The 'snowflakes' of modern society:

A qualitative investigation of female university students' anxiety about adulting.

Abstract

Purpose: To explore the anxiety of university students. We note that the rhetoric of the snowflake is frequently invoked in lay discourse to characterise a generation of young people as overly sensitive. This misleading conceptualisation is potentially stigmatising.

Methods: Interviews were conducted with 12 young women (18-25-years) about anxiety during their transition through university and into adulthood.

Findings: We identified three themes; 1) students in a modern world; 2) gendered demands; and 3) anxiety of adulting. Analysis demonstrated numerous, transecting, and discourse-informed anxieties about modern life.

Originality: The arguably pejorative label of 'snowflake' could negatively impact the social progress made in recognising the importance of taking care of mental health and help-seeking. This is especially concerning for females, as they have higher prevalence of anxiety conditions than males.

Implications: University professionals may benefit from understanding the gendered dimensions of anxiety associated with transitions to adulthood, including the increased pressures to succeed and achieve.

Key words: Anxiety; gender; student; snowflake; qualitative.

Introduction

University life is an important aspect of young people's lives as they develop their careers and educational profile, but also as they develop and grow into their adult selves. Moving into adulthood is itself, however, is not a simple or accepted transition as there are variations regarding the chronological age that a young person can be considered an adult, which can have consequences for the identity formation of university students and their expectations of the transition. While some propose adulthood starts at 18-years (Keenan *et al*., 2016), others extend adolescence to 25-years (Arnett, 2000). Such variation has implications for how university students are perceived and treated by those around them and has potential consequences for their mental health and wellbeing, as well as for any help-seeking associated with that. For example, in the context of mental health service provision in the UK, NHS England [National Health Service] has proposed a Long-Term-Plan to create "a comprehensive offer for 0-25-year-olds" (NHS, 2019) recognising the fluidity of the boundaries of childhood and adulthood.

In terms of mental health support, however, mental health is everyone's responsibility (Prince et al., 2007) and there is increasing recognition that universities have a growing accountability to promote wellbeing and support their students' mental health (Watkins, 2021). This growing recognition of the mental health of university students has put the issue under the spotlight and advocated the necessity of research that examines the complex range of issues and challenges this population face. This is important as these young people are increasingly living in a fast-paced environment, responding to, and engaging with new technology, and managing a range of pressures while also developing toward adulthood. The transition from adolescence toward adulthood happens during those university years, as these

young people are required undertake more adult activities as they grow older, and this 'adulting' can exacerbate anxiety (Johnson 2017). The process of 'adulting' is important for university students, as they manage their education alongside the challenges of growing up.

University then, is an important aspect of these young people's lives and the potential anxiety experienced while there is important to focus on. It is notable, that depression and anxiety symptoms are commonly reported among university students across many countries, which impacts their quality of life and academic attainment (Ritvo *et al.,* 2021). University students are vulnerable to the impact of stress factors that increase depression and anxiety(Santangelo *et al*., 2018). This is further problematised as many university students with moderate or severe mental health symptoms do not seek or acquire help from mental health services (Lee *et al*., 2021).

Alongside the above challenges university students experience, is the aligned problem of how society views them. There is an increasing critical comment on younger generations, with a well-known conceptualisation of the 'snowflake' (Silva, 2012), i.e., overly sensitive, easily offended and narcissistically entitled (Oxford Learner Dictionary, 2022). The narcissism of the snowflake is associated with the idea that they are an instant gratification generation, seeking convenient ways to satisfy need. This conceptualisation has been rolled out through political, media, and lay environments andultimately risks damaging the progress made in terms of societal understandings of mental health and could potentially reify stigma. Such references potentially reinforce the idea that students need to toughen up and fails to acknowledge the reality of anxiety experiences, while covertly masking systemic issues (Webster and Rivers 2019).

It is arguable that the systemic issues are greater for women as they grapple with multiple roles, domestic labour, and university education. Evidence shows that female students are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Santangelo *et al*., 2018).It is therefore problematic that the gendered nature of their experiences has been mostly overlooked (Phillips 2018). Women face increased pressures compared to their male peers, which have consequences for their health (Greene and Patton, 2020) and their mental health, and are important in the context of university education. These gender inequalities have been exacerbated since the pandemic (Flor *et al.,* 2022), with COVID-19 having a greater impact on female anxiety (Heffner *et al*., 2021). These gendered effects can be contextualised in relation to dual burden theory, wherein as young women move toward adulthood they are theorised as responsible for unpaid household work, while simultaneously managing career aspirations (Bratberg *et al.*, 2002; Seedat and Rondon, 2021).

