



## An Investigation into the Factors Affecting Self-Actualization among Undergraduate Students in Karachi, Pakistan

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**Abstract:** *Humanistic psychology, rooted in the concept of self-actualization, reflects an individual's ability to realize and embrace their unique inherent potential. The whole journey of personal growth is marked with so many personal psychological aspects and environmental factors. Depression, anxiety, and social factors mostly affect the self-actualization process of undergraduate students; it gives them opportunities and constraints during this period of intense academic and personal development. The present study aims to explore the landscape of self-actualization among undergraduate students of Karachi, Pakistan while identifying the important factors that help or hinder this journey. A descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted among 100 undergraduate students across various academic institutions in Karachi. The sample consisted of 21.6% males and 78.4% females and the age of participants spanned between 18 and 32 years. The measurement of self-actualization level was observed using SISA (the Short Index of Self-Actualization) among participants. Although students are motivated toward self-actualization, they are unable to overcome substantial barriers, however. A significant proportion of students agreed to feel very much related with the world around them (70%) and feel somewhat easy in expressing their feelings (49%). However, due to others' approbation, many indicated fear of failures and inadequacy. Education-related obstacle, particularly fear of Unemployment and curriculum issues, collectively considered as significant barriers. The undergraduate students in this study showed a very complex and often contradictory path to self-actualization. However, an inherent motivation exists, although this motivation sometimes restrains itself behind the need for outside confirmation and fear of failure. Notably, fear of unemployment emerged as a dominant barrier, underscoring the need for enhanced career support systems. It is felt that special programs initiated in educational institutions would be very useful in changing the culture within educational institutions to develop more autonomy-, resiliency, and authenticity-providing environments to enable students to realize their potential on a more complete level.*

**Keywords:** Self-actualization, Undergraduate students, Pakistan, Short Index of Self-Actualization (SISA), and Personal growth.

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## Introduction

The term "Self-actualization", first coined by Kurt Goldstein (Gopinath, 2020) and later popularized by Abraham Maslow, refers to the process of realizing and fulfilling one's highest potentials. According to Maslow, self-actualization is the desire to become "everything you are capable of becoming," which constitutes the apex of his hierarchically organized theory of motivation (White, 2022). Such self-fulfillment is intrinsic to humanity, urging people towards the physical, emotional, and spiritual development. The journey to self-actualization is distinct for everyone, as crafted by individual values, yearnings, and life experiences (Gewirth, 1998; Malvezzi, 2019).

Many pathways to self-actualization usually depend on both internal and external factors: The personal aspects influencing self-actualization include personality traits, such as openness and conscientiousness, self-esteem, age, and physically and mentally healthy living (Waterman, 2024). In the context of Karachi's socio-cultural environment, these factors are shaped by unique challenges such as economic pressures and traditional expectations, which may limit students' ability to pursue personal growth. Besides, psychological factors directed towards self-awareness, intrinsic motivations, emotional flexibility, autonomy, and resilience are equally important for this cause (Shipunova et al., 2019; Waterman, 2024). They include availability of social support from the sectors of relationships, cultural norms, socioeconomic status, and major life events. Further, access to education and a decent workplace contributes a lot to an individual's ability to self-actualize (Selvi, 2009; Shipunova et al., 2019).

Most of the self-actualized people have traits characterized by a difference in nature. Generally, self-actualized people are independent, introvert and are unaffected by other people's opinion (Ivtzan et al., 2013). They are realistic and have a comfortable relationship with uncertainty and show compassion and acceptance towards themselves and others. A good humor sense, the capacity for deep and meaningful friendships, and a sense of spontaneity are also common (Kenrick & Krems, 2018; Waterman, 2024). Though research indicates that only about 1% of the adult population achieves self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). Their creativity may manifest in various ways from artistic expression to innovative problem solving. They are also prone to peak experiences-moments of intense joy and connection-and often focus on a purpose comparatively larger than themselves, demonstrating a strong sense of justice and social feeling (Kenrick & Krems, 2018).

