Understanding Student's Malleable Reality: The Influence of Cognitive Dissonance on L2 Postgraduate Students' Dissertation Writing

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ABSTRACT

Dissertation writing is a common problem among second language (L2) postgraduate students, and they tend to perceive the experience as gruelling. Apart from experiencing second language writing anxiety (SLWA), they are also susceptible to experiencing psychological discomfort or cognitive dissonance (CD) resulting from conflicting thoughts and feelings when facing the ill effects of their actions and thoughts. Under those circumstances, students may be motivated to resolve their mental conflicts as Festinger's (1957) theory of CD proposed an interplay between cognition, emotion, and motivation. However, more evidence is needed to determine whether L2 students' experience of CD in dissertation writing had caused them to misattribute the cause of their poor writing performance. To have a clearer insight into this phenomenon, this study aimed to explore the extent of the possible influences of CD on apprehensive postgraduate students' dissertation writing performance. The investigation, which was a qualitative multiple-case study, involved four (4) local postgraduate students and data were collected via in-depth interviews, audio journals and personal document analysis. The thematic analysis revealed the following themes: i) SLWA triggers CD; ii) CD changes students' existing beliefs; iii) students' new beliefs cause misattribution of slow writing progress; and iv) poor writing performance. Thus, the study posits that CD influences dissertation writing as students' altered beliefs prevent them from reflecting meaningfully on their writing performance. To overcome CD's effects on dissertation writing, it is recommended that supervisors and language teachers provide constructive feedback, discourage the perception of writing inability, encourage reexamination of writing issues and avoid provoking students' writing performance using anxiety.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance; Second language writing anxiety; Postgraduate students; Dissertation writing; Writing issues; Multiple-case study

INTRODUCTION

Despite the increasing enrolment rates in advanced degree programmes, the delayed completion trend in graduating among Malaysian postgraduate students persists (Sidhu et al., 2021). Based on the 2013 and 2014 statistics released by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2016), the average of the postgraduate intake graduation on time did not achieve 50%, which indicates only two out of five students manage to graduate on time. Notably, the completion rates also appear to be low. Mohd Isa et al. (2018) reported a faculty of a local university where only sixteen (16) master's students (out of 146) and six (6) Ph.D. students (out of 56) graduated from 2006 to 2016. Although these students must have met the university requirements to enroll, they are unable to thrive in academic settings which often leads them to extend their studies or drop out of the programme.

Although there are multiple individual and contextual factors that could influence the students' progress (Muthukrishnan et al., 2022; Sidhu et al., 2021), one of the main challenges to completing a postgraduate study is

dissertation writing (Hoon et al., 2019; Jeyaraj, 2020). Dissertation writing is a common problem among L2 students (Bitchener, 2018; Jeyaraj, 2018). They often struggle to critically read academic texts, synthesize information, construct grammatical sentences, maintain coherency, identify relevant references, make proper citations, and develop an authorial voice (Akhtar et al., 2019; Shahsavar et al., 2020). These struggles form a chain of difficulty networks (Phakiti et al, 2013) which makes dissertation writing linguistically, academically and emotionally demanding for L2 postgraduate students. For this reason, students who are less proficient in English and less competent in writing may find dissertation writing particularly anxiety-provoking (Jafari, 2019; Rohmah et al., 2021) since their academic success depends on their language skills and knowledge.

Moreover, the students may perceive their struggles as confirmation of their writing incompetency which in turn, could influence their progress. As Litalien et al. (2015) highlighted in their research on dropout intentions in Ph.D. studies, perceived competence anchors students' persistence in completing their studies. In other words, if students appraised a gap between their writing skills and the dissertation writing requirements, they are less likely to develop the perseverance to complete their studies. Likewise, in their qualitative study on doctoral students' experiences leading to completion or attrition, Devos et al. (2017) reported that the main difference between Ph.D. students who completed their studies and those who did not is the extent of their feelings of making progress without experiencing excessive distress. Therefore, how the students perceive their competence is more important than their actual competence since they tend to appraise negative outcomes when lacking self-beliefs which could cause SLWA and influence effort expenditure (Autman et al., 2017; Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2020).

