



A Study on Association between Social Comparison, Imposter Syndrome and Future Anxiety among Young Adults

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Abstract: Imposter syndrome refers to the persistent belief that an individual is undeserving of success despite having clear evidence of competence and achievements. It has been linked to social comparison tendencies and to anxiety an individual's psychological state. This study examines the relationship between imposter syndrome, social comparison and dark future anxiety among emerging adults (aged 18-29 years). The data was collected from participants through standardized psychological assessment. It shows that when one tends to engage in excessive social comparison with others anxiety rises higher, and if anxiety rises the feeling of imposter rises along. The findings showed that sub dimension of social comparison, ability comparison was significantly positive with dark future anxiety ($r= 0.643$, $p<0.001$) and results that ability comparison is also significantly positive with imposter syndrome ($r=0.462$, $p<0.001$) which suggests that individual who often compares their ability with other individual are more prone to experience higher level of anxiety and imposter feeling. However, opinion comparison has no significant relationship with dark anxiety ($r=0.167$) and similarly opinion comparison was also shown no significant relationship with imposter syndrome ($r=0.257$). whereas, it was found significantly strong positive relationship ($r= 0.710$, $p<0.001$) which suggests that higher the anxiety was associated with greater imposter feelings.

Keywords: *Imposter Syndrome, Social Comparison, Anxiety, Impostor Phenomenon, Self-Doubt, Psychological Measurement, Self-Perception, Scale Development, Fear of Exposure*

1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a unique developmental stage, generally ranging from 18 to 29 years of age, during which individuals experience considerably psychological, and social changes. This period is characterized by identity exploration, increasing independence, career establishment, higher education, and interpersonal relationships. Although it is often considered period of self-discovery, emerging adulthood is also associated with uncertainty and pressure to succeed in different areas of life. The growing expectations related to academic achievement, career success, financial independence, and social acceptance make this developmental stage psychologically demanding. In today's highly competitive and digitally connected world, young adults are constantly exposed to information regarding the achievements and lifestyles of others through educational settings, workplaces, and social media platforms. Such continuous exposure often encourages individuals to evaluate themselves in comparison with others. While these comparisons may sometimes promote motivation and self-improvement, excessive comparison can negatively influence self-esteem and psychological well-being. When individuals repeatedly perceive themselves as less capable than others, they may develop feelings of inadequacy despite possessing adequate abilities and achievements. One psychological construct that has gained increasing attention in recent years is Imposter Syndrome, also referred to as the Impostor Phenomenon. It refers to the persistent belief that one's accomplishments are undeserved despite objective evidence of competence and success. Individuals experiencing imposter syndrome often attribute their achievements to external factors such as luck, timing, or assistance from others rather than their own abilities. Consequently, they experience chronic self-doubt, fear of failure, perfectionistic tendencies, and apprehension about being exposed as intellectually or professionally incompetent. These experiences may negatively affect academic performance, occupational functioning, self-confidence, and overall psychological well-being.

A major factor contributing to these negative self-evaluations is social comparison. According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), individuals possess an inherent tendency to evaluate their abilities and opinions by comparing themselves with others, particularly when objective standards are unavailable. Such comparisons help individuals understand their own abilities and opinions; however, repeated comparisons, especially upward ability comparisons, may increase dissatisfaction, lower self-worth, and intensify self-critical thoughts. The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure further categorises social comparison into ability

comparison and opinion comparison, suggesting that individuals compare not only their competencies but also their beliefs and viewpoints. Although social comparison may encourage self-improvement in certain situations, excessive ability-based comparisons may contribute to various psychological difficulties.

Another psychological concern receiving increasing attention is Dark Future Anxiety. Unlike general anxiety, dark future anxiety specifically refers to persistent worry, apprehension, and negative expectations regarding one's personal future. This developmental stage frequently encounter uncertainty regarding employment, higher education, financial stability, relationships, and life goals. Continuous doubts regarding future success, combined with fear of failure and perceived inadequacy, may lead individuals to develop pessimistic expectations about their future. Such concerns may further influence emotional well-being, decision-making, motivation, and life satisfaction.

These psychological constructs appear to be theoretically interconnected. Individuals who frequently engage in ability-based social comparison may develop negative self-evaluations, resulting in increased self-doubt and imposter feelings. Persistent imposter experiences may subsequently intensify concerns regarding future achievements and increase dark future anxiety. Therefore, understanding the relationship among social comparison, imposter syndrome, and dark future anxiety is important for gaining a better understanding of the psychological experiences of emerging adults.

