

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Audience Familiarization and Self-Calming Strategies in Managing Public Speaking Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Public speaking anxiety remains a common challenge across academic and professional settings, yet limited research has examined how speakers use audience familiarization and self-calming strategies to manage this anxiety. This qualitative exploratory study investigated (1) how individuals perceive and experience familiarizing themselves with audiences, and (2) the self-calming techniques they employ to regulate their anxiety during public speaking. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 public speakers, and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to identify patterns in their experiences. Findings show that audience familiarization—through demographic research, cultural awareness, and pre-speech interpersonal interactions—reduces uncertainty and fosters a sense of connection, thereby easing anxiety. Participants also used self-calming strategies such as deep breathing, visualization, positive affirmations, and tension-release exercises to manage physiological and cognitive symptoms of nervousness. Together, these strategies helped normalize anxiety and enhanced speakers' confidence and self-trust over time. The study offers practical recommendations for education and training. Integrating audience analysis activities, mindfulness-based calming techniques, and supportive presentation environments into communication curricula can help students and emerging professionals build stronger speaking competence and emotional resilience. These findings highlight the value of a holistic approach that combines external preparation with internal regulation to effectively manage public speaking anxiety and improve speaker performance.

Keywords: Audience; familiarization; self-calming; public speaking

1. Introduction

Public speaking anxiety (PSA), commonly referred to as glossophobia, remains one of the most prevalent forms of social anxiety, affecting individuals across age groups and professional backgrounds ^[1-3]. Despite the increasing emphasis on communication skills in academic, corporate, and social settings, many individuals continue to struggle with fear, nervousness, and physiological stress responses when addressing an audience ^[4-5]. This persistent challenge highlights a need for practical, accessible, and effective strategies to manage PSA and improve performance outcomes.

Current approaches to mitigating public speaking anxiety often emphasize cognitive-behavioral therapy, systematic desensitization, and generalized relaxation techniques ^[6-7]. However, there is a noticeable gap in

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the research regarding the specific impact of audience familiarization the process of becoming acquainted with the audience beforehand and self-calming strategies, such as breathing techniques and mindfulness exercises, as targeted interventions ^[8]. Understanding the emotional connection to an audience has been shown to enhance communication effectiveness ^[9], underscoring the importance of audience familiarization in reducing anxiety. Similarly, verbal and non-verbal communication patterns influence speaker confidence and persuasion, which are critical in managing public speaking anxiety ^[10]. While both strategies are frequently recommended in public speaking literature and workshops, there is a lack of empirical data comparing their effectiveness or understanding their complementary roles in anxiety reduction ^[11]. Furthermore, coping strategies for anxiety in academic and learning contexts, such as those used to address math anxiety, suggest promising parallels for public speaking anxiety management ^[12]. Academic leaders also report unique public speaking challenges and the need for resources that improve speaking engagements, highlighting a gap in support for specialized populations ^[3]. Additionally, discourse on professional integrity and ethical dilemmas in academic settings points to the complexity of managing anxiety in communication-rich roles ^[13].

This study aims to address this research gap by exploring how audience familiarization and self-calming strategies influence the management of public speaking anxiety. The research focuses on three key variables: (1) levels of public speaking anxiety (dependent variable), (2) use of audience familiarization strategies (independent variable 1), and (3) use of self-calming techniques (independent variable 2). The theoretical underpinning of this study is grounded in communication apprehension theory and cognitive-behavioral frameworks, which suggest that both cognitive restructuring and situational familiarity can play critical roles in anxiety reduction ^[14]. Insights from communication in leadership contexts ^[15], and language use among young adults ^[16] provide further conceptual support for the role of audience connection and self-expression in anxiety management.

By investigating these strategies both independently and in combination, this research expects to uncover actionable insights into how individuals especially students, educators, and emerging professionals can effectively prepare for public speaking engagements. The anticipated outcome is to establish whether audience familiarization, self-calming strategies, or a synergy of both produces a statistically significant decrease in public speaking anxiety levels. Findings from this study are expected to contribute to both scholarly discourse and practical application in public speaking training, educational curricula, and anxiety management programs ^[17-18]. Moreover, research on communication confidence in campus journalism ^[19] and professional interest among educators ^[20] highlight the broader relevance of confidence-building strategies in overcoming communication anxieties.

