



The Correlation Between Social Media Usage and Imposter Syndrome Among College Students in Islamabad: Exploring the Role of Class Level (HSSC 1, HSSC 2) Differences

Bareeha Kamran¹, Afia Misri², Ayesha Nadeem³, Izah Shafqat⁴, Eisha Tir Radia Shahbaz⁵ & Rubab Khan⁶

¹BS Student/ hypnotherapist, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan,

Email: 211420@students.au.edu.pk

²Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan, Email: Afia.misri@au.edu.pk

³BS Student, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan, Email: 211392@students.au.edu.pk

⁴BS Student, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan, Email: 211371@students.au.edu.pk

⁵BS Student, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan, Email: 211390@students.au.edu.pk

⁶BS Student, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan, Email: 211375@students.au.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author:

Bareeha Kamran

Email:

211420@students.au.edu.pk



ABSTRACT

In today's digital age, academic meritocracy dictates self-worth creating fertile ground for the proliferation of Imposter Syndrome - a psychological phenomenon characterized by pervasive feelings of fraudulence and incompetence, despite evident accomplishments. Global research suggests that multiple sociocultural factors play a role in the development of this pressing psychological struggle, among which social media usage is of notable importance. Social media usage can either amplify self-doubt, or reduce it by providing emotional support and reassurance. This study aims to examine the intricacy of this relationship among Pakistani college students. A quantitative cross-sectional design was adopted, and data was collected from a sample of 300 first-and second-year college students in Islamabad through convenience sampling. A statistically significant correlation between imposter syndrome and Social media usage was reported, however, individual differences were also observed. This study offers a critical, empirically grounded perspective on imposter syndrome in Pakistan, bridging the fields of developmental psychology, digital behavior, and sociocultural research. It informs of the need to curate culturally adaptive interventions designed to proactively manage this phenomenon before its full-blown manifestation in an era where academic excellence and online validation are deeply intertwined.

Introduction

As children grow older, socialization becomes a powerful influence, particularly through their interactions with peers and, increasingly, through social media. In today's digital age, social media has a profound impact on how individuals perceive themselves by constantly exposing them to the lives and achievements of others. (Rüther et al., 2023). For those who already struggle with self-esteem, this exposure to idealized versions of success and perfection on social media can either heighten feelings of inadequacy or, in some cases, provide validation and connection (Colak et al., 2023). A person who is negatively hindered by social media usage develops a s feeling of self-doubt and this lack of self-assurance is often seen in individuals who develop imposter syndrome, characterized by persistent feelings of inadequacy and the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite external success (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020). The influence of social media on the risk of developing imposter syndrome is complex, with its effects varying greatly based on each individual's unique experiences and vulnerabilities.

Social Media Usage

As children grow older, socialization becomes another powerful influence, particularly through their interactions with peers and, increasingly, through social media. In today's digital age, social media has a profound impact on how individuals perceive themselves by constantly exposing them to the lives and achievements of others. (Rüther et al., 2023). By the year 2022, Pakistan had an audience of 71.70 million social media users. The social media platforms named as YouTube and Facebook marked themselves as the most popular platforms along with WhatsApp and Twitter (Tariq et al., 2023). Since social media permits instant, real-time, conversation without the limitations of distance, the messages spread so much faster and make information more dispersed, thereby making learning more collaborative. Through such conversations, young people negotiate their perspectives of the world build their social networks and share ideas, which are cardinal for their cognitive and emotional development. However, quality matters for the nature of those conversations: while good interactions may enhance understanding and positively develop, experiences with negative or false sources of information may influence perceptions and behaviors. All of this is determined by a variety of things, including the type of content people are watching, the amount of time they spend on it, and their approach to it. It is also found that the 20 likelihood of problematic social media usage increases owing to a variety of issues such as poor offline relationships and friendships, low self-esteem, neuroticism, a lack of emotional control, and social pressure to maintain those online world ties. This pressure is accompanied by a desire for affirmation and the promotion of addictive behaviors, both of which are extremely detrimental. For those who already struggle with self-esteem, this exposure to idealized versions of success and perfection on social media can either heighten feelings of inadequacy or, in some cases, provide validation and connection (Colak et al., 2023). The influence of social media on the risk of developing imposter syndrome is complex, with its effects varying greatly based on each individual's unique experiences and vulnerabilities. Social media, popular among adolescents, is classified into active personal use (sending messages), passive personal use (reading messages), and passive public use (browsing feeds). Active participation can boost social connection and emotional well-being, while passive use is linked to negative effects like social comparison and low self-esteem (Beyens et al., 2024). Platforms like TikTok and Instagram impact university students' self-expression and self-awareness, contributing to identity crises and feelings of inadequacy. A study by Fuchs (2022) indicated that excessive active engagement, especially on image-centric platforms like Instagram, has been related to body image concerns and increased anxiety. The platforms in which users' self-worth is tied to visual feedback, such as likes and comments, can lead to social comparison and feelings of inadequacy, especially among

