

THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON AND THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A SECONDARY ANALYSIS OF SELF-EVALUATION, SELF-ESTEEM, AND DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AMONG UZBEK YOUTH

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
<p>Background. The impostor phenomenon (IP) — the persistent belief that one’s achievements are undeserved, accompanied by a fear of being “exposed” as a fraud — has been increasingly linked to social media environments that amplify upward social comparison and dependence on external validation. This study examined social-media-related negative self-evaluation, global self-esteem, and depressive symptoms through the theoretical lens of the impostor phenomenon among Uzbek youth.</p> <p>Methods. A secondary analysis was conducted on data from 1,605 respondents aged 17–35 years who completed an 18-item Uzbek-language questionnaire measuring the negative impact of social media on self-esteem (with three subscales: body image and emotional impact, social comparison and low self-worth, and dependence on external validation), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II), and Raven’s Progressive Matrices. Correlational analyses, group comparisons, and an exploratory mediation analysis were performed. An integrative model of the impostor phenomenon guided interpretation.</p> <p>Results. Negative self-evaluation from social media correlated strongly and negatively with self-esteem ($r = -.595, p < .001$) and positively with depressive symptoms ($r = .404, p < .001$), but negligibly with intelligence ($r = .034, ns$). The impostor-relevant subscales — dependence on external validation and social comparison/low self-worth — showed the expected moderate associations with low self-esteem ($r = -.452$ and $-.448$) and depression ($r = .306$ and $.327$). Group differences by sex, age, and daily usage duration were small or nonsignificant (all $\eta^2 \leq .004$), indicating that the experience is broadly distributed and not primarily a function of time online.</p> <p>Conclusion. Patterns of social-media-related self-evaluation among Uzbek youth are consistent with core features of the impostor phenomenon — externally contingent self-worth and comparison-driven inadequacy — and are linked to poorer mental health independently of</p>	<p>Impostor phenomenon; impostor syndrome; social media; self-esteem; social comparison; external validation; depressive symptoms; Uzbek youth.</p>

demographics. Because IP was not measured with a dedicated instrument, findings are interpretive rather than confirmatory and motivate future research using validated IP scales.	
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Introduction

The impostor phenomenon (IP), first described by Clance and Imes (1978) and often referred to colloquially as “impostor syndrome,” denotes a pattern in which individuals are unable to internalize their accomplishments and instead attribute success to luck, effort, or deception while living in fear of eventually being “exposed” as a fraud. Although IP is not a formal clinical diagnosis, it is associated with anxiety, depression, perfectionism, low self-esteem, and impaired well-being across academic, professional, and personal domains. Contemporary scholarship increasingly situates IP within the broader context of self-evaluation, viewing it as a self-perception disorder maintained by maladaptive cognitive appraisals, emotional instability, low self-worth, and insufficient social support.

Originally identified among high-achieving women, the impostor phenomenon is now understood to affect people across genders, occupations, and cultures, with prevalence estimates varying widely depending on population and measurement (Bravata et al., 2020; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). It is most pronounced among individuals navigating evaluative, achievement-oriented environments — students, early-career professionals, and others whose competence is frequently judged. A consistent theme in this literature is that impostor feelings are only weakly related to objective ability; highly competent people are frequently the most affected, because the phenomenon is rooted in distorted self-appraisal rather than in genuine deficits. This decoupling of felt fraudulence from actual performance is central to the construct and distinguishes it from realistic self-assessment.

Social media has been proposed as a powerful contemporary amplifier of impostor feelings. Platforms present a continuous stream of curated, idealized self-presentations — highlight reels of others’ achievements, appearance, and lifestyles — that invite upward social comparison. According to Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, individuals evaluate themselves by comparison with others, and in the absence of objective standards they rely heavily on social information. When that information is systematically skewed toward idealized portrayals, comparisons tend to be unfavorable, fostering feelings of inadequacy, the sense that one’s own success is less “real” than that of others, and a dependence on external markers of worth such as likes, comments, and follower counts. Empirical work has linked these comparison processes to lowered self-esteem, increased negative affect, and heightened body image concern (Fardouly et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). These dynamics map closely onto the cognitive and emotional core of the impostor phenomenon: the discounting of one’s own legitimacy and the staking of self-worth on external validation, a pattern consistent with theories of contingent self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001) in which esteem rises and falls with external feedback rather than resting on stable internal standards.