2. Literature review

Understanding Public Speaking Anxiety. Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a form of social anxiety disorder marked by discomfort, fear of judgment, and avoidance of public speaking situations ^[1]. Individuals with PSA often experience physiological symptoms such as sweating, trembling, and increased heart rate, along with psychological symptoms including negative self-talk and fear of embarrassment ^[21]. Researchers differentiate between trait anxiety (a long-term predisposition) and state anxiety (situation-specific fear), with both playing crucial roles in PSA manifestation ^[22]. Cultural and socio-demographic factors also influence how students experience and express PSA ^[23], indicating that anxiety in public speaking is partially shaped by broader educational and social contexts.

Cognitive-Behavioral Foundations of PSA Management. Cognitive-behavioral theory posits that PSA is maintained by maladaptive thoughts and beliefs about performance and audience evaluation ^[7]. Interventions

grounded in this theory typically involve cognitive restructuring (identifying and challenging negative thoughts), exposure exercises (gradual confrontation of fear), and skills training (e.g., organizing speech content and delivery techniques) ^[24]. Confidence, a central target in cognitive-behavioral interventions, is also emphasized in studies of faculty implementing new curricula under high-stakes conditions ^[25], paralleling the pressures faced by public speakers.

Audience Familiarization as a Psychological Buffer. Audience familiarization stems from an audience-centered communication framework, positing that knowing one's audience enhances speaker confidence and performance ^[26]. Research shows that conducting audience analysis through demographic investigation, value exploration, or rehearsal in front of a reflective group enhances speaker self-efficacy and reduces anxiety ^[27]. The underlying mechanism involves increased perceived control and psychological connection to the audience ^[28]. In academic contexts, emotionally connected delivery styles have been shown to foster deeper learning and speaker confidence, which supports the value of tailoring one's message to audience needs ^[9]. Similarly, instructional methods that promote engaged participation and sustained motivation such as experiential workshops have shown to build communicative ease and retention among educators ^[29].

Self-Calming Strategies: Cognitive and Physiological Approaches. Self-calming strategies address both the physiological and cognitive symptoms of public speaking anxiety (PSA) through targeted relaxation and mental preparation techniques. Physiological regulation methods such as deep breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation work by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps reduce physical symptoms of anxiety ^[30]. On the cognitive side, strategies like guided imagery and positive affirmations have been shown to lessen catastrophic thinking patterns that often precede public speaking events ^[31]. In addition, mindfulness-based approaches, which emphasize present-moment focus and non-judgmental awareness, contribute to improved emotional regulation and lower PSA during performance ^[32]. Meta-analytic findings support the idea that combining physical and cognitive techniques produces more significant anxiety reduction than using either strategy in isolation ^[33]. Outside of traditional classroom settings, studies involving instructors using high-tech simulation tools have revealed similar emotional challenges, such as apprehension and stress, further validating the relevance of emotional regulation techniques in performance-driven environments ^[34]. Moreover, motivational orientation has been linked to how individuals manage performance pressure, suggesting that fostering positive attitudes like those observed in student-athletes may enhance emotional resilience in public speaking ^[35].

Integrative Approaches: Combining Audience Familiarization with Self-Calming. A holistic strategy that integrates audience familiarization with self-calming techniques leverages both external and internal coping mechanisms. Wrench, Richmond, and Gorham. ^[36] found that familiarity with audience characteristics reduced uncertainty, while self-calming strategies enhanced cognitive control, resulting in improved speech performance. Similarly, Finn et al. ^[37] demonstrated that communication training programs embedding both psychological preparation and audience analysis led to greater reductions in PSA and higher levels of speaker confidence. The inclusion of emotional engagement and adaptive delivery styles in academic training, as discussed by Garil et al. ^[9], supports this integration, showing how speaker-audience connection can be strategically cultivated alongside self-regulation practices for long-term communication success.

