

# Relationship between Perceived Parental Autonomy and Imposter Syndrome among Adolescents

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**Abstract.** The concept of self is structured from building blocks acquired throughout life. A child's concept of self receives its foremost influence from their parents, impacted by the positive or negative parenting practices employed during the early phases of life. Perceived parental autonomy, a construct explained as the perception of freedom and volition given to children by their parents to govern their own lives, has significant impact on self-image, self-efficacy and the basic concept of self. A weaker self-concept, owing to low self-esteem and self-efficacy is characteristic to imposter syndrome- a belief that one's accomplishments are misattributed to them and occurred as a result of external factors, thus creating a sense of inadequacy and fraudulence. A quantitative cross-sectional approach was used to measure the correlation between perceived parental autonomy and imposter syndrome amongst college students in Islamabad, Pakistan using Perception of Parent Scale and Young Imposter Scale. Statistically significant correlation was found between the two constructs, showing that increased autonomy increases the likelihood of development of imposter syndrome in Pakistani context. This study offers empirical evidence to further the conversation around imposter syndrome and inform parenting methods in Pakistani context. It aims to link the diverse domains of social psychology, developmental psychology and sociology.

**Key words:** imposter syndrome, perceived parental autonomy, college students

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## 1 Introduction

The development of self starts the day a child is born, at the hands of their parents, the first companion of a child in their early years. Parenting heavily influences how a child grows and develops. Positive parenting, defined as practices that promote autonomy, self-reliance and unconditional support are shown to lead to higher self-esteem in the child. On the other hand, negative parenting, based on over-control or neglect, lead to lower self-esteem and a weaker sense of self (Han et al., 2023). Parental autonomy is one of the major constituents of positive parenting practices that allows children to take initiatives, make decisions and explore their sense of self while receiving unconditional support from their parents. This practice fosters confidence and a stable sense of self, while a lack of autonomy can contribute to feelings of self-doubt (Johansen et al., 2024). Self-doubt, low self-esteem and constant need of external

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reassurance are the major characteristics attributed to imposter syndrome – a belief that one is inadequate, a phony and an intellectual fraud, despite external evidence that suggests otherwise (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020).

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Perceived Parental Autonomy

Traditional research on parenting divided it into four distinct types: authoritative, negligent, authoritarian and permissive. Although an easy and useful method to identify the type of parenting in a parent-child relationship, these types have become obsolete as every parent-child relationship is unique and does not strictly fall under one category (Vasiou et al., 2023). Recently, parenting is being described in terms of two basic dimensions: psychological control and behavioural control. To control a child through clear expectations, rules, boundaries and through strict supervision is behavioural control. To control a child by interfering excessively, guilt-tripping, manipulating, withholding the right to autonomy and conditioning positive regard to control behaviour is psychological control (Wang and Guo, 2024).

Autonomy is one of the major constructs that creates a differentiation between positive and negative parenting practices and is defined as the freedom to practice volition in making decisions regarding oneself that satisfy one's values and self-concept (Johansen et al., 2024). Autonomy is strengthened by unconditional positive regard from parents in all matters related to decision making, exhibited by allowing and facilitating the child to make their own decisions, making decision-making a collaborative endeavour and by explaining the reasons and need for decisions that are enforced for discipline (Bouffard et al., 2024). On the contrary, forcing compliance, manipulating and guilt-tripping children to follow decisions made by parents is characterized as parental psychological control (Costa and Oliveira, 2023). The day a child understands the difference between self and the world and differentiates between themselves and the mother as two separate entities, their need for autonomy is evident. A toddler exhibits the need for autonomy by demanding that they feed and clean themselves without additional help (Davies and Burgess, 2025). This autonomy is strengthened when parents allow the child to make their own decisions, take safe risks and learn from their mistakes. Autonomy allows the child to understand that decisions carry consequences, making them careful yet self-reliant. This strengthens their self-esteem and promotes self-efficacy, leading to a much stronger sense of self and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Once this child enters adolescence, it is easier to transition from being under the wing of the parents to an independent person, by the virtue of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Chen et al. (2019), provided evidence to support that parental autonomy went on to correlate to reciprocal filial piety and general life satisfaction in the later years, across all genders and ethnicities, which strengthens the stance that allowing children to be autonomous in their early years increases their happiness, life satisfaction and overall wellbeing throughout life.

