NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCES AND TECHNOLOGY

School of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences

The Psychology of Compliance:

Why do we say "YES" when we mean "NO"

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Abstract

This mixed-method study investigates the challenges faced by Pakistani university students in asserting their right to refuse requests, focusing on a sample of 69 undergraduates from the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad. Combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural, psychological, and institutional factors contributing to students' difficulty in saying "no." In Pakistan's collectivist society, cultural norms emphasize family obligations, group harmony, and deference to authority. These values shape interpersonal dynamics, making refusal behavior particularly challenging. Educational environments further reinforce these norms, with hierarchies and power structures often limiting students' sense of agency.

The findings reveal that 85.5% of participants frequently agree to requests despite personal reluctance, citing external pressures from family expectations, academic demands, and interactions with authority figures. Emotional consequences of this behavior include guilt, burnout, stress, and diminished self-worth, reflecting a conflict between societal expectations and individual needs. Many students adopt coping strategies such as making excuses, deflecting requests, or delaying responses, but these approaches often fail to address the underlying distress. Students expressed a strong preference for resources like peer-group discussions, targeted assertiveness training, and culturally appropriate educational materials to equip them with skills for managing refusal scenarios.

An analysis of these findings underscores the critical role of cultural norms in shaping communication behaviors and highlights the intersection between societal expectations and personal autonomy. The collectivist orientation in Pakistan, while fostering community and mutual support, often places undue emphasis on compliance and self-sacrifice. This tension illustrates the broader implications of balancing cultural heritage with the evolving needs of younger generations in an increasingly globalized world.

The broader cultural and institutional implications are significant. Universities play a crucial role in addressing these challenges by creating supportive environments that empower students to prioritize their mental health and personal boundaries. Integrating assertiveness training into student development programs, fostering peer support networks, and reframing refusal as a constructive behavior can help students navigate these pressures. By aligning institutional practices with students' psychological needs while respecting cultural sensitivities, higher education institutions can promote a more balanced and inclusive academic experience.

Acknowledgments:

With the successful completion of this research report on perinatal mental health awareness in Pakistan, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to our instructor, Ma'am Ayesha Habib. Her insightful guidance, mentorship, and expertise have significantly shaped our understanding of technical and business writing. Her constant encouragement has been a driving force behind our efforts to produce a meaningful and high-quality report.

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We are sincerely thankful to the healthcare professionals, researchers, and participants who shared their valuable knowledge and experiences with us. Their input added immense depth and relevance to our findings, enriching the overall quality of this report.

Additionally, we are profoundly grateful to our families and friends for their constant support and encouragement. Their understanding and motivation helped us navigate the challenges of this semester and remain focused on our objectives.

To all those who contributed to the success of this project, whether directly or indirectly, we offer our sincere appreciation. Your support has been a vital part of our academic journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

In a world that increasingly demands productivity, cooperation, and social harmony, the ability to say "no" often becomes a struggle—especially in cultures where politeness, obedience, and collective values are emphasized. Many individuals, particularly students and young professionals, find it difficult to assert themselves and express refusal, even when their personal limits are being crossed. The result is often emotional exhaustion, stress, and reduced self-worth.

Psychologically, this behavior can stem from a desire to be liked, fear of conflict, low self-esteem, or cultural conditioning. According to various behavioral studies, the inability to say no has been linked to people-pleasing tendencies, lack of assertiveness, and a deep-rooted fear of disappointing others. In Pakistan's collectivist society, where family, social, and professional expectations are tightly knit, this issue becomes even more significant. Yet, despite being a common experience, this topic is rarely discussed openly or researched academically.

This study explores the reasons behind this widespread issue and aims to understand why people frequently say "yes" when they genuinely want to say "no." Through primary data collection, we intend to identify the emotional, psychological, and social pressures involved—and eventually propose practical ways to help people build the confidence to assert their boundaries.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study is targeted upon the following objectives.

