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**Belonging, Rejection Sensitivity and Hikikomori Withdrawal among University Students**Shibra Baig<sup>1</sup>, Uzma Ilyas<sup>2\*</sup>, Arooj Fatima<sup>3</sup>**Abstract**

The pivotal developmental stage of adulthood considered as prime years includes critical decision making related to academic attainment, career selection, spouse selection which are closely tied to social approval, financial stability and competence. Although hikikomori has been extensively examined in Japan, evidence from South Asian context is scarce. This gap could be ascribed to excessive social conformity, dependence of family system and stigma related to mental health. Given the substantial psychological, social, and functional consequences of this phenomenon, particularly within the Pakistani sociocultural milieu, systematic investigation is warranted to inform culturally responsive clinical practice and advance scholarly discourse. The current study investigated the association between interpersonal rejection sensitivity, hikikomori and social connectedness among university students. Convenience sampling was used to recruit sample of  $n = 330$  young adults, aged 18-25 years through cross-sectional correlational research design. The sample comprised students enrolled in public and private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. Data was gathered using self-report questionnaire consisting of informed consent form, demographic sheet, Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale, Hikikomori Questionnaire, and Social Connectedness Scale-Revised. All three scales employed Likert-type format scales. Following the descriptive analysis, the study hypotheses were tested using Correlation and Linear Regression analyses. The results revealed significant associations among the study variables and identified interpersonal rejection sensitivity as a significant predictor of hikikomori tendencies. Overall, study contributes empirical evidence and offers meaningful implications regarding the relatively underexplored psychological challenges faced by contemporary youth.

**Keywords:** Hikikomori, Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity, Social Connectedness, Social Withdrawal, Young Adults

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<sup>1</sup>BS (Hons) Scholar, Department of Psychology, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore, Pakistan.

<sup>2\*</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>PhD Scholar, National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

**\*Corresponding Author Email:**

uzmailyas@fccollege.edu.pk

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**Introduction**

The need for connection and belonging is a human yearning and a fundamental motivation whereas its deprivation has been consistently associated to adverse psychological outcomes (Binte Mohammad Adib & Sabharwal, 2023; Holt-Lunstad, 2024). Challenges related to increased personal and social obligation, autonomy and identity formation are considered crucial during transition from adolescence to young adulthood and had a huge impact on human psychology. While navigating these critical life transitions, young adults are particularly vulnerable to emotional and social difficulties (Medforth & Boyle, 2023).

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Within collectivistic cultural contexts such as Pakistan, individuals tend to define themselves in reference to their social groups, placing substantial emphasis on interpersonal harmony and social connectedness (Bond, 2004; Han et al., 2016). When social approval is highly valued, the pressure to conform to normative expectations intensifies, thereby heightening sensitivity to social appraisal and rejection sensitivity. Compounding this vulnerability, mental health concerns remain widely stigmatized in societies with limited mental health literacy, discouraging open expression and help-seeking behaviors (Khan, 2024; Shafiq, 2020). Such sociocultural dynamics play a critical role in shaping interpersonal rejection sensitivity among youth, influencing their social experiences and psychological well-being (Binte Mohammad Adib & Sabharwal, 2023).

Rejection sensitivity (RS) is characterised by being anxious, having negative perceptions and overreacting to slightly negative cues. When these concerns occur in general social interactions, it is defined in terms of interpersonal rejection sensitivity (IRS). Absence of support and connection can influence the individuals with sensitivity for rejection to become more hostile and dissatisfied with their relationships (Schaan et al., 2020; Rohner et al., 2023). Emotional distress, self-destructive and anti-social behaviours are influenced by rejection sensitivity. Whenever there is a likelihood of rejection, these expectations are triggered, which leads individuals to readily perceive the harmless signs as a confirmation of rejection. This can further increase the possibility of aggression, resentment and lack of interest in socialization (Watson & Nesdale, 2012). A study conducted among college students from Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan provided evidence of relationship between rejection sensitivity and social anxiety (Hussain et al., 2023). Another research conducted in China with the

