

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A qualitative study on the effects of self-doubt on public speaking and audience reception among senior high school students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the detriments of self-doubt on a public speaker's message, particularly among Filipino senior high school student speakers. Using an exploratory design, the research aimed to understand how self-doubt manifests during the preparation and delivery of a speech, and how it affects message clarity, confidence, and audience reception. Fifteen participants shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis revealed that self-doubt operates on both internal and external levels. Internally, it is triggered by fear of judgment, lack of preparation, and negative self-perception, often resulting in overthinking and emotional withdrawal. Externally, it manifests in disorganized delivery, weak persuasive tone, and noticeable nervous behaviors. Despite these challenges, participants reported coping strategies such as positive self-talk, mindfulness, and grounding techniques that helped manage their anxiety. The findings highlight the importance of addressing emotional readiness in public speaking education and call for supportive environments that empower students to overcome internal barriers and communicate with greater clarity and confidence.

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1. Introduction

Public speaking is an important skill that many people need in school, work, and daily life. Being able to speak clearly and confidently in front of others helps people share their ideas and convince others ^[1]. But a lot of people feel nervous or scared about speaking in public. This fear is called public speaking anxiety and affects many people, some studies say up to 75% feel this way ^[2,3]. One of the main reasons for this fear is self-doubt, which means not believing in yourself or worrying you will do poorly. When speakers have self-doubt, they may hesitate, speak too softly, or forget their words. This can make it hard for the audience to understand or pay attention to the message ^[4,5].

Many researchers have studied public speaking anxiety and found that it causes physical symptoms like sweating and shaking, as well as negative thoughts ^[6,7]. But fewer studies have looked closely at how self-doubt changes the actual message a speaker sends. For example, how it affects the words they choose or their body language ^[25]. Most research focuses on college students or adults, but younger students, like high schoolers, also face these challenges and need more attention ^[8,9].

Also, self-doubt can affect speakers in different ways depending on their personality and culture, but this is not well understood yet ^[10,11]. We do not know much about how self-doubt affects the connection between the speaker and the audience, such as how well the speaker keeps the listeners interested ^[5,12]. Since public speaking is a two-way process, it is important to study both the speaker's feelings and the audience's reactions ^[7].

Understanding the role of self-doubt in public speaking remains important not only for improving individual performance but also for developing more effective communication training, especially for learners who are still developing their self-confidence. While many studies have focused on anxiety symptoms or coping strategies, few have explored how self-doubt affects the actual content, structure, and delivery of messages in real-time ^[13,14].

To address this gap, this study aims to explore how public speakers experience and internalize self-doubt during both the preparation and delivery of their messages. In addition, it seeks to examine the perceived effects of self-doubt on the clarity, confidence, and reception of a speaker's message from the perspective of both the speaker and the audience. Using a qualitative approach, the study hopes to provide a deeper understanding of how internal feelings of doubt may shape communication performance, as well as how these challenges can be addressed in public speaking education ^[15,16].

2. Literature

2.1. Understanding self-doubt and public speaking

Self-doubt refers to a person's internal uncertainty or lack of belief in their ability to perform a specific task. In public speaking, this often shows up as fear of being judged, fear of making mistakes, or simply thinking one is not good enough to deliver a message ^[17, 13]. This internal fear has been widely connected to public speaking anxiety, a condition where people feel extreme nervousness or discomfort when speaking in front of others ^[14]. Bandura's ^[18] theory of self-efficacy supports this view, proposing that individuals with low self-belief are more likely to perform poorly in stressful tasks like public speaking because their doubt influences both their preparation and delivery.

Public speaking is more than just using words—it also involves confidence, voice, gestures, and eye contact. Speakers who are experiencing self-doubt may show signs like a shaky voice, avoidance of eye contact, or forgetting parts of their message. These behaviors weaken the connection between the speaker and the audience and reduce how clearly the message is received ^[19]. In this way, self-doubt acts not only as a personal challenge but also as a communication barrier that affects the impact of the message.