When considering undergraduate life, it is to some extent complicated. Marked by intensive academic learning, personal development, boy to man, or girl to woman, and many more phenomena (Moffatt, 1991), this likely refers to the late adolescence to early adulthood period, typically ages 18–22 where undergraduate students narrow down to their specializations and cultivate critical thinking tendencies toward their intended subjects. In Karachi, this transition is compounded by socio-economic uncertainties and cultural pressures, which amplify barriers to self-actualization. However, this transition is also accompanied by many problems, such as fear concerning the future, which sometimes leads to stress and anxiety (Ciarrochi et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2019). Within this context, self-actualization could serve as a powerful channel through which undergraduate students can address this maturation process and cultivate other precedents for well-being (Cox et al., 2016).

Self-actualization, although significant, is one of the least studied needs; this is partly because it often develops only when lower needs are met. There are plenty of accounts of individuals, however, who have managed to become self-actualized while overcoming

exceedingly tough hurdles. Consequently, in some cases, the creative and personal drive may overshadow other needs (Manggie & Faizal, 2020; Tedford, 2023).

This study investigates the factors affecting self-actualization among undergraduate students from various universities (University of Karachi, Jinnah University for Women, etc.) in Karachi, Pakistan. The research objectives will also primarily define the barriers that undergraduate students encounter during their self-actualization. This focus is particularly relevant in Karachi, where economic constraints and cultural norms, such as rigid gender expectations, may uniquely shape students' growth trajectories. This understanding will be significant for raising the awareness of self-actualization and providing perspectives that can help create more supportive educational environments for students. The study hypothesizes that university students in Karachi have a baseline level of self-actualization and that largely, they are limited in growth by important external factors.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional research design to investigate the factors influencing self-actualization among undergraduate students.

### ***Participants***

The study included 100 undergraduate students from various academic institutions in Karachi, Pakistan. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years. The sample consisted of 21.6% (n=21.6) males and 78.4% (n=78.4) females. In terms of education level, 18.9% were at the intermediate level, 68.9% were undergraduates, and 12.2% were graduates. The age distribution of the participants was as follows: 50% were in the 18-22 age group, 45.9% were in the 23-27 age group, and 4.1% were in the 28-32 age group.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study included individuals:

- Enrolled in an academic institution and
- Being between the ages of 18 and 32.

The exclusion criteria for participation in the study includes individuals:

- Individuals younger than 18 or older than 32,
- Those not enrolled in an academic institution, were excluded.

### ***Measures***

The Short Index of Self-Actualization (SISA) was utilized to measure the participants' levels of self-actualization (D'Souza et al., 2015). The SISA is a 15-item questionnaire derived from the longer Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) (Knapp, 1990; Shostrom, 1963). It consists of statements that respondents' rate on a scale to indicate their agreement or disagreement. The items on the SISA are designed to assess various dimensions of self-actualization, including:

- Personal growth and motivation,
- Emotional resilience and self-expression,
- Self-awareness and acceptance,
- Interpersonal relationships and openness (Hajipour et al.; Oliver, 2018).

### ***Procedure***

A descriptive, cross-sectional study employed a survey design, using the SISA questionnaire to gather data from participants on their self-actualization and related behaviors.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data based on the responses to the 15 items of the SISA. The results compiled and interpreted to identify the key factors and limitations related to self-actualization among the student sample (Hajipour et al.).

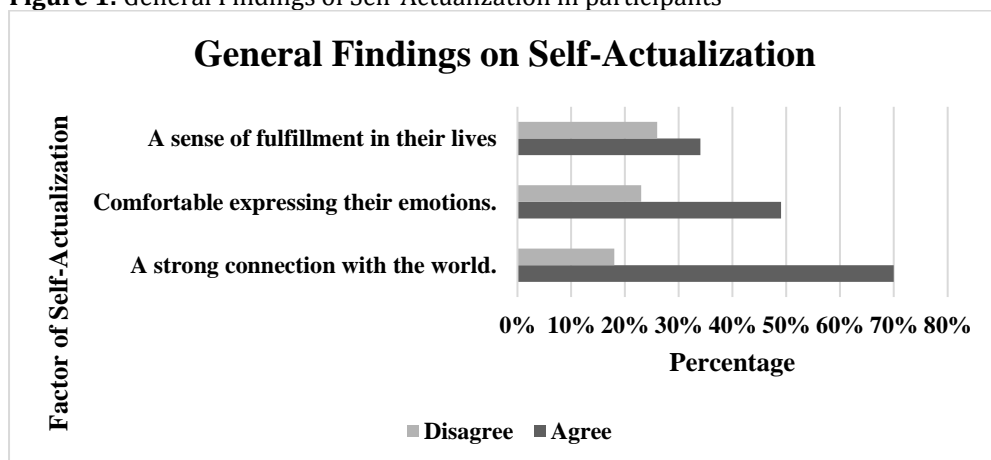
## Results

The analysis of the data collected from the 100 undergraduate students in Karachi provided several key insights into their levels of self-actualization and the challenges they face.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants**

