Cheerboard: For Less Social Anxiety Workplace

Zemeng Li
Innovation design & Service design
01. Exploration and Critical thinking
- What's happened
- Why it matters
- What to do in this situation
- Methodology & Methods
- Ethics

02. Research & Design thinking
- About Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)
- Who is involved in this system
- What is the situation like
- How do people live with SAD in the workplace
- What problems are they facing
- How can sufferers deal with these problems currently
- What is an ideal workplace like for people with SAD
- Is living away from the workplace good for sufferers
- What do they fear
- Which part could be designed

03. Ideation & Design doing
- What they want to say to others
- What they want to hear from others
- How about look this in another way
- What's the final concept
- Testing & feedback

04. Reflection & Self-thinking
- Bibliography
INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has led to many employees working from home. The COVID-19 Remote-Working survey found that 91% of employees said they would like the option to work remotely in the future (Eskenzi, 2020).

What is your preference? Did you enjoy your time working from home, or not?

There is a group of people who would be more relaxed when working remotely because they often struggle to communicate with other people, behave normally at any kind of public event and speak in front of others. In psychology, these symptoms are called social anxiety disorder (SAD). SAD is one of the most common mental health conditions, and it affects millions of people around the world. For people living with social anxiety, the workplace can be a pretty stressful place. They protect themselves the best they can by avoiding situations in which their 'flaws' might be seen by colleagues. Even having a conversation with an employer about experiencing social anxiety is not an easy thing to do for anyone feeling socially anxious. Keeping away from such a workplace seems like a good way to deal with social anxiety, but it actually makes the anxiety worse.

My project will aim to build a SAD-friendly workplace environment. In this journal, I will demonstrate how I am developing a deeper understanding of the situation by using research methods and design thinking.
Exploration and Critical thinking
Have you ever experienced an incident that made you feel nervous and anxious?

Do you feel uncomfortable when someone you do not know tries to talk to you?

I believe all of us will worry about a social situation at some point in our lives, such as giving a presentation at work or telling someone bad news. You probably also know someone who has trouble getting acquainted with others. However, SAD is much more serious than this. The NHS describes it as a ‘long-lasting and overwhelming fear of social situations’, and the condition can be ‘very distressing and have a big impact on your life’. It can ‘affect everyday activities, self-confidence, relationships and work or school life’ (NHS, 2020).

Figures from the UK’s Office for National Statistics show that 19 million adults in Great Britain report high levels of anxiety (Dawn, 2020). Perhaps it’s no surprise that in our career-driven society, the workplace poses a significant problem for those suffering from SAD. It is estimated that 1 in 6.8 people experience mental health problems in the workplace (Lelliott et al. 2008).

It is difficult for people with social anxiety to ask for help. Some may not even recognise their mental health problem because of the lack of knowledge and understanding about social anxiety. The high degree of heterogeneity of feared situations also introduces a challenge for diagnosing SAD (Hofmann, 2010).
What to do in this situation

Self-assess

Cultural diversity
Even though there are many common symptoms of SAD across the globe, there are also considerable differences from person to person. First, people from different cultures hold different conceptions of SAD. For example, SAD is a peculiarly Western construct, while in the East, there may be more concern over offending others than with embarrassing oneself (Dowbiggin, 2009).

In my project, I will refer to both Western and Eastern research on social anxiety and user experiences. In order to guarantee objectivity, I will prioritise data and knowledge that have been gathered in the UK.

Similar experiences
The fact that I have had three years of work experience means I may be better able to empathise with employees. However, it could also be a potential impediment in designing for this type of research. The balance between my studies and my previous employment experience should be noted.

Methodology

This research is about examining the relationship between employees’ social anxiety levels and their experience at work. Therefore, the methodology will mainly consist of phenomenological research. The evaluation of people's views and understanding of how social anxiety is dealt with in the workplace will be explored.