Around the world, researchers have looked into how self-doubt affects communication. Tari ^[17] found that self-doubt contributes to avoidance behavior—some individuals refuse to speak publicly to avoid failure. Gallego et al. ^[20] noted that students with high levels of self-doubt struggle with organizing their thoughts, expressing emotion, and projecting their voice, all of which are key parts of effective communication. Similarly, Pabro-Maquidato ^[14] emphasized that doubt can lead speakers to speak too quickly, mumble, or shorten their responses, resulting in unclear messages.

However, not all studies see self-doubt as completely harmful. Ayres ^[21] suggested that a small amount of doubt may encourage better preparation and lead to more thoughtful communication. Lestari et al. ^[15] also found that students who received supportive feedback and felt emotionally safe were more likely to push through their fears. Despite the presence of self-doubt, these students often delivered better speeches when they felt supported. This implies that the effect of self-doubt can vary depending on the speaker's environment and level of experience.

In the Philippines, several recent studies have explored how self-doubt and public speaking anxiety impact students. Pike and Raymundo ^[22] found that Senior High School students showed symptoms such as sweating, rapid heartbeat, and mental blocks while delivering speeches. This aligns with Reyes et al. ^[23], who observed that even English majors—despite their language skills—struggled with confidence due to the fear of being judged. Likewise, Asio et al. ^[24] noted that many tertiary-level learners avoided eye contact or skipped difficult phrases to avoid making mistakes.

Pabro-Maquidato's ^[14] study, using phenomenological interviews, found that code-switching, shortened responses, and nervous gestures were commonly observed among anxious Filipino speakers. Kenoh ^[13] further explained that pre-service teachers feared making grammar errors, which led them to speak less confidently, even when their content was strong. These behaviors often limited audience engagement and message clarity. Another study explored the experiences of Filipino academic leaders facing public speaking challenges and identified resources and strategies to enhance their speaking skills. The findings highlighted the importance of targeted support, such as professional development workshops and a supportive learning environment, in improving public speaking confidence ^[25].

On a more positive note, Galve and Sarmiento ^[26] found that after undergoing mindfulness and deep-breathing exercises, college students were more capable of managing their anxiety and delivering clear, organized speeches. This shows that with proper training and emotional regulation, speakers can overcome the negative effects of self-doubt.

2.2. Effects on message clarity and audience reception

Self-doubt affects not only how a speaker feels but also what they say and how they say it. When speakers are filled with uncertainty, they may simplify their thoughts, rush through their ideas, or repeat themselves too often. Bialen et al. ^[27] found that students with higher levels of self-doubt were less likely to maintain structured speeches and consistent pacing. This lack of control makes it harder for the audience to follow the speaker's message.

Gallego et al. ^[20] and Pereira et al. ^[28] added that voice projection, tone, posture, and facial expressions are also influenced by inner self-belief. When these are weak, the message suffers. Since public speaking is both verbal and non-verbal, the audience may not just hear, but also sense the speaker's insecurity.

2.3. Coping strategies and support systems

Some researchers have looked into how speakers cope with self-doubt. Internal strategies, such as deep breathing, positive self-talk, and rehearsal, have been shown to reduce the impact of doubt on speaking performance ^[28, 26]. Others suggest that classroom and peer support also help. Lestari et al. ^[15] found that students who received encouragement from their audience or teacher felt more confident, even when they had initial doubts. Another study suggests regular practice and exposure to various speaking opportunities were found to be crucial in managing public speaking anxiety effectively ^[25]. These findings suggest that both internal and external strategies can be combined to manage self-doubt more effectively.

While many scholars agree that self-doubt can hurt communication, there are varying opinions on how much it does. Some argue that it encourages speakers to improve and prepare better ^[21], while others believe that it mostly leads to silence, poor structure, and disengaged audiences ^[6,5]. Cultural factors also play a role, as expectations around grammar, fluency, and composure differ across contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to deeply understand how self-doubt affects the message delivery of public speakers, particularly among Senior High School students. As described by Jason and Rosalina ^[29], exploratory research is ideal for investigating under-researched phenomena, allowing flexibility to uncover rich, nuanced experiences without being restricted by predetermined hypotheses. The qualitative approach was chosen because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of the internal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of public speakers experiencing self-doubt, as well as the perceptions of their audiences. Data collection was guided by semi-structured interviews and analysis of video-recorded speeches, allowing participants to express their lived experiences freely while aligning with the study's objectives ^[30]. This method provided comprehensive insights into how self-doubt influences confidence, clarity, and audience engagement during public speaking.