1. To identify common situations where individuals tend to say "yes" despite wanting to say "no".
2. To explore the emotional and psychological reasons behind this behavior.
3. To analyze the social or cultural pressures contributing to people-pleasing tendencies.
4. To examine the psychological and social factors that make it difficult for individuals to say "no" and explore effective strategies to overcome this challenge.
5. To propose practical techniques and mindset shifts that can help individuals become more assertive.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the key reasons individuals find it difficult to say "no"?
2. In which situations do people most frequently struggle with assertiveness?
3. How do cultural and social norms influence this behavior in Pakistan?
4. What emotional or mental impacts result from not saying "no" when needed?
5. What strategies or interventions can help individuals develop healthier communication boundaries?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study extends across various domains, offering insights and practical applications that benefit multiple stakeholders. For students, employees, and young professionals who often face peer pressure, authority demands, or emotional manipulation, this research provides a framework to understand the social and psychological factors compelling them to say "yes" even when their true intention is to refuse. By exploring the underlying causes of this behavior, such as fear of judgment and social expectations, the study aims to empower individuals to make decisions aligned with their personal values and boundaries. This empowerment can lead to improved mental health, reduced stress, and enhanced self-confidence, contributing to their overall well-being and productivity.

The research also provides value to mental health practitioners and counselors by highlighting an often-ignored behavioral challenge. Understanding the difficulty of saying "no" sheds light on the emotional toll of people-pleasing tendencies and the pervasive fear of conflict. This insight equips professionals with the tools to develop targeted interventions, fostering assertiveness and resilience in their clients. Additionally, the findings support the design of personal development and assertiveness training programs that cater to diverse populations, enhancing communication skills and emotional intelligence.

The study further enables organizations and institutions, such as the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), to conduct workshops promoting healthier communication. By integrating these findings into training sessions, institutions can create an environment that encourages openness and respects personal boundaries. Lastly, this research serves as a foundation for future academic exploration in areas like emotional intelligence, behavioral psychology, and communication skills, paving the way for interdisciplinary studies and practical applications in varied contexts.

1.5 Scope and Delimitations

This study is confined to the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad, focusing on the university urban academic community. The target population consists of undergraduate students aged 18 to 24 from three selected schools within NUST. By concentrating on this specific demographic, the research examines young adults who are likely to encounter peer and authority pressures in an educational setting. The investigation centers on the difficulty of saying no in everyday situations, exploring both the psychological and social factors that contribute to such acquiescence and the emotional consequences that follow. Key variables of interest include peer pressure, fear of negative judgment, prevailing social expectations, and individual self-confidence. The study deliberately excludes contexts that involve legal obligations, medical decisions, or extreme coercion, to maintain focus on normal interpersonal interactions.

Data will be collected using structured questionnaires administered to the selected students. These questionnaires are designed to measure respondents' experiences and attitudes regarding requests and refusals in familiar scenarios. The data collection is planned over a period of approximately two to three weeks, ensuring that all participants complete the survey under

similar temporal conditions. Because the focus is on self-reported attitudes and experiences, the instruments do not include in-depth clinical interviews or comprehensive personality assessments; such psychological testing is beyond the scope of this project's resources.

The study's design also defines certain exclusions. Faculty members, university staff, and working professionals are not part of the sample, as the research is limited to the student population. Similarly, students enrolled at other universities or institutions are not included. By narrowing the scope, the study aims to provide clear insights relevant to NUST students specifically. Finally, the findings will be interpreted within the context of NUSTs urban campus environment. Cultural and institutional factors at NUST may differ from those in rural or non-academic settings, so the conclusions drawn are acknowledged to be specific to this context and may not generalize to all other populations.

1.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the foundation for understanding the difficulty of saying "no" and its multifaceted implications. By situating the research within psychological, social, and cultural frameworks, the study emphasizes the pressing need to address this pervasive issue. The subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, building a comprehensive understanding of why individuals struggle with refusal and how they can be empowered to assert their boundaries. This research not only aims to bridge significant gaps in existing literature but also seeks to offer practical solutions that contribute to personal and societal well-being.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Individuals often learn from early childhood that politeness and helpfulness are virtues.

Manresa (2011) explains that people are conditioned to avoid saying no because they associate refusal with rudeness or hurt feelings. This conditioning can become internalized as part of one's self-worth, so that helping others and pleasing authority figures becomes equated with personal value. Cloud and Townsend (2017) highlight that healthy boundaries are crucial to counteract this dynamic: they note that strong personal boundaries define what is "me and what is not me," giving individuals a sense of ownership and freedom. When such boundaries are weak, people become especially vulnerable to agreeing outwardly while feeling trapped or resentful inwardly. In other words, childhood socialization and personal identity factors set the stage for people to prioritize others' needs (saying "yes") at the expense of their own.