sample of adolescent students explained the connection of RS with social anxiety and societal avoidance. Ambiguous cues in social situations can be interpreted as signs of rejection, hindering further interactions, and ultimately influencing the relationships negatively (Zhao et al., 2024). In current study interpersonal rejection sensitivity is positioned as risk factor that include cognitive appraisal of social context as threatening due to fear of evaluation regarding achievement, financial stability, body objectification and many other aspects of life. In case of negative appraisal, rejection sensitivity amplifies fear of rejection that manifest itself in form of coping by employing avoidance behaviours. Erosion of social connectedness could serve as potential for withdrawal patterns like hikikomori.

The other variable of interest for this study is hikikomori, explained as severe form of social withdrawal for at least six months. It involves the neglect of major responsibilities, for example, an individual's educational, occupational requirements, and friendships (Teo et al., 2018). Theoretical exploration of hikikomori revealed that hikikomori withdraws from society considering it their last resort to avoid the pressure and rejection faced when there is failure to fulfil the high societal expectations (Kim, 2019). It is most common among adolescents and young adults, having high comorbidity with psychopathologies like anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and others (Kato et al., 2019). It has also been referred as a psychosociological phenomenon, attracting the attention of many mental health practitioners across the globe (Pozza et al., 2019). Adults with heighten interpersonal sensitivity misjudge ambiguous social cues as criticism or negative evaluation. Negative appraisal along with cognitive bias tend to increase distress anticipation, anxiety and increased avoidance in social interaction to avoid such emotions. With time such avoidance

in social interaction becomes chronic and consolidates itself as chronic withdrawal patterns, features of hikikomori. This proximal psychological mechanism generated from rejection sensitivity interprets fear of evaluation into chronic withdrawal.

Social connectedness is referred as “the characteristic of self that reflects cognitions of enduring interpersonal closeness with the social world as a whole” (Lee et al., 2001). Belongingness buffers against negative forces like social judgement received by social factors and foster emotional bonding, emotional security and adaptive coping. The sense of interpersonal closeness and belonging to societal network, is referred as social connectedness. Sense of connection with surroundings is essential for physical and psychological well-being. Positive relationships in society fosters the self-worth of youth, motivating them to contribute towards the welfare of society (Butler et al., 2007; Ilyas & Khan, 2023). Secure attachments, competency in social skills and interpersonal trust are closely linked with social connectedness. Individuals who feel less socially connected can have interpersonal problems contributing towards psychological distress. Low social connectedness is linked with loneliness, aggression, depression and anxiety. Connectedness can influence the interplay of interpersonal rejection sensitivity and extreme social withdrawal as diminished sense of social belonging exacerbates emotional and interpersonal rejection conversely accelerating detachment from social roles and increase in vulnerability of hikikomori (Lee et al., 2008). Research conducted among university students in Turkey highlighted that lack of societal connection was a strong predictor of poor mental health outcomes (Yelpaze et al., 2021). The model conceptualizes social belonging as relational trajectory explaining susceptibility into avoidance behaviour.

Individuals with high sensitivity for rejection can show emotional numbness and avoid socialization. As medicines are taken to relieve physical pain, similarly, social pain can act as a motivator to retreat from societal roles in order to get rid of this pain (Schaan et al., 2020). A preliminary study conducted in Lahore concluded that that rejection faced from society and family can significantly contribute towards hikikomori syndrome. Societies which emphasize on social harmony indirectly foster social withdrawal as their criteria for acceptance is very strict (Nazim, 2024).

