

Echoes of Doubt: Unveiling Imposter Phenomenon Among First Generation Pakistani Students

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the imposter phenomenon (IP) among first-generation college students (FGCS) in Pakistan adopting a phenomenological research framework. Nine FGCS from different backgrounds were interviewed to investigate how social and cultural factors affect their IP experiences. The research focused on themes of social adaptation, motivation, university friendship, and the interplay of collectivism-individualism. Findings showed that there are multiple interactions between the traditional cultural roles and the new academic settings. Participants described IP issues when transitioning to university life, making friends, and coping with academic stress in relation to cultural demands. However, they also demonstrated resilience and motivation drawn from peer achievements.

The study highlighted the nature and perception of IP among FGCS in Pakistan based on their cultural background and academic environment. The conflict between collectivist values and the less collectivist university environment became an issue. However, participants' performances were characterized by great tenacity, which was often fueled by family expectations and the need to set an example for other members of the community. This research helps to fill the gap in knowledge about IP in non-Western countries and provides insights for the development of appropriate interventions for FGCS in the context of Pakistan's higher education system. It highlights the importance of culturally appropriate care and more research on IP's experiences in different cultures.

Introduction

Today in the age of globalization and technological development, higher education is more important than ever for economic stability and social elevation. This is especially the case in developing nations such as Pakistan in which the enrollment ratio to the higher education has been on the rise in the recent past. The World Data Atlas (2023) reveals that the enrollment ratio to higher education in Pakistan has risen by 9% between 1979 and 2018, which indicates that the role of higher education in the country's development is gradually being appreciated. With increasing enrolment of students in universities, there is an increased number of first-generation college students (FGCS); students whose parents have not attained a bachelor's degree. There is a lack of precise statistics for Pakistan; however, according to Pakistan Institute of Education, 2015-2016 academic year data, 56% of the total undergraduate students across the country were FGCS and 59% of them were the first in their family to go to college. This demographic shift in higher education has both the possibilities and the problems for the Pakistani universities and students.

Enrolling in the college system and adjusting to it are two different things, adjusting to a college environment is a psychological procedure of coping with and managing the challenges, problems and demands of daily life (Chong et al., 2014; Nasir & Maliha, 2011).

One of the significant challenges faced by FGCS is the imposter phenomenon (IP) which is described as a person experiencing feelings of being a fake and having doubts in one's abilities despite the goal accomplishment (Clance & Imes, 1978). Individuals experiencing IP often attribute their achievements to luck or mistake rather than their own abilities, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and potential underperformance. The person undergoing this phenomenon does not actually believe themselves to be intelligent or accomplished despite objective evidence of success and feel vulnerable to discovery as a fraud (Ménard & Chittle, 2023). While IP has been studied extensively in Western contexts, there is limited research on its manifestation among FGCS in non-Western countries like Pakistan. This literature gap is especially noticeable due to the growing trend in the expansion of higher education in Pakistan and the growing enrolment of FGCS in universities. Therefore, it is vital to comprehend FGCS's perspectives on IP to establish support structures and practices that will facilitate the student's academic progress and future endeavors.

The current research therefore seeks to establish the extent of IP among FGCS in Pakistan and the effect it has on their performance, as well as the strategies that these students use to deal with the issue. Hence, by analyzing the cultural background, social identity, and academic experiences of FGCS, the study aims to offer recommendations that will help in designing better support structures for FGCS in Pakistani universities. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions: In what ways do the social and cultural factors affect the imposter phenomenon experienced by first-generation college students in Pakistan? How does the FGCS in Pakistan deal with the imposter phenomenon? Thus, it is crucial to understand how the shift from collectivist home cultures to more individualistic university contexts influence FGCS' experiences of IP. How does the aspect of peer relationship and social support network influence the IP either positively or negatively among the FGCS in Pakistan?

Answering these questions, this study enriches the existing literature on IP in various cultural settings and offers useful information for educators, policymakers, and university managers who are struggling to facilitate FGCS in Pakistan and other developing nations.