Despite the delayed completion trend among local postgraduate students and the negative consequences, i.e., reduced resources, incurred faculty costs, lower productivity and competitiveness (Wendler et al., 2012), academicians and policymakers show little interest in this issue. When it is addressed, most existing studies are unable to explain how individual and contextual factors could impede students' progress (Sangodiah et al., 2015). Given the significance of writing experience and perceived competence in completing dissertation writing, this study aimed to explore the influence of cognitive dissonance (CD) on apprehensive L2 postgraduate students' dissertation writing performance. The study proposes that apprehensive students' CD link SLWA to writing performance. In the context of this study, writing performance does not only refer to the participants' language and writing competence but also their ability to make consistent progress in dissertation writing. As such, CD appears to encourage the students to add new beliefs, change existing beliefs or reduce the importance of beliefs to resolve their cognitive inconsistencies and reduce dissonance discomfort. However, their altered beliefs misdirect their attention and lead them to misattribute the causes of their writing issues, impeding progress.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY
Cognitive Dissonance and Second Language Writing Anxiety
When engaging with the writing task, the students often consciously assess their performance to determine the next course of action to achieve their writing goals. Hence, these conscious thoughts, inseparable from emotions, could trigger negative emotions such as SLWA, especially when they anticipate a negative evaluation of their work (Fajri et al., 2018; Rohmah et al., 2021). SLWA is a relatively stable trait that manifests as recurring negative and anxious feelings when writing (Woodrow, 2011). However, the triggered emotions and fear of negative evaluation could be inconsistent with their beliefs in their ability to achieve goals, resulting in cognitive inconsistency and dissonance discomfort (Harmon-Jones et al., 2019).

Vaidis and Bran (2019) refer to CD as a cognitive inconsistency that leads to a motivational state promoting regulation through changing opinions or behaviours. The theory highlights that individuals tend to exert great efforts to reduce cognitive dissonance (Schacter, 2001). Under those circumstances, Harmon-Jones et al., (2019) posited that students might add new beliefs, change existing beliefs, or reduce the importance of beliefs, which could influence how they perceive writingchallenges (Sabariah Abd. Rahim et al., 2016) or reduce the importance of written assignments and the pressure to perform (Noriah Ismail et al., 2008). The change of beliefs seems to divert their attention away from unresolved writing issues, which resulted in them misattributing factors affecting their writing performance.

Important to realize that some students' avoidance behaviours, anxiety thoughts and feelings appear persistent, even though SLWA fluctuates and responses to emotions are temporary (Fajri et al., 2018). Perhaps, such effects can be associated with SLWA overlapping with CD as both are combinations of feelings, thoughts, and judgments (Breggin, 2014). Therefore, the students' fear or worries may trigger or sustain the emotional turmoil which makes some cognitions appear more resistant to change and could engage them in specific behaviours and thought processes. Additionally, since the student's academic success depends on their dissertation writing ability, they might not be quick to accept information confirming their writing incompetency or inability to accomplish goals.

Depending on the degree of the individuals' anxiety experience, Harmon-Jones (2019) explained that the degree of pleasure from changing behaviours, the cognition receptivity to changes in reality and compatibility with other cognitions, may alter their beliefs to reduce dissonance discomfort and resolve the cognitive inconsistency. Likewise, since dissertation writing involves making difficult decisions that will influence the readers' evaluation of the students' texts, the decision-making process could create extreme CD and trigger a more profound response similar to error-related negativity, which could compromise their general performance monitoring (Colosio et al., 2017). Hence, due to the interplay between their cognition, emotion and motivation, CD could influence apprehensive students' performance in dissertation writing.

Second Language Writing Anxiety and Writing Performance
Issues of SLWA and its influences on students' writing performance have been investigated by several researchers. Students with high levels of trait SLWA (tendency to experience anxiety) tend to score lower than their less apprehensive peers (Jafari, 2019; Rohmah et al., 2021). Jafari (2019) conducted a mixed-method study to examine whether there was a correlation between forty-five (45) Iranian English for Specific Purposes (ESP) medical students' writing proficiency and their SLWA. Their quantitative data showed the students' varying anxiety levels. Based on these data, students with significantly higher SLWA levels were selected to join the interview. From the interview, the researcher identified several contributing factors to their SLWA, such as fear of teachers' negative evaluation, poor language knowledge and lack of confidence to produce a written work in English. Apart from these factors, the quantitative instruments also revealed that the students experienced cognitive and somatic anxieties (when anxiety symptoms are manifested physically) and avoidance behaviours (procrastination).