Gaps and Future Directions. Although each strategy has empirical support independently, research on their combined effect is limited. More longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the sustained impact of these approaches across different populations, such as students, professionals, or neurodivergent speakers. Future research should also explore how training interventions can be personalized based on speaker

characteristics and contextual demands. Insights from culturally diverse contexts ^[23] and experiential teaching programs ^[29] indicate promising directions for interdisciplinary and applied research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to investigate the experiences and perceptions of public speakers in relation to audience familiarization and self-calming strategies when managing public speaking anxiety. To clearly establish the methodological stance, the study utilized Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as its primary qualitative method, following the approach of Braun and Clarke ^[38]. Beyond functioning as an analytic technique, RTA guided the overall qualitative inquiry by shaping how the researchers interpreted participants' narratives, constructed meaning, and identified patterned experiences across the dataset. An exploratory approach, supported by the flexibility of RTA, was deemed appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences and coping mechanisms employed by individuals in high-anxiety speaking contexts.

3.2. Population and sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select 18 public speakers from academic, professional, and community settings. Participants were chosen based on their relevance to the research focus, specifically adults aged 18 and above who had accumulated at least six months of experience in delivering structured public speaking engagements, possessed prior experience with public speaking anxiety, and were capable of articulating reflective insights about their preparation and coping strategies. Fluency in English or Filipino was required to ensure clarity during interviews. Individuals with clinically diagnosed social anxiety disorder or other psychological conditions requiring therapeutic intervention were excluded, as were professional motivational speakers and media personalities whose expert-level proficiency might not reflect the typical experiences of public speakers. Those without any public speaking exposure were likewise excluded. All participants provided informed consent, resulting in a diverse sample that included educators, student leaders, corporate presenters, and community advocates, thereby offering varied perspectives on audience familiarization and self-calming practices.

3.3. Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the study's conceptual framework to elicit detailed narratives from participants. The guide included open-ended questions targeting two major areas: (1) audience familiarization strategies and (2) self-calming techniques used before or during public speaking engagements. This format allowed for flexibility, enabling follow-up questions that clarified or deepened participants' responses. Table 1 presents the full list of interview questions used in the study.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
1. To explore how individuals, perceive and experience the process of familiarizing the audiences during public speaking engagements.	1. How do you usually prepare to face a diverse audience before a public speaking engagement?
	2. Can you describe a time when getting to know your audience helped ease your anxiety during a speech?
	3. What strategies do you use to connect or relate to unfamiliar audiences, and how do these affect your confidence?
2. To examine the self-calming techniques employed by speakers and how these strategies contribute to normalizing anxiety in public speaking situations.	1. What specific self-calming techniques do you use before or during a public speaking engagement?
	2. How do these techniques help you manage or reduce your anxiety while speaking?

Objectives	Interview question
	3. In your experience, how has using these self-calming strategies changed your perception of public speaking over time?

Table 1. (Continued)

3.4. Data gathering procedure

Data were gathered through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed permission. Interviews centered on participants' preparatory practices, emotional experiences, audience engagement techniques, and self-calming routines. The interviewer used probing questions when necessary to ensure depth, clarity, and richness of participant narratives.

3.5. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's ^[38] six-phase framework. RTA was adopted as the primary methodological approach because of its suitability for exploring subjective experiences and its emphasis on researcher reflexivity. The analytic process involved iterative engagement with the data, allowing meanings to emerge organically rather than being constrained by predetermined categories. A summary of the six phases used in this study is presented in Figure 1, which outlines the systematic yet flexible procedures followed to develop the final themes. Throughout the analysis, reflexive memo-writing and ongoing researcher reflection ensured transparency, depth, and rigor in interpreting participants' narratives.

