the level of trait anxiety in learners, the higher the tendency for them to experience state and intense situation-specific anxiety, which can hinder cognitive processing necessary for speech production.

State anxiety is a type of anxiety that relates to a particular event or act. It is the transient, moment-to-moment experience of anxiety as an emotional reaction to the current situation (Cattell & Scheier, 1963). Zheng (2008) described state anxiety on a continuum, with more stable trait anxiety on one end and more dynamic state anxiety on the other. Due to its fleeting nature, state anxiety is believed to be constantly changing and fluctuates within a person (Spielberger, 1983; Hakim, 2019). For instance, a beginner who is afraid to speak in the target language may experience state anxiety, though these feelings might change over time as the learner gradually masters the language. Situation-specific anxiety is a subset of state anxiety triggered by explicit circumstances and can occur consistently within a given situation or event (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Prior research suggests that anxiety related to learning or using a second/foreign language is most often associated with this type of anxiety. Communicating in the target language can be intimidating for some students, especially if they have a high affective filter or negative emotional responses to specific situations (Krashen, 1986). This type of anxiety is often debilitating, leading to poor performance and low achievement when learners resort to avoidance strategies to escape the discomfort of learning (Scovel, 1978). Nevertheless, research shows that anxiety is not always a deterrent in language development. Learners with high motivation levels, for example, tend to perceive anxiety as a challenge rather than a threat. This is called facilitative anxiety, which stimulates learners to adopt approaches that push them to perform better in the target language (Luo et al., 2020; Scovel, 1978).

1.2 Interview Anxiety

Employment or job interviews are one of the most frequent methods for evaluating future employees. Since they involve contextualised interpersonal interactions in which an unfamiliar evaluator assesses the candidate, job interviews often induce feelings of apprehension or anxiety in many applicants. As anxiety often materialises in threatening circumstances (Eysenck et al., 2007), anxiety during interviews was initially studied as trait anxiety, experienced at a personal level, and as state anxiety reflecting the person's anxiety in a specific moment. However, McCarthy and Goffin (2004) explored interview anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety comprising five dimensions, through The Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI). These dimensions are communication, appearance, social, performance, and behavioural; where each component of interview anxiety describes the feelings of anxiousness experienced by the person in the interview setting. Communication anxiety is seen as the most significant dimension as it is associated with the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Appearance anxiety refers to the interviewee's physical appearance, including dressing style and weight. Social anxiety is defined by the positive gestures expected of interviewees in building rapport with interviewers, such as appropriate handshakes, which may be more relevant to face-to-face interviews. This can impact

interviewers' perceptions of the interviewees. Performance anxiety deals with anxiety related to the interview outcome, while behavioural anxiety reflects the body's reaction to the setting, such as sweaty palms and a fast heartbeat. The five dimensions proposed by McCarthy and Goffin highlight the social and interpersonal dynamics that commonly occur during interviews.

Previous studies in various instructional settings where English is the target language have identified an adverse correlation between anxiety, language proficiency, and interview performance. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) stated that second/foreign language learners experience a fear of negative evaluation, particularly when they are conscious of their limited language skills and ability to make a positive impression. Research conducted with Malaysian employers emphasizes English language mastery during job interviews (Kumar & Salahudin, 2023; Bahrim et al., 2019). It was reported that if interviewees cannot communicate and express themselves well in English, their chances of employment are slim (Nesaratnam et al., 2020). Anxiety experienced by interviewees may also influence their fluency. Some studies have reported that high anxiety levels during interviews can negatively impact the opportunity to secure positions (Powell et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2019). As a result, they often avoid evaluative situations, tending to avoid speaking in the target language due to negative self-image. However, a study conducted by Zheng et al. (2023) established that social anxiety can yield favorable consequences by enhancing learners' incentive to improve their oral communication skills. This may suggest the potentially constructive influence of anxiety on motivation and self-regulation.