Methods

Interview with stakeholders
The research covers many different fields: most of the people and organisations like consultant, mental health charities are within the scope of the survey. I have conducted interviews with two experts in the field and one user interview. Before interviewing the experts, I learned about their research experiences and results in their field, and I asked questions based on the connection with social anxiety. The results of each expert’s interview are clearly unique and have given me much insight on the subject. Although this is a research method that is very suitable for quickly obtaining many design directions, the important thing is to filter the information and choose the direction that suits my project.
Observation
Observations and interviews are usually complementary. Compared with interviews, observations are less sophisticated but help designers easily ‘step into the user's shoes’ (Natalie, 2016, p.71). Because of the current COVID-19 restrictions, I observed the interactive behaviour of users on the Internet, especially their comments and way of talking within the group about certain issues. I also examined published logs that recorded their experiences and feelings. For people with SAD, online observations may have limitations and activities on the Internet cannot fully reflect their behavioural characteristics. Moreover, the authenticity of data sources on the Internet cannot be verified either. Nevertheless this format still has advantages because people with SAD cannot easily express themselves naturally in interviews.

Secondary research
SAD is a field of psychology, and many conclusions are drawn from scientific experiments. Many research results in the literature can provide a theoretical basis for my project. Even if my design is not ultimately for SAD, I need to understand the pathology of SAD and the psychological principles of dealing with it in the scientific field. The data I collect from the literature could become an important design input to determine the ideation (Natalie, 2016).

Usability testing
Whereas the early research and the technical information are proactive (in that they are used to inform design decisions), usability testing is reactive (in that it involves trial and error) (Natalie, 2016, p.78). For project design, the usability and actual value of the project could be the core criteria for judging the ultimate quality. Although my project has not been tested in real scenarios so far, I have asked some potential users for their comments and suggestions. In the following testing part, I will find a company to test the prototype, then recruit participants and make a research protocol for them to record their feedback.

Ethics
This project aims to benefit the people who feel vulnerable in social situations, especially in the workplace. Hence, I need to obtain informed consent from potential research participants to protect their anonymity and confidentiality and minimise the risk of harming them when engaging.

In addition, the project is non-commercial. The interest is only considered as a part of the service system. The ethics should be reassessed if the project is implemented.
Research and Design thinking
Who has it?
SAD often begins in the mid-teens but can also occur in early childhood. During childhood, SAD is often associated with shyness, behavioural inhibition, overanxious disorder, mutism, school refusal, and separation anxiety (Stein & Kean, 2002). However, there is a small subgroup of people who develop the condition in later life. Some people can identify a particular time when their social anxiety disorder started and may associate it with a particular event, for example, moving to a new school or being bullied or teased (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (UK), 2013).

How to know if someone has SAD
Recognition of social anxiety disorder in adults, children and young people by general practitioners is often poor (Ehlers, Gene-Cos, & Perrin, 2009). Because of the different levels of fearing situations or outcomes, researchers have divided SAD into subtypes. Thus, it is more difficult for individuals who lack understanding about SAD’s complexity and care pathways to identify if they have it (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (UK), 2013).

Who needs help?
One of the ironic features of this syndrome for people who suffer from it is that it makes it difficult to speak out about their needs. Only about half of adults with the anxiety disorder ever seek treatment, and those who do generally only seek treatment after 15 to 20 years of symptoms (Grant et al., 2005). Hence, those people who are unaware they are living with social anxiety should have more attention paid to them.
Who are involved in this system

The landscape map was based on brainstorming and desk-bound research. It shows all kinds of information concerning SAD. By looking through the knowledge I found five main stakeholders.
Some people who have been diagnosed with or are conscious of their SAD choose to establish a counselling relationship with a psychological counsellor for a time. The counsellor’s professional background means they will have a relatively deep understanding of users, but ultimately, the counsellor’s understanding is based on the relationship with their clients, and the initiative is in the hands of the sufferers.

**NHS**
The health agency of the British government publishes authoritative data and information to provide citizens with knowledge and treatment of SAD, including agency contact information and a website. Many cooperative charities are managed by the NHS and are responsible for different areas of the condition. However, the NHS is concerned about the health and wellbeing of the public as a whole rather than individuals.

**Charities**
Most charities are organisations that cooperate with the government to provide mental health support for groups of people.