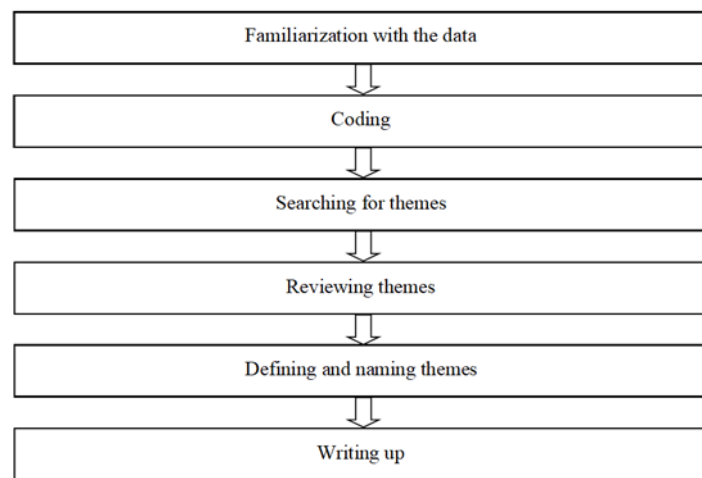


Figure 1. Six steps in conducting reflexive thematic analysis

4. Results

This section presents the themes that emerged from the participants' narratives regarding audience familiarization and self-calming strategies in managing public speaking anxiety. Response frequencies (e.g., $n = 10$, $n = 5$) indicate how many participants strongly aligned with each theme. Because participants often described multiple strategies simultaneously, individual responses contributed to more than one theme. Thus, all 18 participants were represented across the thematic patterns, although not all articulated experiences relevant to every sub-theme.

Research Objectives 1. To explore how individuals perceive and experience the process of familiarizing the audiences during public speaking engagements.

Question No. 1. How do you usually prepare to face a diverse audience before a public speaking engagement?

1.1 Audience Preparation Strategies

A majority of participants (n=10) described preparing for diverse audiences by conducting background research on demographic characteristics, cultural contexts, and audience expectations. Familiarity with the audience's professional roles or interests enabled them to adjust tone, select relatable examples, and refine message clarity. Many also reviewed the event's purpose to align their content with audience goals. Several rehearsed in front of colleagues who could simulate diverse viewpoints and provide constructive feedback, which helped them anticipate questions and enhance confidence.

"Before any major talk, especially with a diverse group, I do thorough background research on the audience demographics. I try to understand their professional background, cultural context, and even language preferences if possible."

"I always start by reviewing the event's purpose and the audience's goals."

1.2 Mental Visualization and Adaptive Speaking

Several participants (n=10) reported using mental imagery to prepare for a diverse crowd. By visualizing audience members' reactions—such as nodding, smiling, or showing uncertainty—they became more mindful of language inclusivity and tone. This visualization also supported adaptive speaking, allowing them to adjust stories, examples, or explanations based on perceived audience energy. These anticipatory insights helped reduce anxiety by framing the audience as relatable individuals rather than unknown evaluators.

"I imagine the faces and reactions of people from different backgrounds. It helps me be more inclusive and responsive."

"Visualizing their energy makes me more empathetic in how I deliver my message."

1.3 Peer Feedback and Cultural Sensitivity in Preparation

A smaller group (n=5) emphasized rehearsing with peers representing varied ages and cultural backgrounds. These practice sessions revealed blind spots, such as unintentionally biased statements or culturally irrelevant examples. Participants noted that incorporating respectful humor or universally relatable cultural references created faster rapport during presentations.

"I rehearse my talk with a peer group that represents different ages and cultural backgrounds. Their feedback often reveals blind spots."

"Having peers from different backgrounds listen to my presentation helps me notice any unintentional biases or assumptions in my content."

Question No. 2. Can you describe a time when getting to know your audience helped ease your anxiety during a speech?

2.1 Building Personal Connection Before the Speech

Many participants (n=10) reported that arriving early and informally interacting with audience members reduced their sense of speaking to strangers. Hearing personal stories or motivations related to the topic shifted their mindset from performance anxiety to meaningful engagement. Simple interactions—such as

asking audience members where they were from—made the environment feel more conversational and supportive.

