

EMOTIONAL TURMOIL- THE COST OF TRUSTING TOO MUCH?

Original Article

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ABSTRACT

Background: Emotional responses and psychological vulnerabilities, such as gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors, play a significant role in shaping the mental health of young adults. In collectivistic societies like Pakistan, cultural and familial factors further complicate these psychological dynamics. This study investigates the relationships among these constructs and explores how they contribute to emotional distress in young adults, particularly within the cultural framework of Lahore.

Objective: The primary aim of this study was to assess the relationship between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors, and to determine the influence of demographic factors such as gender and family system on these psychological constructs in young adults.

Methods: A correlational research design was employed, using purposive sampling to recruit 300 participants (153 males, 147 females) aged 18–25 from private universities in Lahore. Participants completed a structured questionnaire comprising the Gullibility Scale (TGS), Personal Self-Concept Questionnaire (PSC), and Internalizing Behaviors Scale (IBS). Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation, hierarchical regression analysis, and independent samples t-tests through SPSS version 21. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Results: Pearson correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between gullibility and self-concept ($r = 0.33, p < 0.001$) and internalizing behaviors ($r = 0.19, p = 0.001$). Gender showed a significant negative correlation with internalizing behaviors ($r = -0.13, p = 0.028$). Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that the joint family system significantly predicted internalizing behaviors, accounting for 8.5% variance ($F = 4.31, p < 0.001$). Gullibility emerged as a significant positive predictor of internalizing behaviors, explaining 14.47% variance ($F = 4.73, p < 0.05$). Females exhibited higher levels of gullibility and self-concept compared to males.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that gullibility is a significant positive predictor of internalizing behaviors. Gender and family system also significantly influence these psychological constructs, with females showing higher gullibility and self-concept, while individuals from joint family systems are more susceptible to internalizing behaviors.

Keywords: Emotions, Family Relations, Gender Identity, Gullibility, Internalizing Behavior, Self-Concept, Young Adult.

INTRODUCTION

The complexities of human psychology are shaped by an intricate interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social processes that dictate behavior in diverse contexts. Among these factors, gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors emerge as critical constructs influencing how individuals perceive themselves and interact with their environment. This study seeks to investigate the interconnected nature of these psychological dimensions, particularly within the context of young adults in Lahore, Pakistan, where social and cultural dynamics further complicate the landscape of trust and emotional regulation (1). Gullibility refers to an individual's susceptibility to manipulation, whether through interpersonal relationships, societal pressures, or media influence. It involves a tendency to accept information at face value, diminished sensitivity to cues of untrustworthiness, and a lack of critical analysis when processing new information. This vulnerability can often lead to detrimental psychological outcomes, especially when individuals repeatedly encounter deceptive or harmful situations. In parallel, self-concept plays a pivotal role in shaping a person's identity and perception of their achievements. It reflects an individual's internal assessment of their personal value, measured against their ideal self and influenced by the judgments and expectations of their social environment. When this self-assessment diverges significantly from an individual's perceived reality, it can trigger emotional distress and self-doubt (2,3).

Internalizing behaviors further complicate this dynamic, as they involve maladaptive responses to psychological stress, often manifested as anxiety, depression, or self-directed harm. These behaviors are typically hidden from others and are a reflection of an individual's attempt to cope with negative emotions in isolation. The interaction between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors suggests a cyclical relationship where susceptibility to external manipulation diminishes self-worth, potentially leading to harmful internalized responses (4,5). Despite the significance of these constructs, there remains a scarcity of research exploring their combined impact within the cultural and social fabric of young adults in Pakistan. This gap underscores the need for a comprehensive investigation to better understand how trust, self-perception, and internalized emotional distress converge to affect mental health outcomes in this population (6,7). The objective of this study is to explore the correlational relationship between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors in young adults in Lahore. By identifying these connections, the research aims to provide a foundation for future interventions that could mitigate emotional distress and promote healthier coping mechanisms (8).

