

Original Article

The Impostor Phenomenon in medical undergraduates of The University of Lahore

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Impostor phenomenon is feeling like a fraud or cheat despite the contrary. It is when students doubt their capabilities and fear that they might be exposed as something that they are not. They think their achievements are all due to luck, chance, or other reasons instead of acknowledging them. This results in stress and anxiety among the students which further leads to poor patient care and low self-esteem.

Objective: The objective of this study is to identify students suffering from the Impostor Phenomenon from the University of Lahore MBBS program.

Methods: We used the Clance impostor phenomenon scale for identifying impostor phenomenon in medical undergraduates of the University of Lahore. It was a 20 item anonymous and voluntary survey and we sent the forms online by using Google forms.

Results: A total of 112 out of 500 (22%) students responded, with 99 completing the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale with a mean score of 59.0 ± 10.45 (Moderate to severe impostor syndrome). This percentage mostly represented 2nd and 3rd-year MBBS.

Conclusion: In conclusion, third and second-year MBBS proves to be the most affected from impostor phenomenon. The reasons are yet to be found but it could be due to the transition into the clinical phase.

KEYWORDS:

Impostor phenomenon, Medical undergraduates

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INTRODUCTION

The impostor phenomenon (IP) as the name suggests refers to fraudulent behaviour. Psychologically, a student feels like he is not competent enough, despite evidence of his success (Mak, Kleitman, & Abbott, 2019). Such students also attribute their success to luck or chance. The fear of being exposed as a phony lead to stress and anxiety among them. This results in decreased efficacy in patient care. Medical graduates when entering medical schools or when transitioning from the preclinical to the clinical stage are the most vulnerable. They have all kinds of doubts about themselves whether they will be able to compete or not. This needs to be dealt with before it takes a toll on their mental health. There is a substantial concern in, and hard work directed towards, promoting student security in medical education, including alleviating impostor feelings. Studies indicate that the impostor phenomenon can be divided into 3 categories, one in which students blame their success on luck, the other when students try to brush off praise, and lastly when students self-doubt their ability (Holmes, Kertay, Adamson, Holland, & Clance, 1993). Several studies have been linking women to the impostor phenomenon (Vaughn et al., 2020). It was

established that women are more prone to it but later recognized that both genders are affected. Men and women both have different coping strategies. This phenomenon is observed in all types of populations such as ethnic minorities, undergraduates, postgraduates, nurses, and even educationists.

One study has hypothesized two types of impostors (Leonhardt, Bechtoldt, & Rohrmann, 2017). The first category is the one in which individuals self-doubt themselves and fear that their success is transitory and will be exposed one day. While in the second category, individuals have raised levels of impostorism whose views about themselves are significantly more positive, who report low debilitated task-related behaviors and lesser anxiety. Another study suggests the constructive approach of impostorism in which IP is shown as an emotional state resulting from situations in which one is assessed "too highly" (McElwee & Yurak, 2010). This effect is a common reaction to being over judged by peers or professors. This research focuses on the identification of this syndrome in medical undergraduates of the University of Lahore, specifically finding out which year is the most affected by it.

METHODS

Ethical approval was taken from the University of Lahore and online questionnaires were sent to each MBBS class consisting of 130 students each. It took 4 months to collect the data for this cross-sectional study. A validated Clance Impostor

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Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) was used which is a 20 item questionnaire (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true). The Impostor Test was made to help individuals decide whether or not they have Impostor Phenomenon features and, if so, to what degree they are being affected. If the total score is 40 or less, the student has few Impostor features; if the score is between 41 and 60, the student has moderate Impostor Phenomenon experiences; a score between 61 and 80 means the student frequently develops Impostor feelings; and a score higher than 80 means the student often suffers from intense Impostor Phenomenon feelings. The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the Impostor phenomenon plays a role in a student's life. The Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale has proved to be more sensitive than other instruments (Holmes et al., 1993). CIPS has been reported to have strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92-0.96$) and strong validity [5, 15].

RESULT

A total of 112 valid responses were obtained from the 500 students (providing a 19.6% response rate). As seen in Figure 1, of the total responses, 32.65% of the responses were from 1st-year MBBS, 19.39% of the responses were from 2nd-year MBBS, 27.55% were from 3rd-year MBBS and 20.41% were from 4th-year MBBS and 80% declined to respond.