University students in their adulthood are embarked by transition from being dependent to independence, identity formation, autonomy and meeting role expectation and increased social criticism. In Pakistan, academic pressure, manging monetary needs for completion of degree, getting job, socio-economic uncertainty and skimmed chances to acquire jobs exacerbates this vulnerability. The limited empirical data from university aged students limits the theoretical advancement to understand hikikomori as cultural embedded phenomenon and halts the formulation of culturally relevant intervention for those at risk.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study utilized integrated model drawing upon interpersonal acceptance rejection theory (IPARTheory) and social pain framework. Interpersonal rejection sensitivity serves as key factor for cognitive-affective mechanism which enable individuals to internalize and act upon social cues, expectation and norm. The amplified anticipation of rejection leads to hypervigilance towards ambiguous cues to be perceived as interpersonal disapproval (Butler et al., 2007). As social pain framework posits that perceived rejection elicits emotional distress that reinforces behavioural withdrawal to mitigate psychological pain (Schaan et al., 2020). Over time this pattern of avoidance consolidates in form of chronic

disengagement from society and significant others.

From cognitive and developmental perspective, IPARTheory elaborates how early rejection experiences from loved one shape negative enduring internal models of self and others (Rohner, 2021). Such distorted cognitive schemas lead to further misinterpretation of cues and promote emotional numbness, low levels of interpersonal trust and withdrawal from social role responsibility while strengthening the pattern of social withdrawal persistent (Kuyumcu & Muğlu, 2024). Whereas social belongingness serves as buffer among interplay of variables and a relational construct in the framework. In this model hikikomori doesn't serves an abrupt behavioural choice but shows up as an accumulative outcome channelized through sense of being rejected, persistent social pain, societal pressure and emotional bonding with social ties.

### **Rationale**

Extreme social withdrawal and isolation have become an alarming phenomenon among youth across the globe which is particularly underexplored in Pakistan in terms of interpersonal rejection sensitivity (Kato et al., 2019; Nazim, 2024). The present study aims to examine the relationship between IRS, hikikomori and social connectedness among young adults. Published literature mainly focused adolescents or clinical population, missing out on university students as they seem to be most relevant theoretical sample are underrepresented in research papers in indigenous context. This gap is worth studying as adults are considered to be largest chunk of Pakistani population along with the challenges they encounter make them potentially susceptible to distress. The challenges they experience include varied psychological stressors including role obligations, societal expectations, constant pressure to conform, all of which may intensify sensitivity to interpersonal rejection. Moreover, while interpersonal

rejection sensitivity has been linked to various internalizing difficulties, its role in extreme forms of social withdrawal such as hikikomori has received insufficient empirical attention in local research (Watson & Nesdaile, 2012; Lee & Robbins, 1995). Preliminary evidence from Pakistan suggests that rejection from family and society may contribute to hikikomori-like withdrawal; however, systematic examination of this relationship within a theoretically grounded model remains lacking (Nazim, 2024).

Understanding how rejection sensitivity undermines social connectedness may provide critical insight into the mechanisms through which withdrawal becomes entrenched during young adulthood (Caputo, 2021). By examining interpersonal rejection sensitivity and social connectedness as key psychological correlates of hikikomori tendencies among university students, the present study aims to address these gaps. The findings are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive, culturally informed understanding of extreme social withdrawal and inform prevention and intervention strategies targeting young adults in higher education settings.

### **Hypotheses**

H1: Interpersonal rejection sensitivity is positively related to hikikomori (socialization, isolation, emotional support) among university students.

H2: Interpersonal rejection sensitivity, and hikikomori (socialization, isolation, emotional support) have will have inverse relationship with social connectedness among university students.

H3: Interpersonal rejection sensitivity predicts hikikomori tendencies among university students.

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

Cross-sectional correlation research design was employed in this study to investigate the connection between interpersonal

rejection sensitivity, hikikomori and social connectedness.