There is little qualitative research exploring the notion of 'adulting', particularly in relation to the gendered reconfigurations of childhood, adulthood, and mental health. Yet it is essential to examine women's own accounts of anxiety as it relates to the process of growing up.We therefore ask: *'how do female university students describe their experiences of anxiety in adulting?'* Our analysis provides thick description of millennial women's accounts and provides novel insights for action

Method

We took a qualitative approach underpinned by Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and focused on the female experience. This theoretical position accounts for the experiential

knowledge that privileges female university students to express a viewpoint in a meaningful way arising from their personal histories (Wylie, 2012). This approach has been previously applied in a qualitative study of low-income women with depression (Goodman et al. 2009).

Data collection

A reflective interviewing style was adopted, utilising a semi-structured approach to amplify the female voice by encouraging participants to direct the interview (Roulston 2010). In other words, each question was anchored to the participants' revelations, and they were actively encouraged to reflect on their experiences and opinions. Instead of defining anxiety, participants talked about it in a way that meant something to them. The interviews were participant-driven, and thus the schedule of questions provided core domains of interest and questions were responsive to their views, reflections, and experiences. Audio-recorded interviews were conducted by the first author, and transcribed verbatim, averaging approximately 40 minutes.

Participants and context

We purposively sampled female undergraduates (England) via social media to be congruent with our theoretical position. Our focus on female narratives for the study was deliberate and aligned with our feminist epistemology designed to promote female voices around anxiety. Twelve females aged 18-25 who self-identified as having moderate-severe anxiety that impacted their lives and education consented to participate. To assure sampling adequacy as consistent with a qualitative approach, we aligned our sample size decision with the recognised marker of saturation. We reached saturation at nine interviews, but for quality, a

further three interviews were conducted to assure sampling adequacy (Moser and Korstjens 2017). The sample reflected some ethnic diversity, with two participants identifying as East Asian, two as Afro-Caribbean, two as mixed heritage and six as White British. We did not ask for disclosure of any psychiatric diagnosis.

Analysis

We used the reflexive organic thematic design, an epistemological flexible and predominantly inductive approach to coding and analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). We excluded phenomenological analysis because it tends to use hermenueristic epistemology. FST encourages researchers to explore female voices to guide later analytic interpretations and thus our inductive coding and theming of the data, was complemented by the underpinning theoretical attention to gender (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Roulston 2010). Our analytic process was as follows: (1) the entire data set were categorised by the first author into descriptive codes that reflected the content of the interviewee's narrative, using where possible the words of participants; (2) similar codes were merged into broader conceptual categories; (3) through a mapping exercise categories were clustered into wider themes to reflect the salient commonalities across codes. During the mapping exercise, the first author leaned into her feminist epistemology to interpret how participants' experiences were influenced by underlying patriarchal experiences. The first author developed 14 themes which were were revisited for quality and the authors engaged in a dialogue to ensure agreement and the feminist literature at this point facilitated a broader engagement with the issues at stake for our research question. To address the research question for this specific paper, focused on the particular issues pertinent to our focus, there were three main themes of relevance, and these are reported here.

The research was governed by the standardised ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association (2017), and the University of [anon] provided approval. All participants consented to be interviewed.

Findings

We report here three relevant themes to adolescent anxiety in the process of adulting: students in a modern world; gendered demands; anxiety of female adulting.

Theme one: Students in a modern world

In considering the socio-political conditions faced, students pointed to processes of detraditionalisation, individualisation and the influence of technology creating global connectivity. This global connectivity and social media can contribute to anxiety and tends to impact women more than men (Heffner *et al*., 2021). Furthermore, social media were seen to spread the widespread accusation of the snowflake generation being privileged. Participants worked hard to manage this rhetoric of the snowflake by simultaneously embracing and contesting its construction which they reflected was complicated because of their adulting. For those that resisted, they did so by orienting to the stigma associated with the term.