adolescents. In addition, a systematic review by Gordon et al., (2021) reveals a significant connection between passive social media usage and depression. Adolescents who passively scroll through social media, especially negative news or perfect representations of other people's lives, have lower self-esteem and enhanced feelings of loneliness. Users reported that exposure to curated content and peer comparisons shapes their self-perception, leading to struggles with self-esteem and authenticity (Chen, 2023). Valkenburg & Peter (2013) suggest that constant exposure to carefully constructed content on social media can make adolescents make upward social comparisons, comparing themselves to people who are perceived as more successful, attractive, or connected socially. Upward comparison has been associated with depression, anxiety, and lower life satisfaction. On the other hand, a few researchers have discovered that social media also enables 23 downward comparisons, by which the user compares himself with others in worse situations. This can result in positive consequences, for example, elevated self-esteem and feelings of superiority. Such advantages are usually only short-term, and the cumulative effect of frequent upward social comparison remains essentially negative, fostering continued emotional pain (Fardouly et al., 2018).

Imposter Syndrome

Originally, Imposter Syndrome was described as a psychological pattern where individuals, despite their achievements, perceive themselves as intellectual frauds. They experience a plethora of symptoms including anxiety, low self-confidence, and frustration (Clance & Imes, 1978). Recent studies define it as the attribution of accomplishments and esteem to oversight or luck. These studies reiterate that imposter syndrome comes with a constant feeling of being a fraud or a phony, coupled with a constant worry of their fraud being exposed (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020). High level of Imposter Phenomenon limits the acceptance of success as an outcome of one's own ability and influences feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. They reject positive messages about their personal contribution because those messages are incongruent with their perception of their mechanics of success. Imposters disregard their success if there is any gap between their actual performance and their ideal standard, which contributes to discounting of positive feedback, since such individuals are high achievers who also make unreasonably low assessments of their performance (Walker & Saklofske, 2023). Cannon and Mandeville (2023) conducted a meta-analysis revealing a significant link between imposter syndrome and increased anxiety and depression. Individuals with high levels of imposter syndrome reported more severe symptoms compared to those with lower levels. Imposter Syndrome is not a psychiatric disorder in its own right: it does not feature in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5). But, unsurprisingly, it can lead to clinical anxiety or depression, as well as more day to-day unhappiness and stress (El-Ashry et al., 2024). Research indicates that this fear can lead to heightened levels of anxiety and stress, which further exacerbate feelings of inadequacy (Bravata et al., 2020). Additionally, Parkman (2016) highlights how these pressures are particularly pronounced in academic environments, where high achievers may internalize expectations for excellence, leading to a cycle of self-doubt and performance anxiety. This interplay between social expectations and personal standards underscores the complex relationship between imposter syndrome and perfectionism, reinforcing the notion that social validation plays a critical role in shaping individuals' self-perceptions (Miller & Kearney, 2021). In Pakistan, research shows a significant negative relationship between social media usage and teenagers' self-esteem, with increased online time correlating to lower self-worth (Farooq et al., 2023).