In the post-covid-19 pandemic, online interview assessments have gained widespread acceptance among organisations, including international and multinational corporations. This has prompted a shift in the growing body of research on job interview anxiety to focus on online interview settings. Some studies have reported that the mode of interview, whether conducted online or in-person, does not significantly impact the interviewees as anxiety levels remain consistent. Anaza et al. (2023) for instance, explored the usefulness of a collaborative mock-job interview assignment in both virtual and face-to-face modes, and found that many students reported neither positive nor negative effects on their confidence and comfort levels across the two modalities. However, some students still acknowledged a sense of security when being interviewed online, attributing this to their perceived control over their surroundings. This finding is in contrast with some other prior studies that revealed interviewees often experienced heightened anxiety levels when having virtual job interviews, due to their concern that technology-mediated constraints could disrupt the flow of the interview (Blacksmith et al., 2016; McCarthy et al., 2021).

A considerable amount of literature has also been found focusing on factors affecting students' anxiety in mock-job interviews. Hasan et al. (2023) examined variables that impaired students' self-confidence during mock-job interview assessment and suggested that self-image influenced their overall interview performance. The study further unveiled that students with lower feelings of inferiority demonstrated lower levels of anxiety and appeared more confident in their speaking. On the other hand, Mohamad Utama (2022) discovered a negative correlation between students' perceived competence and their actual performance, as many of them rated their competence lower than what was reflected in their mock interview performance. It was believed that the students' lack of confidence might have motivated them to exert greater effort, potentially leading to the improved outcomes. In addition, Fauzi et al. (2025) found that gender can also be a significant factor affecting students' job interview anxiety. This quantitative quasi-experimental study demonstrated that female students exhibited higher anxiety levels than their male peers, although they performed better in the mock interview. A similar finding was reported by Hasan et al. (2023) when they observed that female students appeared more confident in speaking when they were placed in same-gender groups during mock interviews, as compared to mixed-gender groups. This may suggest that female students are more prone to social anxiety, causing them to engage in more effective preparatory behaviours for interview performance. While previous studies have examined job interview anxiety in online environments, limited research has employed McCarthy and Goffin's (2004) Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI) in their analysis, particularly within the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study aims to explore Malaysian ESL engineering students' actual experiences with anxiety in online mock-job interviews. To address this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the levels of online mock-job interview anxiety among the engineering students?
2. What are the challenges that these engineering students experience during the online mock-job interview sessions?

2. Methodology

The research design of this study is a concurrent triangulation mixed method (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) which involves a single online questionnaire that collects both quantitative (Likert Scale) and qualitative data (open-ended questions) to assess interview anxiety among engineering students in an online mock job interview. The qualitative data as triangulation was used to support the quantitative data. This questionnaire was distributed to 91 participants, selected based on purposive sampling as they had to be registered in English for Professional Communication (UHL2432) course for Semester 2, Session 2023/2024. Participants came from different engineering faculties in UMPSA, namely Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Manufacturing and Faculty of Electrical and Electronics, Faculty of Chemical and Process Engineering Technology, Faculty of Civil Engineering and Technology, Faculty of Industrial Management, Faculty of Industrial Sciences and Technology, Faculty of Computing, Faculty of Manufacturing and Mechatronics Engineering Technology, Centre for Mathematical Sciences, and College of Engineering. There was a total of 52 participants who were between 18 to 24 years old and the rest were above 24 years old. The majority were male with 46 participants (50.5%) and the rest were female with 45 participants (49.5%). Table 1 summarises the demographic

information of the participants employed in the current study. As mentioned, participants were selected because they were registered students of English for Professional Communication (UHL2432). This course is compulsory for all Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA) students in which passing the course determines their graduation. The course guides and prepares the students for the workplace through three main modules which are Job Application Documents, Job Interview Skills, and Meeting Skills.