**Commercial organisations**
Many people who have experienced and successfully cured themselves of SAD are committed to researching and finding a solution. They usually have professional backgrounds and have undertaken substantial research. They may build websites for their products and sell their own courses or toolkits, but most services are one-way, and they rarely track the feedback for each user.

**Family and friends**
These people may be aware of their children, parents, partners or friends who are suffering from SAD. They are most concerned about the mental condition, and they will understand habits better because of having lived together for a long time.

**Consultants**
Some people who have been diagnosed with or are conscious of their SAD choose to establish a counselling relationship with a psychological counsellor for a time. The counsellor’s professional background means they will have a relatively deep understanding of users, but ultimately, the counsellor’s understanding is based on the relationship with their clients, and the initiative is in the hands of the sufferers.
Many of us will admit to feeling some anxiety at work. Most of us take this as completely normal – after all, the workplace can cause anxiety and stress even for those who do not suffer from any kind of mental health disorder. However, for most people, there are a number of ameliorating factors, such as positive relationships with colleagues, that make the job bearable, or even enjoyable. However, for people who are living with social anxiety, that very thing could be the cause of stress.
How do they live with SAD in workplace

We already have a general understanding of the workplace as experienced by people suffering from SAD. I also noticed a Facebook anxiety group, a Douban group discussion and anxiety-support organisation website. I collected some information about the life status of people suffering from social anxiety, including their childhood experiences, past encounters with others and their own feelings.

It’s really hard when you have a mental illness to have to pretend to be something you can’t really be just to avoid the stigma. If you had a physical illness, you wouldn’t try to hide it, so why should you have to with mental illness; after all, it’s still a health issue.

It wasn’t easy to speak about it for a long time. I could speak to a few select people, some very close friends and family. But outside of that, with my wider friend group or employers, it was much harder to speak.

After six months off, I was told that I was not capable of doing my old job anymore. I was left jobless and heartbroken. The job I loved so much had been taken away, and I was being treated like I had some deadly contagious disease.

People only saw me as the illness. They didn’t see me for the person I actually was, and they judged what I did on face value. If I couldn’t do something because I was ill, people just thought that was my personality.
During the period of the project, I conducted interviews with both experts and sufferers. With experts who had a background in professional psychology, I focused more on asking them to describe their experiences of the behavioural characteristics of patients with SAD, as well as the sufferers' needs in the work environment.

For interviewees who have experienced social anxiety, I tried to ask them to describe their anxiety and how they coped with it. In consideration of the fact that anxious people may not like talking on the phone, I chose to communicate with them via Facebook and email.

**Expert Interview**

**Zengyao Yan, EAP senior lecturer**

‘The biggest manifestation of social anxiety disorder is when communicating with others, they do not know why they act different from others. A serious social disorder is manifested as a withdrawal behaviour, which makes them easy to be frustrated even though they have already got positive evaluation from others.’

‘Social fear is just a superficial word concept. As for what causes their social fear, everyone is very different.’

‘The way to solve problems should be systematic and comprehensive. Cognition can bring about some changes in thinking. Then behavioural training can lead to changes in some habits, and repetition is powerful.’

**Expert Interview**

**Tom Scott, health and social care improvement advisor at SeeMe**

‘Leadership role modelling, line management, and internal communications are three main learning points that have shifted our thinking about how we can make real reductions in the stigma and discrimination felt by employees and how we promote positive cultures.’

‘If the leader can behave in a way that will keep the sufferer safe and healthy, this will give the sufferer a licence to take care of themselves, to open up in conversation, and to seek help. It makes a huge difference’

‘Even if an employer supports wellbeing programmes, if your line manager doesn’t offer the same respect, then a person with mental health problems is probably going to have a bad experience. The opposite is also true.’

**User Interview**

**Louis, has lived with social anxiety for five years**

‘I feel uncomfortable when I have to deal with people I don’t know and have to talk in front of them. I try to hide the fact that I have anxiety at these times; I memorise dialogues so that I am not so nervous when I have to talk.’