Significance of the Study

There is a growing need to understand how social media usage interact to influence imposter syndrome. This research contributes to both local and global understanding of youth mental health by empowering students to manage imposter syndrome through awareness and coping strategies. Guiding parents on the importance of autonomy in digital-age parenting. Equipping educators to identify and support struggling students. Encouraging community initiatives on responsible digital habits. Assisting policymakers in integrating mental health education in curricula and providing baseline data for future longitudinal and cross-cultural studies.

Theoretical background

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides an extensive overview of how self-determined behavior has an influence on motivation and overall well-being of an individual. Self-determination primarily refers to an individual's willpower to manage their lives and to make their own decisions, predominantly emphasizing the idea that one's life is not dictated by external forces rather than their own decisions. SDT suggests that individuals are motivated by an internal desire to overcome challenges, seek new experiences, and grow, which nurtures a cohesive sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). At the core of this theory are three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are shaped by social and cultural factors that either facilitates an individual's sense of self, performance, and well-being or it hinders them (Legault, 2017)

Imposter Syndrome through the Lens of SDT

Imposter Syndrome (IP) refers to the internal experience of believing that one is not as competent as others perceive them to be, often accompanied by self-doubt, fear of being exposed as a fraud, and difficulty internalizing achievements. In this research, competence is directly related to imposter syndrome, as individuals experiencing imposter feelings, despite evidence of their success, may doubt their abilities. Children may develop a fragile sense of competence, heavily relying on external validation, such as recognition from peers or parents. Failing to internalize their achievements, may lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, which are the important characteristics of imposter syndrome.

Social Media Usage through the Lens of SDT

In this research, relatedness is analyzed through the lens of social media as a moderator in the connection between parental autonomy and imposter syndrome. Individuals especially adolescents who frequently use social media, oftentimes results in social comparisons, which can furthermore heightens the feelings of inadequacy and hinders self-esteem (Vogel et al., 2014). This resonates with the concept of imposter syndrome, especially among adolescents who struggle with low self-identity. Additionally, Li (2019) explores how upward social comparisons on social media can heavily have a contribution to depressive symptoms, with envy and self-efficacy as mediators and moderators. On the contrary, receiving feedback from others on social networking sites is linked to increased state self-esteem, particularly when the feedback is perceived as supportive and positively toned (Krause et al., 2019) Therefore, social media usage may worsen or ameliorate the effects of imposter syndrome by amplification or reduction of one's self esteem.

Understanding the link between SDT and imposter syndrome has significant practical implications for coming up with intervention strategies. By nurturing the environment that which encourages and promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness, it may be possible to strengthen individuals' self-esteem and motivation and to reduce the effects of imposter syndrome.

Method

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed to explore the correlation between social media usage and imposter syndrome among college students. This approach enabled a statistical examination of self-reported behaviors and psychological experiences within a defined adolescent population.

Participants

The sample consisted of 298 students (150 males, 148 females), aged 15 to 19 years, enrolled in 1st and 2nd year (HSSC-I and II) at six public colleges in Islamabad, under the Federal Directorate of Education. Equal representation was maintained across gender and academic year (25 students from each level per college). Due to practical constraints, convenience sampling was used instead of the initially intended stratified random sampling. The sample size was determined using Tabachnick & Fidell's formula ($50 + 8k$), ensuring sufficient statistical power for correlational analysis.

Inclusion Criteria

- Age between 15–19 years.
- Enrolled in a public college within Islamabad.
- Daily active social media user, i.e., logging into at least one platform every 24 hours. Students, who were not active users of social media, not enrolled in Islamabad colleges, or did not meet the age criteria were excluded.

Instruments

Young Imposter Syndrome Scale (Young, 2008): An 8-item instrument measuring feelings of self-doubt and fraudulence. A score of 5 or more indicates strong imposter traits.

Multidimensional Scale of Social Media Use (Summayya, Atta, & Malik, 2024): A 28-item Likert scale capturing four dimensions: active use, enhancement motive, compensation motive, and passive consumption. It has demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$).