Table 1

Demographic information of samples in the study

Characteristics	*n*	%
Gender		
Female	45	49.5
Male	46	50.5
Race		
Malay	74	81.3
Chinese	5	5.5
Indian	6	6.6
Others	6	6.6
Age		
18-21	32	35.2
21-24	50	54.9
Above 24	9	9.9
Faculty		
Centre for Mathematical Sciences	2	2.2
College of Engineering	21	23.1
Faculty of Chemical and Process Engineering Technology	18	19.8
Faculty of Civil Engineering Technology	29	30.8
Faculty of Computing	11	12.1
Faculty of Electrical and Electronic Engineering Technology	3	3.3
Faculty of Industrial Management	4	4.4
Faculty of Industrial Sciences and Technology	2	2.2
Faculty of Manufacturing and Mechatronic Engineering Technology	1	1.1

The focus of this research is on the Job Interview Skills module. At the end of the module, students must attend an online mock-job interview via Microsoft Teams platform, which consists of 30% of their overall assessment. In this assessment, students are divided into groups of 3 to 4. In the mock-job interview, they need to complete two tasks: group interview and group discussion. In the first task, students are asked three frequently asked questions in a job interview which include the 'Tell me about yourself' question and two behavioural questions which asked candidates to describe how they have handled specific situations in the past. An example of a behavioural question would be "Give an example of how you manage your time working under pressure". The second task requires students to discuss workplace issues which also cover Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) related topics. An example of a discussion question is "Good mental health begins at home and in the office. Discuss ways to ensure good mental health at the workplace (SDG3)".

Table 2

Samples of items adapted to the study

Domain	Original Items from MASI	Adapted version
Communication Anxiety	During job interviews, I often can't think of a thing to say.	During the online mock-job interview, I couldn't think of a thing to say.
Appearance Anxiety	I feel uneasy if my hair is not perfect when I walk into a job interview.	I feel uneasy if my hair or my scarf is not perfect when I attend an online mock-job interview.
Social anxiety	I become very uptight about having to socially interact with a job interviewer.	I become very uptight about having to socially interact with an online mock-job interviewer.
Performance Anxiety	During a job interview, I worry about what will happen if I don't get the job	During an online mock-job interview, I worry about what will happen if I don't receive high marks.
Behavioral Anxiety	I often feel sick to my stomach when I am interviewed for a job.	I feel sick to my stomach when I am interviewed for an online mock-job interview.

In this study, interview anxiety was assessed using McCarthy and Goffin's (2004) Measure of Anxiety in Selection Interviews (MASI) questionnaires. The MASI questionnaire was adapted by changing the word 'job interview' to 'online mock-job interview' to suit the context of the online interview assessment conducted. Furthermore, some of the words in the items were also changed to suit the context as illustrated in Table 2. For the quantitative data collection, 30 items were asked using a 5-point Likert response scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) to measure 5 domains of anxiety: Communication (D1); Appearance (D2); Social (D3); Performance (D4); and Behavioural (D5). Cronbach's Alpha (α) is used to measure the reliability of the questionnaire used in this study. It measures the internal consistency or reliability between items, measurements, or ratings. It calculates the reliability of the responses or elements in the questionnaire. According to Pallant (2005), the preferable values are above .80. However, values around .70 are also acceptable. The reliability of the scale was a α .92. The MASI online questionnaire link was shared by the researchers via Google Form to their UHL2432 students after they had covered Module 2: Job Interview Skills and attended Mock-Job Interview Assessment in Weeks 9 and 10 of the semesters. This is in line with suggestions from McCarthy and Goffin (2004, p. 630) that

> MASI was designed to assess the amount of anxiety experienced by applicants during job interview situations. Having applicants respond to the MASI after their job interview was complete provided a recent frame of reference and helped to ensure a vivid recollection of the amount of anxiety experienced during the job interview situations.

The questionnaire consisted of 3 sections, A to C. Section A collected the demographic data of the participants such as gender, race, age, sex and faculty, and Section B consists of MASI questionnaire items. In Section C, participants are asked to describe their experience in attending any job interview. To have a rich elaboration from them, some guiding points were provided to assist them such as factors that bother them about the job interview, which stage of the job interview made them feel most anxious, the effects of anxiety on their performance and their feelings after having gone through their job interview.