Literature Review

The occupational experiences of FGCS in higher education can potentially reinforce inequity if not clearly understood or addressed. According to Whiteford (2017), there hasn't been much investigation in occupational science research on the "[transitional] occupation of being a university student," and more investigation into this occupational perspective is warranted in the field (p. 58). Lack of published research on college students' Professional experiences start to work against the goal of encouraging social inclusion. Consequently, first-generation students who encounter IP will benefit from an occupational lens that offers a more comprehensive viewpoint.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides peripheral insight as to why marginalized groups face adversity by extracting complex social categorizations and identities that comprise a person, such as socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, sexuality, and other oppressed identities/experiences, while also focusing on the interdependence by which these identities interact. As a result, the origin of marginalization against an individual, group, or population can be better understood (Secules et al., 2018). Hewertson and Tissa (2022) coined the term intersectionality as a process of marginalization that is ascribed onto people's bodies and within their identity. Hewertson and Tissa (2022) conducted a student survey which aimed at studying the higher education programs that enable access to the culture of power and their study concluded with the recommendation that teachers should help build confidence in students to alleviate imposter syndrome in marginalized groups.

"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." This is a quote by *Audre Lorde* which captures the essence of intersectionality. Furthermore, (Collins, 2015, p. 2) defines intersectionality as "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities." College campus become more and more diverse as students from multiple backgrounds, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses unite under a single roof with the ambitions of achieving higher education to excel in

their respective domains (*Higher Education Statistics Higher Education Statistics*, 2024). These college students will most likely face intersectional forms of discrimination.

Lived Experiences of First-Generation College Students

In a general educational setting, there are mainly two types of students: the first-generation college students (FGCS) and the continuing-generation college students (CGCS). Among their experiences, microaggression is a widely experienced form of discrimination by these students. As per a recent study finding, 98.8% of the students report experiences of microaggression (Farber et al., 2020). Ellis et al. (2019) refers to microaggression as a form of everyday discrimination that is discrete and indirect but serves as a discriminatory remark (Ellis et al., 2019). Ellis et al. (2019) also discusses how microaggressions are the most pertinent encounters FGCS commonly face.

Many FGCS also face economic struggles which make them feel obligated to provide financial support to their families (LeBouef and Dworkin 2021). Covarrubias et al. (2019) reported that the first-generation college students coming from a low-income family made them feel more responsible to handle their own as well as their family's financial matters. The financial conditions of university students shape them into being overconfident, risk loving and impatient. As per the world economic forum, Pakistan's population comprises 64% of the pupil below the age of 30 and youth unemployment rate as high as 8.5%. Many first-generation college students continue to work to support their families and themselves, but this can also be challenging considering the amount of balance required to maintain both work and school side by side. FGCS are less likely to be involved in social activities that are conducted on-campus to entertain students such as academic and social experiences, study groups, faculty interactions, extracurricular activities, and support services for students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). There is an array of attitudes towards higher education acquisition, some families of FG (Engle & Tinto, 2008). College students perceive higher education as a path to success unlike others (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014).

Support From College

Enrollment in higher education itself is a rigorous procedure which indicates that all students enrolled in higher education have the ability, potential and skills to succeed, but many FGCS lack the social and financial resources to do so (Havlik et al., 2017). Despite the facilities for support of college students, fewer FGCS, as compared with CGCS used health services (14% vs. 29%), academic advising (55% vs. 72%) and academic support (30% vs. 37%) (RTI International, 2019). The lifesavers in these types of situations are the colleges themselves (Ellis et al., 2019). The colleges can advocate an inclusive environment for students from diverse backgrounds by training their staff and faculty likewise. Babineau (2018); Engle and Tinto (2008) provides the guideline to cater to such issues which include but are not limited to transition programs, freshman experiences, population-specific scholarships, and mentorship.

Imposter Phenomena (IP)

IP, also referred to as the 'Imposter syndrome' is a feeling of incompetency among the ones experiencing it. Furthermore, it is a sense of having deceived others about one's abilities. People with IP are shown to be associated with characteristics such as introversion, trait anxiety, over-consciousness, a prosperity of shame, and sometimes a conflictual family background as well (Langford & Clance, 1993). IP was originally developed to describe the lived experiences of high-achieving women in the workforce (Clance & Imes, 1978). The first-generation college students, who identify with IP may have shared perception of incompetency, and fraudulence in their academic environment. Literature suggests that FGCS experience IP at a higher rate and relatively more than their peer CGCS (Martinez et al., 2009; Peteet et al., 2015). FGCS who come from varying backgrounds that include the racial/ethnic minorities, low-income backgrounds and culturally backward areas have reported higher levels of anxiety, the fear of academic failure, lower self-esteem, and lower academic confidence (Peteet et al., 2015).