Rohmah and Muslim (2021) investigated how five (5) EFL undergraduate students perceived their academic writing processes concerning SLWA-related challenges. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and document analysis. To determine the extent of SLWA experience while writing, the participants' views were gathered through interviews, and their writing was analysed to find substantial evidence supporting their perception. The researchers discovered findings similar to Jafari (2019): students with low SLWA levels were better writers than their more anxious peers. The interview also revealed several SLWA-related triggers, such as lack of writing practice, weak language mastery, lack of vocabulary and fear of being negatively evaluated, which could influence the students' writing performance despite their anxiety levels. Since SLWA is a trait that manifests as recurring negative and anxious feelings when writing (Woodrow, 2011), their SLWA increases when they fail to meet their teachers' expectations, which disrupts parts of the writing process (McLeod, 1987). In effect, apprehensive students' written outputs are often underdeveloped, shorter in length (Haddad, 2018), lack quality (Saedpanah et al., 2020), and contain typographical and grammatical mistakes (Abd Rahim et al., 2016).

In addition, Sabti et al. (2020) and Jin et al. (2021) reported that SLWA negatively correlates with writing performance. Sabti et al. (2020) investigated factors such as SLWA, self-efficacy, and achievement motivation among 100 English as a Second Language (ESL) / English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Iraqi university students and their influence on the students' writing. The quantitative study reported a negative correlation between writing self-efficacy and SLWA while writing self-efficacy and achievement were significantly positive. However, Jin et al. 's (2021) quantitative investigation on SLWA among Chinese English Language learners based on data extracted from ninety (90) Chinese senior high school students, revealed that the respondents' SLWA was moderate. This report reflects Cantina et al. 's (2016) and Wahyuni's (2019) research findings. Given these points, trait SLWA levels do not necessarily reflect state SLWA (actual experience of anxiety). The act of engaging in the writing task could trigger intense anxiety reactions (Genç et al., 2019), influencing writing performance.

Furthermore, SLWA can influence and reinforce beliefs, making predictions and a generalisation about the self possible even without concrete evidence (Blasco, 2016). For this reason, students' perceptions of their writing competency are more important than their actual competence, especially for students who view language proficiency or writing skills as a fixed trait (Papi et al., 2019). Under those circumstances, when they doubt their abilities, the fear of negative outcomes could cause SLWA and influence effort expenditure (Aytaç-Demirçivi, 2020). Therefore, apprehensive students may appear unwilling to improve their writing performance (Sabti et al., 2019). According to Abd. Rahim et al., (2016), students did not panic or feel disoriented despite experiencing SLWA when preparing their write-up because they believed that difficulties were normal. These views corroborated Noriah Ismail et al. (2008), who believed that apprehensive students took their written assignments lightly to lessen or cope with their SLWA. In a way, their lack of effort to improve their writing performance could be an attempt to justify the negative outcome and regain control over the situation. Receiving low marks for English written assignments after exerting great effort may pose a bigger threat to their self-esteem and self-concept as L2 students.

In brief, apprehensive students may experience CD during dissertation writing and modify their beliefs to resolve the CD. However, their altered beliefs misdirect their attention and lead them to misattribute the causes of their writing issues, impeding progress.

METHOD

Qualitative multiple-case is considered the appropriate research design since SLWA could be attributed to a variety of individual- and contextual-specific factors (Yin, 2003). For this reason, it fluctuates with different intensities (Jin et al., 2021) throughout the writing process as a result of the student's academic, social and cognitive causes. Additionally, some students may possess higher levels of cognitive anxiety (fear of negative evaluation, negative perceptions and expectations) or somatic anxiety (physiological reactions such as pounding heart, sweat hands, etc.) or avoidance behaviours (observable behaviours such as procrastinating and avoiding writing situations) (Jin et al., 2021; Solangi et al., 2021). Therefore, SLWA may have different effects on the students' cognitions, emotions, behaviours and writing performance (Jin et al., 2021; Sabti et al., 2019). Thus, the present study explored SLWA "within its real-life context" where "the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003: p.13) in order to reconstruct a comprehensive view of the affective phenomenon in dissertation writing.