Workplace Culture and Conflict Avoidance

Beyond early upbringing, many organizational and social environments discourage open refusal. Perlow (2003) describes a "silent spiral" in work settings where employees hide disagreement to keep peace and appear cooperative. In these contexts, speaking up can feel dangerous, so individuals default to conciliation. People may comply to protect their jobs or reputation during layoffs or restructurings. This conflict-averse culture can backfire, tasks drag on, and frustrations build internally when concerns remain unspoken. In fact, Perlow finds that suppressing dissent increases stress and hampers productivity. Ury (2007) captures this dilemma as a false choice: many believe they must either preserve relationships by saying yes or protect interests by saying no. This perceived dilemma creates psychological strain as people try to manage competing goals. Importantly, Ury and others argue that reframing the act of refusal as positive, as protecting one's values without rejecting others, can break this cycle. Nevertheless, the fear of conflict in professional or hierarchical settings still drives people to acquiesce outwardly, even when it harms long-term relationships or outcomes.

Guilt, Obligation, and People-Pleasing

On an emotional level, guilt and obligation are powerful motivators for unwanted compliance. People often say yes to avoid disappointing others or being seen as selfish. For example, Beck et al. (1983) identified a personality dimension called sociotropy (sociality) characterized by excessive concern about others' approval and disapproval. The sociotropy factors explicitly include pleasing others and concern about disapproval or separation. Similarly, Fuentes (2023) finds that many people who say yes do so out of a desire for approval and validation. These people-pleasing tendencies often stem from deep fears, for instance, fear of rejection or the sense of not being good enough, which can originate in childhood experiences of criticism or conditional love. In such cases, agreeing to requests seems like a way to earn affection or acceptance.

This dynamic, however, is self-defeating. Agreeing under emotional duress typically breeds resentment and exhaustion. Martin (2021) notes that while saying yes may seem kind

momentarily, it often backfires by generating chronic stress, resentment, and burnout when one's own needs are ignored. In line with this, clinically oriented sources link people-pleasing to negative mental health outcomes. For example, a treatment-oriented article emphasizes that chronic people-pleasers tend to neglect self-care and accumulate excessive responsibilities, leading to stress and depression. When people hold back their true feelings to avoid conflict, they put on a happy face but internally feel overburdened and frustrated. As Adams (2024) also observes, motivations like guilt, obligation, fear of confrontation, and a desire to appear nice drive people to comply even at their own expense. Over time, this habitual self-sacrifice often results in an inner conflict: resentment of others for asking and of oneself for acquiescing.

Personality Traits and Social Influence

Certain personality traits make people more prone to saying yes. High agreeableness, for instance, tends to involve conflict-avoidant and accommodating interaction styles. Meta-analytic evidence shows that agreeable individuals are more likely to use avoidance and obliging strategies in conflicts. In other words, agreeable people habitually place others' needs above their own and steer clear of confrontation. Agreeableness is also linked to wanting to maintain harmony and positive impressions, so acquiescing often feels like the smooth option. Complementing this, Cialdini (2009) emphasizes that deep-rooted social influence principles (such as commitment, reciprocity, and social proof) foster almost automatic, mindless compliance. He warns that people often agree without thinking because modern life's rapid pace and information overload disable rational pushback. In this view, saying yes can be an almost subconscious response to social cues. Likewise, Tehrani and Yamini's meta-analysis finds that agreeable and conscientious personality facets correlate with prosocial and compliance motivations. In practice, this means that even individuals who care about justice or fairness may default to yes if they deeply value others' approval or are averse to social discomfort.

Cultural and Communicative Norms

Cultural context also shapes how easily people say yes. In collectivistic cultures that value group harmony, direct refusals are often considered impolite. Rodriguez (1996) notes that in many collectivist societies, indirect communication is the norm and saying no outright is viewed as rude. For example, someone in a collectivist culture might claim to understand a request to be polite, even if they really disagree internally. Explicit refusal could embarrass the asker or upset group harmony, so people instead offer linguistically indirect or noncommittal responses. These face-saving norms effectively pressure individuals to agree or nod along, even when they do not. Likewise, power distance and respect for authority (which vary by culture) can make direct refusal especially difficult in, say, workplaces with strict hierarchies. In sum, cultural conventions around politeness and respect often implicitly teach people to subordinate their own preferences for the sake of social cohesion.