Parenting influences how a child develops into an adult, in social, emotional, cognitive and metacognitive domains. Parenting practices are widely discussed to gauge their effects on a child. Parental Conditional Regard (PCR) is shown to lower autonomy, dampen self-esteem and deteriorate the will to take initiatives. Autonomy Supportive Parenting (ASP) produced the opposite results by fostering self-esteem, autonomy and will to take initiative. These two contradictory practices provide insight on how parenting influences the personality and self development in children, from the earliest years of life (Khan and Shahzad, 2020).

In Pakistani context, autonomy is understood, practiced and perceived differently from the western world. In the west, the focus of autonomy is one oneself, gaining complete independence and self-reliance for all needs, physical or emotional (Ma et al., 2022). In Pakistan, autonomy is practiced and promoted in a more collectivistic context, with emphasis being on the collective community, low expectations of complete independence, and emotional support well into adulthood.

## 2.2 Imposter Syndrome

Clance and Imes coined the term imposter syndrome in 1978, describing it as a psychological pattern in which individuals believe themselves to be intellectual frauds. This syndrome carries symptoms like anxiety, low self-esteem and confidence. The belief of being a fraud is not rooted in reality, and individuals suffering from imposter syndrome negate all evidence contrary to their belief (Bravata et al., 2020). Further research increases the understanding regarding the syndrome, terming it as an attribution of achievements to luck, external help or merely a fluke, due to an inability to attribute the achievement to oneself. This is coupled with a constant fear and worry of being exposed as a fraud (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Imposter syndrome was initially studied only in women. One reason for imposter syndrome being more evident in women is that they are expected to lack behind men academically, so in case of an achievement that surpasses the divide between gender, these women attribute the success to external sources. Women across multiple professions, education levels and backgrounds depicted symptoms of imposter syndrome, therefore, initially, it was studied as a phenomenon that only affects high-achieving women (Chrousos and Mentis, 2020). Further research indicated that imposter syndrome is evident in women of multiple ethnicities and domains, including academia, healthcare, and corporate settings (Rice and Ortiz, 2023). Individuals that suffer from imposter syndrome fail to attribute their success to their own effort or talent. They reject all positive indications of intellect and downplay any apparent accomplishment. These individuals compare their achievements to ideal standards that are difficult to be obtained, and any accomplishment that does not meet the ideal standard is disregarded and considered an evidence of inadequacy (Walker and Saklofske, 2023).

Mandeville et al. (2025), reported a significant correlation between imposter syndrome and increased anxiety and depression, with individuals suffering from the syndrome reporting higher levels of both psychopathologies. People who suffer from symptoms like feeling like a fraud, feeling inadequate, feeling like everything they have achieved in life was a fluke or a mistake and experiencing the constant fear that someone somewhere will see through this fraud and expose them to the world experience symptoms of both anxiety and depression. Considering how disorders related to depression and anxiety are affected by imposter syndrome, it is important to include it as a crucial psychological construct in the subject of psychopathology (El-Ashry et al., 2024).

Family dynamics play a very important role in the development of imposter-related personality factors. The constant need for approval in a family where parents withhold results in symptoms like low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy (Ye et al., 2022). These are further exacerbated by factors such as low support, high conflicts and high control in a family's structure (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020).

## 2.3 Relationship between Parental Autonomy and Imposter Syndrome

Research showed links between parenting styles and imposter syndrome. A longitudinal study of 504 children found that conditional parental support predicts higher feelings of imposter syndrome over time. In contrast, fostering parental autonomy, which promotes independence without rigid expectations, can protect against these feelings, reinforcing the importance of unconditional support for healthy self-esteem (Bouffard et al., 2024).

Indigenous research showed that parentification predicts imposter syndrome, with higher levels of role reversal linked to increased self-doubt. Children experiencing parentification are more likely to develop imposter feelings due to diminished autonomy and parental overinvolvement, which undermine their sense of competence (Mukti et al., 2024).

Self-esteem mediated the relationship between parental autonomy support and imposter syndrome. Higher autonomy support from parents boosts self-esteem, reducing feelings of imposterism. Conversely, low autonomy support leads to self-doubt and attributing success to external factors, increasing risk of imposter syndrome.

The study that linked parental abuse to imposter syndrome showed that individuals perceiving higher levels of abuse are more likely to experience self-doubt and fear of exposure as frauds. This suggests that negative parenting contributes to feelings of inadequacy in adulthood (Soares et al., 2025).