“Talking to them beforehand made the room feel human. It turned fear into engagement.”

“A simple question like ‘What brought you here?’ breaks barriers instantly.”

2.2 Cultural Awareness and Adaptive Preparation

Several participants (n=10) noted that speaking with attendees—particularly in international or multicultural contexts—helped them avoid cultural misunderstandings. Insights gained from attendees allowed them to adjust humor, metaphors, or examples to be culturally appropriate, significantly reducing anxiety about misinterpretation.

“Once, I had a diverse international audience, and I was nervous about cultural misunderstandings. But I spoke with a few participants beforehand, and they shared insights about their cultural perspectives.”

“Their input helped me reframe some of my examples, which made me feel more secure and respectful during the talk.”

2.3 Familiarity and Supportive Audience Recognition

A subset of participants (n=5) found comfort in recognizing familiar faces or individuals from prior events. Their presence created a sense of support and continuity, easing tension and fostering emotional grounding during the presentation.

“Their friendly reactions helped me relax, reminding me that the audience was supportive, which greatly lowered my anxiety.”

“It felt like I was talking to friends rather than strangers, which helped me settle into the presentation calmly.”

Question No. 3. What strategies do you use to connect or relate to unfamiliar audiences, and how do these affect your confidence?

3.1 Storytelling and Emotional Connection as a Confidence Booster

Many participants (n=10) reported opening with stories or universal experiences—such as fear, failure, or overcoming challenges—to humanize themselves and build emotional resonance. Observing positive reactions (e.g., nods or smiles) reinforced their confidence and reduced anxiety.

“I usually start with a story or anecdote that’s emotionally relatable something universal like dealing with failure or overcoming fear.”

“It not only sets a friendly tone but also makes the audience more receptive. Once I sense that emotional connection, my anxiety usually fades.”

3.2 Ice-Breaking Techniques for Building Rapport and Easing Anxiety

Participants (n=10) often used rhetorical questions, light humor, or self-deprecating remarks to create rapport quickly. Even minor audience reactions—a brief laugh or attentive eye contact—helped them feel connected and less isolated on stage.

"I use rhetorical questions or humor early in the speech to break the ice. If the audience responds even just with a chuckle or eye contact, I feel more grounded."

"It often gets a laugh and immediately creates a relaxed atmosphere. Once the audience smiles, I feel like the tension lifts for everyone, including me."

3.3 Authenticity and Conversational Style as a Trust-Building Strategy

Some participants (n=5) emphasized the importance of authenticity—speaking conversationally, avoiding overly scripted delivery, and adapting based on audience cues. This natural style fostered trust and reduced internal pressure.

"I focus on authenticity. I don't try to be overly polished I speak as I would in a conversation. That often helps unfamiliar audiences trust me faster."

"Instead of memorizing a script, I speak from key points. That way, I sound more natural and can adjust my tone based on how the audience responds."

Research Objectives 2. To examine the self-calming techniques employed by speakers and how these strategies contribute to normalizing anxiety in public speaking situations.

Question No. 1. What specific self-calming techniques do you use before or during a public speaking engagement?

Physiological Regulation Strategies for Managing Speaking Anxiety

A majority of participants (n=10) described relying on physiological regulation techniques to manage their anxiety before stepping onto the stage. Deep breathing, box breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation were the most commonly cited methods. These exercises helped them slow their heart rate, ease muscle stiffness, and regain control over bodily responses that typically escalate under stress. Participants emphasized that these techniques served as an immediate grounding mechanism—offering a tangible way to calm the body when anxiety felt overwhelming. Some paired breathing with a short walk or light stretching to release stored tension and improve their physical posture before speaking, which further enhanced feelings of stability and readiness.

"I practice deep breathing about 10 minutes before stepping on stage. It slows my heart rate and brings me back into the moment."

"Before going on stage, I do progressive muscle relaxation tightening and releasing each muscle group."