Procedure

Following ethical approval from Air University's Research Committee and permissions from scale authors and the Federal Directorate of Education, students were approached in classroom settings. The study's purpose was explained, and informed consent was obtained. Data were collected using paper-based questionnaires under researcher supervision to ensure clarity and completeness. Participants were debriefed and thanked after participation. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS, applying descriptive and correlational statistics to explore the relationship between social media usage and imposter syndrome.

Results

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants at Baseline

Variable	N	%
Age		
15-20	298	100%
Gender		
Male	150	50.3%
Female	148	49.7%
Class		
HSSC-1	184	61.7%
HSSC-2	114	38.3%
Religion		
Islam	284	95.3%
Other	14	4.7%
Parental Marital Status		
Married	265	88.9%
Separated	18	6.0%
Divorced	15	5.0%
Family Structure		
Nuclear	187	62.8%
Joint	111	37.2%

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations for, Young Imposter Scale (YIS) and Multidimensional Scale of Social Media Use (MSMU)

Variables	n	M	SD	1	2	3
1. YIS	298	12.51	1.80		-	-
2. MSMU	298	94.33	17.00	.31**		-

Note: M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation. 1=POPS, 2=YIS, 3=MSMU ** $p < .01$

The Pearson product moment correlation revealed that imposter Syndrome is significantly positively correlated with Social Media Usage ($r = .31, p < .01$), which implies that as social media usage increases, so do the imposter feelings.

Table 3: Mean Comparisons of College Students Based on their Class (HSSC-1 and HSSC-2) on Imposter Syndrome and Social Media Usage

Variables	HSSC-1 (N=184)		HSSC-2 (N=114)		<i>t</i> (296)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
YIS	12.5	1.57	12.52	2.11	-0.12	0.902	-
MSMU	91.8	15.21	98.32	18.9	3.24	0.001	0.380

Note: M=mean, SD=standard deviation, *t*=difference, *df*=degree of freedom, *p*=significance

The results indicated there was no significant difference between HSSC1 students ($M = 12.59, SD = 1.57$) and HSSC2 students ($M = 12.53, SD = 2.11$) in imposter syndrome scores, $t(296) = -.12, p = .90$. On the contrary there is a significant difference in social media usage, with HSSC2 students ($M = 98.32, SD = 18.93$) reporting higher usage than HSSC1 students ($M = 91.85, SD = 15.22$), $t(296) = -3.25, p = .001$. Additionally, the Cohen's *d* value for YIS ($d = 0.01$) is negligible while for MSMU ($d = 0.38$) indicates a small but meaningful difference.

Conclusion

The correlation between Social Media Usage and Imposter Syndrome was significantly positive, which confirms the notion set out by existing literature. A negative correlation exists between social media usage and self-esteem in Pakistani teenagers, specifying that increased usage corresponded to lower self-worth (Farooq et al., 2023). This supports the findings of this study, where lower self-esteem can be attributed to the development of imposter feelings. With everyone constantly posting about their accomplishments and achievements, social media presents a lot of avenues for comparisons. Imposter feelings among the youth may arise from upward comparisons on social media (Alnutaifi et al., 2023). People that tend to compare themselves to those rated higher than themselves, in terms of beauty, money or achievement, tend to feel a sense of inadequacy that affects their self-esteem. Upward 57 comparisons, by lowering the self-esteem, make a person more susceptible to imposter feelings. A low self-esteem can also be driven by comparisons between the real and presented self. Ibrahim et al. (2024) found that individuals with higher imposter feelings were prone to creating a false, almost deceptive social media persona. Evidence suggests that these people were preoccupied with adjusting and curating a perfect social media presence, often based on over exaggeration and manipulation of facts. This created a cognitive dissonance due to the conflicting social media and real-life personas. This dissonance led to feeling like a fraud or a phony and eventually contributed to the development of imposter feelings. The social media persona is catered to specifically gain the maximum amount of praise and validation. This can quickly become addictive, making a person dependent on social media validation in order to feel good about themselves. Any fluctuation in the praise and validation through social media can significantly affect a person's self-esteem, fostering feelings of inadequacy and an erosion of internal confidence. Lower self-esteem and a constant effort to portray a better self-image on social media can create feelings of being an imposter (Galante & Alam, 2019). In conclusion, social media can affect the young minds in a way that leads them to feel like a phony, be it through the development of a fake persona, the dependence on external validation or a tendency for upward comparison, all of which correspond to the development of imposter syndrome.