Table 3

Interpretation of mean scores

Mean scores	Interpretation
1.00 – 2.00	Low
2.01 – 3.00	Moderately low
3.01 – 4.00	Moderately high
4.01 – 5.00	High

For the Likert-type items in the questionnaire, we utilized the interpretation of mean scores as above. This provides us with information on the strength of the students' opinions on the items in the questionnaire. Means ranging from 1.00 to 2.00 indicated low agreement and 2.01 to 3.00 indicated moderately low agreement. While those ranging from 3.01 to 4.00 were interpreted as moderately high and 4.01 to 5.00 indicated as high agreement.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings for this study will be presented and discussed based on the first research question and will be supported by findings from the second research question. This section discusses the findings which show the students' interview anxiety levels from 5 domains, namely communication anxiety, appearance anxiety, social anxiety, performance anxiety and behavioural anxiety in an online mode. To provide qualitative support for these findings, responses to the open-ended questionnaire item were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen to allow for a systematic examination of students' reflections on their online mock-job interview experiences and to complement the quantitative findings across the five anxiety domains. All open-ended responses were first read several times to gain an overall understanding of the data. During this familiarisation stage, recurring ideas and expressions related to interview anxiety were noted. The responses were then coded inductively by identifying segments of text that captured students' reported emotions, challenges, and perceptions during the interview process. These codes were subsequently compared and grouped based on shared meanings. The grouped codes were reviewed and refined to form coherent themes. Each theme was clearly defined and aligned with one of the five anxiety domains: communication, appearance, social, performance, and behavioural anxiety. Selected excerpts were then incorporated into the findings section to illustrate the themes and to provide qualitative support for the quantitative results.

3.1 Communication Anxiety (D1)

Domain 1 (D1) is Communication Anxiety (CA). Under this domain, there are 6 items as illustrated in Table 4, which are labelled as CA1 - CA6. The aim of these items is to investigate students' anxiety level when they communicate during a mock-job interview. The results show that students demonstrated a moderately low interview anxiety in the communication domain in Items CA1, CA2, CA3 and CA6. The mean scores exhibited moderately low scores even in Items 4 and 5, which are positive statements. What this means is that while they have low communication anxiety in the sense that they are able to answer interview questions (CA1), they can understand well what interviewers ask them (CA2),

they do not get anxious or have trouble answering questions they know (CA3) and they do not get apprehensive that they are unable to express their thoughts clearly (CA6), they do however feel that their verbal communication skills are not that high, hence the mean score of 2.41 in CA4, and it is not easy for them to tout their personal achievements in interviews (M=2.31) for CA5. CA4 is related to English proficiency level and CA6 is related to culture.

Table 4

The levels of students' interview anxiety in communication anxiety domain

Items	*n*	Mean	SD
CA1: During the online mock-job interview, I couldn't think of a thing to say.	91	2.74	1.21
CA2: During online mock-job interviews I find it hard to understand what the interviewer is asking me.	91	2.53	1.21
CA3: I get so anxious while taking online mock-job interviews that I have trouble answering questions that I know.	91	2.43	1.27
CA4: I feel that my verbal communication skills are strong.	91	2.41	1.05
CA5: I find it easy to communicate my personal accomplishments during an online mock-job interview.	91	2.35	1.22
CA6: I become so apprehensive in online mock-job interviews that I am unable to express my thoughts clearly.	91	2.31	1.34

However, despite students reporting that their anxiety level being moderately low (with mean score of 2.74) on the whole, in the open-ended section of the questionnaire, when asked "Describe and elaborate on your mock-job job interview experience", there were quite a number of respondents who did feel this kind of communication anxiety in which they were lost for words as reflected in the excerpts below:

R64: I felt it was very difficult to explain the answer since I am not very fluent in English. I understand the question asked by the interviewer but feeling nervous makes me blank during the question-and-answer session.

R88: During the Mock-Job Interview, there are a lot of conclusions that I can make after the interview ends which is lack of preparation, confidence and word usage. I also stutter a lot due to an overwhelming nervousness which hinders me from creating a proper word to answer the question. I also need to expand my vocabulary so that I can make my speech more appealing to the interviewer.

A study by Zielinska et al. (2021) found no significant difference in terms of Communication anxiety level among final year medical students in the United Kingdom who attended online interviews for academic training posts. Previously, the interviews were conducted face-to-face, thus an online course focusing on critical online interviews and critical appraisal were provided as a treatment to the students. The mean score of 0.35 shows that these students did not experience a high level of communication anxiety which is consistent with the result in the current study.