METHODS

The present study employed a correlational research design to investigate the relationship between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors among young adults enrolled in private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. A total of 300 participants, consisting of 153 males and 147 females, were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Participants fell within the age range of 18 to 25 years, an age bracket identified as young adulthood by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The study specifically included students enrolled in Bachelor of Science (BS), Master of Science (MS), or Master of Philosophy (MPhil) programs, with individuals identifying as either male or female being eligible for inclusion (9). The inclusion criteria required participants to be actively enrolled in private universities in Lahore and fall within the designated age range. In contrast, participants with apparent physical impairments or those who self-reported a clinical diagnosis of any psychological disorder were excluded from the study. Additionally, students who resided outside Lahore at the time of data collection were also excluded to maintain consistency with the study's geographical focus (10).

Data collection adhered to ethical standards for research involving human subjects. The research protocol was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each participant received an information sheet detailing the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Privacy and confidentiality were rigorously maintained, and no personally identifiable information was collected to ensure anonymity (10). The statistical analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to assess the strength and direction of relationships among the variables of interest—gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors. Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to determine the predictive value of the variables while controlling for potential confounders. Additionally, independent samples t-tests were applied to compare mean differences between male and female participants across the key constructs. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize demographic variables and provide a clear overview of the participant population. Reliability analyses were conducted to ensure the consistency and internal validity of the scales used in the study (11,12).

RESULTS

The analysis of the demographic variables revealed that the sample comprised 300 participants, with 51% males ($n = 153$) and 49% females ($n = 147$). The mean age of participants was 1.55 ($SD = 0.49$), falling within the defined range of 18–25 years. Regarding education, the majority (81.3%) had completed intermediate education, while 18.7% had completed O/A levels. A significant proportion of participants (66%) belonged to a nuclear family system, while 34% came from joint family systems. Birth order analysis showed that 32.3% were first-born, 39% middle-born, 25.3% last-born, and 3.3% were only children. Concerning employment status, 34% were employed, while 66% were unemployed. Marital status distribution showed that 6% were married, 16.3% engaged, and 77.7% single. Socioeconomic background data indicated that most participants (82.7%) belonged to the middle socioeconomic class, with 11.7% from upper and 5.7% from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Descriptive statistics for the main variables showed that the mean score for the Gullibility Scale (TGS) was 35.16 ($SD = 9.87$), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75, indicating good internal consistency. The Personal Self-Concept Questionnaire (PSC) had a mean score of 41.17 ($SD = 7.19$), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.56, suggesting moderate reliability. The Internalizing Behaviors Scale (IBS) had a mean score of 10.57 ($SD = 4.95$) with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73, also demonstrating satisfactory reliability. Skewness and kurtosis values for all scales were within acceptable limits, supporting the normal distribution of the data.

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships between demographic and study variables. TGS exhibited a positive correlation with PSC ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and IBS ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals with higher gullibility scores also demonstrated stronger self-concept and internalizing behaviors. Gender was positively correlated with TGS ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) and PSC ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that females were more gullible and had a stronger self-concept than males. Conversely, gender was negatively correlated with IBS ($r = -0.13$, $p < 0.05$), implying that males reported higher internalizing behaviors than females. Education level was negatively correlated with TGS ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and PSC ($r = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that participants with O/A level education were less gullible and had weaker self-concepts compared to their counterparts with intermediate education. Employment status positively correlated with TGS ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$) and PSC ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting unemployed participants showed higher gullibility and stronger self-concepts. Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted in two steps to evaluate predictors of internalizing behaviors. In the first step, sociodemographic variables such as gender, family system, age, education, employment status, and marital status were analyzed. Gender and family system emerged as significant predictors, with participants from joint family systems showing higher internalizing behaviors. In the second step, the inclusion of TGS and PSC as predictors revealed that gullibility significantly predicted internalizing behaviors ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), while self-concept did not emerge as a significant predictor. The overall model indicated a modest explanatory power, with an R^2 change of 0.01 in the second step. Independent samples t-tests showed significant gender differences across all study variables. Females exhibited higher gullibility ($M = 37.32$, $SD = 9.41$) compared to males ($M = 33.09$, $SD = 9.88$), with a statistically significant difference ($t(296) = -3.77$, $p < 0.001$) and a medium effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.44$). Similarly, females had a higher self-concept ($M = 43.19$, $SD = 6.49$) than males ($M = 39.14$, $SD = 7.29$), with a significant difference ($t(290) = -5.02$, $p < 0.001$) and a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.59$). Males, however, scored higher on internalizing behaviors ($M = 11.19$, $SD = 4.95$) than females ($M = 9.93$, $SD = 4.88$), with the difference being statistically significant ($t(296) = 2.21$, $p < 0.05$) and a small effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.26$).