### **Sample**

The population for this research consisted of young adults from universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The sample size was  $n=330$ , obtained by using sample-to-item ratio, maintaining a minimum ratio 1:5 as recommended for multivariate analysis (Memon et al., 2020). The sample size deems adequate for statistical power and reliable parameters.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Non-probability convenience sampling technique was utilized in this research where selection of the participants was sorted from universities as they provide accessible relevant context to identify early warning signs of withdrawal among adults.

### **Inclusion Criteria**

The population for this research consisted of undergraduate students who were able to submit informed consent, aged 18-25 years old, with ability to comprehend and respond to English self-reported questionnaires from private and public sector universities were included in the sample.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

Individuals with any formally diagnosed psychiatric disorder and physical ailment were excluded from participating in the study to avoid confounding clinical symptomology. Any individual who had suffered bereavement from the loss of a loved one within last one month, was not included in the sample of study.

### **Measures**

#### **Demographics**

Demographic sheet was devised in light of previous literature to inquire relevant demographic information. It included age, religion, ethnicity, gender, education sector, academic year, academic major, marital status, history of psychiatric illness, living status and family system of participants.

#### **Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale (IRSS)**

Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Scale (IRSS) developed by Rohner et al. (2020) was employed to measure interpersonal rejection sensitivity. The scale measures an individual's sensitivity to the possibility of being rejected in interpersonal relationships. This is a self-reported scale which consists of 11 items and scoring involves the sum of all items. The scale measures the response on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1-4 with 1=not at all true of me to 4 =very true of me. The original study has reported that the scale has excellent reliability with  $\alpha = .91$ . In the present study the internal consistency of the scale was  $\alpha = .84$ .

#### **Hikikomori Questionnaire (HQ-25)**

Hikikomori was measured by Hikikomori Questionnaire (HQ-25) developed by Teo et al. (2018). It is a self-report instrument consisting of 25 items and measures the symptoms of hikikomori over the period of last 6 months across three subscales including socialization ( $\alpha = .94$ ), isolation ( $\alpha = .88$ ), and emotional support ( $\alpha = .89$ ). The subscale named as socialization consists of 11 items and measures lack of socialization, isolation has 8 items and emotional support subscale has 6 items, measuring lack of emotional support. This measure uses Likert-type response scale ranging from 0 to 4 with 0 representing strongly disagree and 4 representing strongly agree. The 6 items (4,7,10,15,21,25) of this scale are reverse coded. The original study has reported that the scale has excellent reliability  $\alpha = .96$ . In the present research the reliability was  $\alpha = .82$ .

#### **Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R)**

Social connectedness was measured by Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R) developed by Lee et al. (2001). It is a self-report measure consisting of 20-items which measure the level of connectedness felt by an individual, with others in

surrounding of society. The reliability of the scale was reported to be excellent with  $\alpha = .94$ . It comprises of 10 negatively worded items which are reverse coded and 10 positive items. The scale measures the responses on a 6-point Likert scale in which 0= strongly disagree to 6= strongly agree. The reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = .71$  in the present research.

### Procedure

The data was collected after seeking approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Ethics Review Committee (ERC), and Board of Studies (BOS). Permissions were sorted from original authors of all three measures added in this study. Data was collected through structured questionnaire administered in person at public and private sector universities in Lahore. Students were approached on campus after obtaining permission from administration of universities. Informed consent was taken from the participants before their engagement in research. Participants had the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study whenever they feel the need to, without the fear of any negative impacts. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were maintained throughout

the study. The research was self-funded by principal investigator.

Each participant completed the printed questionnaire that included informed consent form, demographic sheet, Interpersonal Rejection Sensitivity Measure (IRSS), Hikikomori Questionnaire (HQ-25), and Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R). IBM SPSS statistics version 25 was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics such as mean, percentages, standard deviation and frequencies were calculated for demographics of the sample. Reliability of the scales was analysed using Cronbach's alpha. The relationship between interpersonal rejection sensitivity, hikikomori and social connectedness was analysed through Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Further, linear regression analysis was performed to analyse how interpersonal rejection sensitivity can predict the hikikomori tendencies.