Frameworks for Saying No

Researchers and experts also examine how individuals can overcome these tendencies. Ury's framework of the "Positive No" reframes saying no as an assertive boundary-setting act rather than a negative refusal. People can protect their interests without damaging relationships by

articulating a no that remains respectful and solution-focused. Cloud and Townsend likewise stress that recognizing one's limits is a skill and that clear personal boundaries enable healthier communication. In practical terms, Monente (2023) provides dozens of actual refusal strategies, showing how practicing assertive language and having ready phrases can build confidence. Real-world examples in her guide illustrate how individuals navigate pressures by politely but firmly declining requests.

Building on this idea, recent experimental work finds that providing people with explicit words to say no makes them feel more empowered to refuse. Schlund et al. (2024) demonstrate that when requesters tell targets exactly how to decline (for example, instructing them to say "I'd rather not"), people report greater subjective freedom and comfort in refusing. In other words, uncertainty about how to refuse amplifies acquiescence — giving someone a script for saying no can break the automatic yes response. These practical insights underline that overcoming the yes-means-no problem often involves skill-building: learning assertion techniques, rehearsing boundary-setting, and mentally reframing refusal.

Together, these sources paint a comprehensive picture of acquiescence. They show that saying yes when you mean no is driven by a mixture of ingrained social norms, emotional needs, and situational pressures. In most cases, individuals want to avoid conflict or judgment, uphold relationships, and fulfill implicit obligations. However, the literature consistently emphasizes that this surface-level compliance is psychologically costly. Theoretical models and intervention strategies from Ury, Cloud, Monente, Schlund, and others provide a counterpoint: developing assertiveness skills and clear boundaries can allow people to refuse without undue guilt or relational damage. In sum, the literature underscores that understanding why people say yes is the first step toward empowering them to say no when they truly need to.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Type of Research: Mixed-Methods (Quantitative + Qualitative)
Design Chosen: Descriptive Research Design
This study tries to understand why students find it hard to say "no" in different situations. A descriptive design is good because it helps describe current behaviors and reasons without changing anything. A mixed-method approach was chosen to get both numbers (quantitative data) and personal opinions (qualitative data). This makes the study complete and more meaningful.

3.2 Population and Sampling

- **Population**: Students from NUST (National University of Sciences and Technology), both undergraduate and graduate, aged 18–24. This population was selected because students often face academic pressure, peer expectations, and cultural norms, making them an ideal group to study this issue.
- **Sample Size**: 40 students. This size is manageable within the given timeframe and allows for meaningful insights without overextending resources.
- **Sampling Technique**: Non-probability convenience sampling. This technique was chosen due to time constraints and ease of access to participants. It enables the research to be conducted efficiently within the available resources.
- **Recruitment Method**: Participants were selected from three schools at NUST and approached through class groups, WhatsApp, and direct contact. This method ensures a diverse but accessible participant pool.
- **Inclusion Criteria**:
    - Age between 18 to 24.
    - Must be a current student at NUST.
    - Willing to take part in the study.
      These criteria ensure the relevance and focus of the study on the target demographic.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

- **Quantitative Tool**: Structured Questionnaire
    - Created using Google Forms.
    - Included multiple-choice and Likert scale questions.
    - Questions focused on when and why people say “yes” even when they don’t want to.
    - Covered areas like emotional pressure, guilt, fear of rejection, and cultural influence.
    - A few open-ended questions were added to capture qualitative insights and personal anecdotes.

This tool allows for a broad understanding of the participants' experiences while maintaining consistency and ease of analysis.

- **Qualitative Tool**: Open Ended Questions
    - Students shared personal stories and opinions.
    - Main discussion points included:
        - When do you feel you can’t say no?
        - How do you feel afterward?
        - What stops you from being honest?
        - What role does culture or family play?