This study attempts to answer the following question; to what extent does cognitive dissonance influence apprehensive postgraduate students' L2 dissertation writing performance?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is based on Hayes' (1996) Social-Cognitive Model of Writing. The model highlights an interrelationship between the internal environment of students and the external environment of dissertation writing, reflecting the individual- and contextual-specific nature of SLWA. The framework also underlines a connection between the students' cognition and motivation and affect (e.g., beliefs, goals, attitudes, predispositions, and cost/ benefit estimates), reflecting the effects of SLWA on writing performance and vice versa. For this reason, the present study explored the participants' psychological individuality, writing process and contextual factors as well as examined their written outputs to reconstruct their SLWA experience in L2 dissertation writing. Furthermore, this framework is preferred as it can address psychological mechanisms such as CD.

Selection of Participants

The L2 postgraduate students were the cases being studied and they were the primary unit of analysis (Yin, 2003). For this reason, the investigated phenomenon was bounded by focusing on the participants' internal environment as student-writers who naturally interacted with the social and the physical environment of L2 dissertation writing. The internal environment was perceived as comprised of motivation and affect (including SLWA) and cognitive components of the writing process. Likewise, the social and the physical environment include the institutional culture, collaboration with the supervisor, interaction with peers and engagement with the text. Additionally, due to the interrelationship between the internal environment of the student-writer and the task environment, each participant was also perceived as a dynamic system (De Bot et al., 2007), whereby their SLWA was viewed as a product of cognition. Therefore, the unit of analysis included the participants' personal history, subjective feelings of anxiety, and negative ideation. Thus, instead of multiple embedded units, multiple cases were able to provide a holistic view of the phenomenon through the reconstruction of each participant's SLWA experience in L2 dissertation writing.

Accordingly, two-stage purposeful sampling was conducted to ensure the representativeness of the cases (Merriam et al., 2016) where the participants completed an online survey and joined a preliminary interview. The online survey gathered demographic data, including the participants' publication achievements, writing block experience, perceived writing challenges, and dissertation writing progress. Since Cheng's (2004) Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory (SLWAI) was incorporated into the survey, the survey also described the participants' trait SLWA levels according to three dimensions: cognitive anxiety; somatic anxiety; and avoidance behaviours. During the interview, the participants were asked several questions about their SLWA experiences in dissertation writing. The survey involved forty-four (44) participants, and out of the large group, nine (9) participants were selected to undergo the preliminary interview, and four (4) were chosen as the final research participants. The selection was based predominantly on the following traits, i.e., trait SLWA levels, perceived SLWA experience, language proficiency, academic writing experience, and dissertation writing progress, as SLWA has been associated with high trait SLWA level, low language proficiency, lack of writing experience and writing progress. Thus, rigorous selection was made by recruiting a mix of participants (see Table 1) who were at

different stages of dissertation writing with different levels of English language proficiency, publication achievements, and trait SLWA.

Table 1: Brief Summary of Participants' Profiles

No.	Pseudonym (Gender)	Age	Trait SLWA Level	English Language Proficiency	Dissertation Writing Progress	Publication Achievements
1	Nayla (F)	32	73 (High)	Band 4 (MUET)	Working on a proposal (in her 10th semester)	2 conference proceedings
2	Adam (M)	47	37 (Low)	Did not take MUET/ IELTS/ TOEFL but is a certified translator	Working on a proposal (in his 3rd semester)	2 research articles
3	Sophia (F)	29	33 (Low)	7.5 (IELTS)	Completed 3 chapters (in her 4th semester)	None
4	Arwaa (F)	32	32 (Low)	Band 3 (MUET)	Working on a proposal (in her 1st semester)	None

Note. MUET = Malaysian University English Test

Ethical Considerations
The present study obtained its research ethic clearance from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). The participants were briefed about the research before they gave their consents and they are addressed in this paper by their pseudonyms (i.e., Nayla, Adam, Sophia, and Arwaa) to protect their safety, privacy and anonymity as the data provider.