3.2. Population and sampling

The population size of the study consisted of 15 Senior High School students who regularly participate in public speaking activities as part of their curriculum. Selection criteria included: (1) active participation in at least one school-based public speaking activity or competition within the past year, (2) willingness to reflect on personal experiences of self-doubt, and (3) availability to participate in in-depth interviews. A purposive sampling technique was employed, consistent with the approach described by Aldrin and Micah ^[31], to select participants who have experienced self-doubt during public speaking engagements. This non-probability sampling allowed the researchers to intentionally focus on students who could provide detailed and relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. Selecting participants with varying degrees of experience ensured a broad perspective on how self-doubt manifests and impacts public speaking performance. The purposive method is effective for qualitative research where depth of understanding outweighs the need for statistical generalization ^[32]. Table 1 presents a summary of participant demographics.

The study involved 15 Senior High School students aged 16 to 18 years old, with 8 males and 7 females participating. Eleven students were in Grade 11, while four were in Grade 12. Participants reported between 1 to 4 years of public speaking experience, with most students having 2 to 3 years of practice. This range of

age, grade level, and experience allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives on how self-doubt manifests and affects public speaking performance across varying levels of exposure and confidence.

3.3. Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection was a flexible interview guide designed to explore the experiences of Senior High School students regarding self-doubt during public speaking engagements. The guide consisted of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting detailed descriptions of how self-doubt manifests, its effects on message delivery, and the coping mechanisms participants employ. Open-ended questions are particularly effective in qualitative research because they allow participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words, thus providing rich and authentic data [25]. Furthermore, the flexibility of the interview guide enabled the researcher to ask follow-up questions to clarify and deepen understanding of participants' responses [33].

The interview questions were framed to probe aspects of self-efficacy theory [18] and communication apprehension [34], which are relevant to understanding how self-doubt influences public speaking performance. For example, questions addressed how students perceive their speaking abilities, moments when they felt least confident, and the impact of these feelings on their speech content, delivery, and audience connection. The instrument also explored external factors such as audience feedback and peer support, which previous studies [15,26] have shown to affect speaker confidence.

This interview guide was pilot-tested with a small group of students outside the main study sample to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of questions. Based on feedback, minor revisions were made to improve the flow and comprehensibility of the questions. **Table 1** presents the instrument of the study which helped gather the data to obtain the goal of the study.

Table 1. Instrument of the study.

Objectives	Interview questions	Participants
To explore how public speakers experience and internalize self-doubt during the preparation and delivery of their messages.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe a time when you experienced self-doubt before or during a speech? What triggered those feelings? 2. How do thoughts of self-doubt usually manifest for you while preparing for a public speaking engagement? 3. What strategies, if any, do you use to manage or cope with self-doubt before or while speaking? 	Senior High School Students
To examine the perceived effects of self-doubt on the clarity, confidence, and reception of a public speaker's message by the audience.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe a time when you experienced self-doubt before or during a speech? What triggered those feelings? 2. How do thoughts of self-doubt usually manifest for you while preparing for a public speaking engagement? 3. What strategies, if any, do you use to manage or cope with self-doubt before or while speaking? 	

3.4. Data gathering procedure

The data gathering procedure involved conducting semi-structured interviews with selected Senior High School students who had prior experiences with public speaking. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the participants' availability and preference, to ensure convenience and comfort. This conversational and respectful approach was essential in fostering a safe space where participants could openly express their personal experiences, feelings of self-doubt, and perceptions of their communication performance. Each interview began with a clear explanation of the study's objectives, followed by the

acquisition of informed consent from both the students and their parents, in line with ethical protocols for minors.