This approach provides a deeper understanding of the emotional and social nuances influencing behavior.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data from the questionnaires will be analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, means, and percentages using Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets. This will help summarize patterns in responses, such as how frequently students experience pressure to agree or how many report feeling stressed due to over-commitment. Thematic analysis will be applied to the qualitative responses from open-ended questions. Responses will be coded into recurring categories such as fear of judgment, family pressure, or lack of assertiveness training.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the questionnaire will be reviewed by an academic supervisor and piloted on a group of 5 students to refine language and relevance. This will help in identifying ambiguous or leading questions. Content validity will be ensured by aligning the questions directly with the research objectives. Reliability will be enhanced by maintaining a consistent format, using standardized scales, and ensuring all participants received the same instructions and environment during the data collection.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research maintained complete respect towards both participant privacy and self-governing freedoms. Researchers explained both the research objectives and data utilization terms to everyone who joined the study. Individuals who are taking part in the study could freely choose whether to participate before being told they would not face consequences if they withheld consent at any time. The research project protected all individual identities by not gathering personal information and using proper care when processing participant responses. The research questions were developed with emotional sensitivity to the subject matter in mind. Participants received a sensitive listening experience that avoided pushing them into distressing situations.

3.7 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings of this research. The sample size was confined to students from three schools within NUST, which may not fully represent the wider student population or individuals from different academic institutions and backgrounds. Time constraints also posed a challenge, as the study was conducted within a limited period of 2–3 weeks, restricting opportunities for deeper exploration or follow-up. Resource limitations, such as budget constraints and limited access to a broader pool of participants, affected the overall scope of the research. Furthermore, since the data was collected through self-administered questionnaires, there is a possibility of self-report bias or unconscious influence from the researcher's own assumptions. To strengthen future research, it would be beneficial to conduct longer-term studies with more diverse samples and include methods that allow for richer, more in-depth responses.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Introduction

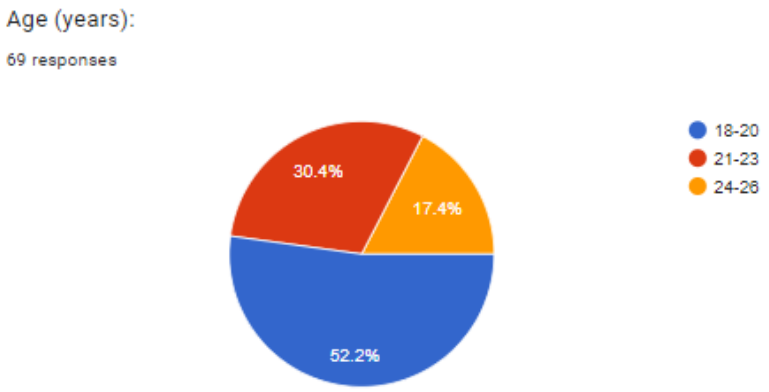
This chapter presents the results of a survey administered to 69 respondents regarding their experiences with saying "yes" when they actually wanted to say "no." The survey explored the frequency of this phenomenon, the contexts in which it occurs, the psychological and emotional factors involved, the consequences of such behavior, and the coping strategies employed by respondents. This chapter reports the findings objectively without interpretation, using various visual representations to enhance clarity.

Overview of Participants/Sample

A total of 69 individuals participated in this survey. The demographic breakdown is as follows:

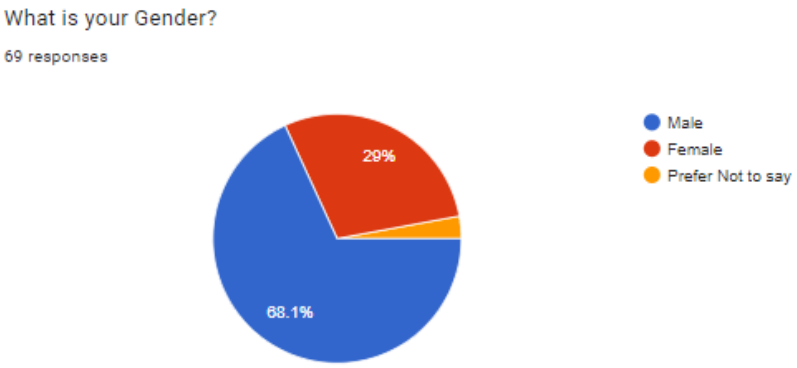
Age Distribution

- 18-20 years: 52.2%
- 21-23 years: 30.4%
- 24-25 years: 17.4%



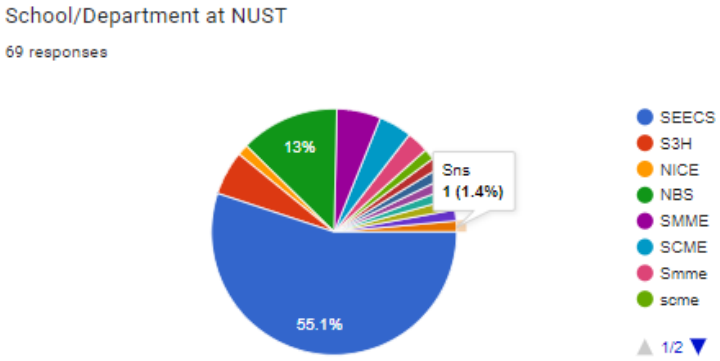
Gender Distribution

- Male: 68.1%
- Female: 29%
- Prefer Not to Say: 2.9%



Educational Affiliation

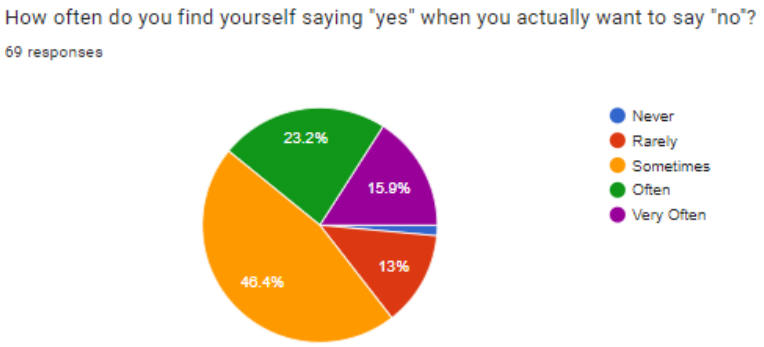
The majority of respondents (55.1%) were affiliated with the SEECS department at NUST, with other departments including NBS (13%), S3H, NICE, SMME, SCME, and others represented in smaller percentages.



Frequency of Saying "Yes" When Meaning "No"

When asked how often they find themselves saying "yes" when they actually want to say "no," respondents reported:

- Never: 1.4%
- Rarely: 13%
- Sometimes: 46.4%
- Often: 23.2%
- Very Often: 15.9%



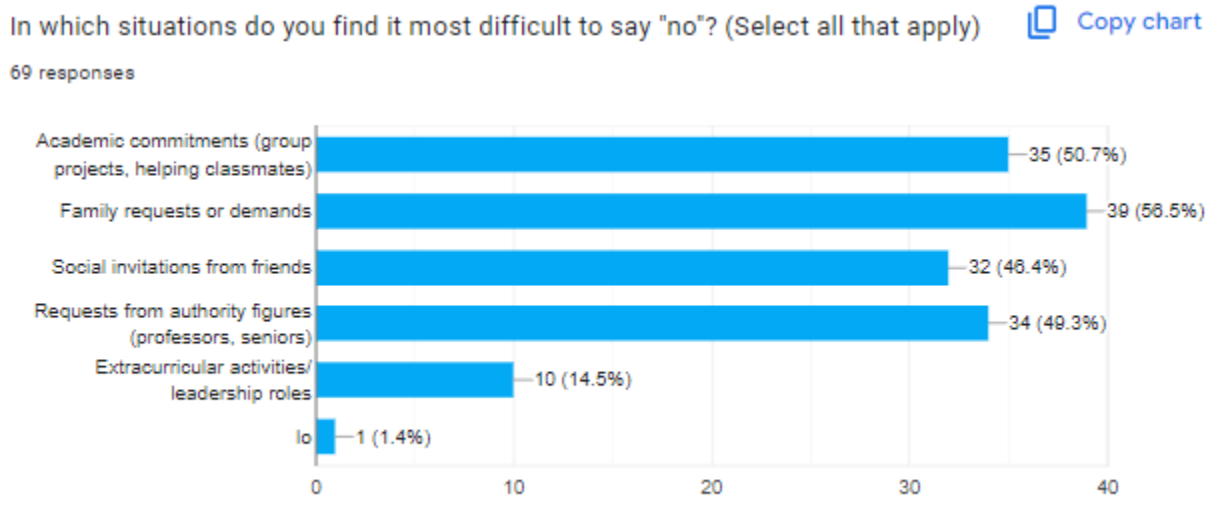
This indicates that a significant majority (85.5%) of participants sometimes, often, or very often agree to things unwillingly, with only 14.4% reporting that they rarely or never do so.