‘I think my perfect job would be one where there aren’t that many people or one where I have to concentrate on doing my own work without having to deal with people; I think an afternoon job would also be good. I would like to work in such an environment because when I’m in a crowded place, I start to feel very bad; there don’t seem to be as many people around during the afternoon either.’

‘Being surrounded by people and having to pass through where there are many people are both challenges that have led me to feel anxious at work. I think being alone has helped me to clear my head and relax.’
What problems are they facing

The problem map shows the negative problems experienced by people with social anxiety from earlier research. It helps to structure how they see the workplace and what they suffer in social situations.

They can hardly find someone to talk about their anxiety

Their social anxiety affects their work efficiency and life quality

There is lack of a stable, long-term mental health support at work

Employers and employees have conflict of interest

They could easily suffer from stigma and discrimination at work

They think nobody can understand them even the doctors can’t
How can sufferers deal with these problems currently

There are some treatments available for social anxiety, as you can see, all of them target the people who are sure they have social anxiety, and they have certain ways to get those treatments. For example, CBT and Antidepressant medicine are applied from the therapist. But what about those who do not know their state? Where should they get help?

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

This is a therapy that helps you identify negative thought patterns and behaviour and change them. CBT is generally considered the best treatment.

Guided self-help

This involves working through a CBT-based workbook or online course with regular support from a therapist.

Antidepressant medicine

This type of medicine is usually called a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, such as escitalopram or sertraline. These are usually not used to treat people under the age of 15.

Treatment information from NHS UK (https://www.nhs.uk/)
So, how might we create a friendly workplace for people who are living with SAD?

The people with SAD usually have hard time at work, and there is lack of mental health support in the workplace.
What’s an ideal workplace like for people with SAD

I posted this question in a Facebook group that includes hundreds of people with SAD. Several replies said that working at home or engaging in work that did not require talking with anyone would be the ideal working environment.

Is living away from the workplace good for sufferers

If we put the phenomenon itself aside and just look at the heart of the issue, we find that this behaviour is a type of avoidance. Research has shown that avoidance only makes anxiety worse in the long run because you never actually have to handle the situation at hand. Away from the workplace, avoidance can come in many forms. Perhaps you drink at parties to get through the night; maybe you read speeches word for word or avoid eye contact when you talk to people. There are many forms of avoidance, some of which are so subtle you might not even realise that is what they are (Brooke, Gregory, & Simon, 2020).

However, from the perspective of a person with social anxiety disorder, this avoidance behaviour is a kind of self-protection, by avoiding putting themself in a situation where they may feel concerned or be criticised. Fear and avoidance of potentially dangerous situations are adaptive human responses to potential threats. The subjective experience of fear helps to prepare our body to engage in the fight or flight response, facilitating escape from danger, and avoidance ensures that we remain protected from encountering future dangerous situations (LeDoux & Pine, 2016). Sufferers hope that their workplace is a place that can give them a high degree of freedom and security, where it should have a relaxed and harmonious atmosphere, rather than full of pressure and tension.
What do they fear

In order to better understanding the sufferers, I have created three Personas, including two types of employees with SAD and a potential carer in the work environment.

Addie, 35 years old,
Programme manager

I am working for a small high-profile company, and I worry that people think I’m not coping with the workload, so that anxiety hits me.

But nobody knows. I keep a lot of things private from many people due to a fear of their reaction and judgement. My boss said I was always the guy who appeared to be on top of things, and it was that sense of losing credibility that stopped me from having the courage to tell anyone that I was panicking.

Sarah, 24 years old,
Accounting assistant

My experience started at a young age. My Dad was in the military, so that involved a lot of moving around and changing, often leaving friends and family.

This led to me being nervous about any change. Although I have grown up and worked for a year, it was really difficult to talk about it, and people were not clued up.

I’m anxious about uncertainty: I’d rather plough through with my head down and not ask for feedback until a project is nearly finished.

Sophie, 40 years old,
Head of human resources

I have met a lot of people, and I like to talk with all kinds of people; that’s why I think I’m good at managing and team working.

Sometimes I tend to be careful when I talk to shy and sensitive people because I don’t want to say anything inappropriate to upset them. To be honest, I’m not happy hanging out with them unless we have to do some work together.