Current literature reports the firsthand experiences of FGCS all around the world with a specific focus on their occupational engagement and social enactment while this domain remains unexplored in the Pakistani academic environment. IP is a widely experienced phenomena but the lack of knowledge regarding the existence of this

concept creates a barrier to overcoming this. Therefore, this study aims to use phenomenological theory to explore the IP experiences among FGCS enrolled in a four-year university program in Pakistan.

Methodology

This research is inductive qualitative research using phenomenological methods. Data was collected through interviews in a network of students who identified themselves as FGCS. The number of participants kept on increasing until the saturation point. This study utilizes a phenomenological-theory approach to unveil the existence and experiences of FGCS in Pakistan.

Procedure

This study included nine first generation college students (FGCS) from different universities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, where four participants were females and five were males. We used purposive sampling to ensure participant diversity in terms of geographic origin, academic program, and year of study. Inclusion criteria specified that participants had to be first-generation college students (with neither parent having completed a bachelor's degree), currently enrolled at a higher educational institute. Our sample size was determined using data saturation principles, and additional interviews were conducted until new themes emerged. Although the sample of nine participants is relatively small, this is consistent with phenomenological research practices that prioritize in-depth analysis over broad sampling (Creswell, 2013). We conducted semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. The interview protocol explored participants' backgrounds, experiences of transitioning to university, academic and social challenges, and narrative-linked emotions pertaining to the imposter incident (IP). With the consent of the participants, the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. For data analysis, we used thematic analysis to identify, explore, and report patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis

After conducting our interviews and doing extensive research we were able to gain insight on how participants and students originating from different cultural and social backgrounds face, and deal with Imposter Phenomenon after coming to university. We were able to gain insight and conduct analysis on the similarities and differences of the responses we obtained in order to get a deeper understanding of the topic at hand.

After conducting these interviews, we were able to identify a stark difference between the environment students face back at home and the one they face at their respective universities. The primary themes we identified that were mentioned repeatedly, in which the participants faced the most differences, and which contributed the most to Imposter Phenomenon were: *University friendships, social adjustment and peer relationships, motivation and goals, along with the concept of collectivism vs individualism.*

The interviews we conducted focused on how these participants navigated their social and academic lives in their universities according to the above-mentioned themes. The responses we received had both similarities and differences, particularly regarding how participants manage their social lives and peer relationships after coming to university, the concept of individualism vs collectivism, with some participants remaining isolated while others doing well in groups, along with how they perceive their lives to be when comparing it how it was back at home before coming to university.

These responses, along with the similarities and differences were analyzed using thematic analysis, as this type of analysis provided us with flexibility, adaptability, a wider range of themes originating from the original data, along with a better understanding of said data and the topic.

Social Adjustment and Peer Relationships

One of the primary challenges the Imposter Phenomenon describes is the difference between the social environments students face back home and the ones they must face when they eventually come to university. Social acceptance and positive relationships with peers often help these students become better integrated in different social environments and develop in them a sense of belonging, positively affecting their academic performance as well. On the other hand, not being able to form these positive relationships results in students

feeling alienated and alone, negatively affecting not just their academic performance but their mental health as well. Moreover, students from different backgrounds also face self-doubt, stress and anxiety when comparing their achievements to their peers, furthering their problems of social integration.

One of the respondents, described how he manages to create a positive social network in his university despite being from a completely different cultural and social background: *“Apart from this I have participated in multiple societies in my university, due to which I, once again, have developed a healthy social network.”* By actively taking part in different societies and social settings, he has managed to create a positive and healthy social network and relationships, resulting in him enjoying his life in his university. Another respondent says *‘Now that I’ve come to university, I’m participating in a lot of stuff, in societies and in sports events and other opportunities which are presented by the university itself.’* This also shows how a strong and healthy social network is formed by the respondents as this environment was not easily accessible back home.

Another respondent, provides a different perspective on how he views and navigates social life and his relationship with his peers: *“In university, friendships are confined to study behaviors. If you are a good student, you will hang out with students with good GPAs and likewise.”* He is of the opinion that friendships and social networking in university is based primarily on academics, with people of similar academic performances and backgrounds forming their own social groups and relationships.

