

Research Paper

A Comparative Study of Impostor Syndrome and Interpersonal Relationship Quality Among First-Attempt and Repeat UPSC Aspirants

Anshika Jaiswar^{1*}, Dr. Deepa Pandey²

ABSTRACT

The preparation for the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) examination involves intense academic pressure and uncertainty, which may contribute to psychological challenges among aspirants. We examined the relationship between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality among UPSC aspirants and compared first-attempt and repeat-attempt candidates. We used a quantitative cross-sectional design with a sample of 100 aspirants who completed standardized self-report measures. We analyzed the data using Pearson correlation and independent samples t-test. The results showed a significant negative correlation between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality. Repeat-attempt aspirants reported significantly higher impostor syndrome, while no significant difference was found in interpersonal relationship quality. These findings highlight the psychological challenges experienced by aspirants in highly competitive examination environments.

Keywords: *impostor syndrome, interpersonal relationship quality, perceived social support, UPSC aspirants, competitive examinations*

Each year, over one million candidates appear for the preliminary stage of the UPSC Civil Services Examination, yet fewer than 1% succeed in securing a final appointment. The examination spans multiple stages, including preliminaries, mains, and interviews, demanding extensive knowledge, analytical skills, and consistent preparation over several years.

The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) Civil Services Examination is one of the most competitive and demanding academic assessments in India. Aspirants often spend several years preparing, balancing extensive syllabus coverage, coaching schedules, mock tests, and personal commitments. Success in this examination requires not only intellectual competence but also emotional resilience, effective coping strategies, and sustained motivation over multiple years of preparation. The high stakes of the examination, coupled

¹Student, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

²Associate Professor, Amity Institute of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

*Corresponding Author

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with intense peer comparison and societal expectations, make the aspirants susceptible to psychological stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion.

Prolonged preparation and repeated examination attempts can exacerbate self-doubt, reduce self-efficacy, and influence aspirants' social and emotional functioning. Studies focusing on repeated attempts have highlighted changes in emotional regulation, coping patterns, and resilience over time (Manasa, 2023; Pundir, 2024). Aspirants may experience pressure from both personal expectations and societal norms, while constantly comparing themselves with peers who may have succeeded earlier. Such conditions create an environment where psychological vulnerabilities, including anxiety and impostor feelings, may be heightened.

Repeated attempts are common among aspirants, as the success rate in any given year is extremely low. Those preparing for a second or third attempt frequently face additional stressors, including self-comparison with peers, fear of failure, and concerns about lost time or financial investment. The combination of prolonged preparation, academic rigor, and social evaluation may intensify feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and anxiety, creating a fertile ground for impostor experiences. Furthermore, aspirants may experience isolation due to the demanding study schedules, leading to reliance on family, friends, and peer networks for emotional support. These unique challenges make UPSC aspirants a particularly relevant population for studying impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality.

The term impostor syndrome was first proposed by Clance and Imes (1978), and it describes the constant sense of intellectual fraudulence in the face of obvious success and effectiveness. People with the impostor phenomenon themselves attribute their success to external influences like chance or timing over ability and usually worry about being discovered as incompetent. Although it was first described in high-achieving women, later studies have shown that it is also found among various academic and professional groups.

Empirical studies have consistently associated impostor feelings with psychological distress, showing strong correlations with stress, anxiety, and depression among college and university students across demographic groups (Cokley et al., 2013; Qasem et al., 2025). A systematic review also emphasized that impostor experiences are commonly reported by both students and professionals and are linked to worse psychological well-being, decreased academic performance, and work-related problems, with factors such as gender, minority status, perfectionism, and high achievement orientation contributing significantly (Yang et al., 2024). In addition to personal vulnerability, interpersonal contexts play a role: perceived social support negatively correlates with impostor feelings, mediated by stress and anxiety, suggesting that supportive environments can indirectly reduce impostor experiences (Fatima et al., 2025).

Studies among competitive exam candidates and students preparing for high-stakes academic evaluations indicate that stronger perceived social support is associated with greater resilience, lower stress, and better emotional well-being (Nazar & Joseph, 2019; Kumari & Singh, 2022). Specifically, family support has been found to alleviate examination stress and improve coping capacity (Mishra and Nath, 2023), while high-quality interpersonal relationships are linked with increased subjective well-being and reduced emotional distress (Sun, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Perceived social support and optimism have also been associated with lower examination anxiety among competitive aspirants (Chitra et al., 2025).