### Results

Preliminary analyses included assumption of normality for which skewness and kurtosis values were analyzed through histograms and Q-Q plots for the study variables. The values ranged between  $\pm 2$ , fulfilling the assumption of normality for all the variables (Hair et al., 2022).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n=330)*

Sample Demographics	N	%	Sample Demographics	N	%
Age ( $M=21.04$ , $SD=1.89$ )	-	-	Education Sector		
18	36	10.9	Public	209	63.3
19	38	11.5	Private	121	36.7
20	67	20.3	Academic Major		
21	49	14.8	Social Sciences	142	43.0
22	62	18.8	Humanities	42	12.7
23	45	13.6	Science and Technology	106	32.1
24	20	6.1	Business and Finance	40	12.1
25	13	3.9	Marital Status		
Gender			Single	314	95.2
Male	156	47.3	Married	16	4.8
Female	174	52.7	Academic Year		
Family system			Freshmen	59	17.9
Nuclear	230	69.7	Sophomore	39	11.8

Joint Living status	100	30.3	Junior	83	25.2
Hostelite	97	29.4	Senior	149	45.2
Day Scholar	233	70.6			

A sample of  $n=330$  undergraduate students was collected which consisted of both men and women. Majority of participants were aged between 20 and 23 years. Most of the participants belonged to religion Islam while few belonged to Christianity. The sample predominantly consisted of

participants belonging to Punjabi ethnicity. Few participants identified as Sindhi, Balochi, Gilgiti, and Pathan while minority belonged to other ethnic backgrounds. All participants included in the sample had no self-reported history of psychiatric illness.

**Table 2**  
*Reliability Analysis and Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (n=330)*

Variables	M	SD	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Actual Range	Potential Range
IRS	27.29	7.06	.84	11-44	11-44
Hikikomori	45.85	14.17	.82	8-79	0-125
Social Connectedness	73.41	11.85	.71	30-115	20-120

Note. IRS= interpersonal rejection sensitivity

Table 2 presents the Cronbach's alpha value for interpersonal rejection sensitivity, hikikomori and social connectedness

measuring internal consistency. All scales had adequate to good reliability ranging from ( $\alpha=.71-\alpha=.84$ ).

**Table 3**  
*Correlation Analyses between Study Variables (n=330)*

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
IRS	27.29	7.06	-	0.24**	0.21**	0.21**	0.08	-0.22**
Hikikomori	45.85	14.17	-	-	0.90**	0.82**	0.51**	-0.55**
Socialization	20.52	8.24	-	-	-	0.60**	0.25**	-0.50**
Isolation	14.94	5.33	-	-	-	-	0.28**	-0.35**
Emotional Support	10.18	4.22	-	-	-	-	-	-0.38**
Social Connectedness	73.41	11.85	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note. IRS= interpersonal rejection sensitivity; \*\* $p<.01$

Table 3 shows that there was a significant positive correlation between interpersonal rejection sensitivity and hikikomori and its subscales (socialization, isolation) except emotional support. Social connectedness had a significant negative correlation with interpersonal rejection sensitivity and hikikomori and its subscales. Significant

inverse correlation was found between social connectedness and socialization, isolation and emotional support subscale. As expected, hikikomori had significant positive relation with its subscales including socialization isolation and emotional support.

**Table 4***Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Hikikomori (n=330)*

Variable	B	SE	B	T	p	95% CI	
						LL	UL
(Constant)	32.83	3.03	-	10.82	<.001	26.87	38.8
IRS	.48	.11	.24	4.43	<.001	.27	.70
R	.24						
R <sup>2</sup>	.57						

Note. IRS= interpersonal rejection sensitivity; CI= confidence interval; LL= lower limit; UL= upper limit

Linear regression analysis revealed that interpersonal rejection sensitivity is a significant predictor of hikikomori ( $F(1, 328) = 19.66, p < .001$ ). The variance

explained in Hikikomori is 5.7% demonstrated through interpersonal rejection sensitivity.

### Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed a significant positive association between interpersonal rejection sensitivity (IRS) and hikikomori tendencies. Contemporary young adulthood is increasingly characterized by intense competitiveness and pressure to conform to societal standards, which may heighten vigilance toward social evaluation and rejection. As social acceptance becomes a central developmental concern, young adults are more likely to attend closely to cues of rejection. During this emotionally demanding period, vulnerable individuals with elevated rejection sensitivity may cope by avoiding social interactions and engaging in social isolation as a coping strategy (Nazim, 2024). For individuals high in IRS, perceptions and expectations of rejection play a crucial role in shaping the quality and nature of social encounters (Schaan et al., 2020). The results from current findings corroborate with previous research revealing that rejection sensitivity is linked to avoidance behaviours, frequently used as coping mechanism as attempts to reduce the psychological distress and anticipation risk of further rejection (Giovazolias, 2023; Li et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2020).

Further analysis indicated that IRS was significantly and positively associated with

the hikikomori subscales of *isolation* and *lack of socialization*. Persistent distress augmenting from pressure to conform, criticism, or misunderstanding in interpersonal relationships may fuel gradual pattern of isolation and detachments from loved ones. Individuals with high rejection sensitivity may increasingly seek solace in solitude due to repeated negative social experiences and anticipatory fears of rejection (Caputo, 2021). Moreover, emotional distress and maladaptive cognitive schemas associated with IRS may foster a negative appraisal of the social world, thereby impeding engagement in social interactions. Fear of disapproval and negative evaluation can thus contribute to reduced socialization and increased isolation, offering a plausible explanation for the observed associations between IRS and hikikomori dimensions (Schaan et al., 2020; Watson & Nesdale, 2012).

The second hypothesis was also supported, as both interpersonal rejection sensitivity and hikikomori demonstrated significant negative associations with social connectedness. Additionally, social connectedness was significantly negatively related to all subscales of hikikomori. Individuals reporting heightened rejection sensitivity and pronounced withdrawal behaviours tended to experience

diminished feelings of belonging and interpersonal closeness. These findings corroborate prior research suggesting that social isolation driven by fear and expectations of rejection is strongly linked to reduced social connectedness (Mountain, 2018; Satan, 2020). Caputo (2021) further emphasized that erosion of social connectedness may play a critical role in sustaining prolonged social withdrawal characteristic of hikikomori. Collectively, these findings underscore social connectedness as a crucial protective factor in mitigating the emotional and behavioural consequences of rejection sensitivity (Watson & Nesdale, 2012).

Consistent with the third hypothesis, interpersonal rejection sensitivity emerged as a significant predictor of hikikomori tendencies. Early adulthood is a developmental stage marked by major life transitions, including career planning, family expectations, and identity consolidation, all of which are embedded within sociocultural frameworks that impose high standards and evaluative pressures. During this phase, experiences of rejection or criticism may exacerbate vulnerability to maladaptive coping patterns. According to Kato et al. (2019), a major susceptibility resulting in social avoidance and emotional detachment stems from distressing cognitions centred on rejection among young people. Elevated rejection sensitivity may therefore increase the likelihood of behavioral outcomes such as social avoidance and extreme withdrawal. Supporting this interpretation, Watson and Nesdale (2012) demonstrated that rejection sensitivity predicts social withdrawal through avoidance of interpersonal interactions. Such withdrawal may function as a defensive strategy to reduce exposure to perceived rejection. Heightened sensitivity to rejection cues can elicit intense negative emotional responses, which, if persistent, may culminate in severe withdrawal behaviours characteristic of hikikomori (Zheng et al.,

2025). Given these findings, rejection sensitivity among young adults warrants particular concern due to its potential contribution to extreme social withdrawal, with broader implications for societal functioning (Lei et al., 2024).