Participants provide completely different perspectives on how they form peer relationships and navigate their social life after coming to university. While one participant actively goes out and participates in societies and social events to form a diverse and healthy social network and relationships, the other participant is of the opinion that social relations in universities are entirely based on academics and studies.

One respondent, provides her opinion on how her social life has changes after she joined her university: *“I’m participating in a lot of stuff, in societies and in sport events along with other opportunities that are presented by the university itself. So, I guess now it’s different, as I’ve discovered I’m an extrovert and I’ve made more friends than o had back then,”* By participating in various event, activities and societies, particularly sports, She has managed to form her own positive social circle and create a multitude of relationships with different people, far more than she had previously back home in Hunza, allowing her to realize her true personality has an extrovert and navigate her social life and peer relationships much more effectively.

When the topic came to how these respondents managed their stress, emotions, and feelings in regard to their academics and seeing the success and achievements of other people, all the respondents described a feeling of motivation and drive to do better.

This can be best described by the response of one participant: *“Obviously, I get motivated by other people’s accomplishments. Because I believe if people around me who are also students can accomplish great things, it doesn’t mean I can’t, so yes, it’s more of a motivating factor that pushes me to work harder and do better and outdo myself.”* Instead of giving into stress, anxiety and pessimism, he describes a feeling of motivation, drive, and a desire to do better when seeing other people’s achievements, which is a factor that ultimately leads to success and is an indication of confidence and self-efficacy.

All the participant replies show how complex the imposter phenomenon is and how much of an impact it has on students' experiences at universities. A prevalent motif discernible among the participants is the noteworthy obstacle presented by the shift from accustomed social settings in their hometowns to the ever-changing and frequently daunting social terrain of tertiary education. Students may have increased sentiments of impostorism during this adjustment period because they must learn to navigate new social norms, expectations, and peer dynamics. The subjects repeatedly stress how important peer relationships and social approval were in influencing how they experienced impostorism. Positive social network building is essential for promoting a sense of belonging and reducing symptoms of imposter syndrome, according to university societies, events, and sports participants. On the other hand, those who find it difficult to build meaningful relationships with their peers frequently experience elevated levels of alienation and self-doubt, which can negatively affect their mental and academic wellbeing.

Even if the respondents' points of view are varied, a theme about the emotional coping mechanisms used to deal with impostorism appears. Some people believe that social relationships are primarily determined by one's academic performance, while others place more value on social participation and extracurricular activities. This variability emphasizes how crucial it is to identify and accept different coping strategies that are suited to personal preferences and situations.

In order to equip students to navigate and overcome the obstacles offered by impostorism in university environments, it is imperative that these dynamics be understood in order to build tailored interventions and support mechanisms.

Motivation and Goal setting

Motivation and goal setting play pivotal roles in shaping the academic journey of students. A strong sense of motivation drives students to set ambitious yet achievable goals, providing them with a clear direction and purpose. This clarity not only enhances their focus and determination but also helps them overcome obstacles and setbacks along the way. Additionally, setting and achieving goals boosts students' self-confidence and self-efficacy, reinforcing their belief in their abilities to succeed. Conversely, a lack of motivation or unclear goals can lead to procrastination, lack of direction, and ultimately, feelings of frustration and disengagement. Therefore, fostering motivation and effective goal-setting strategies are essential in empowering students to reach their full academic potential.

One respondent, described how she feels motivated by watching others excel. For example, when she says that a group gave a good presentation before her, she would be motivated to do better as well. By having such a positive mindset, she can keep herself motivated and ready for any obstacle.

Another respondent, also shared similar views on this as he explained that he also feels more motivated and goal-oriented by watching his peers become successful in their tasks. Both respondents are generally motivated by the actions of others and feel the need to do better while in the presence of people that are successful. Another respondent, mentions how the relative grading system plays a big role in shaping students' academic journeys. She explains how in such a system, you have to at least match or surpass your peers in terms of marks to get a good grade. This grading system always keeps the students on their feet and keeps them motivated.

Overall, it can be seen that the accomplishments of others play a big role in determining the motivation levels of students. If they see that their peers are doing well, they are naturally inclined to do better with the thought that if our friends can do it, then why can't we. This thought process can be considered a good tool when talking about motivation and goal setting as it ensures that the bare minimum is done by everyone. There are some negative aspects to this as well, as this leads to a lack of personal agency and autonomy. People are less motivated to find new ideas, as they too focused on doing better than their peers. Students may find themselves pursuing goals that align more with the expectations or desires of their peers rather than their own interests and passions. This can result in feelings of disconnection from their goals and a lack of intrinsic motivation. Additionally, comparing oneself to peers who are perceived to be more successful can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, hindering rather than enhancing motivation.

