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WHEN PERFECTIONISM BECOMES SELF-EVALUATIVE: RUMINATION, NEED FOR APPROVAL, AND THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON AMONG PAKISTANI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The impostor phenomenon reflects a persistent inability to fully internalize achievement, often leaving capable individuals with enduring doubts about their competence despite objective evidence of success. Although perfectionism has frequently been linked with impostor experiences, treating perfectionism as a single, undifferentiated construct can obscure the psychological processes that are most closely involved. This study examines the relationship between impostor phenomenon and multidimensional perfectionism among university students in Pakistan, with particular attention to the distinction between self-evaluative and more conscientious forms of perfectionism. A sample of 196 undergraduate students from a university in Lahore, Pakistan was used to fill out the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) and Perfectionism Inventory (PI). Pearson correlation analysis indicated strong positive relationships existed between IP and perfectionism overall, with self-evaluative perfectionism dimensions (concern over mistakes, need for approval, rumination) having the highest correlation and organization and planfulness dimensions having the lowest. Multiple regression analysis showed that rumination and need for approval were the only factors that were significant predictors of IP. There was no gender differences in the scores found with regards to IP. The results indicate that self-evaluative perfectionism associated with the desire to please others rather than be conscientious to conform to standards is the most important determinant of impostor syndrome among students. Overall, the study refines the understanding of perfectionism in relation to impostor

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phenomenon by showing that its maladaptive, self-evaluative features appear to be more consequential than perfectionism as a broad personality tendency. These findings extend evidence from an underrepresented Pakistani context and support future research focused on culturally informed, longitudinal, and intervention-oriented approaches to rumination, approval dependence, and self-evaluative perfectionism.

INTRODUCTION

The impostor phenomenon (IP) describes a persistent difficulty internalizing evidence of competence and achievement, accompanied by the fear that one has created a misleading impression of ability and may eventually be exposed as inadequate (Clance & Imes, 1978). Although first described among high-achieving women, subsequent research has established that impostor feelings occur across genders, disciplines, and educational and occupational settings (Bravata et al., 2020; Ménard & Chittle, 2023). The construct is particularly relevant to higher education because academic life repeatedly places students in situations of evaluation, social comparison, uncertain feedback, and escalating performance expectations. These conditions can make genuine accomplishments psychologically unstable: success may be discounted, attributed to luck or excessive effort, or treated as evidence that even higher standards must be met next time.

Contemporary reviews indicate that impostor feelings among post-secondary students are associated with a broad range of adverse psychological and educational correlates, including lower self-esteem, greater distress, and difficulties in academic and career decision-making (Ménard & Chittle, 2023). A systematic review similarly documented the wide distribution of impostor experiences and their links with anxiety, depression, burnout, and reduced well-being across multiple populations (Bravata et al., 2020). More recent university-based evidence continues to show that IP covaries positively with maladaptive perfectionism and negatively with self-efficacy and happiness (Pákozdy et al., 2024). Collectively, this literature has shifted the field away from viewing IP as an unusual reaction confined to a narrow high-achieving subgroup and toward understanding it as a recurring self-evaluative pattern embedded in achievement contexts.

Perfectionism is one of the most theoretically plausible correlates of IP, but the relationship is more complex than the simple proposition that 'perfectionists feel like impostors.' Multidimensional models distinguish between forms of perfectionism centered on conscientious goal pursuit and organization and forms centered on harsh self-evaluation, fear of mistakes, approval seeking, and perseverative thinking (Hamachek, 1978; Hill et al., 2004). This distinction matters because high standards alone need not be psychologically maladaptive. The more problematic configuration is often one in which performance standards become fused with self-worth and social acceptance, making mistakes disproportionately threatening and success difficult to internalize.

The conceptual overlap between IP and self-evaluative perfectionism is therefore substantial. Individuals experiencing strong impostor feelings often monitor their performance for evidence of inadequacy, exaggerate the meaning of mistakes, and remain dissatisfied even after objectively successful outcomes (Thompson et al., 2000). They may also engage in self-presentational strategies intended to prevent perceived shortcomings from being discovered (Ferrari & Thompson, 2006). Perfectionism can function within this cycle as both a compensatory strategy

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and a source of vulnerability: exceptionally high effort may temporarily protect against feared exposure, yet the same effort provides a ready explanation for discounting competence ('I succeeded only because I overprepared'). Over time, this pattern can maintain the belief that achievement does not reflect genuine ability.

Empirical work supports this differentiation. Pannhausen et al. (2022) reported a robust relationship between IP and maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism, while adaptive or achievement-oriented dimensions showed weaker associations. Wang et al. (2019) likewise demonstrated that perfectionism and impostorism are linked to psychological distress, and Pákozdy et al. (2024) found that maladaptive perfectionism independently predicted IP in university students. Earlier dimension-level research also pointed to approval seeking, rumination, and concern over mistakes as especially relevant features (Dudău, 2014). Thus, the central empirical issue is not whether perfectionism and IP are related, but which perfectionistic processes account for the relationship when multiple dimensions are considered simultaneously.

Rumination and need for approval are theoretically important in this regard. Rumination prolongs attention to perceived errors, shortcomings, and anticipated evaluation, making negative self-appraisals cognitively persistent even in the presence of positive evidence. Need for approval, by contrast, locates standards of adequacy outside the self: achievement becomes valuable not simply because a task was completed well, but because it must secure acceptance and protect against criticism. Both processes are compatible with the classic impostor cycle described by Clance and colleagues, in which success is difficult to own and future evaluation reactivates fear of exposure (Clance et al., 1995). When these dimensions are elevated, perfectionistic striving can become an interpersonal defense against anticipated rejection rather than a straightforward pursuit of excellence.

Most of the established literature on IP and perfectionism has been generated in North American and European samples. This concentration limits the ability to determine whether the same dimension-level pattern generalizes to South Asian educational settings, where family expectations, interpersonal evaluation, and competitive academic pathways may shape how achievement and self-worth are experienced. The original thesis underlying the present article was conducted at a Pakistani university specifically to address the limited local evidence base. A contextually grounded analysis is valuable not because cultural background is assumed to determine impostor experiences, but because replication across settings is necessary before apparently general psychological patterns can be treated as broadly applicable.

Two complementary perspectives are useful for interpreting this gap. A self-regulatory perspective emphasizes how perfectionistic concerns can make mistakes, uncertainty, and incomplete mastery disproportionately salient, thereby sustaining self-monitoring and rumination. A contextual-interpersonal perspective emphasizes that impostor feelings are also shaped by evaluation environments, belonging, and the perceived consequences of disappointing significant others (Feenstra et al., 2020; Ménard & Chittle, 2023). Examining need for approval alongside rumination therefore connects internal cognitive persistence with the interpersonal contingency of self-worth. This distinction is particularly important in cross-cultural research because similar scale scores may arise from different combinations of personal standards, social expectations, and institutional evaluation practices.

The present study therefore tested a dimension-specific account of the perfectionism-IP relationship among undergraduates in Lahore, Pakistan. Three hypotheses were specified. First,

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overall perfectionism was expected to correlate positively with IP. Second, the eight perfectionism dimensions were expected to explain significant variance in IP when considered simultaneously, with self-evaluative dimensions - particularly need for approval, rumination, and concern over mistakes - showing the strongest unique associations. Third, because prior evidence on gender differences is inconsistent, IP scores were compared between male and female students without treating either direction as established a priori (Bravata et al., 2020; Fassl et al., 2020; Ménard & Chittle, 2023). The analysis was designed to distinguish broad perfectionistic striving from the specific evaluative processes most closely associated with impostor experiences.

Method

Design and Participants

A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design was used. The sample comprised 196 undergraduate students recruited through convenience sampling from Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants were 18-25 years old (M = 22.22, SD = 2.02); 121 (61.7%) were women and 75 (38.3%) were men. Academic-year representation was 21 freshmen (10.7%), 24 sophomores (12.2%), 51 juniors (26.0%), and 100 seniors (51.0%). The single-institution convenience sample is therefore best understood as an analytic sample for examining associations rather than as a population-representative sample of Pakistani university students.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	n	%
Women	121	61.7
Men	75	38.3
Freshmen	21	10.7
Sophomores	24	12.2
Juniors	51	26.0
Seniors	100	51.0

Note. N = 196. Age range = 18-25 years; M = 22.22, SD = 2.02.

Measures

Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS). The CIPS (Clance, 1985) is a 20-item self-report measure designed to assess impostor experiences such as perceived intellectual fraudulence, difficulty accepting praise, and attributing success to external or unstable causes. Items are rated on a five-point response scale, producing total scores from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating stronger impostor experiences. The scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency in previous research (Holmes et al., 1993). Internal consistency in the present sample was high (Cronbach's α = .90).

Perfectionism Inventory (PI). The PI (Hill et al., 2004) is a 59-item multidimensional measure comprising eight subscales: concern over mistakes, high standards for others, need for approval, organization, perceived parental pressure, planfulness, rumination, and striving for excellence. Items are rated on a five-point scale. The measure was selected because it separates self-evaluative aspects of perfectionism from more conscientious or achievement-oriented tendencies. In the present sample, subscale reliabilities ranged from α = .76 to .87, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency.

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Table 2. Internal Consistency of Study Measures

Measure / subscale	Items	Cronbach α
Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale	20	.90
Concern over mistakes	8	.80
High standards for others	7	.80
Need for approval	8	.87
Organization	8	.86
Perceived parental pressure	8	.86
Planfulness	7	.76
Rumination	7	.81
Striving for excellence	6	.80

Note. Reliability estimates are from the present sample (N = 196).

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board before data collection. Participants were provided with information about the purpose and voluntary nature of the research and completed an informed consent form. They were informed of their right to withdraw without providing a reason. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected by assigning participant numbers rather than recording names. Completion of the survey battery took approximately 15 minutes. Data were subsequently entered into IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25 for analysis. The thesis records also indicate that permission to use the study instruments was obtained from the original authors.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics and internal consistency. Pearson product-moment correlations quantified associations between IP and total perfectionism as well as the eight PI dimensions. A simultaneous multiple regression entered all eight perfectionism dimensions in a single model to estimate their unique associations with IP after accounting for shared variance. An independent-samples t test compared male and female students on IP, and Cohen's d was used to describe the standardized mean difference. Statistical tests were two-tailed with alpha = .05. Because the design was cross-sectional and observational, regression coefficients are interpreted as adjusted associations rather than causal effects. Analyses reported in the source study were conducted in SPSS Version 25.

Results

Associations Between Impostor Phenomenon and Perfectionism

Overall perfectionism was positively associated with IP, r = .59, 95% CI [.49, .67], p < .001. The dimension-level pattern was notably uneven. Need for approval showed the largest bivariate association with IP, r = .69, 95% CI [.61, .76], followed by rumination, r = .64, 95% CI [.55, .72], and concern over mistakes, r = .61, 95% CI [.51, .69]. Perceived parental pressure, striving for excellence, and high standards for others showed smaller positive associations. By contrast, organization was essentially unrelated to IP, r = -.004, p = .956, and planfulness showed only a weak, nonsignificant association, r = .12, p = .094. The self-evaluative perfectionism composite

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was strongly related to IP, r = .71, 95% CI [.63, .77], p < .001.

Table 3. Correlations Between Perfectionism and Impostor Phenomenon

Variable	r with IP	95% CI	p
Perfectionism, total	.59	[.49, .67]	< .001
Concern over mistakes	.61	[.51, .69]	< .001
High standards for others	.33	[.20, .45]	< .001
Need for approval	.69	[.61, .76]	< .001
Organization	-.004	[-.14, .14]	.956
Planfulness	.12	[-.02, .26]	.094
Perceived parental pressure	.46	[.34, .56]	< .001
Rumination	.64	[.55, .72]	< .001
Striving for excellence	.36	[.23, .48]	< .001
Self-evaluative perfectionism composite	.71	[.63, .77]	< .001

Note. *N* = 196; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .001 hso= high Standards for others' O= organization; p= Planfulness; se = Striving for excellence; r= Rumination ; pp= Perceived parental Pressure ;com= Concerns over mistakes ; na= need for approval ; pic= perfectionism Composite Score; cp= Composite Score; sep= Self-evaluative Perfectionism

Multivariable Prediction of Impostor Phenomenon

The simultaneous regression model was statistically significant and explained 57% of the variance in CIPS scores, R^2 = .57, F(8, 187) = 28.06, p < .001. After the shared variance among all eight dimensions was taken into account, only need for approval (B = 1.10, SE = .36, β = .38, p = .002) and rumination (B = 1.03, SE = .41, β = .29, p = .012) made statistically significant unique contributions. Concern over mistakes and perceived parental pressure, despite their sizeable zero-order correlations with IP, were not significant in the simultaneous model. The divergence between bivariate and multivariable results suggests substantial overlap among self-evaluative perfectionism dimensions and underscores the importance of distinguishing simple association from unique predictive contribution.

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Table 4. Multiple Regression Predicting Impostor Phenomenon From Perfectionism Dimensions

Predictor	B	SE	95% CI	β	p
High standards for others	.03	.36	[-.67, .74]	.01	.93
Organization	-.03	.47	[-.95, .89]	-.01	.95
Planfulness	.05	.40	[-.73, .83]	.02	.90
Striving for excellence	.03	.37	[-.70, .76]	.01	.94
Rumination	1.03	.41	[.23, 1.83]	.29	.012
Perceived parental pressure	.25	.40	[-.53, 1.03]	.08	.53
Concern over mistakes	.20	.43	[-.64, 1.04]	.06	.64
Need for approval	1.10	.36	[.39, 1.81]	.38	.002

Note. N = 196. Model R^2 = .57, $F(8, 187) = 28.06$, $p < .001$. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval.

Gender Differences

There was no statistically significant gender difference in IP scores. Men (M = 65.6, SD = 15.3) and women (M = 65.2, SD = 14.0) had nearly identical mean CIPS scores, t(194) = .153, p = .87, d = .03. Total perfectionism scores were also similar for men (M = 201.6, SD = 33.2) and women (M = 199.7, SD = 33.2), t(194) = .396, p = .69, d = .06.

Table 5. Gender Differences in Impostor Phenomenon and Total Perfectionism

Variable	Men M (SD), n = 75	Women M (SD), n = 121	t(194)	p	d
Impostor phenomenon	65.6 (15.3)	65.2 (14.0)	.153	.87	.03
Perfectionism total	201.6 (33.2)	199.7 (33.2)	.396	.69	.06

Note. Cohen's d values indicate negligible group differences in this sample.

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Discussion

The present study examined whether the impostor phenomenon is associated with perfectionism as a broad trait or, more specifically, with particular self-evaluative dimensions of perfectionism. The findings support the latter interpretation. Although overall perfectionism correlated substantially with IP, the strongest relationships occurred for need for approval, rumination, and concern over mistakes, whereas organization and planfulness were weakly related or unrelated. More importantly, when all eight dimensions were considered together, only need for approval and rumination retained statistically significant unique associations with IP. This pattern sharpens the conceptual relationship between the two constructs: impostor experiences in this sample were not primarily a function of being organized, planful, or committed to high standards, but were concentrated in evaluative processes that make performance psychologically contingent on external acceptance and repetitive self-scrutiny.

The prominence of need for approval is theoretically consequential. A person whose sense of adequacy depends heavily on others' endorsement faces an unstable criterion for success because external evaluation can rarely provide permanent reassurance. Positive feedback may be discounted as politeness, incomplete knowledge, or temporary approval, whereas criticism may be treated as diagnostic evidence of underlying inadequacy. This asymmetry maps closely onto the impostor pattern described by Clance and Imes (1978), in which objective success fails to revise the core belief of fraudulence. Ferrari and Thompson (2006) similarly emphasized self-presentational concerns among individuals with strong impostor fears. In the present data, need for approval remained the strongest unique regression coefficient even after other perfectionism dimensions were controlled, suggesting that interpersonal evaluation may be a central component of the perfectionism-IP link.

Rumination was the second unique predictor and provides a complementary cognitive mechanism. Impostor experiences are unlikely to be maintained by a single negative thought; they are more plausibly sustained by repeated attention to mistakes, imagined judgments, and alternative explanations for success. Rumination can keep evaluative threat active after the triggering event has passed and can increase the accessibility of evidence that appears to confirm inadequacy. This interpretation is consistent with research linking impostorism with repetitive negative thinking and maladaptive perfectionism (Dudău, 2014; Wang et al., 2019). It is also compatible with recent university findings showing that maladaptive perfectionism is positively related to IP even when other psychological variables are considered (Pákozdy et al., 2024).

Concern over mistakes had a strong zero-order association with IP but did not remain significant in the simultaneous regression model. This is not evidence that mistakes are irrelevant to impostor experiences. Rather, it suggests that the variance shared between concern over mistakes, rumination, and need for approval is substantial. A student may fear mistakes precisely because errors are repeatedly rehearsed mentally and interpreted as threats to social or academic acceptance. When these interrelated processes are entered simultaneously, the regression coefficient for any one dimension represents only its residual contribution beyond the others. The finding therefore favors a network of mutually reinforcing self-evaluative processes rather than a single isolated trait.

The near-zero association between organization and IP and the weak association with planfulness are equally informative. They show that perfectionism should not be treated as uniformly maladaptive. Planning, structure, and disciplined task management can coexist with low impostor feelings, and these characteristics may be

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conceptually distinct from the self-critical dimensions that maintain distress. This distinction is consistent with multidimensional perfectionism theory and with prior evidence showing that maladaptive perfectionism is more closely tied to IP than adaptive or conscientious forms (Pannhausen et al., 2022). It also helps explain why interventions aimed indiscriminately at 'reducing perfectionism' may be poorly targeted: lowering organization or constructive goal pursuit would not address the psychological processes most closely related to IP in this sample.

No gender difference in IP was observed. The means were nearly identical, and the effect size was negligible. This finding contributes to an inconsistent literature in which some studies report higher IP among women while others find little or no difference. Reviews of post-secondary research have emphasized precisely this inconsistency and caution against treating IP as intrinsically gender-specific (Bravata et al., 2020; Ménard & Chittle, 2023). The present result should therefore be interpreted narrowly: among these 196 students at one Pakistani university, gender did not explain meaningful variation in IP. It does not establish that gender, gendered expectations, or stereotype-related experiences are irrelevant in other educational contexts.

The Pakistani setting adds value to the literature because much of the empirical work on IP has been concentrated in Western populations. The present results broadly converge with international findings that link IP to maladaptive or self-evaluative perfectionism, suggesting that the distinction between evaluative vulnerability and conscientious striving may extend across cultural contexts. At the same time, cultural interpretation should remain cautious. The study did not directly measure family obligation, collectivism, academic competition, socioeconomic status, or culturally specific forms of approval seeking. Consequently, the data cannot determine why need for approval is salient in this population or whether its meaning differs from that observed elsewhere. Such questions require culturally informed measurement rather than post hoc assumptions.

Taken together, the bivariate and multivariable results demonstrate why dimension-level analysis is necessary. A total perfectionism score can conceal theoretically meaningful heterogeneity: the same broad score may reflect organized, goal-directed behavior in one student and approval-contingent, ruminative self-evaluation in another. The present pattern therefore supports greater construct precision in both research and practice. Future studies should avoid treating perfectionism as a single risk factor and should instead examine whether different combinations of perfectionistic traits form distinct profiles of vulnerability to impostor experiences.

From an applied perspective, the findings point toward more precise targets for university counseling and student-support programs. Interventions focused on metacognitive awareness of rumination, cognitive restructuring of catastrophic interpretations of mistakes, and development of internally anchored standards of success may be more directly relevant than generic messages encouraging students to 'be less perfectionistic.' Work on approval seeking can also address the tendency to equate evaluation with personal worth, while structured reflection on evidence of competence may help students integrate positive feedback rather than immediately discount it. These implications should be treated as hypotheses for intervention research rather than as demonstrated treatment effects, because the present study did not test any intervention.

The findings also have an institutional implication. If repeated high-stakes evaluation is experienced as a referendum on personal adequacy, feedback practices can either intensify or reduce self-evaluative threat. Clear performance criteria, feedback that separates task-specific shortcomings from global judgments of

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ability, and opportunities for formative rather than exclusively summative evaluation may reduce the ambiguity that fuels approval seeking and rumination. However, institutional recommendations should not individualize a phenomenon that can be shaped by competitive climates, belonging, and broader social expectations. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that impostor experiences should be understood in relation to context as well as individual traits (Feenstra et al., 2020; Ménard & Chittle, 2023).

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations constrain interpretation. First, the convenience sample was drawn from a single private university and contained more women than men. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all university students in Pakistan. Replication across public and private institutions, regions, disciplines, and socioeconomic groups is necessary to establish the robustness of the observed pattern.

Second, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about directionality. Although regression terminology identifies statistical predictors, the data cannot establish that need for approval or rumination causes impostor feelings. IP may increase rumination and approval seeking, the relationships may be reciprocal, or all may partly reflect shared vulnerabilities such as low self-esteem or broader negative affectivity. Longitudinal and experimental designs are needed to test temporal ordering and causal mechanisms.

Third, all focal variables were assessed by self-report. Shared method variance and socially desirable responding may have inflated some associations. Future studies should combine self-report with behavioral indicators, repeated assessments, peer or instructor feedback, and measures of relevant contextual factors. Fourth, several perfectionism dimensions were moderately to strongly intercorrelated. This creates shared variance in the regression model and means that nonsignificant coefficients should not be interpreted as evidence of no relationship. Future work should report multicollinearity diagnostics and consider latent-variable or regularized models when examining closely related perfectionism dimensions.

Finally, the study did not assess mechanisms that may be especially important in the Pakistani context, including perceived parental expectations, family achievement norms beyond the PI subscale, academic competition, belonging, and the meaning attached to social approval. Future research should test whether these contextual variables moderate or mediate the relationship between self-evaluative perfectionism and IP. Prospective intervention studies could also examine whether reductions in rumination and externalized standards of self-worth are followed by measurable reductions in impostor feelings.

Conclusion

The present study refines the relationship between perfectionism and the impostor phenomenon by showing that the association is concentrated in self-evaluative rather than organizational aspects of perfectionism. Among Pakistani undergraduates, need for approval and rumination were the only perfectionism dimensions that retained significant unique associations with IP after the remaining dimensions were considered simultaneously, whereas organization and planfulness contributed little. The findings therefore challenge undifferentiated accounts in which high standards or conscientious striving are assumed to be inherently impostorogenic. Instead, they point to a more specific configuration in which achievement becomes psychologically unstable when self-worth depends on external validation and performance-related concerns are repeatedly rehearsed. Because the evidence is cross-sectional and drawn from one university, causal and

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population-level conclusions are not warranted. Even so, the study provides a clear basis for longitudinal, culturally responsive, and intervention-focused research on the cognitive and interpersonal processes that may sustain impostor experiences in higher education.

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