The interview questions focused on students' internal thoughts before, during, and after speaking engagements; the specific manifestations of self-doubt such as shaking, mind blanking, voice cracking; and perceived effects on how their message was received by peers and teachers. As Bucoy et al. ^[35] emphasized, qualitative interviews provide an in-depth platform for uncovering individual perspectives and communication challenges, particularly in areas involving affective and psychological constructs. All sessions were audio-recorded (with permission) and supplemented by note-taking to ensure a comprehensive and accurate account of participant responses.

3.5. Data analysis

To analyze the qualitative data, this study used reflexive thematic analysis ^[36], which allowed for a flexible yet systematic identification of themes related to self-doubt and message delivery. The process involved repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity with the data, followed by manual coding of meaningful phrases or statements. These codes were then organized into broader themes.

The researcher maintained an iterative and reflexive stance throughout the analysis, revisiting themes to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. This analytical method is particularly suitable for exploring inner psychological experiences and social interaction patterns ^[37]. Credibility of findings was ensured through member-checking, where selected participants were shown the summarized themes and given the opportunity to validate or clarify interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data across multiple interviews to strengthen consistency and trustworthiness.

3.6. Ethical considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical research guidelines to protect the participants' rights and well-being. Before any data collection, written consent was obtained from both the students and their guardians, as participants were minors. The research purpose, procedure, and voluntary nature of participation were clearly explained. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect participant identity, and all interview data were stored securely on encrypted devices to ensure confidentiality.

Participants were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. As emphasized by Michael and Omoruyi ^[38], maintaining ethical rigor not only ensures the psychological safety of respondents but also contributes to the overall integrity of the research process.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore how public speakers experience and internalize self-doubt during the preparation and delivery of their messages.

Question No. 1. Can you describe a time when you experienced self-doubt before or during a speech? What triggered those feelings?

1.1 Fear of Negative Judgment and Embarrassment

Twelve (12) participants shared that their self-doubt mostly came from the fear of being judged or embarrassed in front of their classmates, teachers, or audience. Many students admitted that they felt anxious about making mistakes, being laughed at, or receiving negative feedback. This fear caused them to lose focus, hesitate, or even blank out during their speeches. The worry about being perceived as "not good enough" became a heavy burden that affected their performance.

“I was really afraid my classmates would laugh at me if I made a mistake.”

“I froze because I felt like everyone was staring and judging me.”

“Even before I spoke, I already thought people would say I was bad at it.”

1.2 *Lack of Preparation and Practice Confidence*

Ten (10) participants admitted that they felt self-doubt because they were not fully prepared or did not practice enough. These students explained that they forgot what to say, panicked while recalling their lines, or felt their ideas were not organized. The lack of preparation made them feel unsure and weak in front of the crowd.

“I doubted myself because I did not prepare well. I thought I would mess up.”

“I did not know how to start my speech, and that made me panic.”

“When I do not practice, my hands shake, and I speak too fast.”

1.3 *Comparison with Others and Low Self-Efficacy*

Nine (9) participants described how comparing themselves to more confident classmates made them feel smaller or unqualified to speak. They believed their ideas or delivery style were weaker than others. This comparison created a sense of insecurity and led to thoughts like “I am not as good,” which stopped them from giving their best. This theme echoes Bandura’s (1997) *self-efficacy theory*, which states that believing in one’s ability is key to performance. Without it, performance tends to suffer.

“I saw my classmate perform really well, and it made me question myself.”

“I compared my voice to others and felt mine was not good enough.”

“They spoke so confidently. I felt I could not match that energy”

Question No. 2. How do thoughts of self-doubt usually manifest for you while preparing for a public speaking engagement?

2.1 *Overthinking and Mental Rehearsal*

Twelve (12) participants shared that self-doubt showed up as excessive overthinking before the actual speech. They constantly questioned their ability to speak well, feared forgetting their lines, and worried about being judged. This led them to rehearse their parts repeatedly, often more than necessary, which increased their anxiety rather than reducing it. Some also said that the more they practiced, the more they became unsure if they were prepared enough.

“I kept asking myself: what if I forget something? What if they laugh at me?”

“I practiced so many times but still felt like I was not ready.”

“Even during preparation, I could not stop thinking about messing up.”