University Friendships: A Journey of Doubt and Disconnection

The sentiment expressed by the interviewees underscores a common struggle experienced by many noncitizens navigating the social dynamics of university life. The transition from familiar childhood bonds, nurtured over years of shared experiences and cultural understanding, to the transient and often superficial connections formed in academia can be particularly daunting. One participant stated: *"Before university I didn't have a huge number of friends, but I think they were the type of friends I could easily trust, now I've got more friends, but it feels like we're not that close with each other"*.

Friendships forged in university settings often revolve around shared academic goals and professional aspirations, leaving little space for the genuine personal connections prevalent in relationships outside the academic sphere. Additionally, the constant pressure of coursework and the uncertainties offered by the new place, culture, norms, and people, can further complicate the development of meaningful bonds. As described by one respondent:

“Before university, friendships were not made based on study routines, instead we bonded over what we liked to play, what we wanted to eat. In university, friendships are confined to study behaviors. You are a good student; you will hang out with students with good GPAs and likewise. This is something that I do not like”.

Time also plays a significant role in distinguishing university friendships from those cultivated in one's hometown. Childhood friendships back home are rooted in years of shared history and cultural understanding, whereas in university, initial years are spent grappling with cultural differences and navigating the complexities of immigration status. Just as one begins to form meaningful connections, the university journey comes to an end, dispersing friends into separate professional trajectories. This lack of continuity is articulated by one participant: *“I guess I was more comfortable with my previous social circle because I had a long friendship with people of that circle like close to 15 to 16 years, so I was very comfortable in sharing anything and everything with them. But now in university, I've known my current friends for a very short time and my first year here was very different and difficult, but now it has gotten much better but not that much, so I would have to say I was much more comfortable with my previous social circle before university based on the fact that I had known them for a longer period of time”.*

The shortage of time, the professional nature of university friendships, coupled with the inherent complexities of being a noncitizen contribute to the fact that the intentions of colleagues can be mired in mystery. As one respondent from Gilgit expressed saying *“I would say I felt more at comfort with my previous friend circle because the new people I've met, I can never know their intentions and that is a primary factor which makes me say that I preferred my older friend group”.* This uncertainty can cause distrust and can be a hurdle in the way of good friendships. And the preconceived notions about university friendships doesn't help either, *“We've created this concept that there are a lot of snakes in universities, so I guess that influences people into thinking that the friends you make in college are generally better”.*

The theme explores the complicated experiences of noncitizens figuring out friendship in college environments. It sheds light on the difficulties involved in making the shift from the enduring, profound friendships of childhood to the fleeting, frequently surface-level relationships made in academic settings. The interviewees all expressed a feeling of uncertainty and detachment from their university friendships. In conclusion, the theme draws attention to the various obstacles that noncitizens encounter when attempting to establish sincere connections in college environments. Noncitizens face challenges in establishing lasting relationships among the fleeting nature of university life, from overcoming cultural displacement to negotiating academic pressures and societal expectations. Fostering an inclusive and encouraging social environment in academics requires an understanding of these problems.

Individualism Vs Collectivism

Some common emotions that the participants of this study demonstrated were in line with personal adaptation, social integration, and cultural identity. While analyzing their responses thematically, it became almost inevitable to avoid the prevalence of the two most dominating and contrasting cultural dimensions, collectivism, and individualism. These dimensions influence individual's perceptions, behaviors, and coping mechanisms, especially in the transition from traditional closely-knit social structures to diverse academic environments.

Individualism is characterized by a focus on personal goals, individual achievements, autonomy, and self-expression. While on the other hand, collectivism is characterized by group harmony, interdependence, and collective achievements. These two contrasting dimensions are reflected in the participants' experiences.

The interviews reveal how individuals navigate through these cultural dimensions. Participants adherences'-knit communities and social circles such as in Gilgit and Kohat describe their home-culture as embedded in collectivist values where family bonds, community cohesion and traditional adherence are dominant. For instance, one participant from Gilgit reflects on the complexities of her Hunzai culture by stating:

If we talk about the cultural environment at my house, we might say it's different from a typical household in Islamabad. Hunzai people in my opinion are quite complex, they can be liberal and conservative at the same time and in my house at least it depends on the situation.