> '*Older people think our generation are privileged, snowflakes…they think we are*
>
> *spoilt because we have certain things that they didn't necessarily have. They think*
>
> *because more of us are going to uni, there is a better quality of life… But they are*

kind of ignoring all the other stuff. Yes, we have that stuff, but house prices are through the roof, we have higher wages but relatively they aren't really that different. So, are we snowflakes really? I don't think so' (Interviewee8)

'*You see people like Piers Morgan* on telly spewing his rubbish about us. He calls us snowflakes as if to say we have nothing to whinge about, but life is hard for us and very different than what it was like when he was growing up*' (Interviewee3)

*Piers Morgan = English television presenter and journalist

The comparative element was important as participants sought to contrast the challenges faced by previous generations with their own and resisted the identity of snowflake by orienting to the pressure placed on their generation. They worked to equalise the narrative about anxiety, by downgrading suggestions of privilege and replacing it with difficulties only this generation are argued to be facing. Indeed, life was constructed as '*hard*' in ways that older generations did not experience, like pressures of going into higher education and succeeding as an adult.

Some students worked to identify the snowflake conceptualisation as a positive association to deconstruct the language of mental health. The social construction of mental health has long been gendered with the association of 'madness' 'femininity' and the 'disordered mind' creating stigmatised understandings of female health (Ussher, 2011). Our participants recognised this stigmatising of anxiety and sought to rhetorically reposition the very understanding of the snowflake. They argued that they are the first generation to care about others, and suggested global connectivity promotes a collective action against worldwide issues to justify anxiety experienced.

> '*I try to reclaim the word snowflake, yes, I may be a bit anxious about things but rightly so. I am a snowflake in a good way. I worry about our country and about how millennials are going to survive in this world*' (Interviewee3).

In reclaiming the notion of snowflake and reconfiguring its meaning, the participant rejected the stigmatising aspect and embraced the value of associated anxiety. Anxiety was constructed as a necessity, a *'survival'* mechanism. Many participants juxtaposed education success with worry, stress, and anxiety, as the pressure to achieve was especially problematic for women. They felt under pressure which caused anxiety to achieve and anxiety to be perfect. This is consistent with evidence showing neoliberalism emphasises competitive individualism encouraging a culture of perfectionism pushing women toward unrealistic standards and harsh self-criticism (Curran and Hill, 2019). Such a competitive sense of perfectionism was voiced by our participants as they demonstrated the stress of being career focused.

> '*Millennials are all about education; we enjoy learning and are aware of how a degree can push us into the next stage in our career. I can imagine myself doing a masters just because a degree isn't valued as much now. That will be a lot of stress. Perhaps, I will even do a PhD. Whatever it takes really to be one of the best of my generation. It is not like I want to do it, but kind of like I have to.*' (Interviewee8).

> '*I have always worried about how I will get a job, especially now I am at uni. What if I get a 3rd or 2:2. Most jobs ask for a 2:1 or 1st now*' (Interviewee12).

Evident in these accounts is the normative everyday anxiety associated with the pressures related to career aspiration, positioned as fundamental for successful female identity. As interviewee eight reported *'a degree isn't valued as much now'*. When older generations entered the labour market, it was one that valued experience and skills, as well as a degree, but in the current competitive society the demand for a degree and further educational qualifications has left students in a perpetual state of fear for their future employment (Wiklund *et al.,* 2014).

Theme two: Gendered demands

Participants recognised that changes in society made gendered roles more complex. In other words, they promoted their femininity by striving toward emotional and financial independence, against the likelihood of eventually assuming more traditional roles of managing domesticity and raising a family. Participants struggled with anxiety about possible unfair gendered treatment in the workplace, probable gender pay gaps, and being constantly subjected to the male gaze. They wanted to advocate equality, but simultaneously feared any need to complain. Thus, they experienced a female anxiety of trying to *'balance it all'*.

> *'There are more pressures on women to achieve than men. I think because we are seen as more sensible and because there is an assumption, we have equality now so we must live up to that. Men don't have to worry about that because they were always and will always be ahead'* (Interviewee1).

> *'The amount of pressure that women have now is no joke'* (Interviewee2)

It was argued that achievement was taken-for-granted by males because they '*will always be ahead'*. Indeed, participants commonly talked about the need to be constantly working and getting stressed if they needed time off. Participants reported great levels of anxiety invoked by having to turn their attention away from educational responsibility for other activity like caring or mental health need, typically viewed as female issues. Such female responsibility was therefore constructed as '*no joke*'. This reflects a neoliberal individualised ideology resulting in participants feeling anxious about how they managed their time, experiencing guilt, anxiety, and stress, summarised as being more pressure on '*women to achieve than men'*. Clearly, these students felt anxiety and pressure to be successful in ways whereby anxiety becomes an encapsulating emotion for the modern stressors experienced in a gendered and generational way.