DATA COLLECTION
The study utilized several data collection methods such as in-depth interviews, personal document analysis and audio journals. The data collection process took 24 weeks, and it was conducted concurrently with initial data analysis. Within this period, each participant underwent seven interview sessions (with allotted time gaps of one or two weeks between interview sessions) to encourage them to reflect and share their SLWA and dissertation writing experience. Since the country was under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time, each session was conducted and recorded (with permission) in English via telephone call and lasted no longer than an hour. Although the participants were allowed to use the Malay Language (their first language), they mostly used English except for the occasional colloquial expressions to further express their feelings. All recordings (including audio journals) were transcribed and translated by the researcher. In brief, the interview analysis allowed her to understand the way they perceived and interacted with their worlds as their thoughts, emotions, goals and beliefs are not observable (Merriam, 2009).

Moreover, since the participants' SLWA may fluctuate (Jin et al., 2021) and their claims may contradict their behaviours, they were also instructed to record their SLWA experience and writing progress in audio journals (in English). Although the participants were provided with some prompts to note the date, time, context (place, present activity and writing progress), physical reactions, emotions, and thoughts, they were encouraged to say whatever they wanted. To facilitate the process, they recorded their journals on their phones and submitted the audio files directly to the researcher via Telegram or WhatsApp. The length of each audio journal varies for all participants, but none is longer than 14 minutes. Likewise, the participants were also asked to submit relevant personal documents, written in English for analysis (e.g., research proposal, draft, literature review matrix and completed dissertation). Hence, the verbal and the textual data (see Table 2 for a summary of the collected data on the next page) serve to corroborate their interview responses and thus, offered more compelling cases as these data sources are free from the researcher's influence. However, the interview excerpts will appear dominant in this report as evidence of conflicting thoughts and feelings.

Table 2: Summary of Collected Data

	Research Methods	Quantity
1	In-depth interview	• Nayla: 7 sessions (Total duration: 276 minutes) • Adam: 7 sessions (Total duration: 438 minutes 29 seconds) • Sophia: 7 sessions (Total duration: 272 minutes 18 seconds) • Arwaa: 7 sessions (Total duration: 329 minutes 25 seconds) •
2	Audio journal	• Nayla: 3 entries (Total duration: 5 minutes 36 seconds) • Adam: 1 entry (Total duration: 4 minutes 50 seconds) • Sophia: 2 entries (Total duration: 4 minutes 4 seconds) • Arwaa: 14 entries (Total duration: 73 minutes 1 second) •
3	Personal document analysis	• Nayla: 2 submissions (1 draft, 1 literature review matrix) • Adam: 7 submissions (6 drafts, 1 literature review matrix) • Sophia: 2 submissions (1 completed dissertation, 1 literature review matrix) • Arwaa: 5 submissions (4 drafts, 1 literature review matrix)

DATA ANALYSIS

This study implemented the cyclical data analysis which allows deep exploration of L2 postgraduate students' SLWA experience in dissertation writing. The first round of data collection and analysis established the initial propositions to develop a more focused data collection in order to further refine and explore propositions (Mackey et al., 2016). These propositions were constructed based on open, axial and selective coding by identifying emergent categories and relationships (Corbin et al., 2015, as cited in Merriam et al., 2016). The data went through three re-coding cycles (with allotted time gaps in between cycles) to ensure consistency (Mackey et al., 2016). Then, the patterns in within- and cross-case analysis were examined for abstraction (Stake, 1995) to build an integrated framework.

The participants' written outputs were based on language use, organisation, authorial voice, referencing and citation, usages of academic and discipline-specific vocabulary, coherence and cohesion, and addressing readers' needs. Hence, the study explored the participants' psychological individuality and examined their written outputs to determine the possible influences of the cognitive dissonance on their dissertation writing experiences.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings such as triangulating data, ensuring adequate engagement in data collection and providing rich and thick descriptions (Merriam et al., 2016). Correspondingly, member checks were conducted by seeking the participants' feedback on the analysis and interpretation of data and maximum variation was ensured by purposefully seeking diversity in participant selection (Merriam et al., 2016). In a nutshell, steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS

The findings on the influence of cognitive dissonance are thematically categorised for each case study (see Table 3). Each case theme is explained and discussed using excerpts from the interviews, audio journals and analysed documents.