1.2 Mental Imagery and Visualization for Confidence Building

A smaller group of participants (n=5) used mental imagery as a cognitive preparation strategy. Visualization allowed them to rehearse success internally by picturing themselves delivering their speech confidently and receiving positive reactions from the audience. Participants shared that imagining themselves navigating the first few lines smoothly, or envisioning engaged listeners, helped reduce anticipatory fear. This mental practice fostered a sense of familiarity with the task ahead, making the speaking situation feel less foreign and intimidating. Over time, visualization became a form of emotional rehearsal that strengthened their belief in their capability to manage high-pressure moments.

"Right before I speak, I close my eyes for a few seconds and visualize the audience reacting positively."

"I imagine myself walking confidently onto the stage and delivering the first few lines smoothly. I picture the audience nodding or smiling in agreement."

1.3 Positive Affirmations / Self-Suggestion

Many participants (n=10) engaged in positive affirmations, which functioned as a cognitive reframing tool that redirected attention away from self-doubt. Statements such as "I know this material," "I am capable," and "I can handle this" helped counter intrusive negative thoughts and provided reassurance during moments of heightened anxiety. These internal messages served as a form of self-suggestion, enabling them to regulate their mindset and shift from fear-oriented thinking to feelings of capability and preparedness. Several participants shared that affirmations became part of a personalized pre-speech ritual, which over time contributed to a stronger internal sense of confidence.

"I use positive affirmations like 'You know this material' or 'You're prepared.' Repeating them quietly before I speak helps drown out the negative inner voice that says I'll mess up."

"I find that positive affirmations help me build genuine confidence. When I repeat phrases like 'I am capable' or 'I can handle this,' it reinforces a mindset of strength. This kind of self-talk shifts my focus from fear to capability, making me feel more ready to face challenges."

Question No. 2. How do these techniques help you manage or reduce your anxiety while speaking?

2.1 Regaining Control Over Physical Reactions

Participants (n=10) emphasized that physiological techniques such as deep breathing offered immediate relief during moments of intense anxiety. These strategies helped interrupt the cycle of escalating physical symptoms—like trembling, sweating, or rapid heartbeat—that often made them feel out of control. By slowing their breathing or practicing deliberate muscle release, they felt more composed and capable of focusing on their delivery. Several noted that even brief breathing resets during a presentation helped them maintain presence and reduce panic when anxiety resurfaced unexpectedly.

"When I use box breathing before speaking, it calms my nervous system almost immediately. My hands stop shaking, and my thoughts stop racing."

"Deep breathing helps me take back control when my body starts reacting to nerves like a racing heart or sweaty palms."

2.2 Mental Rehearsal Builds Confidence

Participants (n=10) who engaged in visualization reported that it significantly reduced the cognitive component of anxiety. By mentally rehearsing the speech and imagining successful interactions with the audience, the speaking scenario became less unpredictable. This decrease in uncertainty helped quiet "what if" thoughts and allowed them to anchor their attention on a more constructive mental script. The familiarity created by visualization instilled a sense of preparedness that carried into the live speaking situation, making the transition from anticipation to performance more manageable.

"That sense of familiarity helps quiet the 'what if' thoughts and gives me something positive to focus on instead of imagining everything going wrong."

"When I mentally walk through my speech seeing the stage, hearing my voice, imagining the audience engaged I start to believe I can actually do it."

2.3 Loosening Tension to Improve Presence

Another group (n=10) emphasized the importance of loosening physical tension before and during speaking. Light stretching, walking in a hallway, or rolling their shoulders helped them reduce bodily stiffness associated with anxiety. Participants explained that physical relaxation led to improved breathing patterns and a more natural, confident posture, which in turn supported stronger audience connection. They described feeling more “open,” both physically and emotionally, which allowed them to engage more authentically with their listeners.

"A few stretches or walking in a quiet hallway before I speak releases that tension and helps me feel more physically grounded."

"It relaxes the stiffness that anxiety builds up, and I feel more open like I can breathe better and connect with the audience more naturally."

Question No. 3. In your experience, how has using these self-calming strategies changed your perception of public speaking over time?