It was common for participants to conflate perfection across gendered roles as they identified a need to be '*perfect*' in all life spheres, including their romantic relationships, with parents and in their educational environment, while ultimately managing to achieve success in the labour market. Participants recognised the competitive element to employment as they felt pitted against others with similar career objectives. For these students, they were striving to meet the gendered ideals of society by having a perfect personality, a conventionally attractive body, and academic success to appeal to the job market. For example, they sought to improve their profiles through extracurricular activity and increasing their stress to fit more and more into the working day. This is congruent with the gendered notion of the 'dual burden' whereby the societal norm is for women to work hard to achieve, but to also do unpaid domestic labour (Bratberg *et al.,* 2002). For our participants it seemed that this dual burden caused significant anxiety:

'I really push myself to do everything I can to impress my family and improve my CV. I go to many societies, write a blog, do my degree, and have a couple of part-time jobs. It is hard to do everything, and I do beat myself up when I have to say no to things' (Interviewee3).

"*As a woman, you have to be and do everything*" (Interviewee4).

Participants put themselves under pressure to succeed and blamed themselves for an inability to *'say no to things'* as they believed they needed to do it all to achieve perfection. Such internalising led to anxiety as these students transitioned toward adulthood aiming for an unattainable perfect standard. Conversely, for their male peers, it was seen that there was simply one criterion of success, employment with high income (Wiklund *et al*., 2014).

In balancing the gendered demands, participants talked about their experience of modern society underpinned by gendered biographies which conflated the need to be successful, self-sufficient, and hard-working with traditional demands of idealised standards of female beauty and domesticity.

'I feel obliged to do all the stuff at home still even though it's not necessarily my responsibility. I do my share and more' (Interviewee10).

"*I think a key source of my anxiety is trying to balance everything, my home life and work-life*" (Interviewee1).

Notably, all participants discussed their adult future in terms of anxiety and fears about gendered demands. In that sense, becoming a woman represented an institution that these participants did not look forward to 'doing', while viewing it as difficult to escape because of societal demands and gendered expectations. They believed they still took predominant responsibility for domestic roles, *'all the stuff at home'* creating an anxiety to *'balance everything'*.

> *'Growing up I noticed that I was expected to do a lot of chores compared to my brother. If he had to do anything it would be the very normal masculine stuff like changing the bulbs. These expectations continued even while I was at university, and I believe this is why I act the same in my relationships'* (Interviewee4).

> *'When we talk about work-life balance men are often excluded from these conversations'* (Interviewee5).

> *There are still mass inequalities in the workplace and around domestic life''* (Interviewee8).

Although statistics suggest males are increasingly becoming more involved in domestic labour and from a younger age (Johnson 2017), the participants believed they still occupied most of this role. Indeed, it is arguable that in society there are still significant gender inequalities (Aune and Holyoak 2017), which starts when children are at a young age and continues through the lifespan (MacPhee and Prendergast, 2019). Participants cited examples whereby they engaged significantly more in traditional female activities than their male counterparts, typically in response to expectation. Furthermore, they suggested this started

young and continued through university, and impacting their mental health. Participants noted there were already work-life balance issues while studying, contrasted against their male peers who were seen as not having the same demands on their time.

"I feel like men can do what they want, whereas girls have to put in twice as much effort to get the same reward" (Interviewee1).

Theme three: Anxiety of female adulting

As students work toward adulthood, their expectations and aspirations potentially become tempered leading the participants to reconceptualise adulthood as uncertain and anxiety-provoking, contrasting with their childhood ideals. Interestingly, participants negotiated their older-adolescent-to-young-adult identity, resisting an entirely adult conceptualisation, but also resisting an adolescence position. This was reflected in their conflation of terms from women to girls, and actively voicing that they did not see themselves as adults yet. Instead, they constructed themselves as 'in-between' adolescence and adulthood, a period where they held some autonomy but maintained an emotional and financial reliance on parents (Schwarts *et al*., 2015). Participants viewed this adulting as being more problematic for women because of the convergence between modern society (see theme one) and gendered demands (see theme two)

These anxieties led to participants constructing an anxiety specific to becoming an adult. Such anxieties reflected a transition from the dependence associated with childhood to the independence needed in adulthood.

'I do look forward to being a fully-fledged independent adult.' (Interviewee10).

What is interesting about this formulation is the resistance of belonging to the category of adult. Legally, these participants are positioned as adults, and yet the resistance of taking up this adult identity reflects the idea that life-course categories are fluid, iterative and socially constructed (Arnett 2000). Understanding where female adolescents position themselves on the lifespan spectrum will help to identify and manage how anxiety manifests in gendered ways.