## 2.4 Rationale

Imposter syndrome is an important psychological construct that is widely understudied. This research aims to fill the gap in the understanding regarding the imposter syndrome phenomenon. Despite existing research on the topic being highly valuable, there exist gaps that need to be addressed (Jabbari et al., 2021; Yaffe, 2023). Lengthy questionnaires were employed in past research, contributing to participant fatigue, thus lowering the reliability of results. Gender representation was also unequal in existing research, lowering its generalizability (Hinduja and Patchin, 2024). In the context of Pakistan, imposter syndrome has yet to be studied from the lens of perceived parental autonomy. Furthermore, this research also fills the population gap as it addressed imposter syndrome specifically from the population of college students. These students fall into the age range of late adolescents, a critical developmental stage for identity formation (Khalid et al., 2019; Mukhtar). A study linking parental practices to the understudied, yet crucial phenomenon of imposter syndrome seeks to educate the general masses about the existence of this phenomenon, the importance of parental practices in the development of self, and promote awareness for prevention of risk factors that exacerbate the existence of these feelings. This study aims to increase the understanding regarding imposter syndrome, particularly in the context of Pakistan, employ quantitative methods that ensure generalizability and prevent biases, while addressing the critical population of college students.

## 2.5 Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between perceived parental autonomy and imposter syndrome among college students.
- To examine the relationship between perceived maternal autonomy and imposter syndrome among college students.

- To examine the relationship between perceived paternal autonomy and imposter syndrome among college students.

## 2.6 Hypothesis

- There will be a significant relationship between perceived parental autonomy and imposter syndrome amongst college students.
- There will be a significant relationship between perceived paternal autonomy and imposter syndrome amongst college students.
- There will be a significant relationship between perceived maternal autonomy and imposter syndrome amongst college students.

## 2.7 Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination theory posits a lens to theoretically correlate the concepts of imposter syndrome and parental autonomy. The theory provides that individuals who are self-determined are in charge of the decisions related to their life, take initiative, derive motivation intrinsically and are eager to grow and flourish. For an individual to become self-determined, three needs; autonomy, competence and relatedness must be fulfilled (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Autonomy is the need to be free to make one's decisions, shape one's life and govern all aspects of one's life without external or enforced control. Competence is the belief that one is skilled, talented and able enough to compete with peers and contemporaries (Neufeld, 2022). Therefore, SDT suggests that there exists some correlation between autonomy and competence and thus perceived parental autonomy and imposter syndrome.

# 3 Method

## 3.1 Research Design

Quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used as an aim to explore the relationship between perceived parental autonomy and imposter syndrome. The quantitative approach enables the measurement of correlation among these variables. The study was conducted over a sample of college student's public colleges in Islamabad, specifically including 1st year and 2nd year students with an age group of 15-19 years old. Convenience sampling was employed owing to problems in gaining permissions across colleges in Islamabad. The sample size was (N=298) college students from different educational institutes calculated through Tabachnik and Fidell's formula  $(50+8K)$  where k is equal to number of predictors.

## 3.2 Instruments

### 3.2.1 Perception of Parents Scale (POPS)

The Perception of Parental Autonomy Scale (POPS) is a tool designed originally by Robert J. Robbins in 1994; Dr. Samina Naz translated it into Urdu language in 2015. It has two sub-scales measuring the perception of autonomy provided by the mother and father individually.

It consists of 18 items: 9 items for each subscale. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all true to 5 = very true. Item no 2, 6 and 9 were reversely scored. The test-retest reliability coefficients were  $r=.85$  for the English version and  $r=.82$  for the Urdu version ensuring internal consistency over time. Additionally, when the English and Urdu versions were compared the scores were closely related  $r=.79$  when comparing English to Urdu and  $r=.76$  when comparing Urdu to English. This shows that both version are reliable and measures the same thing. Internal consistency was high, with Cronbach's alpha values of  $.86$ (mother),  $.83$ (father) and  $.83$ (total) confirming the scales reliability in both languages (Naz and Liaquat, 2015; Robbins et al., 2013).

### 3.2.2 Young Imposter Scale

The Young Imposter Scale, developed by Dr. Valerie Young in 2008 is an 8- item instrument designed to assess imposter- like feelings, it measures self-doubt and the fear of being exposed as a "fraud" despite evident accomplishments. YIS consists of 8 items, scored on a dichotomous scale. The cut-off score for this scale is five, indicating that an affirmative response on five or more out of the eight questions indicates stronger imposter feelings (Young, 2022).