Table 3: Summary of Themes

No.	Case Study	Themes
1	Nayla	• Second language writing anxiety triggers cognitive dissonance. • Cognitive dissonance changes existing beliefs. • New beliefs cause misattribution of slow writing progress.
2	Adam	• Second language writing anxiety triggers cognitive dissonance.

		• Cognitive dissonance changes existing beliefs.
		• New beliefs cause misattribution of slow writing progress.
3	Sophia	• Second language writing anxiety triggers cognitive dissonance.
		• Cognitive dissonance changes existing beliefs.
		• New beliefs cause misattribution of poor writing performance.
4	Arwaa	• Second language writing anxiety triggers cognitive dissonance.
		• Cognitive dissonance changes existing beliefs.
		• New beliefs cause misattribution of poor writing performance.

Second-language writing anxiety triggers cognitive dissonance.
SLWA and CD involve thoughts and feelings. When individuals experience SLWA and CD, they face a choice and possible negative consequences. Depending on their decision or response, both could influence behaviours. Notably, apprehensive students often choose to avoid writing. As Adam had stated, focusing on his work instead of writing, makes him "*temporarily forget*":

> "*Because maybe I feel justified doing these other things for work first? Then, I will not feel the anxiety – the writing anxiety goes away. But if I suddenly recall that this is due, then it comes back.*"
> (Adam, I2: 315)

The negative consequences resulting from avoidance behaviours, e.g., failure to submit on time, trigger CD because apprehensive students believe they have the ability to achieve their goals and they also believe themselves to be better than their anxious self:

> "*I should be able to do this! If it's not 100%, at least 90% level – not at 40% level or 30% level!*"
> (Adam, I1: 242-243)

Therefore, SLWA may trigger CD as their underlying mechanisms seem to overlap in dissertation writing. When facing the ill effects of their actions, the inconsistencies in their thoughts and feelings motivate students to modify their beliefs as individuals tend to exert great efforts to reduce CD (Schacter, 2001).

Cognitive dissonance changes existing beliefs
Under those circumstances, apprehensive students may reinterpret bad behaviours as good by dissociating themselves from the outcome. For example, when asked for Nayla's opinion on why she avoided reading research journals, she initially acknowledged her procrastination, explaining that:

> "*I hate to experience the same feelings that I've had before. For examples, the anxious feeling, feeling useless, feeling unsure and at the same time, feeling frustrated, whenever I sit down and try to do something on my dissertation. So, I procrastinate.*" (Nayla-I1: Line 169-171)

However, she changed her views later in the second interview and attributed her lack of writing progress to "*a lot of distractions that would refrain me from focusing on something in particular*" (Line 90-91). Therefore, this act of defending the ill effects of her own actions could be her way to reduce the mental conflict the dissonance created because despite believing that she has the capacity to achieve her goals, she was unsuccessful at accomplishing her writing goals. Thus, changing her beliefs allows her to escape the possibility that she had wasted time and resources.

Likewise, Adam originally shared that he often procrastinated in writing.

> "*I know I should write this but I'm not going to write this now because if I do, I will have to write it again and that's what stops me.*" (Adam-I1: Line 16)

However, he added later in the fifth interview that he was struggling to write because it had "*something to do with how I draw*" and that it was "*very rare that I can just sit down and write*" (Line 72-73). In essence, he added new beliefs to reduce the mental conflicts created by the disparity between what he believed he could achieve and the actual outcome. Adding new beliefs allows him to maintain his original beliefs and discount the possibility that he had wasted time and resources.

Similarly, when Sophia was asked to share about her struggles in dissertation writing, she exclaimed that she "*tend to write stupid things*" (I1: Line 178) for she has a "*tendency to write something off the track*" (I1: Line 182),

which reflect possible writing issues. However, as the interviewing process progressed, Sophia added new beliefs to justify her writing performance. The added beliefs appear to revolve around her supervisor:

> *"I think I could do better, provided that my supervisor can be a bit more attentive to me."*
> (Sophia-I2: Line 118)

> *"I think I am the kind of a person who needs a push. I need the push."* (Sophia-I2: Line 120-121)

> *"Most of it must come from me but I think having guidance is almost equally important."*#
> (Sophia-I4: Line 310-311)

It seems that when Sophia perceived failure to produce a dissertation that she "*can be proud of*" (I1: Line 216-217), she added new beliefs to discount any confirmations of her writing incompetencies. This frees her from having to change herself.