3.2 Appearance Anxiety (D2)

Domain 2 (D2) is Appearance Anxiety (AA). Under this domain, there are also 6 items as illustrated in Table 5, which are labelled as AA1 - AA6. The items consist of statements that are related to overall appearance, dressing, physical features and hair or scarf.

Table 5

The levels of students' interview anxiety in appearance anxiety domain

Items	*n*	Mean	SD
AA1: Before an online mock-job interview, I am so nervous that I spend an excessive amount of time on my appearance.	91	2.55	1.25
AA2: I often feel uneasy about my appearance when I am being interviewed for an online mock-job interview.	91	2.54	1.12
AA3: During an online mock-job interview, I worry about whether I have dressed appropriately.	91	2.48	1.13
AA4: In online mock-job interviews, I worry that the interviewer will focus on what I consider to be my least attractive physical features.	91	2.41	1.22
AA5: I feel uneasy if my hair or my scarf is not perfect when I attended an online mock-job interview.	91	2.37	1.29
AA6: If I do not look my absolute best in an online mock-job interview, I find it very hard to be relaxed.	91	2.34	1.31

The aim of these items is to investigate students' anxiety level in terms of their appearance for the mock-job interview which was conducted online. It would be expected that for online mock job interviews, appearance would be the least of

students' worries as long as they are presentable within the frame of the camera. According to Radzuan et al. (2023), whose study compared students' perceptions of learning oral presentation skills in an online learning environment versus in-class presentations, 84.4% of 224 students reported they would dress more appropriately in face-to-face presentations than they would in online presentations (15.6%). Not surprisingly, Table 5 illustrates that all items in the Appearance Anxiety Domain have moderately low mean scores ranging from 2.34 to 2.55. The low means scores can be interpreted as students having low Appearance anxiety in interviews as the students reported that they were not so nervous about their appearance (M = 2.55) that they did not spend excessive amount of time looking attractive and felt confident about their appearance (M=2.54) during the online mock-job interview. It can be interpreted that appearance is one of the elements that these students give emphasis to in the job interview preparation as appearance is the first thing that is judged by the interviewers before they listen to the answers during the interview. The findings show that students seem unruffled about their dressing (AA3), physical features (AA4), hair or scarf (AA5) and overall look (AA6) as the means for each item are also moderately low which are M=2.48, M=2.42, M=2.37 and M=2.34 respectively.

The low anxiety level experienced by these students may be due to their preparation before the interview, such as R23 who reported that "I will also prepare myself to be more confident by ensuring that my appearance is ok". Student R32 stated that the job interview session was a nerve wrecking situation for him and for him to increase his confidence, he reported that "I will tend to keep my physical appearance properly before the interview". Nevertheless, there were several students who confessed that their appearance did bother them during the interview, for instance:

> R24: Another thing that bothers me during the interview is my appearance. I think that my attire and scarf are not suitable to wear for the interview. Especially when I see other candidates, I will be nervous thinking of their appearance. Hence, to overcome this feeling, I try not to think about their appearance and before the interview I try my best to prepare the best appearance for me to feel confident.

This finding is reassuring since studies report that discrimination on job applicants based on appearance does exist. Appearance is also categorized as non-verbal information (Lowman, Harms and Mills 2019) and it was normally measured through body weight, height, BMI and physical appearance refers to looks (Deng et al. 2020). Even though the participants had moderately low levels of appearance anxiety, they still were conscious of their appearance in terms of dressing, physical features, hair or scarf and their overall look. The results of this study reflect those of Deng et al. (2020) that found men were less discriminated against by appearance if having good educational credentials, unlike women who would still receive appearance discrimination regardless of their level of education. This suggests that women should consistently look after their appearance. Nevertheless, Lowman, Harms and Mills (2019) argue that even though candidates' appearance has a lasting effect on the evaluation, creating an objective and fair selection practice should be prioritized.

3.3 Social Anxiety (D3)

Domain 3 (D3) is Social Anxiety (SA). Social Anxiety domain is about the anxiety faced by the student interviewees which could be manifested or observed in their social interaction, personal impression and the way they are perceived by their interviewers. Therefore, under this domain, there are 6 items, as illustrated in Table 6. These items have been labelled as SA1 – SA6 and are arranged based on its M value from the highest to the lowest for readers' ease.