### 3.3 Procedure

After selecting the appropriate research design, permission was obtained to use the scales employed in this study. Next, permission was sought from the research committee, department of psychology, Air University. Following the permission to conduct this research, approval was sought from the Federal Directorate of Education to conduct this research in public colleges across Islamabad. Data was collected from Islamabad Model College for Boys, F-8/4, Islamabad, Islamabad Model College for Boys, F-7/3, Islamabad, Islamabad Model College for Boys, F-10/4, Islamabad, Islamabad Model College for Girls (Post Graduate), F-7/2, Islamabad, Islamabad Model College for Girls F-8/1, Islamabad and Islamabad Model College for Girls, F-10/2, Islamabad after obtaining informed consent. The collected data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), employing descriptive and inferential statistics to determine the results.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was attained from Department of Psychology, Air University. Approval to conduct research in public colleges was gained from the Federal Directorate of Education, Pakistan, along with head of the institutes. In addition, informed consent was taken from the participants, and they were assured regarding privacy and confidentiality.

1. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained
2. Participants were allowed to withdraw from this anytime
3. The data of participants was protected
4. Participants were informed and explained about the research in detail
5. Efforts were made to minimize any sort of potential psychological distress
6. The cultural norms and values of the participants were given special consideration.

## 4 Results

Table 4.1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations for Perception of Parent Scale (POPS) and Young Imposter Scale (YIS)

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. POPS	298	61.54	10.9	-	-
2. YIS	298	12.51	1.8	.24**	-

Note: *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation

\*\**p*<.01

The Pearson product moment correlation revealed that Parental Autonomy is significantly positively correlated with Imposter Syndrome ( $r=.24$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which implies that as parental autonomy increases, so do the imposter feelings.

Table 4.2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations for Perception of Parent Scale's Maternal Subscale (POPSM) and Young Imposter Scale (YIS)

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. POPS (M)	298	31.16	6.64	-	-
2. YIS	298	12.51	1.8	.22**	-

Note: *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation

\*\**p*<.01

The Pearson product moment correlation revealed that Parental Autonomy (Maternal) is significantly positively correlated with Imposter Syndrome ( $r=.22$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which implies that as maternal parental autonomy increases, so do the imposter feelings.

Table 4.3: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations for Perception of Parent Scale's Paternal Subscale (POPSF) and Young Imposter Scale (YIS)

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1. POPS (F)	298	30.37	5.72	-	-
2. YIS	298	12.51	1.8	.21**	-

Note: *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation

\*\**p*<.01

The Pearson product moment correlation revealed that Parental Autonomy (Paternal) is significantly positively correlated with Imposter Syndrome ( $r=.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which implies that as paternal parental autonomy increases, so do the imposter feelings.

## 5 Discussion

In this fast-paced world, competition over achievements and resources has now become a key motivator in everyone's lives. Among these people are those who feel like frauds in their own achievements. These people suffer from the phenomenon of imposter syndrome, which is becoming increasingly relevant to psychological research. This research aimed to uncover the intricate relationships surrounding the understudied topic - imposter syndrome. The results of our analyses showed that there exists a significant positive relationship between imposter syndrome and perceived parental autonomy, with negligible differences among the maternal and paternal subscales when correlated with imposter syndrome individually, which are essential to understanding and creating a dialogue around imposter syndrome. It highlighted the intricacies regarding the internal and external influences on the development of imposter syndrome, particularly within the context of the Pakistani society.

The hypotheses stated that perceived parental autonomy, both maternal and paternal, will be significantly correlated with imposter syndrome among college students. The findings corresponding the first hypothesis indicated a statistically significant positive relationship between college students' perceptions of parental autonomy and imposter syndrome. This implied that higher perceived parental autonomy is associated with higher imposter feelings among college students. The second hypothesis dissected parental autonomy to study perceived paternal autonomy. The second hypothesis also showed a significant positive correlation between perceived paternal autonomy and imposter syndrome, implying that higher the autonomy provided by fathers, higher is the likelihood of development of imposter syndrome. The third hypothesis studied the independent effect of autonomy provided by mothers on the development of imposter syndrome and found consistent significant positive association between the two. Existing literature assumes autonomy-supportive parenting to promote confidence and self-efficacy (Iotti et al., 2023; Shengyao et al., 2024). Current findings of all three hypotheses contradict with this rhetoric, yet are consistent with a more nuanced picture, particularly when considered through cultural and psychological perspectives within the Pakistani community, which inherently is a collectivistic society with a pronounced emphasis on achievements and pride.