In like manner, Arwaa initially prioritized producing a good dissertation. For this reason, she often delayed submitting her work to her supervisors because she kept revising it: "*...when I read it, I still find things to improve. I keep on improving it.*" (I1: Line 231-232). At one point, she even considered dropping out of the programme due to her fear that she would waste her supervisors' time: "*Sometimes, I discuss with my husband...do you think it's okay for me to stop?*" (I3: Line 259-260). However, she later reduced the importance she placed on dissertation writing when asked to share her opinions on what causes SLWA:

> *"You just write – you don't have to be bothered so much about how it will be at the end of it."*
> (Arwaa-I2: Line 162)

> *"Actually, master's study is just about completing the requirements. There's a form that you have to do, publishing papers...it's not so much about thesis than you have to complete the requirements."*
> (Arwaa-I2: Line 502-503)

Some may argue that Arwaa might have gained insights from her writing experience and the change in perspective could be the reflection of her personal development. Nevertheless, what had changed was her beliefs because she was experiencing SLWA and had unresolved writing issues. Therefore, reducing the importance of dissertation writing in getting the degree keeps her motivated with positive biases and prevents her from ruminating over her writing incompetencies. Thus, when facing the ill effects of their own actions and thoughts (i.e., slow writing progress or poor writing performance), the students may change their existing beliefs to reduce the dissonance discomfort and resolve cognitive inconsistencies.

New beliefs cause misattribution of slow writing progress

Although what Nayla and Adam said in later interviews may be true, the number of audio journals that they had submitted appears to indicate avoidance behaviours. Throughout the 24 weeks, Nayla had submitted three audio journals, whereas Adam, had only one. A study by Solangi et al. (2021) has highlighted that apprehensive students' avoidance behaviours are the strongest out of the three dimensions of SLWA. This could explain why Nayla was still working on her research proposal in her 10th semester (refer to Table 1). Since Nayla and Adam alter their beliefs to reduce the dissonance discomfort, they may presume their avoidant actions as what prevented the negative outcomes (e.g., receiving negative feedback from supervisors). As such, their responses became habitual avoidance and were no longer goal-oriented as they unnecessarily and voluntarily chose not to write.

> *"When you plan to do this, you'll say to yourself, tomorrow, I'll do this. Then, something comes up and you cannot help but shift your focus to that thing that you are supposed to do. On working days, you'll hardly have the time to allocate some to writing. Then, you'd say, it's okay, I'll do this on the weekends. But on the weekends, something comes up too.*" (Nayla-I4: Line 40-44)
> *"I sit down and I want to write this, but if I do this, I'll be wasting my time."* (Adam-I1: Line 27-29)

This resulted in impeded writing progress or long-term procrastination in dissertation writing. The misattribution could add further anxiety as it fails to adequately address the resulting cognitive dissonance (LeDoux, 2015) and this could explain why Nayla experienced frequent writer's block since SLWA is a prevalent factor (Dela-Rosa et al., 2018). For Adam, he was perplexed to find himself unable to perform well in "*something which I could sit down and easily do*" (I3: Line 9-10). Hence, altered beliefs could cause misattribution of slow writing progress and encourage avoidance behaviours among students.

New Beliefs Cause Misattribution to Poor Writing Performance
In contrast, Sophia and Arwaa appear to misattribute the cause of their poor writing performance. Their altered beliefs seem to divert their attention away from dissertation writing and they fail to reflect meaningfully on their writing approach. This could influence the quality of their written outputs as they remain unmotivated to resolve their existing writing issues. For instance, they have a habit of combining different parts of other sources to form the content of their dissertations:

> *"When I read things, I tend to take it first and copy-paste it into my writing to see how it will look like."* (Sophia-I6: Line 125-126)

> *"I copied and pasted the whole parts that I believe would be suitable for me to include in the literature review. Later on, once I have understood what is actually happening, then there'll be a possibility for me to re-word some parts or maybe I have to add more?"*
> (Arwaa-AJ5: Line 75-79)

Although they put some of the sources into their own words, it is still not the synthesis of the original and when combined, does not form a synthesized review. As shown in Excerpts 1 and 2, it is also difficult to consider the cited sources as annotated bibliographies since Sophia and Arwaa do not include concise descriptions and evaluations of the sources. As aforementioned, apprehensive students' compositions tend to be underdeveloped (Haddad, 2018) and lack quality (Saedpanah et al., 2020).