I’m used to organising my work and reporting back to my boss. It makes me feel a sense of accomplishment even though sometimes I make it look better than it was meant to be.
In the workplace, people who are usually good at communicating tend to be more popular and receive more attention than quiet people who rarely communicate with others. While this is reasonable, people tend to regard this as a reflection of their performance at work. Those employees who suffer from social anxiety also use this to measure themselves, believing that social anxiety is a manifestation of their lack of work ability. This can generate feelings of self-blame and low self-esteem. Therefore, considering the cognitive and behavioural balance of social anxiety people could be the key to alleviating anxiety in the workplace.

**His goal is**
Perform well in the work
Get along with his coworkers
Get over the social anxiety

**Beacause**
He likes his job and want to gain the sense of self-worth from his work
He wants to be kind and friendly to others to build harmonious relationship
Having social anxiety makes him feel uncomfortable in a lot of social situation

**But**
He is sensitive about his evaluation form other people, feel ashamed of his social anxiety

**Her goal is**
Enjoy her time alone
Being in a stable career circumstance
Want to talk with someone who understands her

**Beacause**
She feels free when she stays alone
She feels nervous about the change or anything which is uncertain

**But**
She have to communicate with colleagues at workplace
The work stress makes her doing worse in social situation
Everyone at work is busy and she cannot find anyone to help her with the social anxiety

**Her goal is**
Get promotion
Get along with her coworkers

**Beacause**
She has confidence to take in charge of the important work
She likes to make friends and she would like to feel relaxed and welcome when talk to others

**But**
The work is harder than she think
Some people do not like to talk too much
Which part could be designed

After finding a key to solving the problem, we need to find a suitable design opportunity for targeting the user’s behaviour and habits. Changing cognitive dissonance, knowledge of sufferers’ behaviour and environment, and new information are all important design points. Hence, I have created an employee’s journey to work map and analysed all of the aspects of this journey. In comparison with ordinary journey maps, touchpoints and scenes, I added changes in their anxiety levels. Using this map, I can see the relationship between their anxiety and their environment and how their cognition is affected. When I find a design opportunity, it is easier to think about the idea and the detailed strategy.

It can be seen from the map that for employees suffering from social anxiety, work tasks involving communicating with people are difficult. When they are the focus of attention of multiple people, the anxiety values increase, and they avoid talking with colleagues outside of working hours. Therefore, design opportunities exist in communication. Using the previous characters to analyse behaviour, they appear to lack the initiative to communicate, and even passive communication will cause anxiety. There is barely a suitable way for them to express their need for help and to be cared for.
People with SAD may feel they do not do their job well and blame on their social anxiety, which makes things worse.

So, how might we design a new way for shifting their view of work capacity?
Ideation and Design doing
What they want to say to others
What they want to hear from others

To investigate the communication patterns experienced by socially anxious employees, I designed a tool to collect sufferers’ thoughts. I created a game in which they were asked to construct their ideal conversations in a number of situations, including choosing what they said, who they talked to, and their expectations of the answer they received. I created this survey with Miro, sent the link to the SAD Facebook group, and called on everyone to participate.

Unfortunately, no-one had responded within a week, so I sent the link to a few friends and asked them to fill it in and provide feedback. The first problem was that the process was not easy to understand: they thought the whole task was more complicated than it actually was, and for people who had never used Miro or similar collaboration tools, unfamiliar operations made them feel overwhelmed.

On this first attempt, I overlooked two issues: the first is providing a tool for guiding users on how to express their ideas. The focus should have been on guiding them on how to express, not the idea itself. Faced with such a complex problem, users have often lost their desire. In the desire to express an idea, the focus should be on thinking about the answer, not how to navigate the interface. However, this tool could be used for interviews or workshops rather than a research tool. I did not consider whether users had the motivation to participate.
How about looking at this in another way

I set about trying to reverse the design idea and started by reviewing the key outcomes I was aiming to achieve. First, I determined where I’m going to mark the most difference in this system, then wrote down the priority solutions for those expected changes. In this process, I used the theory of change worksheet. Having to include every goal into the users’ journey and empathising with the user made me think about how changes could affect the original model and help the user have a better experience.