3.1 From Fear to Focus

Many participants (n=10) reported a meaningful shift in how they perceived public speaking after consistently applying self-calming techniques. What once felt like a threatening or overwhelming experience gradually transformed into something more manageable. Techniques such as breathing and visualization allowed them to move from a fear-based mindset to one centered on focus and intention. Participants emphasized that anxiety did not disappear entirely, but the strategies enabled them to approach speaking roles with greater mental clarity and emotional balance.

"In the beginning, public speaking felt terrifying like something I had to survive. But using breathing techniques and visualization helped shift my mindset."

"But once I learned how to prepare mentally with visualization and calm breathing, I stopped fearing the moment and started focusing on doing my best."

3.2 Building Self-Trust

Participants (n=10) widely agreed that the consistent use of calming practices helped cultivate a sense of self-trust. Before learning these techniques, many doubted their ability to stay composed under pressure. Over time, however, they realized that they had reliable tools to center themselves and regain control. This trust in their own capacity to cope contributed to heightened confidence, making speaking engagements feel less like moments of potential failure and more like opportunities to demonstrate competence.

"Before I found these calming strategies, I didn't trust myself in high-pressure moments. Now, I know how to center myself before I speak."

"Over time, that consistency-built confidence. I began to believe, 'Yes, I can do this,' instead of hoping I wouldn't fall apart."

3.3 Feeling Empowered, Not Exposed

A smaller group (n=5) shared that grounding and anchoring techniques helped them reinterpret feelings of vulnerability as a form of empowerment. Instead of perceiving the audience as a critical force waiting for mistakes, participants began to see public speaking as a chance to offer value and connect meaningfully. Calming strategies provided an internal sense of safety, enabling them to step into the spotlight with greater confidence and purpose.

"But strategies like visualization and anchoring have helped me feel empowered instead as if I'm offering something of value, not being judged."

"I always felt incredibly vulnerable, like I was under a spotlight with no armor. But anchoring myself with a calming object and using grounding techniques gave me an internal sense of safety."

5. Discussion

This exploratory study investigated two interconnected aspects of managing public speaking anxiety: how speakers perceive and experience audience familiarization, and how self-calming techniques contribute to anxiety normalization during speaking engagements. Through in-depth interviews with eighteen public speakers, reflexive thematic analysis revealed meaningful patterns related to preparation, coping strategies, and evolving speaker confidence.

Audience Familiarization as a Buffer Against Anxiety

Participants' emphasis on understanding their audience before speaking strongly aligns with existing literature suggesting that audience familiarity reduces uncertainty and perceived threat, thereby lowering anxiety ^[4, 27]. Similar to the findings of Martin and Kazyak ^[28], the present study shows that when speakers recognize who their audience is, or when they establish even minimal interpersonal connection beforehand, the speaking experience becomes less intimidating and more relational.

These results also parallel Garil et al. ^[9], who found that emotional connection to the audience strengthens delivery and reduces performance stress. In contrast, earlier studies on communication apprehension ^[14] highlight that unfamiliar audiences often amplify fear—yet the participants in this study demonstrated that active familiarization practices can counteract this tendency, showing a more optimistic perspective compared to traditional apprehension theories.

Furthermore, informal interactions with audience members before speaking reflect insights from Savellon et al. ^[3], who noted that academic leaders benefit from relational engagement to minimize anxiety during public presentations. Together, these findings reaffirm that familiarity—whether demographic, cultural, or interpersonal—acts as both a cognitive and emotional buffer.

Self-Calming Techniques and Normalization of Anxiety

Participants used a range of physiological and cognitive self-calming strategies such as breathing exercises, visualization, and positive affirmations. These findings support earlier work by Ayres & Hopf ^[5], who demonstrated that mental imagery and cognitive reframing reduce speech anxiety. They also echo research by Grossman et al. ^[30] and Kiken & Shook ^[32], which validated mindfulness-based and relaxation strategies as effective tools in managing performance anxiety.