Finally, the predominance of participants from nuclear family systems in the present sample may have influenced experiences of rejection sensitivity and withdrawal tendencies. Within joint family systems, personal boundaries are often less clearly delineated, potentially leading to increased interpersonal scrutiny, criticism, and perceived judgment. Conversely, greater autonomy and reduced familial oversight in nuclear family structures may inadvertently facilitate social withdrawal by limiting protective interpersonal engagement. In the Pakistani cultural context, the presence of extended family members may serve as a buffer against prolonged isolation by fostering regular social interaction and emotional involvement (Nazim, 2024). These familial dynamics merit further investigation as potential contextual moderators in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and hikikomori.

### **Implications**

The present study enhanced the limited body of research on interpersonal rejection sensitivity (IRS), hikikomori, and social connectedness in Pakistani society. The study has particularly contributed to reduce the gap of research focusing on psychological correlates of hikikomori in Pakistan. Along with influencing social involvement and psychological well-being, hikikomori affects the structure of society in broad context (Kato et al., 2019; Nazim, 2024). Thus, the relationship between IRS and hikikomori emphasizes the need to address the early indicators of sensitivity for rejection and social disengagement. This will help to reduce escalation towards academic and social disengagement. It implies that tendencies of hikikomori must be rigorously studied as it can further contribute towards development of

addictive behaviours and suicidal tendencies.

This research contributed towards scientific and public awareness, providing useful evidence for researchers, and clinicians to design interventions for identifying IRS. To help students who are vulnerable to sensitivity for rejection mental health practitioners including counsellors can work for improving emotional literacy. The study has implied that society must develop better understanding regarding the sensitivity of these psychological constructs. Community-level approach for reducing judgements based on strict societal norms is crucial to strengthen the sense of belonging and connection. The significant predictive relationship of IRS with hikikomori suggests that IRS is a serious psychological concern that can be gradually manifested in maladaptive behavioural patterns. This highlights the importance for early detection and prevention strategies focused on interpersonal perceptions and psychological struggles of young adults. Universities should incorporate awareness programs to help students better understand and recognise their psychological struggles including sensitivity for rejection.

#### **Limitations and Recommendations**

Along with providing valuable insights, the limitations of the study include the use of cross-sectional design because of time constraints. Longitudinal research design can be employed in future to understand how rejection sensitivity influences withdrawal patterns over time. The data was collected from undergraduate university students within Lahore through convenience sampling, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Future studies can incorporate the experiences of young adults from non-academic backgrounds as well. This research has paved the way for future studies to understand the relationship of these psychological constructs among significant age group of adolescence. Research within

socially marginalised populations like divorced individuals, religious or ethnic minorities and people from low socioeconomic background, would be useful to further explore IRS and hikikomori tendencies in Pakistan.

Qualitative research method can help future researchers to explore the nature of subjective experiences of interpersonal rejection sensitivity and their sense of belonging. Additionally, mixed method approach can be helpful for rich understanding of these constructs with reference to cultural aspect. This can specifically contribute to understand the prevalence and nature of relatively new phenomenon of hikikomori in Pakistan.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings confirm that individuals with heightened interpersonal rejection sensitivity are more vulnerable towards hikikomori, and disconnection from society. This highlights how IRS may serve as a risk factor for psychosocial disengagement, with relevance to collectivistic cultures where interpersonal harmony and belonging are highly valued. The study has provided enriching understanding through addressing the under-researched areas contributing towards broader field of psychological research.

#### **Ethics Statement**

All the ethical standards of APA were met. Informed consent was taken in written form from all the respondents to participate in this study.

#### **Contribution of Authors**

Shibra Baig: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft  
 Uzma Ilyas: Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision  
 Arooj Fatima: Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft

#### **Conflict of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest declared by the authors.

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### Data Availability Statement

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [U.I.] upon the reasonable request.

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