2.2 *Negative Self-Talk and Low Confidence*

Ten (10) participants reported engaging in negative self-talk such as telling themselves they were not good enough, their speech was boring, or others would do better. This kind of internal dialogue lowered their motivation and made them hesitant even during preparation. Some said they avoided eye contact with the mirror or stopped practicing out loud because it only made them more conscious of their flaws.

“While practicing, I kept telling myself I was not good enough.”

“I doubted if anyone would even care about what I was going to say.”

“I kept thinking I sounded weird, so I stopped practicing.”

2.3 Procrastination and Avoidance

Seven (7) participants mentioned that their self-doubt made them avoid preparing altogether or delayed their preparation until the last minute. They said they felt overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty, which led them to put off writing their speech or practicing it. Some even shared that they only seriously started preparing the night before the speech, and by then, they were too anxious to do well.

“I avoided preparing because I felt like I would fail anyway.”

“I waited until the night before to write my speech.”

“I felt so overwhelmed, I kept delaying until I ran out of time.”

Question No. 3. What strategies, if any, do you use to manage or cope with self-doubt before or while speaking?

3.1 Positive Self-Talk and Mental Conditioning

Eleven (11) participants shared that one of their go-to strategies was practicing positive self-talk. They would repeat reassuring thoughts like “I can do this,” “I prepared well,” or “Just speak like you’re telling a story.” Some said they tried to block out negative thoughts by replacing them with encouraging phrases or imagining the audience as friendly faces. This mental shift helped them calm down before stepping on stage. “When I feel nervous, I always tell myself that I’ve prepared for this. I try to stop negative thoughts before they take over. I focus on what I know, not what I fear.”

“I say things like, ‘This is my moment’ or ‘I’m good enough.’ It makes me feel braver even if I’m shaking inside.”

“I try not to let the fear grow. I talk to myself kindly and try to believe that I’m capable.”

3.2 Breathing and Grounding Techniques

Seven (7) participants shared that they used breathing exercises or mindfulness strategies to calm themselves before or during their speech. They described taking deep breaths, pausing to collect their thoughts, or doing small relaxation routines to ease physical symptoms like shaking or fast heartbeat. One participant even mentioned squeezing their hands tightly and then releasing to feel more grounded.

“I breathe in and out slowly right before I speak. It helps me relax and not rush my words.”

“When I feel myself shaking, I press my fingers together or close my eyes for a second. It brings me back.”

Research Objectives 2. To examine the perceived effects of self-doubt on the clarity, confidence, and reception of a public speaker’s message by the audience.

Question No. 1. In your experience, how has self-doubt affected the way you deliver your message to an audience?

1.1 Message Delivery becomes Disorganized and Unclear

Nine (9) participants shared that self-doubt caused them to lose their train of thought while speaking. This often led to disorganized delivery—skipping points, repeating ideas, or abruptly changing topics. Many noted that even if they had rehearsed, once self-doubt crept in, their thoughts became scattered, which affected the flow of their message. These disruptions often made them feel more embarrassed, worsening their anxiety mid-speech.

“When I start doubting myself while speaking, my mind races. I suddenly forget what I wanted to say next, so I just say whatever comes to mind. Sometimes it makes no sense, and I get more nervous.”

“I have all the ideas in my head, but the moment I feel unsure, my message becomes confusing. I end up jumping from one point to another.”

1.2 *Emotional Disconnection from the Message*

Seven (7) participants expressed that self-doubt made them emotionally distant from their message. Even if they cared deeply about the topic, their fear of judgment overshadowed their passion. As a result, their delivery lacked energy and emotional connection. Some said they felt like they were just reading a script rather than speaking from the heart. This loss of authenticity made the speech less impactful.

“I sometimes sound robotic because I just want to finish the speech. The fear is stronger than the message I want to say.”

“There are times when I feel like I’m just reciting, not really connecting. Self-doubt takes the joy out of speaking.”

Question No. 2. Do you believe your audience can sense when you are experiencing self-doubt? If so, how?