Previous studies have independently demonstrated significant associations between social comparison and anxiety, as well as between imposter syndrome and psychological distress. Similarly, research has highlighted the influence of social comparison on self-esteem and emotional well-being. However, comparatively limited research has examined the relationship among social comparison, imposter syndrome, and dark future anxiety simultaneously, particularly by distinguishing ability comparison from opinion comparison among emerging adults. Understanding these relationships may contribute to identifying psychological risk factors associated with self-doubt and future-related concerns and may assist mental health professionals in designing more targeted preventive and intervention strategies.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationship between social comparison, imposter syndrome, and dark future anxiety among emerging adults. Additionally, the study seeks to explore whether the dimensions of social comparison, namely ability comparison and opinion

namely ability comparison and opinion comparison, differ in their relationship with imposter syndrome and dark future anxiety.

1.1 *Imposter Syndrome*

Imposter syndrome (IS) is a behavioural health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments among high-achieving individuals. These individuals cannot internalize their success and subsequently experience pervasive feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, depression, and/or apprehension of being exposed as a fraud in their work, despite verifiable and objective evidence of their successfulness Bravata DM (2020). Impostor syndrome, also known as impostor phenomenon or impostorism, is a psychological experience in which a person suffers from feelings of intellectual and/or professional fraudulence Mak (2019). Walker et. al (2023) explains imposter syndrome as "the subjective experience of perceived self-doubt in one's abilities and accomplishments compared with others, despite evidence to suggest the contrary."

Qasem et al. (2025) conducted a cross-sectional study among university students to examine the imposter syndrome and its association with depression, anxiety, and stress. The results show imposter syndrome was rife among students and was significantly positively associated with depression, anxiety, and stress. The need for interventions to increase awareness of imposter syndrome and promote healthier coping strategies among university students. Fraenza, (2016) conducted a cross-sectional study to examine imposter syndrome and its psychological outcomes among graduate students. The findings revealed that imposter syndrome was significantly and positively associated with anxiety. The study also identified perfectionism as a strong predictor of imposter syndrome and suggested that social factors may contribute to its development.

1.2 *Social Comparison*

Social comparison is that people may sometimes even engage in comparisons with others who do not yield relevant information concerning the self (Gilbert et al., 1995). social comparisons are their power in eliciting universal human emotions. We may feel pride when we succeed in outperforming competitors, marvel in admiration about the excellence of other but may also feel the pain of envying them (Crusius & Lange, 2017; Smith, 2000; Steckler & Tracy, 2014). Social comparison can also have interesting behavioural consequences. If one were to observe a discrepancy in performance between them and others, then one might behave more competitively. Garcia et al. (2013). According to (McCarthy & Morina, (2020) examined the relationship between social comparison, depression and anxiety, the also study finds that social comparison has a

significant association with depression and anxiety. Goodwill et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between social comparison and social anxiety using experience-sampling methods. The findings indicated that individuals with higher social anxiety made less favourable and more unstable social comparisons. Favourable social comparisons were associated with higher positive affect and lower negative affect, suggesting that social comparison plays an important role in emotional well-being.

1.3 Dark Future Anxiety

Dark Future Anxiety is characterised by ongoing uncertain expectations, distressing thoughts and persistent worry about one's future. Especially common among young adult, as it is transitional stage dominated by uncertainty related to career, personal identity, financial security, relationship and overall life stability (Zaleski, 1996). Unlike general anxiety, future anxiety is especially concerned with anticipated future events rather than present circumstances making it more relevant during this period of developmental stage education, career and life decisions (Zaleski et al., 2017).

It is suggested that social comparison, imposter syndrome, and future anxiety are inter-related closely individuals those who compared themselves with other are more likely to experience self-doubt and imposter feeling (Rohrmann et al., 2016). In addition, imposter syndrome has been linked with higher levels of anxiety and psychological stress among students (Al shehhi et al., 2025). Furthermore studies have also found that ability based social comparison is strongly associated with lower self-confidence and higher imposter syndrome. Existing literature suggests that frequent social comparison may increase imposter feelings, which may future contribute to concerns about the future.

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore association to explore association between imposter syndrome, social comparison and future anxiety among emerging adults.

1.5 Hypothesis

H₁: There will be a positive relationship between imposter syndrome and social comparison.

H₂: There will be a positive relationship between imposter syndrome and future anxiety.