Characteristic	Subgroup	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	21.60%
	Female	78.40%
<b>Age Group</b>	18-22	50.00%
	23-27	45.90%
	28-32	4.10%
<b>Education Level</b>	Intermediate	18.90%
	Undergraduate	68.90%
	Graduate	12.20%

**Figure 1: General Findings of Self-Actualization in participants**



**Table 2: Internal Conflict Indicators from SISA Responses**

<b>SISA Item</b>	<b>What It Measures</b>	<b>% Agree</b>
I am constantly striving to reach my full potential.	Motivation for growth and self-improvement	22%
I feel free to be myself.	Autonomy and authenticity	38%
I am able to find meaning in challenging experiences.	Growth mindset, resilience	27%
I often reflect on my life and personal growth.	Self-awareness, introspection	28%

**Table 3: Barriers to Self-Actualization and Their Psychological Manifestations**

<b>Obstacle Category</b>	<b>Specific Obstacles</b>	<b>Associated SISA Indicators</b>
Personal	Stress, low confidence, poor motivation	Fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy, lack of striving for potential
Parental & Social	Domestic conflict, restrictive norms, need for approval	Dependence on others' opinions, compliance over autonomy
Educational	Teaching inefficiencies, fear of unemployment	Lack of purpose, difficulty engaging deeply with complex material
Economic	Limited access to development opportunities	Reduced sense of responsibility to others, survival focus over growth

## Discussion

Self-actualization forms the apex need of Maslow's hierarchy- that is, it means realizing one is fullest potential. In psychology, especially in academia and developmental psychology, self-actualization is understood as a sure crowning of psychological health and personal growth. For the undergraduate students who fall in this age bracket, that is early adulthood, and live in very complex socio-cultural settings like Karachi, self-actualization is not only an ideal in theory but also a necessity they live by in terms of resilience, motivation, and satisfaction with life. Analyzing the ways in which internal beliefs and external pressures either facilitate or inhibit such a process could help design appropriate educational and policy-level interventions for empowerment and societal wellbeing for youth.

The Self-Actualization Inventory for Students and Adolescents (SISA) (Hajipour et al.; Oliver, 2018) was used in this study to measure the self-actualization potential of undergraduate students with respect to their emotional expression, intrinsic

motivation, and autonomy. Demographically, the sample was slanted with young women (78.4%) aged 18-22 years (50%). As exhibited in Figure 1 which represent that this is a life stage marked by exploration of identity and enhanced emotional sensibility (Jan et al., 2020). Whereas 70% of the students reported having a strong connection with the

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world and 49% claimed to be at ease in their emotional state, the deeper results revealed an internal dissonance-built emotional conflict between aspiration and inhibition (Kringle, 2015).

Table 2 illustrates the stress. Only 22% of students reported “constantly striving to reach their full potential,” while 34% disagreed with this statement. This suggests a suppression of intrinsic motivation, which is central to self-actualization. Similarly, feelings of autonomy and personal meaning—those measured through items like “I feel free to be myself” and “I find meaning in challenging experiences” also revealed nearly equal splits between agreement and disagreement. This psychological ambivalence highlights how students oscillate between wanting growth and being constructed by environmental limitations.

This internal conflict is not unique to the Karachi student populace (Pedaprolu et al., 2024; University, 1981). The study on Indian university students, established that struggles with self-actualization were common among many students due to the limited autonomy and social expectations (Nagarathna & Sreenivas, 2021)—particularly among female students, who received mixed signals about balancing independence and conformity. These findings, where the students reported needing approval from others and showed distrust in themselves—these behaviors were indicated to directly undermine the essential personal authenticity needed for self-actualization.