2.1 *Observable Nervous Behaviors as Cues*

Twelve (12) participants strongly believed that their audience could easily sense their self-doubt through visible signs such as shaky hands, stammering, lack of eye contact, and awkward movements. These students shared that during their speeches, they often noticed puzzled or distracted expressions from the audience, which further confirmed their belief that their nervousness was noticeable.

“Yes, I think they can tell because I often avoid eye contact and speak really fast. Some of my classmates look confused or stop paying attention.”

“When I forget lines or say ‘uhm’ a lot, people start whispering or making faces. That makes me feel they know I am not confident.”

2.2 *Facial Expressions and Body Language Give it Away*

Eight (8) participants focused on how their facial expressions and body posture reflect their self-doubt. They described forcing smiles, frowning unconsciously, or standing too stiffly. These non-verbal cues, according to them, often catch the audience’s attention and make their nervousness more visible.

“I try to smile, but sometimes it feels fake. I think people can tell when I am forcing it.”

“I get stiff and barely move, like a statue. My teacher once told me I looked very nervous even before I said anything.”

Question No. 3. How do you think self-doubt influences the clarity or persuasiveness of your message during a speech?

3.1. Disrupted Thought Flow and Message Organization

Thirteen (13) participants shared that self-doubt significantly interrupts their train of thought, causing disorganized or incomplete delivery of ideas. When feeling uncertain, they admitted to forgetting key points, losing their place in the speech, or jumping from one idea to another without transitions. This affects not only clarity but also how well their audience understands the main message.

“When I feel doubtful, I forget some parts of what I planned to say. Sometimes I just skip to another part, and it ends up sounding messy.”

“Self-doubt makes me lose focus. I get confused about what I already said or what I am supposed to say next.”

“My ideas come out in the wrong order when I am nervous. So even if the content is good, it becomes hard to follow.”

3.2 Weak Persuasion and Loss of Confidence in Message Delivery

Eleven (11) participants noted that their self-doubt directly weakens the persuasiveness of their message. They explained that when they are unsure of themselves, they end up sounding unsure of their arguments too. Some said they hold back on strong statements or reduce the emphasis on their key points, thinking that the audience might not agree or might judge them.

“When I doubt myself, I don’t speak with enough conviction. So, the audience might not believe what I am saying.”

“Sometimes I remove strong words or statements because I am afraid they will not agree. That makes my speech weaker.”

“Self-doubt stops me from emphasizing important points, and I end up sounding unsure about my message.”

5. Discussion

This study examined how self-doubt affects public speaking among Senior High School students in the Philippines, focusing on the internal experience of self-doubt during preparation and delivery, as well as its perceived effects on message clarity, confidence, and audience reception.

5.1. Internal experience of self-doubt

This study examined how self-doubt affects public speaking among Senior High School students in the Philippines, focusing on both preparation and delivery. Participants consistently described self-doubt as an internal struggle triggered by multiple factors. The most dominant theme was fear of negative judgment and embarrassment, causing nervousness even before speaking. Many feared making mistakes in front of peers or teachers, leading to hesitation, mental blocks, and visible anxiety. This aligns with Pabro-Maquidato ^[14], who observed similar behaviors among Filipino students, such as avoiding eye contact and code-switching due to fear of criticism. Likewise, Tari ^[17] identified fear of judgment as a central trigger for youth public speaking anxiety. This supports the idea that emotional regulation and perceived social evaluation are central to performance anxiety theory.

Lack of preparation was another significant source of self-doubt, where participants felt unsure about their message. This is supported by Beebe and Beebe ^[39] and McCroskey ^[34], emphasizing that rehearsal enhances self-efficacy and reduces anxiety. Comparing themselves to others also heightened self-doubt, reflecting Bandura’s ^[18] theory that low self-efficacy undermines performance. Pike and Raymundo ^[22]

similarly observed that even academically competent learners feel insecure when they compare themselves to peers. Overthinking and obsessive rehearsal during preparation were reported, increasing anxiety rather than alleviating it, consistent with findings from Tari ^[17], Bandura ^[18], and Bialen et al. ^[27].