Similarly, Gregerson & MacLean ^[11] reported that mindfulness practices produce sustained reductions in public speaking anxiety—consistent with participants' descriptions of developing long-term confidence through repetitive calming routines.

Contrary to traditional views that anxiety is primarily a barrier, participants' experiences are aligned with Von Gunten et al. ^[18] who argued that structured practice and anxiety-normalizing strategies can transform speaking anxiety into manageable energy. This differs from older deficit-oriented perspectives that viewed speech anxiety as something to be eliminated rather than regulated.

Additionally, parallels can be drawn to Inoferio et al. ^[12] whose work on academic anxieties emphasized that cognitive reframing and emotional regulation can improve performance across domains, not only in public speaking. The present findings support this cross-contextual relevance.

Interconnection of Audience Familiarization and Self-Calming

A notable insight from this study is the synergistic relationship between external preparation (audience familiarization) and internal regulation (self-calming). This combination mirrors the integrated approach recommended by Wrench, Richmond, & Gorham ^[36], who found that uncertainty reduction combined with coping strategies is more effective than using either in isolation.

Similarly, Finn et al. ^[37] emphasized that audience-centered public speaking training improves confidence when paired with psychological preparation—closely reflecting participant experiences in this study. This suggests that both methods operate as complementary mechanisms: one reduces external ambiguity, while the other manages internal arousal.

This integrated effect contrasts with earlier approaches focusing solely on cognitive-behavioral techniques ^[24], indicating that contextual and relational factors deserve equal attention when helping individuals manage speech anxiety.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for education, communication training, and professional development. The emphasis participants placed on audience familiarization reinforces existing recommendations by Beebe and Beebe ^[26] and Witt and Behnke ^[27] suggesting that communication instructors can embed structured audience analysis tasks—such as demographic profiling, cultural sensitivity evaluations, and peer audience simulations—into public speaking courses to help students reduce anxiety and prepare more effectively. The widespread use of self-calming practices, including breathing exercises, visualization, and positive affirmations, further indicates the value of incorporating mindfulness-based techniques into classroom speaking activities, supporting the approaches highlighted by Kiken and Shook ^[32] and Gregerson and MacLean ^[11]. Additionally, the results align with Garil et al. ^[9] who emphasize the importance of emotional connection and cultural responsiveness; educators can foster supportive classroom climates by encouraging active listening, culturally relevant examples, and positive peer feedback during presentations. Beyond academic contexts, the study's insights are applicable to leadership training and workplace communication programs, as public speaking anxiety is also prevalent among professionals [3, 15]. Training initiatives in teacher education, corporate settings, and community leadership may therefore benefit from integrating audience engagement strategies with self-regulation techniques to enhance participants' competence and confidence. Finally, consistent with Russell and Topham ^[17], institutions can play a broader role by offering programs and workshops focused on confidence-building, communication skills, and mindfulness practices to support students' emotional well-being and academic performance.

6. Conclusion

This study showed that audience familiarization and self-calming strategies play complementary roles in helping speakers manage public speaking anxiety. Familiarizing oneself with the audience—through demographic understanding, cultural awareness, or brief interpersonal interactions—reduces uncertainty and supports more confident, audience-centered communication. Likewise, self-calming strategies such as breathing exercises, visualization, and positive affirmations help regulate anxiety by stabilizing both physiological and cognitive responses.

Importantly, the results offer clear applications in the field of education. Communication instructors can integrate audience analysis activities, culturally responsive preparation, and structured pre-speaking

interactions into classroom presentations to help students reduce apprehension. Likewise, teaching evidence-based self-calming techniques can equip learners with practical tools for managing anxiety during oral examinations, reports, and academic presentations. Embedding these practices in speech courses, teacher training programs, and student leadership development can foster more confident, self-regulated communicators.

Overall, the findings highlight the value of combining external preparation with internal regulation. By incorporating these strategies into educational settings, institutions can support learners in developing stronger public speaking skills, greater emotional resilience, and improved performance across diverse speaking tasks.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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