An integrative model of the impostor phenomenon (Figure 1) organizes these processes across three levels. At the level of determinants, IP is driven by four interacting components: cognitive distortions, emotional instability, low self-esteem, and a lack of social support. At the level of manifestation, IP appears as self-doubt, fear of exposure, and the experience of feeling “fake.” The model also specifies developmental dynamics across the lifespan and a feedback loop whereby the manifestation of impostor feelings generates further cognitive distortions and emotional strain, deepening the syndrome.

Within this framework, social media operates primarily on the cognitive-distortion and low-self-esteem determinants, intensifying comparison and validation-dependence and thereby feeding the cycle.

Despite growing interest, most empirical work on IP and social media has been conducted in Western, English-speaking contexts, and validated impostor-phenomenon instruments are not widely available in Uzbek. At the same time, large-scale data on social-media-related self-evaluation among Uzbek youth have recently become available. These data measure constructs that overlap substantially with the cognitive-emotional core of IP — particularly comparison-driven inadequacy and dependence on external validation — and therefore offer an opportunity to examine impostor-relevant patterns empirically, even in the absence of a dedicated IP scale.

The present study reports a secondary analysis of these data, framed by the integrative model of the impostor phenomenon. We address three questions: (1) How strongly is social-media-related negative self-evaluation associated with global self-esteem and depressive symptoms, the affective correlates most closely tied to IP? (2) Do the impostor-relevant subscales — dependence on external validation and social comparison/low self-worth — show the discriminant pattern predicted by the IP framework (moderate links to self-esteem and depression, negligible links to intelligence)? (3) Is the experience concentrated in particular demographic or usage groups, or broadly distributed as the IP literature would suggest? We hypothesized strong negative associations with self-esteem, positive associations with depression, negligible associations with intelligence, and only weak demographic and usage-duration effects.

Method

Design and Data Source

This was a secondary, cross-sectional analysis of an existing dataset originally collected for the psychometric validation of an Uzbek-language questionnaire measuring the negative impact of social media use on self-esteem. The present study reuses that dataset to examine impostor-relevant constructs through the lens of the impostor phenomenon. No new data were collected.

Participants

Participants were 1,605 respondents aged 17–35 years, recruited through stratified sampling proportional by age (17–20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35 years), sex, and daily duration of social media use (< 1 hr, 1–3 hr, > 3 hr). The sample comprised 784 men (48.8%) and 821 women (51.2%). Age groups were distributed as 17–20 (n = 438, 27.3%), 21–25 (n = 560, 34.9%), 26–30 (n = 382, 23.8%), and 31–35 (n = 225, 14.0%). Daily usage was < 1 hr (n = 233, 14.5%), 1–3 hr (n = 772, 48.1%), and > 3 hr (n = 600, 37.4%).

Measures

Social-media-related negative self-evaluation. An 18-item Uzbek-language questionnaire rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree; total range 18–90), with higher scores indicating a stronger negative impact of social media on self-esteem. The instrument comprises three subscales: F1 — body image dissatisfaction and emotional impact (8 items); F2 — social comparison and low self-worth (5 items); and F3 — dependence on external validation (5 items). In the source validation study the total scale showed good internal consistency ($\alpha = .899$) and a confirmed three-

factor structure. Subscales F2 and F3 are conceptually closest to the cognitive core of the impostor phenomenon.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). A widely used measure of global self-esteem, used here as an index of the low-self-esteem determinant of IP.

Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck et al., 1996). A standard measure of depressive symptom severity, used as an affective correlate of IP.

Raven’s Progressive Matrices. A nonverbal measure of fluid intelligence, used to establish discriminant validity: impostor-relevant self-evaluation should be largely independent of actual cognitive ability.

Analytic Strategy

Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Pearson correlations examined associations among the total score, the three subscales, and the external criteria (RSES, BDI-II, Raven). Group differences in the total score were tested with independent-samples t tests (sex) and one-way analyses of variance (age group, usage group), with Cohen’s d and η^2 as effect sizes. An exploratory mediation analysis tested whether global self-esteem accounts for the association between social-media negative self-evaluation and depressive symptoms. All analyses were conducted on the full sample (N = 1,605); statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Conceptual Note

The impostor phenomenon was not assessed with a dedicated instrument (e.g., the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale). Accordingly, the impostor-relevant subscales are treated as proxies for the cognitive-emotional core of IP, and all interpretations in terms of IP are theoretical rather than confirmatory. This limitation is revisited in the Discussion.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics. The total score approximated a normal distribution (M = 49.51, SD = 12.34), as did the three subscales and the external criteria.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics (N = 1,605)