Difficult Situations for Declining Requests

Participants identified several contexts in which they find it most difficult to say "no" (respondents could select multiple options):

- Academic commitments (group projects, helping classmates): 35 (50.7%)
- Family requests or demands: 39 (56.5%)
- Social invitations from friends: 32 (46.4%)
- Requests from authority figures (professors, seniors): 34 (49.3%)
- Extracurricular activities/leadership roles: 10 (14.5%)
- Other situations: 1 (1.4%)

Family requests emerged as the most challenging context for refusing, closely followed by academic commitments and requests from authority figures.



Psychological and Emotional Factors

Fear of Disappointing Others

- Strongly Disagree: 5.8%
- Disagree: 2.9%
- Neutral: 17.4%
- Agree: 55.1%
- Strongly Agree: 18.8%

A substantial 73.9% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they fear disappointing others if they refuse their requests.

Worry About Being Perceived as Selfish

- Strongly Disagree: 5.8%
- Disagree: 14.5%
- Neutral: 13%
- Agree: 50.7%
- Strongly Agree: 15.9%

66.6% of participants agree or strongly agree that they worry about being perceived as selfish if they say "no."

Guilt After Refusing Someone's Request

- Strongly Disagree: 7.2%
- Disagree: 13%
- Neutral: 17.4%
- Agree: 31.9%
- Strongly Agree: 30.4%

A notable 62.3% experience guilt after refusing someone's request.

Fear of Conflicts from Refusing Requests

- Strongly Disagree: 11.6%
- Disagree: 18.8%
- Neutral: 20.3%
- Agree: 34.8%
- Strongly Agree: 14.5%

Nearly half (49.3%) of the respondents fear conflicts that might arise from refusing requests.

Saying "Yes" for Approval or Validation

- Strongly Disagree: 8.7%
- Disagree: 18.8%
- Neutral: 23.2%
- Agree: 33.3%
- Strongly Agree: 15.9%

Approximately 49.2% of participants acknowledge saying "yes" to gain approval or validation from others.

Worry About Damaging Relationships

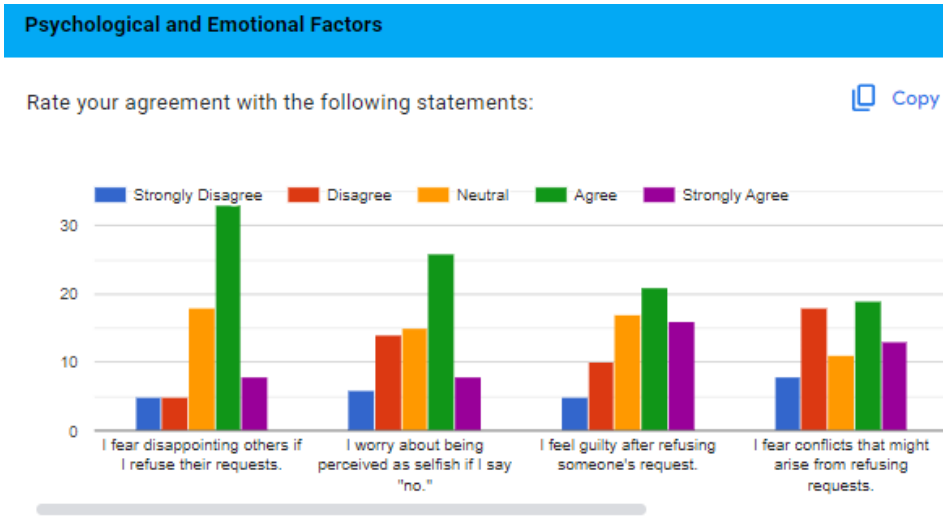
- Strongly Disagree: 7.2%
- Disagree: 11.6%
- Neutral: 20.3%
- Agree: 46.4%
- Strongly Agree: 14.5%

A significant 60.9% worry about damaging relationships if they refuse requests.

Feeling They Don't Have the Right to Refuse

- Strongly Disagree: 27.5%
- Disagree: 17.4%
- Neutral: 23.2%
- Agree: 21.7%
- Strongly Agree: 10.1%

Notably, 31.8% of respondents feel they don't have the right to refuse certain requests, though 44.9% disagree with this notion.