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The competitive examination environment itself acts as a major source of psychological stress. Empirical research reports high levels of stress, anxiety, performance pressure, and emotional exhaustion among aspirants preparing for competitive examinations (Prasad et al., 2022; Shandilya, 2023). A mixed-method study on Civil Services aspirants further reported moderate to severe psychological distress, economic burden, isolation, and intense performance pressure as common concerns (Fatima, 2025).

Research has also started to investigate the intersection between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality. Greater perceived social support and self-awareness have been associated with lower impostor experiences (Antony & Tadi, 2022), while interpersonal interaction patterns may be influenced by impostor tendencies, including approval-seeking behaviors (Ravikumar et al., 2024). However, this type of inquiry is limited in the context of highly competitive examinations.

Despite the increasing body of literature on impostor syndrome and social support individually, limited studies have focused on UPSC Civil Services aspirants who undergo years of preparation and repeated examination attempts, stiff competition, and social comparison. Moreover, there is limited understanding of the relationship between impostor syndrome and perceived interpersonal support within this group, particularly when comparing first-attempt and repeat aspirants.

The presence of unique psychological demands in the UPSC preparation context suggests that examining impostor syndrome and the quality of interpersonal relationships can provide important insights into the emotional functioning of aspirants and their coping resources. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to examine the levels of impostor syndrome and perceived interpersonal relationship quality among UPSC aspirants and to compare these variables between first-attempt and repeat aspirants.

Objectives of the study:

- To examine the levels of Impostor Syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality (perceived social support) among UPSC aspirants.
- To compare Impostor Syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality between first-attempt and repeat UPSC aspirants.
- To examine the relationship between Impostor Syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality among UPSC aspirants.

Hypotheses:

- **H₁:** There is a significant relationship between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality among UPSC aspirants.
- **H₂:** There is a significant difference in the levels of impostor syndrome between first-attempt and repeat UPSC aspirants.
- **H₃:** There is a significant difference in interpersonal relationship quality between first-attempt and repeat UPSC aspirants.

METHOD

Research Design:

The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional comparative design to investigate differences in impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality between first-attempt and repeat-attempt UPSC aspirants. This design was chosen because it allows for

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the assessment of group differences and the relationship between psychological variables at a single point in time. A cross-sectional approach is particularly suitable for time-constrained populations such as UPSC aspirants, enabling efficient data collection while capturing variations in impostor feelings and perceived social support.

Variables:

Independent Variable (IV):

Attempt Status (first-attempt UPSC aspirants vs. repeat-attempt UPSC aspirants)

Dependent Variables (DVs):

1. Impostor Syndrome
2. Interpersonal Relationship Quality (Perceived Social Support)

Sample:

We collected data from 100 UPSC aspirants, including 50 first-attempt and 50 repeat-attempt candidates. The sample included both male and female participants, representing diverse educational backgrounds and regions, in order to reflect the heterogeneity of the aspirant population. Participants were within the typical age range of Civil Services aspirants (21-32 years). This sample size was selected to allow meaningful comparisons between first-attempt and repeat-attempt groups, as well as to support correlational analyses, while remaining feasible given recruitment constraints. We selected participants using convenience sampling, primarily based on accessibility through coaching institutes, peer networks, and social media groups, in addition to applying the specified inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Actively preparing for the UPSC Civil Services Examination (first or repeat attempt)
- Provided informed consent

Exclusion Criteria:

- Not preparing for UPSC examination
- Did not provide informed consent
- Incomplete questionnaire responses

Tools:

1. **Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS):** A 20-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess impostor feelings, including self-doubt, fear of failure, and tendency to attribute success to external factors (Clance, 1985). Participants rate each item on a Likert scale, and higher scores reflect stronger impostor experiences. The scale demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha > .85$) and has been widely used in academic and professional populations.
2. **Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL-40):** A 40-item self-report scale that evaluates perceived social support across four domains: Appraisal Support (the perceived availability of someone to talk to about problems), Tangible Support (the perceived availability of material or practical assistance), Self-Esteem Support (the perceived availability of support that enhances one's sense of personal worth), and Belonging Support (the perceived availability of companions for social activities) (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). Participants respond on a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater perceived interpersonal support. The scale has

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demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha \approx .88$) and has been validated across diverse student and professional populations.