Variable	M	SD	Range
Total negative self-evaluation	49.51	12.34	18–86
F1 – Body image & emotional impact	21.80	6.44	8–40
F2 – Social comparison & low self-worth	14.50	4.50	5–25
F3 – Dependence on external validation	13.21	4.11	5–25
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	10.06	3.96	0–26
Beck Depression Inventory-II	13.59	9.13	0–48
Raven’s Progressive Matrices	34.89	8.18	10–60

Correlations: Self-Esteem, Depression, and Intelligence

As predicted, total negative self-evaluation correlated strongly and negatively with self-esteem, $r = -.595$, $p < .001$, and moderately and positively with depressive symptoms, $r = .404$, $p < .001$. The correlation with intelligence was negligible and nonsignificant, $r = .034$, $p = .168$, supporting discriminant validity: the experience is essentially independent of cognitive ability. Each subscale reproduced this pattern, with the impostor-relevant subscales (F2 and F3) showing moderate links to low self-esteem and depression and near-zero links to intelligence. Table 2 presents the correlations.

Table 2 Correlations of the Total Score and Subscales With External Criteria ($N = 1,605$)

Scale	RSES (self-esteem)	BDI-II (depression)	Raven (IQ)
Total negative self-evaluation	-.595 ***	.404 ***	.034
F1 – Body image & emotional impact	-.539 ***	.350 ***	.042
F2 – Social comparison & low self-worth	-.448 ***	.327 ***	.007
F3 – Dependence on external validation	-.452 ***	.306 ***	.030

Note. RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; BDI-II = Beck Depression Inventory-II. *** $p < .001$; correlations without asterisks were nonsignificant. Inter-subscale correlations ranged from .47 to .52.

Group Differences by Sex, Age, and Usage

Group differences in total negative self-evaluation were uniformly small. There was no significant difference between men ($M = 49.75$, $SD = 12.55$) and women ($M = 49.29$, $SD = 12.15$), $t(1603) = 0.75$, $p = .453$, $d = 0.04$. The one-way ANOVA across age groups was nonsignificant, $F(3, 1601) = 2.39$, $p = .067$, $\eta^2 = .004$. The omnibus effect of daily usage duration on the total score was marginal, $F(2, 1602) = 2.93$, $p = .054$, $\eta^2 = .004$; however, the dependence-on-external-validation subscale (F3) did differ significantly by usage, $F(2, 1602) = 3.14$, $p = .044$, $\eta^2 = .004$, with lighter users (< 1 hr) scoring lowest. All effect sizes were trivial in magnitude. Table 3 summarizes the comparisons.

Table 3 Group Comparisons for Total Negative Self-Evaluation and the External-Validation Subscale

Grouping	Groups (M)	Test	Effect size
Sex (total)	M 49.75 / F 49.29	$t = 0.75$, $p = .453$	$d = 0.04$
Age (total)	49.25 / 49.36 / 50.82 / 48.19	$F = 2.39$, $p = .067$	$\eta^2 = .004$
Usage (total)	47.88 / 50.10 / 49.40	$F = 2.93$, $p = .054$	$\eta^2 = .004$
Usage (F3 ext. valid.)	12.59 / 13.33 / 13.30	$F = 3.14$, $p = .044$	$\eta^2 = .004$

Note. Usage groups are < 1 hr / 1–3 hr / > 3 hr per day; age groups are 17–20 / 21–25 / 26–30 / 31–35 years.

Exploratory Mediation

An exploratory analysis tested whether global self-esteem mediates the association between social-media negative self-evaluation and depressive symptoms. The total (unmediated) standardized effect of negative self-evaluation on depression was $\beta = .404$. After adding self-esteem to the model, the direct effect remained essentially unchanged ($\beta = .398$), and the unique contribution of self-esteem was negligible ($\beta = -.01$), yielding a trivial indirect effect ($\approx .006$). Thus, contrary to a simple mediational expectation, global self-esteem did not account for the link between social-media self-evaluation and depression in these data; the association was almost entirely direct. This suggests that the impostor-relevant appraisals captured by the questionnaire relate to depressive symptoms through pathways only partly shared with global self-esteem.

Discussion

This secondary analysis examined social-media-related self-evaluation among Uzbek youth through the lens of the impostor phenomenon. Three findings stand out. First, negative self-evaluation arising from social media was strongly tied to low self-esteem and moderately tied to depressive symptoms, while being independent of intelligence. Second, the two subscales most closely aligned with the cognitive core of IP — dependence on external validation and social comparison/low self-worth — reproduced this pattern, supporting the conceptual link between social-media self-evaluation and impostor-relevant appraisals. Third, the experience was broadly distributed across sex, age, and usage groups, with only trivial effect sizes.