Negative self-talk, such as repeating “I’m not good enough,” reshaped participants’ perception of their own performance ability and often resulted in surface-level delivery and low engagement, confirming Lestari et al. ^[15] and Pabro-Maquidato ^[14]. Procrastination and avoidance also emerged as coping mechanisms, temporarily reducing stress but ultimately weakening performance quality, as explained by Ayres ^[21] and Tice & Baumeister ^[10]. These behaviors illustrate how cognitive and behavioral avoidance can maintain and exacerbate performance anxiety.

5.2. Coping strategies for self-doubt

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated awareness of strategies to manage self-doubt. Positive self-talk and mental conditioning were most frequently cited, helping students replace fearful thoughts with affirmations, consistent with Bandura’s ^[18] theory of self-efficacy. Breathing exercises and grounding techniques, such as deep breaths and physical cues, also helped students manage physiological symptoms of anxiety and regain composure, echoing findings from Galve and Sarmiento ^[26]. These strategies demonstrate how self-regulation and mindfulness can mediate the impact of self-doubt on performance, supporting theories of emotional self-management.

5.3. Effects on clarity, confidence, and audience reception

Self-doubt affected message organization and clarity. Participants reported forgetting ideas, skipping sections, or speaking out of order when anxious, confirming Bialen et al. ^[27] and Gallego et al. ^[20]. Emotional disconnection was another effect, where students felt they were merely reciting lines, weakening audience connection—supporting Rise and Tassa ^[40]. Observable behaviors like shaking hands, stammering, and avoiding eye contact signaled internal doubt, consistent with Daly and McCroskey ^[6], Tari ^[17], and Kenoh ^[13].

Furthermore, participants felt self-doubt diminished persuasiveness, as they softened tone or avoided strong statements, echoing Daly and McCroskey ^[6] and Rise and Tassa ^[40]. This highlights the interplay between intrapersonal confidence and interpersonal message reception, reinforcing models of performance appraisal and social cognition.

5.4. Implications

Overall, the results highlight that self-doubt operates across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains, affecting preparation, delivery, and audience perception. These findings reinforce the importance of integrating both technical and psychological support in public speaking instruction, particularly in contexts where cultural expectations, peer comparison, and limited exposure amplify performance anxiety. By connecting observed behaviors to self-efficacy and emotional regulation theories, this study extends understanding of how internal psychological states manifest in observable performance outcomes.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study confirm that self-doubt is a complex and multi-layered experience that significantly influences both the preparation phase and the actual performance of public speaking among students. It is not a surface-level concern that can be easily dismissed; rather, it operates through various internal and external factors. Internally, it manifests as persistent fears, excessive overthinking, negative self-talk, and feelings of inadequacy—often triggered by past experiences, comparison with peers, or a lack of

confidence in one's abilities. These psychological barriers begin long before a student even steps on stage, gradually undermining their readiness and mental composure.

Externally, self-doubt reveals itself through observable behaviors during the actual delivery of a speech. Disrupted pacing, unclear message organization, avoidance of eye contact, and weak voice projection all serve as visible signs of internal struggle. These behaviors not only hinder the speaker's performance but also impact how the audience receives and interprets the message. As a result, even well-prepared speeches can lose their intended clarity, emotional appeal, or persuasive power due to the speaker's ongoing internal conflict.

However, despite the challenges posed by self-doubt, the study also uncovered promising strategies that students use to cope with it. Techniques such as positive self-talk, mental conditioning, breathing exercises, and mindfulness have shown to be helpful in reducing anxiety and building moment-to-moment focus. These strategies, while personal, demonstrate the students' ability to actively respond to their fear and take control of their performance. Their experiences suggest that self-doubt, although deeply rooted, can be managed and reduced over time through conscious practice and emotional support.

These findings emphasize the importance of schools and educators in addressing not only the technical aspects of public speaking but also the emotional readiness of learners. It is therefore recommended that institutions provide guided practice, constructive feedback, and confidence-building programs tailored to the needs of students, particularly within the Philippine educational context where cultural and linguistic pressures may intensify performance anxiety. By fostering supportive environments and integrating psychological preparation into public speaking instruction, educators can help students gradually overcome self-doubt and develop the clarity, confidence, and purpose necessary for effective communication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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