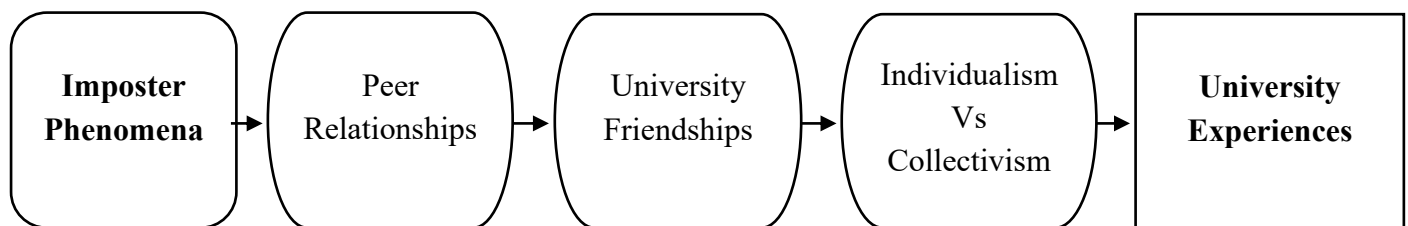
She highlights the blend of liberalism; often associated with collectivism and conservatism; often associated with individualism. Similarly, another participant emphasizes the challenges of transitioning from a closely knit social structure to a more individualistic setting, university life. He states that:

So there definitely are a variety and people being generally more closed off and keep to themselves and unless you find a good friend group, it's difficult to survive in this environment, considering you are from a culture where you have always been surrounded by people.

On the other hand, some participants, descending from diverse backgrounds also navigate the shift towards individualism in university settings. One respondent states that:

Another difference is that Urdu and English are the commonly spoken language here but back home, we speak our mother tongue. I feel like people here are more individualistic, they're more focused on themselves and are invested in their own life meanwhile the cultural environment back in Gilgit is very collectivist.

The thematic analysis of these cultural dimensions underscores their impact on individuals' academic and social performance in environments such as a university. The participants' narratives highlight the struggle in preserving adopted cultural heritage and adapting to new sociocultural norms in educational settings that prioritize individual achievement and self-expression. Conclusively, the thematic analysis shows how individualism and collectivism play a driving role in the experiences of first-generation college students faced with the reality of being outcasts, the imposters. First-generation college students face significant challenges in adjusting to a new culture and integrating into society. This tension between their collectivist upbringing and individualistic academic settings emphasizes the importance of inclusive educational systems that value cultural diversity and should be prioritized by policymakers.



Discussion

The research conducted above aligns with the study of Lane (2015) on IP as per which there is a heightened level of incompetence felt by individuals that experience imposter phenomenon (IP). After analyzing the data collected, it can be concluded that many participants experienced a sense of dis-belonging and over-whelming in their educational environments. In addition to the study of Lane (2015) and Gibbons et al. (2019), this research also negates some of the propositions such as lack of motivational drive in an intense environment where imposter phenomenon is prevalent among the students. As per research, participants felt motivationally driven in their educational setting and were intimidated to perform well by witnessing their peers' accomplishments. Engaging in leisure and other activities while finding support from friends and family enabled them to stay motivated and more focused towards their goals.

Intersectionality, on the other hand, provided a different perspective on the factors due to which an individual may experience the feeling of being an imposter. Intersection of cultural and social identity highlights how students from differing cultural backgrounds navigate through other aspects of their identity such as their ethnicity, gender, and race. For instance, a female student from a non-diverse cultural background may experience more obstacles in navigating social dynamics in a university compared to a male student from the same background. Similarly, the intersection of cultural expectations with motivation and goal setting highlights the pressure that comes with the societal expectations. Regarding the support, participants tilted towards their newly formed social circles and families, they preferred self-made communities for help. This research adds to the study of Ellis et al (2019) as per which the first-generation college students benefit from support communities which enhance their sense of belonging in their communities. The support from peers and family turned out to be self-

made communities for the students which enhanced their sense of belonging in the competitive environment of their universities.