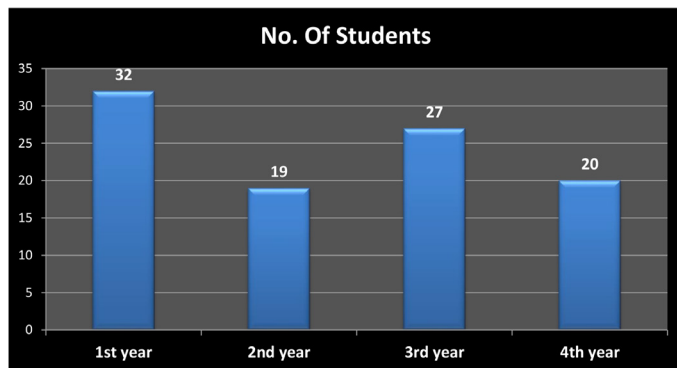


Fig I: Frequency of student's response

Most of the data shows that students are suffering from moderate to intense IP feelings as shown in Figure 2 with a mean score of 59.0. The second-year (94%) and the third-year students (96%) are the most affected.

There are a lot of symptoms associated with the Impostor Phenomenon. It is generally recognized that feelings of Impostor Phenomenon contribute adversely to an individual's life, and several studies have shown that Impostor Phenomenon relates to increased levels of despair and apprehension. In a study, educational developers responded to a survey, mentioning the negative effects of the Impostor Phenomenon (Rudenga & Gravett, 2019).

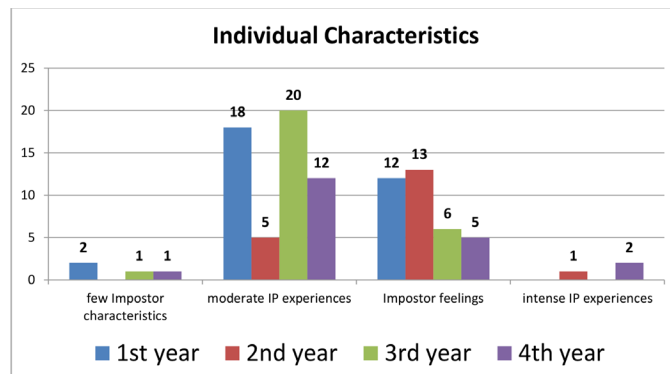


Fig II: Individual Characteristics

DISCUSSION

The literature has multiple theories as to why more than half of students in medical science might experience the impostor phenomenon. One probable description may be the abrupt transition to clinical practice in the traditional curriculum (Levant, Villwock, & Manzardo, 2020; Rudenga & Gravett, 2019). In integrated medical teaching, there are elements of clinical medicine from the start.

At the beginning of MBBS, some students might feel pressured due to different educational backgrounds or schools. They might compare themselves to other high-achieving students. Some may feel hassled due to their different ethnical background, resulting in insecurity. In a qualitative study, 6 doctoral students have mentioned that family expectations, racial identity and the pressure of studies may result in a lack of confidence (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011).

Most of the students are hit by impostor feelings during post-graduation. They feel academically unprepared to face future challenges (Cisco, 2020a). If academic writing and research become part of the curriculum, these feelings of uncertainty can be overcome (Cisco, 2020b).

In another study, researchers have linked the impostor phenomenon to 5 personality traits and have come up with the conclusion that neuroticism has the most contribution to impostor feeling (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002). Neuroticism is the trait disposition to experience negative effects, including anger, anxiety, self-consciousness, irritability, emotional instability, and depression.

Individuals, along with help from external sources allow a person to overcome feelings of impostorism. In a mixed-method study, around 12 coping strategies have been recommended (Barr-Walker, Werner, Kellermeyer, & Bass, 2020).

It is shown that students of the University of Lahore exhibit almost similar features as students in other universities. They are affected the most in the phase that precedes the practical application of their knowledge. Literature shows that numerous coping mechanisms have been recognized. Those of which have

been the most suggested are, reflecting and writing about your strengths (Vaughn, Taasobshirazi, & Johnson, 2020). Reviewing your achievements from time to time brings confidence in oneself. Also, talking to a mentor has proved to be very beneficial. Sharing experiences with peers and discussing with them your shortcomings is a positive step towards overcoming impostorism. There have been several studies on the causes and factors affecting impostorism (Bravata et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

After questioning over 112 medical science students at a large private institute of Lahore, we found out that 36.7% of them present with frequent feelings of Impostor Phenomenon even though it has a functional mentoring program. These results inspire the constant research of possible causes as to why this figure is higher among Medical science students and research on how to reduce feelings of Impostor Phenomenon among medical science students. The best strategies then should be implemented in institutes and their results examined.

DECLARATION

The author report no declaration of interest.

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

1. Tazmeen Kaukab. Manuscript preparation, study design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation of results.
2. Sundus Iftikhar. Data collection and data analysis.