In Western literature, autonomy-supportive parenting is typically linked with greater self-esteem and lower imposterism (Bouffard et al., 2024). However, in South Asian cultures such as Pakistan, autonomy is typically provided with implicit high-achievement expectations, particularly in educational contexts. The population of this study, college students, constitutes a critical time period in which adolescents specifically face immense pressure to take career choices and build a future for themselves. Autonomy-supportive parents provide their children the freedom and autonomy to choose and build their career based upon children's own interests and alignment. Most students view this autonomy as a social pressure to perform rather than unconditional trust. As Aqeel and Mehmood (2025), stressed, parenting within Pakistani families typically involves a keen focus on educational success and reputation for the family. Accordingly, students might internalize the notion that they need to "earn" freedom they are accorded, such that they develop feelings of inadequacy and imposter-like self-doubt when they fail.

Additionally, Mukti et al. (2024), discovered that low self-esteem acts as a mediator between parental autonomy and imposter syndrome. This implies that when autonomy is granted without emotional validation—e.g., praise, validation, or consistent support—students might not establish a secure sense of self-worth. As a result, even when autonomy is granted, students might feel undeserving or unprepared, creating the psychological conditions that lead to imposter thoughts. Yaffe (2023), also noted that both overprotection by the mother and father,

or control masquerading as autonomy, can generate a discrepancy between what students are instructed to do and what they perceive. This discrepancy causes emotional dissonance and strengthens the perception that their achievement is not a result of internal capability but external demand or chance.

Imposterism is viewed as not being caused by one factor but rather the result of interactions between individual vulnerabilities and environmental cues (Feenstra et al., 2020). When autonomy is defined in terms of emotional distance, students are more likely to feel abandoned during distress, feeding back into isolation and perceived falseness. Further, in collectivist societies where parental intervention is high by tradition and family ties are closely bonded, autonomy may be interpreted wrongly as neglect or disconnection instead of confidence. Children may feel unable to address this issue so as to protect the image of autonomy-supportive parenting that their parents are most proud of. In a collectivistic society, it is difficult to question parenting practices due to the norm of parents boasting about these practices and their successful outcomes. Such cultural incongruence can also lead to self-doubt, especially among students who remain emotionally attached to parental protection.

In short, while autonomy is traditionally understood to be psychologically beneficial, its connection to imposter syndrome is conditioned by the affective environment in which it is exercised. Cultural norms, emotional endorsement, and the student's understanding of autonomy all determine if that autonomy promotes development or internal vulnerability. These implications highlight the importance of culturally sensitive parenting interventions that combine autonomy with predictable emotional validation.

## 5.1 Limitations and Suggestions

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, there were some acknowledgeable limitations. College students encompass both F.Sc. and A-levels streams, but due to difficulty in gaining permissions from Cambridge affiliated colleges through the Federal Directorate of Educations, only public colleges that covered the F.Sc. stream were included in this study. Self-response-based questionnaires were employed, risking the possibility of social desirability bias. Quantitative approach was used in the study due to time constraints, which creates a void in depth and understanding of data which a mixed-method design could have filled. Only two genders .i.e. male and female were included in the research, as gaining a representative sample from the inter-sex community was difficult. Lastly, convenience sampling was employed due to lack of permission from colleges, which may limit the representativeness of the sample.

Therefore, future researchers are suggested to opt for a mixed-method design to gain both qualitative and quantitative data. It is also advised to extend the sample to A-levels students, to better account for all college students in the sample. Parents' self-report may also be included, to provide a comparative analysis between parent and child perceptions and validate the perception of children through triangulation. Random sampling may be used to increase generalizability and reliability of data. There is also an urgent need to develop culturally appropriate scale of measurement for imposter syndrome, as the existing scales lack Urdu translations.

## 5.2 Implications

The current study aims to add to the body of knowledge regarding parenting, imposter syndrome and the interplay of these two variables. On a household level, this study aims to inform parents of the positive and negative parenting practices, their effects on children and the

process of development of self-concept. On a societal level, this research aims to psychoeducate the public regarding imposter syndrome, its predictors and the importance of right and appropriate parenting practices. It envisions awareness programs through workshops, media and policy changes to highlight the important conversation around imposter syndrome. Lastly, it envisions to inform researchers about the impact of Pakistani cultural context on the development of psychological syndromes, and to catalyse more research that uncover the causation between parental autonomy and imposter syndrome variables.

## 6 Conclusion

This study correlated perceived parental autonomy with imposter syndrome, leading to a significantly positive correlation. This correlation explains that as perceived parental autonomy increased among college students, so did the likelihood of imposter syndrome in Pakistani cultural context. Moreover, similar results were witnessed when perceived maternal autonomy and perceived paternal autonomy were correlated with imposter syndrome individually. This result was contradictory to the existing literature and highlighted how Pakistani students perceived and understood autonomy, leading to its effects on their personality and sense of self.

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