H₃: There will be a positive relationship between social comparison and future anxiety.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

The sample was collected by simple random sampling. In which interested participants filled google form with honesty. The total number of samples obtained were 55 in the city of Sirsa, Haryana.

2.2 Measures

The Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale: The Clance Imposter phenomenon scale was used to measure the Imposter Syndrome was developed by Clance in 1985. The test consists of 20 items that determines whether an individual has imposter characteristic like self-doubt, fear of failure. Items scoring is on 5-Likert scale ranging from 1 (not true), 2,3,4,5(very true). The higher the score the stronger imposter characteristics.

The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM): The Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) scale was used to measure one's tendency to compare with others. This scale was developed by Gibbon and Buunk in 1999. The scale has 11 items and scoring is on Likert scale ranging from disagree strongly (1) to 1 agree strongly (5). The scale is further sectioned into two subscales, 1) ability to compare and 2) opinion comparison.

The Dark Future Anxiety Scale: The Dark Future Anxiety Scale was developed Zaleski et al. (2017) The DFS consists of 5 items ranging on 7 Likert scale from 0(decidedly false) to 6 (decidedly true). The scale is a short self-report measures designed to assess.

2.3 Procedure

The participants were informed purpose of the research and questionnaire were filled through google form. Standardized test was administered with the participants. Each participant was appreciated for their cooperation and participation.

3. Analysis of Data Results

Table 1. Descriptives: N, Mean, Standard deviation

	Ability Comparison	Opinion Comparison	Dark Anxiety Scale	Imposter Syndrome
N	55	55	55	55
Mean	18.1	13.4	18.1	60.9

Standard deviation	2.94	2.20	10.1	15.3
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Table 2: *Correlation between variables*

	Ability Comparison	Opinion Comparison	Dark Anxiety Scale	Imposter Syndrome
Ability Comparison	—			
Opinion Comparison	0.214	—		
Dark Anxiety Scale	0.643***	0.167	—	
Imposter Syndrome	0.462***	0.257	0.710***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

4. Discussion of Results

The present study examined the relationship between social comparison, Dark future anxiety and Imposter Syndrome among young adults. The findings showed that sub dimension of social comparison, ability comparison was significantly positive with dark future anxiety ($r = 0.643$, $p < 0.001$) and results that ability comparison is also significantly positive with imposter syndrome ($r = 0.462$, $p < 0.001$) which suggests that individual who often compares their ability with other individual are more prone to experience higher level of anxiety and imposter feeling. However, opinion comparison has no significant relationship with dark anxiety ($r = 0.167$) and similarly opinion comparison was also shown no significant relationship with imposter syndrome ($r = 0.257$). whereas, it was found significantly strong positive relationship ($r = 0.710$, $p < 0.001$) which suggests that higher the anxiety higher the experience of imposter feeling. The findings are supported by Qasem et al. (2025), who found that higher imposter syndrome is associated with increase anxiety among university student. Overall, the findings, ability comparison is more correlated positively to anxiety and imposter syndrome. Which suggests that if individuals' ability is repeatedly compare it leads to negative influence on psychological well-being. The present findings are consistent with McCarthy and Morina (2020) reported that social comparison is significantly associated with anxiety.

5. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to examine relationship among social comparison, imposter syndrome and dark future anxiety among young adults. A total of 55 emerging adults participated in the study. The finding revealed that ability comparison was significantly and positively related to both dark future anxiety and imposter syndrome. This indicates that individuals who frequently compare their ability with others are more likely to experience higher level of self-doubt and greater concern about their future.

The study also found a strong positive relationship between imposter syndrome and dark future anxiety, suggesting that individuals with stronger imposter feelings are more likely to experience anxiety regarding their future. However, opinion comparison did not show a significant relationship with either imposter syndrome or dark future anxiety. These findings suggest that comparing one's ability may have a greater psychological impact than comparing opinion. Overall, the study highlights the ability-based social comparison in understanding imposter syndrome and future anxiety among young adults. The findings may contribute to a better understanding of factors affecting psychological wellbeing during this stage of life.

5.1 Suggestions

The findings of the present study suggest that educational institutes and mental health professionals should focus on reducing unhealthy social comparison among young adults, guidance and counselling may help them to build healthier beliefs and patterns. It may also help them to build awareness about managing unhealthy thoughts and perception. They might organise awareness workshop, programs and counselling sessions.

Young adults may benefit from interventions that promote coping strategies, resilience and self-acceptance and they might also learn how to use social media mindfully which may further support psychological well-being.

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