Table 1: Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	f	%	M	SD
Age				
18-25			1.55	0.49
Gender				
Male	153	51		
Female	147	49		
Education				
Intermediate	244	81.3		
O/A Level	56	18.7		

Characteristics	f	%	M	SD
Family System				
Nuclear	198	66		
Joint	102	34		
Birth Order				
First Born	97	32.3		
Middle Born	117	39		
Last Born	76	25.3		
Only Child	10	3.3		
Employment Status				
Employed	102	34		
Unemployed	198	66		
Marital Status				
Married	18	6		
Engaged	4	16.3		
Single	233	77.7		
Socioeconomic Background				
Upper	35	11.7		
Middle	248	82.7		
Lower	17	5.7		

Note. N = 300. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; f = frequency; % = percentage.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities of TGS, PSC, and IBS

Variable	k	M	SD	Cronbach's α	Skewness	Kurtosis
TGS	12	35.16	35.03	0.75	0.09	0.22
PSC	18	41.17	41.28	0.56	-0.28	1.12
IBS	6	10.57	10.57	0.73	0.02	-0.21

Note. N = 300. TGS = the gullibility scale; PSC = personal self-concept questionnaire; IBS = internalizing behaviors scale; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha; k = number of items.

Table 3: Correlation between demographics, TGS, PSC, and IBS

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	.55	.49	-	-.05	.21**	.05	-.27**	-.14*	-.11	-.05	.04
2. Gender	.49	.50		-	-.12*	-.16**	.25**	-.12*	.21**	.28**	-.13*
3. Education	.19	.39			-	-.06	-.29**	-.06	-.23**	-.18**	-.02
4. Family system	.34	.47				-	-.03	-.06	-.05	-.04	.27**

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
5. Employment Status	.66	.47					-	.06	.16**	.17**	.05
6. Marital status	.94	.24						-	.01	.00	-.05
7. TGS	35.16	9.87							-	.33**	.19**
8. PSC	41.17	7.19								-	.01
9. IBS	10.57	4.95									-

Note. N = 300. age: 0 = 18-21, 1 = 22-25; gender: 0 = male, 1 = female; education: 0 = O/A Level, 1 = intermediate; family system: 0 = nuclear, 1 = joint; employment status: 0 = employed, 1 = unemployed; marital status: 0 = married, 1 = unmarried; TGS = the gullibility scale; PSC = personal self-concept questionnaire; IBS = internalizing behaviors scale.