'I realised during university that I am on the brink of adulthood I can't afford adulthood.' (Interviewee1).

Participants expressed fear of fulfilling the category entitlement of being an adult and continued to resist association with the role in their current position of university student. While they recognised that they were on the '*brink of adulthood'* they expressed concerns about the meaning of that. They felt anxiety about many aspects of being an adult, but especially adult responsibilities. As interviewee one articulated *'I can't afford adulthood'* as if one must be financially stable to fit into and align with the construction of 'adult'. What was pertinent, was the gendered nature of the anxious adult as they talked specifically about how their changing social roles led them to imagine different futures to their predecessors.

'Our mothers and grandmothers were on this normalised path that they would get the basic education, get married, have children, and if they were lucky, have a part-time job. Women have those traditional aspirations to look after their families today, but they also want to be modern and get that job and have a good wage' (Interviewee12).

"I feel that as a feminist I want to fulfil the feminist agenda and make my ancestors proud, but I don't want to be seen as making a mountain out of a molehill" (Interviewee2).

Participants alluded to the changes in female social roles over generations and considered the challenges of gender equality in terms of modern success. They contrasted the '*traditional aspirations'* in terms of domestic labour and familial responsibilities, with current aspirations to hold a '*good wage'*. This was aligned with adulting into a woman that would make *'ancestors proud'* by occupying a strong feminist identity, and not allowing anxiety to overshadow those successes. Associated with such notions of responsibility, they expressed concerns about blame. They feared stigmatisation of becoming an 'unsuccessful woman', feeling personally responsible for those consequences.

'If I don't do well after university, I think people will tell me it's my own fault and that I should have worked harder' (Interviewee9).

This internalisation of blame is congruent with social discourses that overtly and covertly position what success means for modern women. Thus, participants felt judged if they were unable to conform to such standards. Connected to these considerations of responsibility was a general narrative of support. Participants connected their personal accountability for success to the need for support from a range of agencies and individuals. This created a tension as they negotiated the extent to which they held themselves accountable for their own success, and the role others might play in facilitating any achievements.

> *'The support isn't there for women like me, but you have to take some personal responsibility, I can do things to help myself before the university helps me'* (Interviewee7).

It is arguable, that a lack of social support, alongside the pressure of balancing the personal gendered demands seem to be a strong stressor associated with adulting. This is important as the participants distanced themselves from the anxieties of becoming a woman.

> *'Adulting is hard, you fail and fail until you get it right'* (Interviewee12).

By employing the concept of adulting directly, the participants acknowledged the process they felt engaged in while promoting the idea that becoming an adult is challenging. Adulthood requires competence, responsibility, and hard work, especially in the labour market. These participants created their own definitions of adulthood and rejected the idea of normative adulthood as something they had yet to reach. They believed anxiety is more than a biological issue, but one with a social aspect related to gendered expectations. The snowflake narrative coupled with the gendered demands of becoming an adult risk stigmatising those who disclose any kind of mental health struggle. Notably, participants identified their own levels of anxiety as progressive as they moved through the process of adulting.

Discussion

As we move toward a society that is more accepting of mental health, universities need to be mindful of the way they use language and construct students in need. While university staff

may not use the pejorative concept themselves, it is helpful for them to have awareness of public and media language and its potential impact on young people. Such discourses of snowflakes have lost the imagery of 'wistfulness as the harbinger of winter' and have instead become an insult to reflect an inability to cope in a challenging and demanding world (Haslam-Omerod, 2019). The conceptualisation of 'snowflake' as an all-encompassing category of a whole generation fails to account for the systemic sources of anxiety facing them or the complex gendered challenges faced by female university students as they move into adulthood.

For our participants, anxiety was reified by comparing the freedom of childhood to the fears associated with becoming a successful adult woman and the wider stressors, such as university education. The narratives pointed to an omnipresent dominant and influential set of gendered norms they were trying to achieve while simultaneously resisting. Necessarily, then, women have a challenge of overcoming their perceived privilege and any failure to conform to self- or society-imposed standards can create anxieties connected to feelings of not being able to live up to 'intersectional expectations' (Schuster, 2016). When the participants reported failure to live up to their perfectionist ideals it led to self-blame, stress, and increased anxiety.