Table 6

The levels of students' interview anxiety in social anxiety domain

Items	*n*	Mean	SD
SA1: When meeting a mock-job online interviewer, I worry that my greeting will not be correct.	91	2.85	1.29
SA2: I become very uptight about having to socially interact with an online mock-job interviewer.	91	2.46	1.11
SA3: I get afraid about what kind of personal impression I am making on online mock-job interviewers.	91	2.33	1.19
SA4: While taking an online mock-job interview, I become concerned that the interviewer will perceive me as socially awkward.	91	2.31	1.22
SA5: During an online mock-job interview, I worry that my actions will not be considered socially appropriate.	91	2.31	1.24
SA6: I worry about whether online mock-job interviewers will like me as a person.	91	2.20	1.15

The aim of these items is to investigate students' social anxiety level. In interviews, communication plays an important role to portray a positive self-image (Tan et al., 2016). Therefore, in terms of greetings, student interviewees may be too nervous that it affects their first impressions on their online mock-job interviewers. Greetings are the first attempt to establish rapport with the interviewers and they are expected to show confidence from the moment they greet their interviewers to the end of the interview. Some candidates could be so nervous that they wrongly greet their interviewers, e.g., by saying 'Good morning' instead of 'Good afternoon' or vice versa. This is also common in face-to-face interviews. Leaving a good first impression would lead to a positive perception of the interviewees throughout the interview session

(Prickett et al. 2000). In terms of social interaction, having to interact socially with the interviewer(s) before the interview session could be awkward for the interviewees. Personal impressions might also be an issue as they could be perceived as socially awkward, or doing things that are socially inappropriate, leading to not being liked.

Table 6 above shows that the overall analysis illustrates that these students were reported to have moderately low anxiety in the Social Anxiety domain. In SA1, when the students were asked to rate their anxiety level "When meeting a job interviewer, I worry that my greeting will not be correct", the students were reported to have moderately low anxiety. Interestingly, this item recorded the highest mean score (M=2.85) in this Social Anxiety domain. In SA2, the mean score of 2.46 showed that students did not become very uptight about having to socially interact with the job interviewer. Similarly, in SA3, the students were moderately anxious (M=2.33) about the personal impression they leave on the interviewers. In SA4, whether the interviewers would perceive them to be socially awkward, the students did not rate the item too high either (M=2.31) which shows that their social anxiety level is somewhat low. In SA5, for item "During a job interview, I worry that my actions will not be considered socially appropriate", the students also did not seem too worried with the mean score of 2.31. Finally, for SA6, when asked to rate whether the job interviewers would like them as a person, this item received the lowest mean score (M=2.20).

The overall low mean scores for D3 signify that the students had rather high self-confidence in attending job interviews. Contributing factors to this could be due to the exposure they received on how to sit for interviews in terms of the do's and don'ts in their UHL2432 English lessons. It could also be interpreted that these students were being themselves and not trying to be somebody else just to impress the interviewers to get the job. Another reason could be because this is a mock-job interview and they are already familiar with their interviewers, who are their lecturers. However, the fact that giving a good first impression to the interview cannot be dismissed as stated by R83. Giving a favorable first impression about his appearance was very significant. As noted by R40, he felt a bit apprehensive about the first impression people have about him, given his reputation as being somewhat arrogant and that worried him very much during the interview. R53 also pointed out that establishing a positive initial impression shaped the interviewers' approaches, making them more approachable and less fierce during the interview. Therefore, researching the background of the company thoroughly helped him (R53) a lot in leaving a good impression because questions about the company were normally asked at the beginning of the interview. A related study was conducted by Kumazaki et al (2019) who provided skill training using an android robot known as (JUA) with young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who face problems in their non-verbal communication skills such as facial expression, posture, eye-contact, voice pitch and nodding) in job interviews. Results have shown that the use of JUA with these ASD young adults have successfully trained them to improve their non-verbal skills through several imitation tasks. Possessing appropriate non-verbal communication skills may leave a positive impression and render higher chances for the interviewees to give better performance in the job interview.

3.4 Performance Anxiety (D4)

In this Performance Anxiety (PA) domain, the students were asked to rate their anxiety levels in terms of self-performance in the job interview. The items have been labelled as PA1 – PA6 and are arranged based on their M value from the highest to the lowest for readers' ease.

Table 7

The levels of students' interview anxiety in performance anxiety domain

Items	*n*	Mean	SD
PA1: While taking an online mock-job interview, I worry about whether I am a good candidate for the job.	91	2.38	1.26
PA2: During an online mock-job interview, I worry about what will happen if I don't receive high marks.	91	2.35	1.24
PA3: I am overwhelmed by thoughts of doing poorly when I am in online mock-job interview situations.	91	2.31	1.18
PA4: In online mock-job interviews, I get very nervous about whether my performance is good enough.	91	2.27	1.27
PA5: During an online mock-job interview, I am so troubled by thoughts of failing that my performance is reduced.	91	2.24	1.22
PA6: I worry that my online mock-job interview performance will be lower than that of other applicants.	91	2.15	1.27

Table 7 illustrates that all items in the Performance Anxiety Domain have moderately low mean scores. It signifies the moderate low anxiety level experienced by the students concerning their performance in the job interview. PA1, which requires the students to rate their worry about being good candidates for the job, receives the highest mean score of 2.38. Similarly, PA2 has a mean score of 2.35, which indicates that the students were not so anxious about what would happen if not securing the job. Meanwhile, the mean score for PA3 which is 2.31 also manifested students' moderately low anxiety levels when they felt confident and thought they had done their best during the job interview. Items PA4, PA5 and PA6 received mean scores of 2.27, 2.24 and 2.15 respectively. Notably, PA6, which asked the students to rate their

anxiety about underperforming compared to other applicants, received the lowest mean score (2.15). It clearly demonstrates the students' confidence in giving their best performance during the interview.

The interview data aligns with the quantitative data presented above. Several participants expressed their anxiousness and worry about their job interview performance. Participants, namely R15, R20, R34, shared similar thoughts on their experience where their high level of worry impacted their capacity for clear thought and quick responses to interview questions. In addition, both R20 and R34 added that the pressure was compounded due to the thought of their performance being compared to other candidates. In addition, R47 expressed his anxiety about his communication skills during the interview and the interview questions that may be posed to him. When these students were asked about their feelings after the job interview sessions, many respondents (R58, R63, R68, R75) felt relief regardless of their performance during the interview. These suggest that performance anxiety levels can vary among individuals and both before and after job interviews. The qualitative data provided reaffirms that some students may experience some level of anxiety, but that does not necessarily result in high anxiety levels. The results of the current study also support the findings of Zhang et al. (2022) that there is a positive relationship between interview anxiety and negative evaluation. In this context, the mock-job interview assessment carries 20 percent, and this results in the students having worries about receiving low marks for the assessment. Nevertheless, Wilkie and Rosendale's (2024) findings suggested that preparation using an automated video mock interview (AVI) has helped the undergraduate business communication students to be more confident for future interviews. In relation to this study, this mock-job interview preparation experienced by these engineering students is hoped to give positive influence in lowering their performance anxiety in actual interviews in the future.

3.5 Behavioural Anxiety (D5)

Under this Behavioural Anxiety domain, there are 6 items as illustrated in Table 8, which are labelled as BA1 - BA6. The items are arranged based on its M value from the highest value to the lowest for reader's ease. Table 8 illustrates that all items in the Behavioural Anxiety Domain are with moderately low mean scores.

Table 8

The levels of students' interview anxiety in behavioral anxiety domain

Items	*n*	Mean	SD
BA1: My mouth gets very dry during online mock-job interviews.	91	2.88	1.21
BA2: During online mock-job interviews, my hands shake.	91	2.74	1.24
BA3: It is hard for me to avoid fidgeting during an online mock-job interview.	91	2.56	1.14
BA4: I often feel sick to my stomach when I am interviewed for an online mock-job interview.	91	2.53	1.24
BA5: My heartbeat is faster than usual during the online mock-job interview.	91	2.51	1.32
BA6: Online mock-job interviews often make me perspire (e.g., sweaty palms and underarms).	91	2.49	1.28