Table 4: Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Demographics, TGS, and PSC

Variable	B	95% CI		SE	B	R2	ΔR2
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.04	.01
(Constant)	14.39	12.74	16.05	.84			
Gender							
Male	-1.22	-2.25	-.21	.51	-.15*		
Female	1.22	.12	2.24	.51	.15*		
Family System							
Nuclear	-1.99	-1.23	.83	.52	-.02		
Joint	.19	-.83	1.23	.52	.02		
Step 2						.05	.01
(Constant)	12.54	8.85	16.24	1.88			
Gender							
Male	-1.20	-2.26	-.15	.54	-.15*		
Female	1.20	.15	2.26	.54	.15*		
Family System							
Nuclear	-.23	-1.27	.81	.53	-.03		
Joint	.23	-.80	1.27	.53	.03		
TGS	-.00	-.05	.05	.03	.01		
PSC	.01	-.07	.09	.04	.02		

Note. N = 300. age: 1 = 18-21, 0 = 22-25; gender: 1 = male, 0 = female; education: 1 = O/A Level, 0 = intermediate; family system: 1 = nuclear, 0 = joint; employment status: 1 = employed, 0 = unemployed; marital status: 1 = married, 0 = unmarried; TGS = the gullibility scale; PSC = personal self-concept questionnaire.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test for Gullibility, Self-Concept, and Internalizing Behaviors of Genders

Scales	Male		Female				95% CI		Cohen's d
	(n = 152)		(n = 148)		t(df)	p			
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
TGS	33.09	9.88	37.32	9.41	-3.77(296)	.00	-6.42	-2.02	0.44
PSC	39.14	7.29	43.19	6.49	-5.02(290)	.00	-5.65	-2.47	0.59
IBS	11.19	4.95	9.93	4.88	2.21(296)	.03	.14	2.38	0.26

Note. N = 300. TGS = the gullibility scale; PSC = personal self-concept questionnaire; IBS = I internalizing behaviors scale; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; CI = confidence interval; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

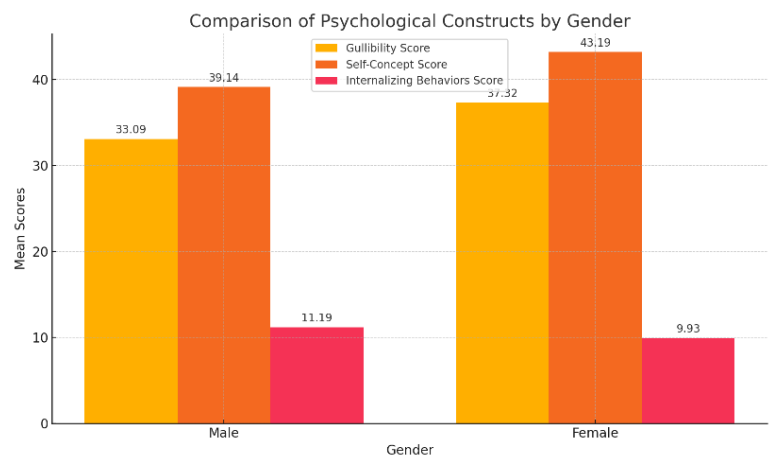
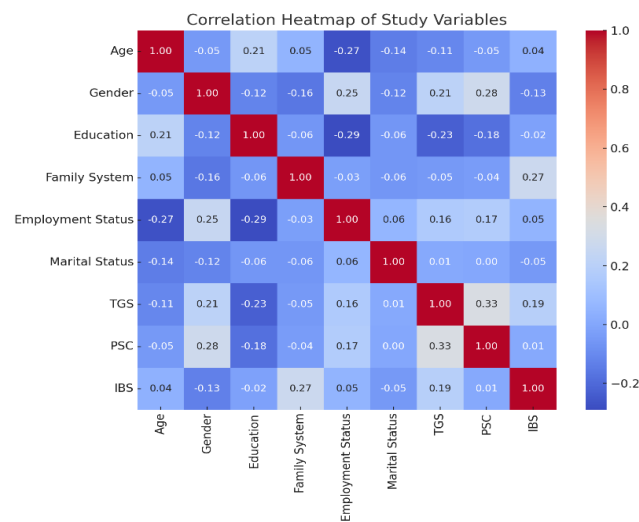