Then I also listed some potential solutions and examined whether they were valid for solving important changes. The effective solutions will be selected and combined in preparation for a new round of ideation.
What’s the final concept

Three ideas are most likely to solve the important priorities, they are processing of nonverbal social cues, self-assess tool and staff notice board. Then I tried to separate them into product features. For example, processing of nonverbal social cues could be applied in symbolic exchange of information, self-assess toolkit could be used for evaluating their social status and think about their own problems or needs. The employees’ assessment board represents that everyone in the workplace has the opportunity to use, that means all of the employees should be the users in this service. It could be a social anxiety patient or a potential colleague or supervisor who can help them.

Combining these product characteristics, I developed the final concept. I designed a toolkit for the workplace and named it Cheerboard. It is suitable for use in a team or an entire company. For those who are about to face public occasions or stressful social engagements, Cheerboard provides a card to write down their work tasks. They can either choose to do this anonymously or disclose their name. Other members of the team can choose to paste different gesture symbols on the board to encourage the sufferer, or they can choose to leave a message to tell the sufferer their own experiences or feelings. The only principle is to encourage employees to actively express their encouragement for others.
Cheerboard

Could be taped on the wall or whiteboard, make sure it could be seen by everyone in the team.

Write down your name (or not if you want to be anonymous) and your challenge on the speech bubble, then post it on the Cheerboard.

Cheerboard cards

The gesture emojis from your colleagues shows their encouragement for you.

Stickers
How to use this tool

Addie works for a small company, he would meet a very important client in a week, it made him anxious.

He felt he needed some help, but he didn’t know who would like to talk with him, and he was scared to ask for help.

So he picked a cheerboard card, wrote down that he is worried about meeting the client.

Then he posted on the cheerboard.

The cheerboard is stucked on the whiteboard in the meeting room, so everyone could see it.

Sophie, who works with Addie, saw there was a new post on the cheerboard, she added some suggestions and cheerstickers on the post.

Three days later, Addie got his post with a lot of suggestions and encouragement, he felt cared.

Addie got inspired from the cheerboard, although he was still a little nervous about talking with the client, he was more confident to get over it.

Then, some Addie’s colleagues also added some comments and encouragement on his post.
Reflection & Self-thinking
The entire project lasted for nine weeks. Going out during the lockdown period was restricted. Therefore, on the experience of the first two semesters, focusing on a specific scene and finding the problem as soon as possible is the key to the success of the short-term project.

In addition, collaboration is one of the basic elements of service design. It may be that previous group projects always made decisions in a short time frame, and it is often difficult for individuals to make decisions. The personal projects force the individual to focus more carefully on their own ideas. Nevertheless, it is always better to ask the stakeholder – or people who know the stakeholders’ opinions – to strengthen belief in one’s own judgment.

For the next plan of the project, I want to explore the commercial value of the product. Socially anxious employees are the initial design goal, but in fact, when thinking about using the product, all people in the scenario have valued opinions. They may bring different goals or get different results. In a larger service system, business operators are the target users who pay for services. Therefore, how to balance the interests of business managers and employees is also the focus of the next project.

This project has triggered deeper thinking. The impact of the corporate environment on the mental health of employees is far more profound than we currently realise. The workplace is not only a place for work but also a mechanism for spreading corporate culture and team spirit. It also effectively separates work and personal life. It is clearly important to consider vulnerable employees with fragile mental health in the corporate culture.
Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my tutor, Jonathan Baldwin, who helped my thinking tremendously.

Special thanks goes to my colleagues Xidan Tu and Arooj Alim, who gave me their comments and suggestions on my project.

I would like to thank all of the participants who take part in my project research, especially Mr Zengyao Yan and Mr Tom Scott, who are really patient to answer all the inquiries and gave a lot of new insights.
Bibliography


Eikenzi PR is a useful source of teaching materials (http://www.eikenzipr.com/)


NHSUK is a useful source of teaching materials (https://www.nhs.uk/)

INNOVATION SCHOOL
THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART