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# From Manipulation to Self-Doubt: Gaslighting, Impostor Phenomenon, and Self-Concept Among Young Adults

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## ABSTRACT

***Background:*** *Gaslighting, a pattern of relational manipulation that undermines a person's trust in their own perceptions and memory, has been linked to self-doubt and psychological distress. The mechanisms connecting it to impostor feelings are poorly understood, particularly outside Western settings.* ***Objective:*** *This study tested whether self-concept clarity mediates the association between gaslighting victimization and impostor feelings among young adults in Pakistan.* ***Method:*** *In a cross-sectional online survey, 300 young adults (aged 18–35 years; $M = 27.37$, $SD = 4.18$) completed measures of gaslighting victimization, self-concept clarity, and impostor feelings. Mediation was tested using ordinary least squares path analysis equivalent to PROCESS Model 4, with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples.* ***Results:*** *Gaslighting victimization predicted lower self-concept clarity ($b = -0.21$, $p = .002$), and higher self-concept clarity predicted lower impostor feelings ($b = -0.32$, $p < .001$). The total effect of gaslighting on impostor feelings was significant ($c = 0.21$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect was also significant ($b = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.11]) and accounted for about 30% of the total effect. The direct effect remained significant ($c' = 0.15$, $p = .004$), indicating partial mediation.* ***Conclusion:*** *Self-concept clarity appears to be one partial pathway linking gaslighting victimization to impostor feelings in this sample. Other mechanisms likely contribute, and longitudinal research is needed to test temporal ordering.*

***Keywords:*** *Gaslighting; impostor feelings; self-concept clarity; mediation; young adults; Pakistan.*

## INTRODUCTION

Young adulthood is a developmentally sensitive period. Most lifetime mental disorders have their onset before the mid-twenties (Kessler et al., 2005; Solmi et al., 2022), and the prolonged identity exploration and role instability that characterize emerging adulthood can leave the self-structure vulnerable to disruption (Arnett, 2000). Two experiences that may destabilize the young adult's sense of self are gaslighting and impostor feelings, yet they have been studied largely in separate literatures.

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which one person systematically undermines another's confidence in their own perceptions, memory, and judgment, typically within an intimate, familial, or power-differentiated relationship (Sweet, 2019). It is distinguished from ordinary disagreement or deception by its cumulative, patterned character and its aim of destabilizing the target's epistemic confidence (Klein & Wildman, 2021). Victims commonly report chronic self-doubt, difficulty trusting their own judgment, and heightened anxiety (Ahern, 2020; March et al., 2023). Impostor

feelings, first described by Clance and Imes (1978), are a pattern of persistent self-doubt in which people attribute their successes to luck or deception and fear being exposed as less competent than others believe. They are common across student and professional groups (Bravata et al., 2020) and are increasingly understood as embedded in a person's broader evaluative relationship to the self, not as a discrete syndrome (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Self-concept clarity, the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable (Campbell et al., 1996), is a plausible link between the two. Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) suggests that repeated conflict between a person's own appraisals and an imposed version of reality produces self-related distress. Self-verification theory (Swann, 1987) suggests that people need stable, coherent self-views and become distressed when experience cannot be reconciled with them. If gaslighting erodes the clarity of the self-concept, an unclear self-concept may in turn leave people unable to integrate evidence of their own competence, producing impostor feelings. Low self-concept clarity has already been associated with psychological distress and diminished well-being (Campbell et al., 1996; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010), and impostor feelings have been linked to self-evaluative processes such as low self-esteem (Mak et al., 2019).

As far as we are aware, no study has tested gaslighting, self-concept clarity, and impostor feelings together in a single mediation model, and almost none has done so outside Western samples. This gap matters in Pakistan, where young adults develop identity within collectivistic family systems that emphasize deference to authority, family reputation, and academic achievement (Khan & Husain, 2020), and where mental health stigma limits open discussion of self-doubt (Karim et al., 2004; Suhail, 2005). Pakistani research on gaslighting is emerging (Ateeq, 2025; Bhatti et al., 2023; Muazzam, 2024; Qureshi, 2025; Sattar et al., 2025), and impostor feelings have been documented among Pakistani medical students (Qureshi et al., 2017), but the mechanisms linking the two have not been examined.

A mediation result alone says little about for whom a pathway operates. Theory and prior work suggest that impostor feelings may be experienced differently across gender (Vaughn et al., 2019) and social position (Cokley et al., 2017), and that the impact of gaslighting may be unevenly distributed across social groups (Sweet, 2019). Education, relationship status, and social media engagement are further contexts in which self-evaluative processes may differ. Examining whether the mediation pathway is conditional on these characteristics therefore indicates whether any resulting intervention needs to be tailored to subgroups.

**The present study tested the following hypotheses:**

- **H1 (mediation).** Gaslighting victimization is indirectly associated with higher impostor feelings through lower self-concept clarity.

## METHOD

### Design and participants

We used a cross-sectional, correlational online survey. Eligible participants were aged 18–35 years, resident in Pakistan, able to read English or Urdu, and willing to provide informed consent. Recruitment was by purposive and snowball sampling through social media, university mailing lists, and community networks. A power analysis in G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) for a multiple regression with up to six predictors ($f^2 = .15$, $\alpha = .05$, power = .80) indicated a minimum of about 146 participants; a target of at least 300 was set to allow for attrition and for bootstrapped indirect-effect testing (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007).

The final sample comprised 300 participants (*M*age = 27.37, *SD* = 4.18, range 18–35). Gender distribution was 49.7% male ($n = 149$), 47.7% female ($n = 143$), and 2.7% non-binary/other ($n = 8$).

Participants held a high school education or less (14.3%), a bachelor's degree (42.3%), a master's degree (31.7%), or a doctoral/professional degree (11.7%). Relationship status was single (29.7%), in a relationship (25.3%), married/cohabiting (33.7%), divorced/separated (10.0%), or widowed (1.3%, $n$ = 4). Mean daily social media use was 3.44 hours ($SD$ = 1.52), and participants were divided by tertile into low (0.97–2.51 hr/day), moderate (2.54–3.88 hr/day), and high (3.92–8.00 hr/day) engagement groups of 100 each.

**Measures**

*Gaslighting victimization* was measured with an adapted version of the 10-item Gaslighting Behaviors Questionnaire (March et al., 2023); higher scores indicate greater exposure to gaslighting behaviors. *Self-concept clarity* was measured with the 12-item Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996), with items 1–5, 7–10, and 12 reverse-scored so that higher scores indicate greater clarity. *Impostor feelings* were measured with the 7-item Leary Impostorism Scale (Leary et al., 2000); higher scores indicate stronger impostor feelings. All three scales showed good internal consistency in the present sample (Table 1). A demographic questionnaire recorded age, gender, educational level, relationship status, and average daily social media use.

An Urdu version of the survey was prepared for participants who preferred it, using translation and back-translation (Brislin, 1970) by bilingual experts, with discrepancies resolved by discussion. A pilot with 20–30 participants (excluded from analysis) informed minor wording refinements.

**Procedure and ethics**

Participants accessed the survey through a shared link, read an information sheet, gave informed consent, and completed the demographic questionnaire followed by the three scales in a fixed order (approximately 15–20 minutes). A debriefing screen provided psychoeducational information and contact details for mental health services. The study followed APA (2017) ethical principles and received approval from the relevant institutional review board. No identifying information was collected, and participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time.

**Data preparation and analysis**

Item-level missingness was low (1.0%–3.0% per item). Scale totals were computed by pro-rating (mean of completed items multiplied by the number of items) when at least 80% of a scale's items were completed (Parent, 2013). This yielded valid totals for gaslighting ($N$ = 300), self-concept clarity ($N$ = 300), and impostor feelings ($N$ = 298), compared with $N$ = 165 under listwise deletion. Variables were approximately normally distributed (skewness −0.15 to 0.81; kurtosis −0.60 to 0.35), and Spearman correlations were computed as a robustness check.

**Mediation.** Self-concept clarity was tested as a mediator of the effect of gaslighting victimization ($X$) on impostor feelings ($Y$) using ordinary least squares path analysis equivalent to PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018), with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples to estimate the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect ($a \times b$). The proportion mediated ($P$M) was computed as the indirect effect divided by the total effect.

**RESULTS**

**Preliminary analyses**

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and zero-order correlations are shown in Table 1. Gaslighting victimization was negatively correlated with self-concept clarity and positively correlated with impostor feelings, and self-concept clarity was negatively correlated with impostor feelings. These associations

satisfy the preconditions for testing mediation. Spearman coefficients showed the same pattern (ρ = −.17 to .22, all *p*s < .003).

**Table 1**: **Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations Among Study Variables**

| **Variable** | ***M*** | ***SD*** | **α** | **1** | **2** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Gaslighting victimization | 20.60 | 5.47 | .80 | — | |
| 2. Self-concept clarity | 38.42 | 6.57 | .82 | −.18** | — |
| 3. Impostor feelings | 18.57 | 5.18 | .85 | .22*** | −.40*** |

*Note.* $N$ = 298–300 (pro-rated scale totals). Reliability coefficients were computed on complete cases ($n$ = 233–259). ** $p$ < .01. *** $p$ < .001.

**Mediation analysis**

Results of the mediation model ($N$ = 298) are shown in Table 2 and Figure 1 (path diagram: Gaslighting → Self-concept clarity → Impostor feelings). Gaslighting victimization significantly predicted lower self-concept clarity (*a* path), and self-concept clarity significantly predicted lower impostor feelings when gaslighting was controlled (*b* path). The total effect of gaslighting on impostor feelings was significant (*c*), and remained significant, though attenuated, after accounting for self-concept clarity (*c′*). The bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero, and the indirect effect accounted for approximately 30.1% of the total effect (*P*M = .30), indicating partial mediation. The model explained 3% of the variance in self-concept clarity ($R^2$ = .03) and 19% of the variance in impostor feelings ($R^2$ = .19). H1 was supported.

**Table 2**: **Mediation Model: Self-Concept Clarity as a Mediator Between Gaslighting Victimization and Impostor Feelings**

| **Path** | ***b* (*SE*)** | **β** | **95% CI** | ***P*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *a*: Gaslighting → Self-concept clarity | −0.21 (0.07) | −.18 | [−0.35, −0.08] | .002 |
| *b*: Self-concept clarity → Impostor feelings | −0.32 (0.04) | −.38 | [−0.40, −0.24] | < .001 |
| *c*: Total effect, Gaslighting → Impostor feelings | 0.21 (0.05) | .22 | [0.10, 0.32] | < .001 |
| *c′*: Direct effect, controlling for self-concept clarity | 0.15 (0.05) | .16 | [0.05, 0.25] | .004 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Indirect effect ($a \times b$) | 0.06 (0.02) | .07 | [0.02, 0.11] | — |

*Note.* $N = 298$. $b$ = unstandardized coefficient; β = completely standardized coefficient. The CI for the indirect effect is a bias-corrected bootstrap interval (5,000 resamples); other CIs are based on normal-theory standard errors. $PM = .30$; $R^2 = .03$ (self-concept clarity) and .19 (impostor feelings).

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the mediating role of self-concept clarity in the relationship between gaslighting victimization and impostor feelings amongst young adults in Pakistan. As hypothesized in H1, gaslighting victimization was indirectly related to increased impostor feelings via reduced self-concept clarity. The indirect effect accounted for approximately 30% of the total effect, however there was a significant direct effect indicating partial mediation.

### Gaslighting victimization and self-concept clarity

Gaslighting victimization was negatively related to self-concept clarity (a path). This is consistent with gaslighting being an epistemic injury. As gaslighting relies on causing individuals to doubt their own perceptions, memories, and judgements (Klein & Wildman, 2021; Sweet, 2019) prolonged exposure to this can cause the overall self to become less coherent. From a self-discrepancy perspective, continual pressure to believe alternative realities can cause individuals to be less certain about themselves (Higgins, 1987). This extends previous literature regarding the negative effects of low self-concept clarity on wellbeing (Campbell et al., 1996; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010) by highlighting that gaslighting is one relational experience that can cause reduced self-concept clarity. However, the magnitude of the a path was small (β= -.18), meaning that gaslighting only explained 3% of the variance in self-concept clarity. This indicates that gaslighting is likely one of many factors that can influence self-concept clarity (Campbell et al., 1996; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010).

### Self-concept clarity and impostor feelings

Self-concept clarity was negatively related to impostor feelings when controlling for gaslighting (b path). This was the strongest path in the mediation model (β= -.38) and the model explained 19% of the variance in impostor feelings. From a self-verification perspective, individuals have a need to maintain a stable and coherent view of themselves. If they feel unable to incorporate evidence of their competence into their unclear self-concept, this may cause distress and manifest as impostor feelings (Swann, 1987). This is consistent with views that impostorism is a reflection of the individual's overall self-evaluative processes rather than a syndrome (Feenstra et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2019; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). This indicates that self-concept clarity is a closer correlate to impostor feelings.

### Partial mediation

The mediation was partial. There was a significant direct effect (c'= 0.15, p= .004) and the indirect effect was small (b= 0.06). A significant indirect effect does not indicate that the mediator is the main mechanism (Hayes, 2018). Other variables may be responsible for the remaining association. These could include attributional style, hypervigilance towards social evaluation, reduced interpersonal/epistemic trust, and trauma related symptoms (Ahern, 2020; March et al., 2023).

The small a path may be due to the cultural context. In collectivist family systems gaslighting like behaviours may be normalised or not acknowledged as manipulation. Cultural norms encourage individuals to be respectful and not question the reality of elders (Bhatti et al., 2023; Khan & Husain, 2020). This may cause under-reporting of gaslighting. Additionally, measures not fully equivalent to those developed in western cultures may have caused under-reporting (Khan & Husain, 2020). Impostor

feelings have been previously documented in students from Pakistan (Qureshi et al., 2017). However, this study highlights that these feelings are linked to relational experiences and self-concept clarity.

**Implications**

Theoretically, this provides an integrative test of the relationship between gaslighting and impostor literature. The partial mediation indicates that self-discrepancy or self-verification theories are not sufficient. Further mechanisms may need to be included in models of the consequences of gaslighting including epistemic trust, relational security, and trauma related hyper-vigilance. Clinically, practitioners working with young adults who have experienced manipulative or invalidating relationships may want to measure self-concept clarity. Intervention may help increase the coherence and stability of self-concept (e.g. values clarification, narrative approaches) which may indirectly reduce impostor feelings. However, as only a partial mediation was found this is unlikely to be enough on its own. It should be combined with addressing the direct effects of relational manipulation, as emerging assertiveness based approaches are being used with students affected by gaslighting in Pakistan (Muazzam, 2024).

**Limitations and future research**

This was a cross-sectional study meaning causal conclusions cannot be made. It is plausible that the relationship is reversed or reciprocal. Individuals with less clear self-concepts may be more susceptible to gaslighting or likely to perceive gaslighting and are more prone to impostor feelings. Longitudinal or experimental studies would be needed to determine temporal precedence.

The sample was collected using purposive and snowball sampling online meaning it is likely to be overrepresented by young adults with internet access and higher education. This will limit generalisability. All variables were self-reported meaning common method variance may have occurred. This could have inflated the associations. Additionally, the measures may have suffered from recall bias and social desirability bias. As gaslighting was a past behaviour, this could have caused issues. Measures may not have been fully equivalent despite translation and back-translation. The effects were small and the model only explained 3% of the variance in self-concept clarity.

Future research should use longitudinal methods to investigate multiple mediators (e.g. epistemic trust, attributional style, trauma related symptoms) in addition to self-concept clarity. Future research should investigate whether the mediation varies between different groups (e.g. gender, education level, relationship status). This should be done using a large sample to determine any interactions. Qualitative or mixed methods research could be used to investigate how young adults in Pakistan identify and understand gaslighting in family and relational systems.

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