Hofstede Cultural Model

Hofstede's cultural model identifies 'overarching cultural patterns or dimensions which influence people's behaviors in significant ways' (Arasaratnam, 2011, p. 45). This framework provides a distinctive comparative approach to studying cultures by identifying and measuring defining aspects of world cultures (Hofstede, 2011). Specifically discussing the dimension of individualism versus collectivism encapsulated in this model, we analyze the degree to which a society prioritizes individual goals and autonomy over collective well-being and achievement.

Analyzing the research through the lens provided by Hofstede, the struggles of transitioning from collectivist-oriented cultural backgrounds to individualistic university environments is evident. Participants highlight the challenges of navigating a more individualistic setting of their universities, where social interactions are more transactional and less cohesive compared to the communities where they descend from. This shift can lead to feelings of isolation particularly in individuals accustomed to strong communal ties and high coherence. While some participants may face the challenges, others actively engage in social activities and networking events to bridge this gap which allows them to form diverse and healthy social networks despite the individualistic setting of their universities.

Similarly, in the context of motivation and goal setting, the influence of both individualism and collectivism is evident as per research, the participants draw motivation from observing the achievements of their peers, this characteristic aligns with the collectivist ideologies that they descend from where collective success is valued. Moreover, in context of university friendships, the research highlights the struggle in transitioning from close-knit childhood friendships to more professional relationships in academia. The struggles of adapting to a more individualistic university environment where people are focused on their individual goals and are less aligned towards forming deep personal relations is evident. This contrasts with the collectivist values that are prevalent in students' hometowns where trust and communal bonds are highly valued.

Social Identity Theory

According to the Social Identity Theory, which was put forth by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, people divide themselves into social groups according to traits like race, nationality, religion, occupation, or even support of a particular sports team. This theory holds that people tend to compare themselves favorably to members of other groups, known as out-groups, and get a sense of identity and self-esteem from their membership in these groups, known as in-groups. According to the thesis, people work to uphold a positive social identity by elevating their in-group's standing in relation to out-groups. This could entail showing preference to members of their own group, abiding by the norms and ideals of the group, and trying to set themselves apart from other groups. Behavior is also influenced by social identity, since people may act in ways that support and strengthen their sense of belonging to a particular group.

Furthermore, according to Social Identity Theory, perceptions of group resemblance or difference have an impact on intergroup relations. Groups are more inclined to work together and foster good intergroup interactions when they believe they are like one another. On the other hand, prejudice, discrimination, and conflict can result when groups believe they are unique or in rivalry with one another. An extensive tapestry of experiences that highlights the complex relationship between the Imposter Phenomenon and Social Identity Theory is revealed through investigating the themes of Collectivism vs. Individualism, University Friendships, Motivation and Goal-setting, and Social Adjustment and Peer Relationships. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, people's sense of self and identity are mostly shaped by the social groups they belong to. This theory offers a prism through which people can see how complicated social dynamics and group affiliations are handled by people, especially in academic environments where the Imposter Phenomenon frequently appears.

The relationship between social identity and the imposter phenomenon is further explained by university friendships, social adjustment, and peer relationships. In academic settings, where perceptions of academic

performance and belonging are crucial, participants negotiate the challenges of making friends and building social networks. The experiences of participants highlight the impact of peer interactions on people's sense of self and belonging. According to Social Identity Theory, people compare themselves favorably to members of their own group to boost their self-esteem. This might make them feel like outsiders when they think they don't measure up to the expectations or norms of the group. All things considered, the topics covered provide a sophisticated investigation of the relationship between social identity theory and the phenomenon of impersonation. We may learn a great deal about the intricacies of impostors and their connection to social identity by investigating people's experiences in social settings and the impact of group dynamics on their actions and self-perceptions. Understanding these relationships is crucial to creating a welcoming and inclusive learning environment where people feel empowered to celebrate their individuality and accomplishments.

Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cultural adaptation theory explores how individuals adapt to new cultural environments and the challenges they face during this process. Cultural adaptation encompasses adjusting to various aspects of daily life, learning culturally appropriate behaviors, and acquiring necessary social skills to facilitate comfortable interactions with residents (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). It's a multifaceted framework that helps us understand the challenges and opportunities that arise when encountering different customs, values, and ways of life. Cultural adaptation is more than just learning new behaviors. It involves a complex interplay of various factors.