Figure 1 Comparison of Psychological Constructs by Gender

Figure 2 Correlation Heatmap of Study variable

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to assess the relationship between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors among young adults in Lahore. The findings provided significant insights into the intricate interplay between these psychological constructs, revealing patterns not extensively explored in previous research. The results demonstrated a significant positive correlation between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors, suggesting that individuals who are more gullible tend to possess a heightened sense of self-concept while simultaneously exhibiting higher levels of internalized psychological distress. This duality highlights the complexity of gullibility as a personality trait; while gullible individuals may maintain a favorable self-image, they are also more susceptible to emotional distress when confronted with manipulation or deception, leading to maladaptive coping mechanisms (13-15). Regression analysis further indicated that gullibility and family system were significant positive predictors of internalizing behaviors. This suggests that personality traits, such as gullibility, combined with environmental factors, like familial influence, contribute to the emergence of internalizing behaviors. The role of the family system is particularly relevant in the cultural context of Lahore, where joint family structures often exert a stronger emotional and social influence on individuals. This finding aligns with family systems theory, which posits that families operate as emotional units, and the emotional dynamics within the family directly influence individual behaviors and coping mechanisms. Additionally, the stress-coping model supports this relationship by emphasizing how personal traits and social contexts influence the ability to manage stress, potentially leading to the development of internalizing symptoms in vulnerable individuals (16-18).

Gender differences observed through independent samples t-tests revealed that females exhibited higher levels of gullibility and self-concept compared to males, while males demonstrated higher internalizing behaviors. These findings reflect the broader influence of gender socialization, where societal expectations and cultural norms shape distinct emotional responses and personality traits. Females, often socialized to be more empathetic and trusting, may exhibit heightened gullibility, whereas males, due to societal pressures surrounding emotional expression, may internalize distress more frequently, leading to higher scores on internalizing behavior measures (19-21). Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations warrant consideration. The correlational design restricts causal inferences, and the reliance on self-report measures introduces the potential for response bias, including social desirability and demand characteristics. Expanding the methodological approach in future research, such as incorporating longitudinal designs or qualitative analyses, could offer deeper insights into the evolving nature of these psychological constructs over time. Additionally, the sample size was limited to university students in Lahore, restricting the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future research should aim to include more diverse geographic and socio-demographic samples to enhance the applicability of the results (22-24).

The uneven distribution of participants across demographic variables also constrained the ability to conduct more advanced statistical analyses, particularly concerning other sociodemographic factors such as socioeconomic status and birth order. Ensuring balanced sample sizes across these variables would allow for more robust statistical testing in future investigations. Moreover, exploring potential mediators and moderators—such as resilience, social support, or coping strategies—could deepen the understanding of how gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors interact in diverse populations (25-27). In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the psychological factors influencing young adults in Lahore, particularly concerning gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors. While highlighting significant relationships between these variables, it also underscores the importance of cultural and familial contexts in shaping psychological outcomes. Future research should build upon these findings by employing diverse methodologies and larger, more representative samples to develop targeted interventions aimed at promoting psychological well-being among young adults (28-31).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study explored the intricate relationship between gullibility, self-concept, and internalizing behaviors among young adults in Lahore, shedding light on how these psychological constructs interact within a specific cultural context. The findings revealed that gullibility serves as a significant predictor of internalizing behaviors, highlighting its role in emotional vulnerability. Additionally, demographic factors such as gender and family system were found to significantly influence these behaviors, reflecting the broader impact of societal and familial dynamics. The study also underscored the influence of cultural factors, particularly within collectivistic societies, where gullibility may be encouraged to maintain social harmony and hierarchy. However, when individuals realize they have been misled, feelings of distress and frustration can arise, contributing to anxiety, stress, and other internalizing behaviors. These findings emphasize the need for targeted psychological interventions and culturally sensitive strategies to address the emotional challenges faced by young adults in similar social contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author	Contribution
Bakhtawar Batool Khan	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Mahrukh Raza	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Sarah Usman	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Bushra Nasim*	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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