Table 3 brings out clarity in linking certain specific obstacles to corresponding psychological outcomes. Barriers linked to the self—such as low-confidence and chronic stress find their manifestations through SISA items such as “I fear failure” and “I feel inadequate.” This takes shape in a feedback loop in which fear translates to inactive states, which in turn further intensifies incompetence-feelings. Parental and social pressures, especially those based on gender expectations, were shown to stir a need for external validation; this is quite a common view towards which also (Mohammad et al., 2023; Yim, 2022) directed their discussion—in particular, mentioning that authoritarian parenting styles within the South Asian households correlated with emotional dependence and, consequently, diminished autonomy in adolescents (Yeo et al., 2022). The educational barriers also contributed immensely. The students expressed concerns about their curriculum and the impending fear of becoming unemployed after graduation. These concerns correlate very well with low scores on indicators such as “I have no mission in life” and “I avoid analyzing complex domains.” This lacked neither affinity to academic creation nor a wider continuum of existence (Perveen et al., 2025). Similarly, concluded that job-insecure Pakistani undergraduate students often lacked clarity and had lower psychological well-being, reflecting barriers to self-actualization consistent with the present study’s findings. (Zahid et al., 2023).

Limited access to developmental opportunities, associated with undergraduate students’ reduced sense of societal responsibility, suggests that many in Karachi remain focused on survival needs rather than self-actualization, as they are stuck at lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy. This is very important because it demonstrates how structural inequality directly impedes higher-order psychological growth. While 70% of the respondents reported having a connection to the world, fears of suspension of both trust

and rejection were prevalent. This contradiction in this case is similar to what (Al Jaberi et al., 2024) found in Jordan where students, despite surface integration in social terms, had their inner emotional insecurities masked by rigid cultural norms.

Therefore, self-actualization is not achieved through academic teaching alone. Systemically breaking some cultural taboos, empowering independence, reducing performance-based validation, and prioritizing emotional development are very important. When extrinsically regulated by family's expectations or social judgment, the conditions under which a student grows become conditional and fragmented, as this lacks that intrinsic force on which true fulfillment rests. In such conditions, pursuit of self-actualization for approval gardens itself into a paradox; the act must be intrinsically motivated to be authentic and meaningful (Kaufman, 2021; Roy, 2022).

Longitudinal studies in the future may examine how interventions-such as mental health counseling and curriculum-related changes-affect self-actualization over time in undergraduate students in Karachi. Research could also look into the influence of some cultural factors concerning gender-based expectations on autonomy and self-trust, especially in female students. Other comparison studies with cities in South Asia may further elaborate on economic and cultural contexts of self-actualization, thereby broadening the angle for policy formation.

## **Conclusion**

It has been determined through research that undergraduate students in Karachi want their lives to be fulfilled, though the expression of their desires, that is greatly obstructed by a convoluted interplay of internal and external barriers. On the other hand, personal insecurities like fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy, and lack of self-confidence breathe deeply into and shape societal expectations, authoritarian parenting, and institutional instability.

Instead of openly exploring their potentials in education, students carry the burden of living life marked with constant validation, fear of rejection, and very limited chances to experience meaningful education in their lives. These conditions thwarts their psychological growth toward lower levels of need, such as safety and esteem needs, so they would never be sufficiently fixed to develop themselves into higher needs of autonomy, creativity, and self-realization.

It is important for the academic institutions and policy-makers to mold such environments where students feel emotionally backed, encouraged, authentic enough, and secure, and will have access to resources for intellectual risk-taking if they are to arrive at the reality of self-actualization. This involves incorporating mental health services, supporting diverse learning methods, involving families in student growth, and easing economic burdens through targeted support. Only under such conditions can pupils start the journey of becoming "everything they are capable of becoming" - not for the others, but for themselves.

In the context of Karachi, this study distinguishes itself from other works by revealing how socio-cultural and economic barriers obstruct the path toward self-actualization and thus provides a ground for intervention aimed specifically at promoting student well-being and development.

This investigation establishes that an inherently self-actualizing personality exists among the university students of Pakistan, impeded, however, beneath a host of

personal insecurities, socio-cultural pressures, and poor availability of education and economic opportunities. Though experiencing emotional connectedness and awareness, many remain mired in internal conflict and lack self-confidence.

The gaps must be filled via direct institutional intervention in the areas of mental health counseling, family education programs, curriculum restructuring for purpose-oriented learning, and extended availability of financial aid. This would create a better ecosystem within which students could develop and grow meaningfully.

There should be longitudinal studies in the future focusing on these challenges and interventions to further inform policy and support services for youth development.

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