Cognitive Adaptation refers to the modifications people make to their thought processes and approaches to problem-solving to function in unfamiliar surroundings. This can entail picking up new legal knowledge, comprehending various social structures, or adjusting to brand-new educational initiatives. Participants shared different feelings towards the move to a new environment. Rayyan embraced the change as a positive experience, suggesting an open and adaptable mindset. In contrast, Ayesha initially struggled in a more individualistic environment but ultimately developed a new perspective and a sense of acceptance. This example highlights the challenges of adaptation but also the potential for personal growth which was discussed in *Social Adjustment and Peer Relationships*. Ayesha further exemplifies cognitive adaptation by describing a university experience where she initially faced setbacks. However, she adopted a new approach, aiming to learn and improve rather than simply compete with her peers. This demonstrates how cognitive adaptation can involve changing one's goals and strategies in response to new circumstances.

Effective emotion management is essential for overcoming negative feelings like homesickness, irritation, and anxiety. These feelings can exacerbate the imposter phenomenon by adding to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The relationship between cultural adaptation theory and Imposter Phenomenon in college students can be understood through the lens of Acculturation Stress. The difficulties of adjusting to a new culture give rise to acculturation stress, which can intensify sentiments of impostorism. This process is called Affective Adaptation and can be facilitated by creating connections with people who share similar experiences and learning coping techniques. Successful adaptation hinges on developing healthy coping mechanisms to manage emotions. This could involve activities like meditation, journaling, or connecting with people from similar backgrounds who can offer support and understanding. Participants talked about the diverse population in the environment that fostered a sense of belonging in the bustling environment. As highlighted by one participant, a reduction in discriminatory practices towards students from varied cultural backgrounds fosters a more welcoming atmosphere. His observation regarding the opportunities to interact and comprehend diverse perspectives further strengthens the notion of a supportive environment. This study draws a link between the benefits of a culturally diverse environment and successful affective adaptation. It implies that opportunities for social interaction and a sense of belonging serve as catalysts, helping people control their emotions and eventually successfully adjust to a new cultural environment.

FGCS frequently compare themselves socially to their friends, especially those who are thought to be doing exceptionally well academically, which was considered in *the Goal setting and Motivation theme* that analyzes the correlation between the two concepts. It states that while peer motivation can drive academic performance, it must be balanced with individual interests and aspirations to maintain a sense of autonomy and personal

fulfillment. Finding this equilibrium ensures that students leverage both internal drive and external encouragement to pursue meaningful goals and achieve academic success. Students from minority backgrounds may find this comparison especially relevant if they believe they are not as prepared academically or culturally as their peers.

The connection between IP and cultural adaptation theory in FGCS reveals a nuanced interaction between the difficulties of adjusting to unfamiliar cultural contexts and the psychological obstacles to confidence and self-belief. Students from varied backgrounds face numerous challenges as they adjust to university life, which can intensify feelings of inadequacy and impostorism. Understanding this relationship offers institutions an opportunity to equip students with skills that empower these students to come out of their bubble and face the complexities of the real world with utmost resilience. Through collective efforts to address the Imposter Phenomenon and acculturation stress, participative learning settings can be created where each student feels appreciated, seen, and capable of reaching their greatest potential.

Limitations

The biggest limitation to our study was the small sample size and limited data sources. Our sample only consisted of nine participants, all from the Higher Education Institutes. The population and sample size could have been larger and more diverse in order to gain a better understanding of the Imposter Phenomenon. Moreover, focused groups interviews could have been conducted which would have allowed us to gain a much better understanding of the data and the topic at hand.

Implications

Students who face the Imposter Phenomenon may also end up facing academic difficulties, social isolation, poor mental health, and difficulty forming positive and healthy peer relationships after coming to universities. This study aims to highlight this problem and promote efforts in order to cater to these students, helping them adapt, and creating an environment where people from all cultural and social backgrounds feel safe and at home. This study also identified the similarities and differences of experiences and problems these participants faced after coming to university. These factors should be further studied in order to gain a better understanding of how to create a more friendly and welcoming environment for students coming from different backgrounds, along with how to cater to students who suffer from Imposter Phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study examines how students from different backgrounds navigate their social and academic lives after coming to university. The results were generated based on interviews conducted from students studying in different universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. This study and its results highlight the difficulties faced by these students in managing their day-to-day lives, social interactions, and academic performances away from home in a completely different environment. It also highlights the efforts universities have to make in breaking barriers and creating a better environment for these students in order to make them feel more at home and to cater to students facing the Imposter Phenomenon.

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