These results are coherent with the integrative model of the impostor phenomenon (Figure 1). The strong inverse association with self-esteem and the positive association with depression mirror the model's placement of low self-esteem and emotional instability among the core determinants and correlates of IP. The discriminant finding for intelligence is theoretically important: like the impostor phenomenon itself, social-media-related inadequacy is not a deficit in ability but a distortion in self-appraisal. Highly capable individuals can feel fraudulent precisely because their self-evaluation is governed by comparison and external validation rather than by objective competence — exactly the dynamic that image-based platforms intensify.

The subscale findings are particularly relevant to the impostor framework. Dependence on external validation captures the staking of self-worth on likes, comments, and follower counts — a contemporary, digitally mediated form of the contingent self-worth that underlies impostor feelings. Social comparison and low self-worth capture the comparison-driven sense of inadequacy that, in the impostor literature, leads individuals to discount their own achievements relative to idealized others. That both subscales correlated moderately with low self-esteem and depression, but negligibly with intelligence, is consistent with the view that these are impostor-relevant appraisals rather than reflections of actual competence.

The near-absence of demographic and usage-duration effects is itself informative. If the negative impact were chiefly a matter of exposure time, heavy users would score markedly higher; instead, usage duration explained essentially none of the variance ($\eta^2 = .004$), and only the external-validation subscale showed a small, significant difference. This pattern aligns with a growing consensus that how people engage with social media — through comparison and validation-seeking — matters more than how long they spend on it. From an impostor perspective, the syndrome is sustained by internal

appraisal patterns that can be triggered by relatively brief but comparison-laden exposure, and it is therefore not confined to any single demographic group.

Considered together, the findings can be read as a digitally mediated expression of the impostor cycle depicted in Figure 1. Idealized online content supplies an endless source of upward comparison (a cognitive determinant); repeated exposure erodes self-evaluation and fosters validation-dependence (lowering the self-esteem determinant); and the resulting sense of inadequacy and emotional strain feeds back into further comparison and self-monitoring, sustaining the loop. Crucially, the trivial association with intelligence indicates that this loop is not corrected by genuine competence — a defining feature of the impostor phenomenon. The robust link to depressive symptoms locates these appraisals within the emotional-instability component of the model and underscores their clinical relevance.

These observations have practical implications. Because the negative impact appeared largely independent of usage duration and demographics, blanket advice to simply reduce screen time may be insufficient; interventions are likely to be more effective if they target the appraisal processes themselves — for example, cognitive-behavioral work to identify and challenge comparison-based distortions, media-literacy training to contextualize idealized imagery, and strategies to decouple self-worth from online metrics. The model's coping block, which emphasizes cognitive-behavioral therapy, emotional-regulation techniques, self-esteem practices, and group or mentoring programs, offers a ready framework for such efforts. The interpretable subscale structure further allows practitioners to tailor intervention to whichever facet — appearance-related distress, comparison-driven inadequacy, or validation dependence — is most salient for a given individual.

The exploratory mediation result warrants comment. We did not find that global self-esteem mediated the link between social-media self-evaluation and depression; the effect was almost entirely direct. One interpretation is that the questionnaire taps state-like, context-specific appraisals (how one feels in relation to social media) that are linked to depressive symptoms through pathways not fully captured by trait global self-esteem. This is consistent with the impostor literature's distinction between situational impostor feelings and stable self-esteem, and it suggests that interventions targeting social-media-specific appraisals may influence mood independently of broad self-esteem work.

Several limitations must be emphasized. Most importantly, the impostor phenomenon was not measured with a validated instrument such as the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale; the impostor-relevant subscales are proxies, and the IP interpretation is therefore theoretical rather than confirmatory. Future research should administer a dedicated IP measure alongside the social-media questionnaire to test these relationships directly. Second, the design is cross-sectional, precluding causal or temporal inferences; the feedback loop posited by the model can only be tested longitudinally. Third, all measures were self-reported and may be subject to common-method and social-desirability biases. Fourth, the sample, although large and stratified, was restricted to ages 17–35, limiting generalization to the older life stages described in the developmental component of the model.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study contributes a large-sample, culturally grounded examination of impostor-relevant self-evaluation in relation to social media among Uzbek youth. The findings indicate that comparison-driven and validation-dependent self-appraisal is robustly associated with poorer mental health, broadly distributed across the population, and independent of cognitive ability — a profile that closely matches the core of the impostor phenomenon. They support the integration of social-media self-evaluation into impostor-phenomenon models and motivate

confirmatory research using validated IP instruments, longitudinal designs, and intervention trials targeting comparison and external-validation processes.

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