> **Ex. 1**   Moreover, according to Conzett (2000), participants would facilitate their subsequent acquisition by using the same formulaic sequences repeatedly.
> (Taken from Sophia's texts)

> **Ex. 2**   Farehah, Uri, Salehhuddin, & Aziz (2019) mentioned that the main issue with the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) alignment process is the dilemma between a total revamp or to adapt where necessary by retaining the suitable components of the current syllabus.
> (Taken from Arwaa's texts)

In brief, altering beliefs in response to cognitive dissonance may cause misattribution or misperception of the cause of poor writing performance. This could influence the quality of students' written outputs as their altered beliefs discourage them from resolving writing issues and improving their writing skills.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Since consciousness is inseparable from emotions, students' anticipation of readers' negative evaluations could trigger SLWA and other emotions (Rohmah et al., 2021). The interpreted information from their emotions could cause cognitive inconsistency and dissonance discomfort (Harmon-Jones et al., 2019) if it is inconsistent with their beliefs regarding their own abilities to accomplish their writing goals. In this case, students are motivated to find ways to interpret what they do, think, feel and say in a certain light to maintain their self-conception (Macdonald, 2009). This may explain why some students change the way they view writing challenges (Abd Rahim et al., 2016) and reduce the importance placed on written assignments (Ismail et al., 2008). In brief, SLWA causes cognitive dissonance because the emotion seems stronger for recurring when they are thinking and for occupying their attention when other thoughts are easier to dismiss (Macdonald, 2009).

Moreover, due to the interplay between students' cognition, emotion and motivation, one implication is to refrain from using anxiety to provoke students' performance (Horwitz, 2010) as this may cause cognitive dissonance and further anxiety. Modifying beliefs to resolve cognitive dissonance may encourage long-term procrastination and divert students' attention away from dissertation writing. In such situations, it is advisable for language instructors and supervisors to redirect students' attention back to dissertation writing and encourage them to reappraise their SLWA sources to writing challenges that can be overcome. Likewise, since SLWA may impede students' writing progress, it is essential that language instructors and supervisors discourage perceptions of writing inability by identifying their writing competence, recognizing improvement and suggesting specific solutions to resolve their writing issues.

Correspondingly, more can be understood about students' writing experiences and challenges when emotion is factored in and when the flexibility of qualitative research is used to address emotion and the phenomena that hide under its name. Since students can have cognitions about everything (e.g., behaviours, perceptions, feelings, attitudes, objects and people), cognitive dissonance is relevant to many different topics. Therefore, it is important

not to discount emotion when exploring and constructing students' emic perspectives. Thus, it is advisable for novice qualitative researchers especially, to consider practicing the followings before attempting interpretation and abstraction: conduct data analysis concurrently with data collection (Merriam et al., 2016); organize multiple interview sessions (Mackey et al., 2016); allot sufficient time-gap between sessions; repeat key interview questions; revisit emergent topics; and devote ample time and effort to establish a good rapport with the research participants (Merriam et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, this study has its limitations. Since the findings are based on four cases, involving more participants may enable more readers to apply the findings to their contexts (Merriam et al., 2016). Similarly, the inclusion of instructors' and supervisors' voices could offer more compelling insights as they present different perspectives on the participants' SLWA experience and dissertation writing journey. Be that as it may, the research was able to provide in-depth descriptions of the participants' SLWA in dissertation writing. Hence, for future empirical efforts, a longitudinal study can be considered, and the research focus can be widened to include L2 self, self-efficacy and self-regulatory skills, following an academic writing course.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, L2 postgraduate students may experience SLWA and CD in high-stakes writing such as dissertation writing. In this case, they are motivated to alter their beliefs in order to resolve the cognitive inconsistency and reduce the dissonance discomfort when anticipating or facing negative outcomes. Although this mechanism may prevent the students from ruminating over failed goals and keeps them motivated with positive biases, it can also lead to misperception and misattribution. This could encourage behaviours and thoughts that could negatively influence the student's performance in dissertation writing.

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DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. All co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of the manuscript and there is no financial interest to report.

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