Participant narratives were imbued with discourses of the need for success. The most evident expression was found in their descriptions of busy schedules and struggles to balance time, while focusing on the need to succeed intellectually. For female students, the experience of anxiety can have implications for societal perspectives of them as either socially competent or as vulnerable, and such binary perspectives stem from the social constructions of difference, from otherness as deviance (Rogers and Pilgrim, 2020). In trying to manage the

necessary transition to adulthood, the way society constructs young women risks threatening their preferred identities and, in this way, can create an additional layer of anxiety as they continue to try to balance it all. The duality of the female biography illustrates how female anxiety is submerged in gender-politics and notions of gendered individualism. This kind of individualism positions gendered responsibilities to engage in self-care, rather than seek out social or medical support (Gordan and Lahelma 2004). Importantly this increasing individualisation of women is a tactic that removes attention from the collective (Schuster, 2016).

In the university context this is especially problematic, as evidence shows that institutional, cultural, political, and intersectional factors impeded engagement with mental health promotion and treatment, despite modern campuses highlighting the need to address mental health challenges because of high prevalence of mental distress (Parizeau *et al*., 2016). In educational settings, it is well established that anxiety is an inevitable part of student life because of different internal and external pressures, and women are vulnerable to the consequences of that (Reddy *et al*., 2018).

These rising rates of anxiety conditions female university students are problematic. There is a gap in knowledge about gender, mental health, and transitions through adulting (Ritsher 1997). The process of adulting can result in anxiety and frustration (Johnson 2017) and is arguably difficult for women in education who are balancing being a 'modern female' with traditional female destinations and expectations. Female voices are therefore important in the context of mental health and education. Our participants self-identified as transitioning toward adulthood but did not identify as 'fully fledged' adults, and the boundaries at which they reach this new conceptual category was not fully determined. Indeed, it was clear that

they were putting off aligning with the category matching their chronological age. There is value in encouraging university professionals to be more critical of child developmental theories which perhaps view life stages as discrete entities as opposed to an ongoing process. Maturing is a subjective experience that is processed differently by individuals and will depend on several factors including gender and associations tied to it which are also likely to be strongly culturally influenced. In practice, university staff may need to specifically consider on the impact of gender on anxiety and how it may relate to societal disadvantages and the contradictory expectations of women who are adulting. This would enable them to practice in a way which is consistent with the promotion of self-advocacy with female voices at the centre (Bowell 2019).

We acknowledge the limitations of our study. The aim of this work is not to generalise, but rather to provide a rich and contextualised understanding of how female undergraduates experience anxiety the modern world (Levitt 2018), which when synthesised with future studies will have a benefit of transferability. Indeed, the congruence with earlier research (e.g., Wiklund *et al*., 2014) suggests that there is relevance of these women's voices. However, it is also recognised that the voices represented were all in university education and university students were the focus of our work. It is notable that our study did not include those who took alternative life-courses, such as those on welfare, those in employment, or those with disabilities and neither did this include women with low levels of anxiety.

The deliberate exclusion of men, means that there has been no direct gender comparison, which is an area for future research. Exploratory qualitative research using reflexive thematic analysis does not have a goal of comparing populations, and therefore this paper provides a platform for developing new research ideas to expand and build the findings further. Future

work would benefit from including male participants to explore the issue more comparatively, as well as including women with a broader spectrum of anxiety levels. That said, there is evidence that suggests that participants' experiences may mirror men's experiences. For example, a quantitative study found that stressors related to work-balance was a predictor of major depression and generalised anxiety in Australian university students of all genders (Farrer et al. 2016)

We also acknowledge that this study was specific to the UK, where there is significant of neoliberalism (Bacevic, 2019). Our findings may be somewhat transferable to other western, neo-liberal countries such as America and France. However, our findings are inevitably less transferable to non-western and less neoliberal societies, including in the west (e.g. Norway, Sweden).

In conclusion, it is necessary for the education and mental health professionals to pay further attention to the gendered experiences of anxiety. The perceived experiences of anxiety were closely connected to individualised notions of gendered individualism, autonomy, and agency. The narratives of participants revealed the progressive gender politics in the modern world and the contradictory ways in which they felt encouraged to be educated and enter the labour market but remain under the male gaze and fulfil domestic duty. There is a growing pressure for adolescent females to achieve everything from academic and employment success to the standardised ideals of beauty, while maintaining a level of femininity across various social domains. The consequences are a clash of ideologies to empower them against pressure, stress, and anxiety that those ideologies create. It is therefore unsurprising that female university students are keen to postpone their transitions to adulthood, preferring to cling to the safety of their adolescence.

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