In line with the second hypothesis, it was found that there was no significant difference in the scores YIS between HSSCI 1 and HSSC 2 students. However, there was a tremendous difference in social media usage with HSSC-II students having a greater use. This indicates that although imposter feelings do not vary among junior and senior college students, their online engagement patterns are quite different. The lack of difference in imposter syndrome indicates that such feeling may be deeply rooted in early personality development and cultural demands rather than academic level. Clance and Imes (1978) pointed out that imposter syndrome is strongly influenced by internalized perfectionism and parental expectations, which likely stay stable across both HSSC levels in Pakistani students. This is consistent with the findings of Khalid et al. (2019) reporting that imposter syndrome could continue across academic transitions and promotion into senior classes does not affect the IP phenomena reported similar results. Consistent to this Maqsood et al (2018) conducted a research and reporting there is no association between class level and severity of imposter syndrome.

Analogously, the large rise in the use of social media among HSSC-II pupils might be indicative of increased scholastic pressure, impending university applications, and heightened peer pressure. Senior students could be using social media as an escape, a source of validation, or for social comparison, all of which aligns with the Priming Theory, which states that prolonged exposure to idealized visuals can influence one's emotional and cognitive judgments. This is backed by research by Beyens et al. (2024) that indicates adolescents under more stress use social media for

both recreation and as a means of managing emotional demands, which in turn can indirectly increase imposter feelings in the end. The Covid-19 pandemic amplified the social media usage amongst adolescents as students were forced into online learning which increased their time spent on social media (Delogu et al., 2025). However, class level as a demographic factor played a crucial role. A study revealed that senior high school students tend to engage more with social media for career-related networking, leading to an increase in the time they spend on these platforms. (Mingle, Adams, & Adjei, 2016)

Finally, though impressions of imposter syndrome are constant over academic years, the increased use of social media among HSSC-II students is a potential risk factor that, if not intervened on, could increase psychological distress. This emphasizes the importance of specifically designed digital wellness interventions and coping skill training programs for senior students undergoing high-stakes transitions.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the valuable insights offered by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was limited to F.Sc. students in Islamabad, excluding those from other academic streams such as A-levels, which restricts the generalizability of the findings across different educational systems. The study was also conducted under time constraints, potentially limiting the depth of data collection. As with most self-report measures, there is a risk of response bias, particularly social desirability bias, which may have influenced participants to respond in ways aligned with cultural norms. Furthermore, the quantitative nature of the research limits its ability to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of the participants. The absence of qualitative data constrains a deeper understanding of the interplay between parental autonomy, social media usage, and imposter syndrome. Additionally, convenience sampling was employed, with data collected only from a few colleges in Islamabad where permission was granted, further limiting the representativeness of the sample. To address these limitations, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to gain a richer understanding of the phenomena. Expanding the sample to include students from A-levels, O-levels, and universities would improve the generalizability of the findings. Incorporating parents' self-reports of their parenting styles could also enhance the validity of perceived parental autonomy ratings by enabling a comparative analysis with student perceptions. There is a need to develop revised and culturally appropriate imposter syndrome scales, preferably in Urdu, to ensure contextual relevance and accessibility within the Pakistani sociocultural context. Future studies should also consider key demographic factors such as residential area, socioeconomic status, and income levels, as these may significantly impact experiences of imposter syndrome and social media behavior. Lastly, transgender individuals should be included within the gender categories to ensure inclusive representation without compromising analytical clarity.

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