Procedure:

We contacted participants through coaching institutes, personal networks and social media groups dedicated to UPSC aspirants. Before participation, we clearly explained the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and assured participants that their responses would remain confidential and used only for research purposes. We collected data using a structured questionnaire that included demographic details, the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) and the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL-40). Participants had the option to complete the questionnaire either offline using a paper-pencil format during coaching sessions or online through Google Forms, depending on their convenience and availability. We provided detailed instructions for each section, clarified any doubts participants had, and reminded them to respond honestly and independently. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were explicitly informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. We ensured strict confidentiality throughout the study by securely storing both physical and digital responses. All responses were systematically recorded and organized in an Excel datasheet for subsequent analysis.

Statistical analysis:

We analyzed the collected data using IBM SPSS Statistics. First, we calculated descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviations, to summarize the study variables and provide an overview of the participants' scores on both CIPS and ISEL-40. To examine the relationship between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality, we conducted Pearson correlation analyses, which allowed us to assess the strength and direction of the association between the two continuous variables. Additionally, to determine whether first-attempt and repeat-attempt aspirants differed on these variables, we performed independent samples *t*-tests. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ for all analyses, and results were interpreted in the context of the research hypotheses.

RESULT

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Impostor Syndrome and Interpersonal Relationship Quality among First and Repeat Attempt UPSC Aspirants

Variable	Attempt type	N	Mean	SD
Impostor Syndrome (CIPS)	First-Attempt	50	58.50	14.00
	Repeat-Attempt	50	63.80	11.90
Interpersonal Relationship Quality (ISEL)	First-Attempt	50	71.00	20.10
	Repeat-Attempt	50	75.80	19.40

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality among UPSC aspirants. Repeat-attempt aspirants reported higher scores on impostor syndrome ($M = 63.80$, $SD = 11.90$) compared to first-attempt aspirants ($M = 58.50$, $SD = 14.00$). Similarly, repeat-attempt aspirants showed slightly higher interpersonal relationship quality ($M = 75.80$, $SD = 19.40$) compared to first-attempt aspirants ($M = 71.00$, $SD = 20.10$).

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Table 2: Correlation between Impostor Syndrome and Interpersonal Relationship Quality among UPSC Aspirants (N = 100)

Variables	1	2
1. Impostor Syndrome (CIPS)	—	
2. Interpersonal Relationship Quality (ISEL)	-.25*	—

Note. *p < .05

Table 2 indicates a significant negative correlation between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality ($r = -.25$, $p = .013$), suggesting that higher impostor feelings are associated with lower perceived interpersonal support.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-test for Impostor Syndrome between First-Attempt and Repeat UPSC Aspirants

Variable	Attempt Type	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Impostor Syndrome (CIPS)	First-Attempt	50	58.50	14.00	-2.04	98	.044
	Repeat-Attempt	50	63.80	11.90			

Table 3 indicates a significant difference in impostor syndrome between the two groups, $t(98) = -2.04$, $p = .044$, with repeat-attempt aspirants reporting higher scores than first-attempt aspirants.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test for Interpersonal Relationship Quality between First-Attempt and Repeat UPSC Aspirants

Variable	Attempt type	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Interpersonal Relationship Quality (ISEL)	First-Attempt	50	71.00	20.10	-1.21	98	.229
	Repeat-Attempt	50	75.80	19.40			

Table 4 indicates no significant difference in interpersonal relationship quality between first-attempt and repeat-attempt aspirants, $t(98) = -1.21$, $p = .229$, despite slightly higher mean scores among repeat-attempt aspirants.

DISCUSSION

The current study tested the association between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality among UPSC aspirants and compared first-attempt and repeat-attempt candidates on these variables. The results are presented along with the relation to the study objective and hypotheses.

The findings demonstrated a significant negative correlation between impostor syndrome and interpersonal relationship quality, indicating that stronger impostor feelings are associated with lower perceived relationship quality. People who have high impostor tendencies usually have constant self-doubt, fear of negative judgment, and feelings of inadequacy. This kind of internal insecurity may lead to reduced self-disclosure, social withdrawal, and difficulty trusting others, which in turn influences the quality of interpersonal interactions. The constant performance pressure in the highly competitive environment of UPSC preparation could further contribute to the influence of self-doubt and produce adverse effects on social connectedness. Therefore, the hypothesis of a significant

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correlation between impostor syndrome and the quality of interpersonal relationships was supported.