Behavioral anxiety refers to body reactions that normally happen during interviews. This is particularly true especially when English is the medium of interaction in an assessment context (Benraghda et al., 2018), and even more worrying if the context is a job interview that determines their employability success rate. However, the moderately low mean scores in this study indicate otherwise. For example, the item "My mouth gets very dry during online mock-job interviews" recorded the highest mean score (M=2.88) which still shows that the majority of the students had moderately low anxiety levels. Another item, BA2, "During online mock-job interviews, my hands shake" with the mean score of 2.74 was rated second highest under this domain. While it can be interpreted that the anxiety level of the students was mostly manifested through their hands, be it numbness or trembling or sweat, et cetera; again, the score is merely moderately low. Nevertheless, R67 and R88 shared their experiences during the interview where their hands were numb and R75 noted that his hands were shivering even before he sat for the interview.

Fidgeting is another anxiety manifestation experienced by the students during a job interview. Many students, with the mean score of 2.56 claimed that it was difficult to avoid fidgeting during a job interview. Another indication of anxiety is when the students complained of feeling sick to their stomach. However, not many students reported experiencing it as the mean score is only 2.53. It can be inferred that most of the students were able to control their anxiety level during the job interview. The mean score for the next item which is "My heartbeat is faster than usual during online mock-job interviews" was 2.51 which illustrates that the students had moderately low anxiety. However, it was reported by R77 that his "heartbeat was pounding and made me stutter during the interview" as he could not really control his anxiety. With similar experience, R75 claimed that "What bothers me the most is the uncontrollable heartbeat and sweating palms" and this happened even before the start of the interview until the interview lasted. The last item with the lowest mean score with only 2.49 is "Job interviews often make me perspire (e.g., sweaty palms and underarms)". It appears that these students managed to control their perspiration during the job interview effectively. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that some students did experience sweaty palms. For instance, R67, R77, R88 and R58 shared that their palms became very sweaty during the interview and some experienced it even before the interview session started. R43 disclosed that her anxiety level increased because she was not well prepared for the interview and therefore could not anticipate the questions asked. Even though some students were reported to experience anxiousness during the interview, the level of their anxiety

is moderately low. It can be interpreted that these students may have successfully applied some of the tips on anxiety management they have learned in the UHL 2432 course. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area linking behavioural cues with interview anxiety. Feiler and Powell (2016) who examined behavioural cues such as (hand gesture time, pause frequency, pause time, and speech rate) and interview performance found that speech rate was the only cue that influenced one's performance. This reflects the findings of this study where the students also reported having dry mouths that could also affect the speech rate during the interview.

4. Conclusion

Job interview anxiety is a critical element to the success of getting a dream job with an esteemed company. Research studies have shown that anxiety has contributed to a low performance in job interviews. The aims of the present study were to investigate the online mock-job interview anxiety among engineering students and to explore the challenges they encountered. It is interesting to find out that these engineering students experience relatively low anxiety in these online mock-job interviews. One limitation of this study is that the interview responses were based on open-ended questions in the questionnaire; therefore, there were no follow-up questions to probe further. Another is that the research is limited to mock-job interviews which was part of students' assessment. Further research is needed to measure the interviewees' actual job interview anxiety in both physical and online modes for a more comprehensive picture. Future research may also consider a semi-structured interview with the respondents to gain deeper insight on their experience. Lastly, since this study only involved engineering students in one public university in Malaysia, therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other students in other contexts. Hence, it is suggested for future research to have bigger samples and to involve the interviewers as well. The findings from this study have several practical implications. First, it is recommended for higher institutions to customize modules specifically for graduating students, to enhance their job interview readiness. The contents may include writing an impactful resume and practical training in mastering job interviews. Second, having collaborations with industry professionals with higher education institutions, particularly being interview panels in the mock-job interview assessments will benefit the students to be exposed to the actual job interview scenarios.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Generative Artificial Intelligence Declarations

The authors used generative AI tools solely to assist with language editing, grammar checking and improving readability. The AI tools did not contribute to the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings or the generation of scientific content. All outputs generated by AI were carefully reviewed, verified and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and originality of the manuscript.

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