This finding can be understood in light of cognitive-behavioral frameworks, which suggest that persistent negative self-evaluations and fear of failure influence not only personal functioning but also social engagement. High impostor feelings may limit aspirants' willingness to share difficulties with peers or mentors, potentially reducing access to emotional support networks. Moreover, the intense comparison with peers who perform well can reinforce feelings of inadequacy, creating a cycle where social withdrawal further intensifies impostor tendencies as not only an individual psychological issue but also a factor affecting social connectedness in competitive academic environments.

The results also indicated that there was a significant difference in impostor syndrome between first-attempt and repeat-attempt aspirants, with the repeat candidates reporting higher levels. The recurring stress of examinations, uncertainty about results, and constant self-comparison may gradually reinforce feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Thus, the hypothesis about differences in the impostor syndrome depending on the status of attempts was substantiated.

This suggests a cumulative stress effect, where repeated exposure to failure or delayed success can exacerbate self-doubt and fear of negative evaluation. Aspirants attempting the examination multiple times may internalize previous setbacks, heightening psychological vulnerability and increasing the likelihood of impostor experiences. Intervention strategies targeting repeat-attempt aspirants, such as resilience training or peer support groups, could be particularly beneficial in mitigating these effects. These findings also highlight the potential for monitoring aspirants' mental health over time, rather than relying solely on one-off assessments.

Nevertheless, there was no significant difference in the quality of interpersonal relationships between the two groups. This implies that perceived social support can remain relatively stable irrespective of the attempts. The aspirants can still be supported by their family, friends, and peer groups on a regular basis, both emotionally and practically, during their preparation time. Therefore, the hypothesis of differences in interpersonal relationship quality was not supported.

This stability in perceived interpersonal support may reflect the strong and consistent role of family and close social networks in sustaining aspirants through long preparation periods. Despite differences in impostor feelings, the consistent availability of emotional and practical support might buffer the potential negative effects on social relationships. These findings suggest that interventions aiming to reduce impostor experiences can leverage existing support systems rather than attempting to create new networks from scratch.

These results align with previous studies, showing that impostor syndrome is connected to emotional distress, lack of self-confidence, and social insecurity. High impostor individuals might also be afraid of negative evaluation and may be reluctant to discuss their problems or seek assistance, potentially affecting their perception of relationship support. Available literature also indicates that long-term academic pressure and performance stress may lead to heightened impostor feelings over time.

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Furthermore, the results are consistent with findings in other competitive academic contexts, where aspirants experience high cognitive and emotional load, leading to both internalizing behaviors and social caution. The combination of self-imposed pressure and perceived societal expectations may compound feelings of inadequacy, which explains the negative relationship with interpersonal functioning. Future research could examine whether structured mentoring or group support reduces these effects over time.

Overall, the study underlines the psychological pressures of an extremely competitive atmosphere that UPSC aspirants have to deal with. The findings emphasize the need to recognise and address impostor feelings, as they may affect both emotional well-being and social adjustment. The development of psychological awareness and supportive conditions might help aspirants cope more effectively with self-doubt.

Practical implications of these findings include integrating stress management programs, resilience-building workshops, and psychoeducational sessions in coaching institutes or online platforms. Aspirants may benefit from learning strategies to challenge self-critical thoughts, develop realistic self-appraisals, and cultivate supportive peer interactions. Such initiatives can improve not only individual psychological health but also the quality of social relationships, potentially enhancing overall academic performance and well-being.

The study has certain limitations that must be considered during the interpretation of the results. The sample size was limited and restricted to UPSC aspirants, which may affect the generalizability of the results. There is also the possibility of bias in responses using the self-report measures. In addition, the study was cross-sectional in nature, which does not allow for any causal interpretation of the relationship between impostor syndrome and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, regional, cultural, or gender differences could influence both impostor experiences and perceived social support, which were not accounted for in this study. The mix of offline and online data collection may also introduce variability in responses. Future research could use longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and multi-method assessments to validate and extend these findings.

To sum up, the present study demonstrates that impostor syndrome plays a profound role in the psychological functioning of UPSC aspirants. The results indicate that increased impostor feelings are linked to lower perceived interpersonal relationship quality and are more common among repeat-attempt candidates. The findings can be used to learn about the psychological issues in highly competitive academic settings.

Overall, understanding the interplay between impostor syndrome and social support highlights the need for both individual-level strategies (e.g., self-reflection, cognitive restructuring) and system-level support (e.g., mentoring, peer networks) to enhance aspirants' emotional and social well-being. These insights can guide educators, counselors, and policymakers in creating environments that reduce the psychological burden of high-stakes competitive examinations.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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