Consequences of Saying "Yes" When Meaning "No"

Stress or Anxiety

- Never: 8.7%
- Rarely: 29%
- Sometimes: 29%
- Often: 17.4%
- Always: 5.8%

52.2% of participants sometimes, often, or always experience stress or anxiety after agreeing unwillingly.

Resentment Toward the Person Making the Request

- Never: 13%
- Rarely: 27.5%
- Sometimes: 39.1%
- Often: 11.6%
- Always: 8.7%

59.4% report experiencing resentment toward the requester at least sometimes.

Decreased Academic Performance

- Never: 21.7%
- Rarely: 18.8%
- Sometimes: 40.6%
- Often: 11.6%
- Always: 7.2%

A considerable 59.4% note that their academic performance sometimes, often, or always decreases as a result.

Physical Exhaustion

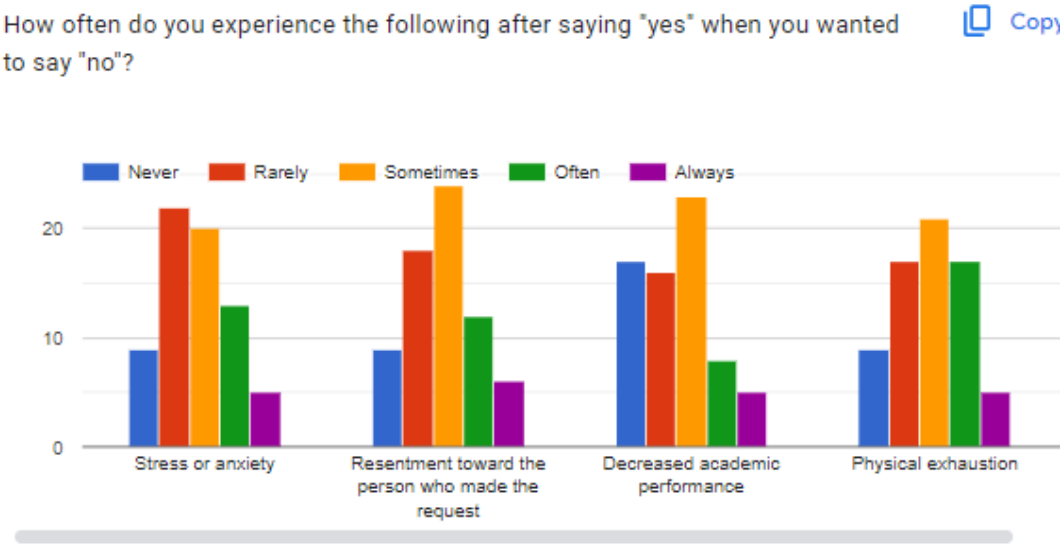
- Never: 11.6%
- Rarely: 21.7%
- Sometimes: 34.8%
- Often: 24.6%
- Always: 7.2%

Physical exhaustion is experienced sometimes, often, or always by 66.6% of respondents.

Reduced Self-Worth or Confidence

- Never: 13%
- Rarely: 18.8%
- Sometimes: 42%
- Often: 10.1%
- Always: 14.5%

66.6% report reduced self-worth or confidence at least sometimes after saying "yes" unwillingly.

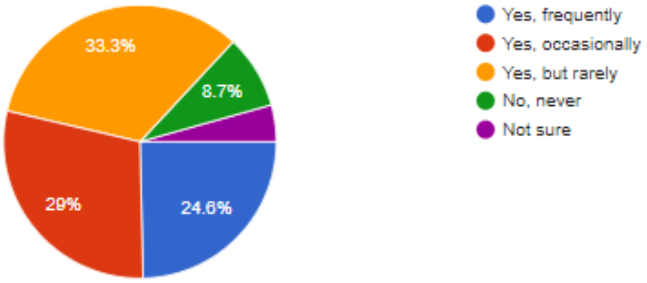


Mental Health Impact

When asked if they had experienced burnout or significant mental health challenges due to taking on too many commitments:

- Yes, frequently: 24.6%
- Yes, occasionally: 29%
- Yes, but rarely: 33.3%
- No, never: 8.7%
- Not sure: 4.3%

A substantial 86.9% of participants have experienced burnout or mental health challenges due to excessive commitments at least rarely, with 53.6% experiencing these issues frequently or occasionally.

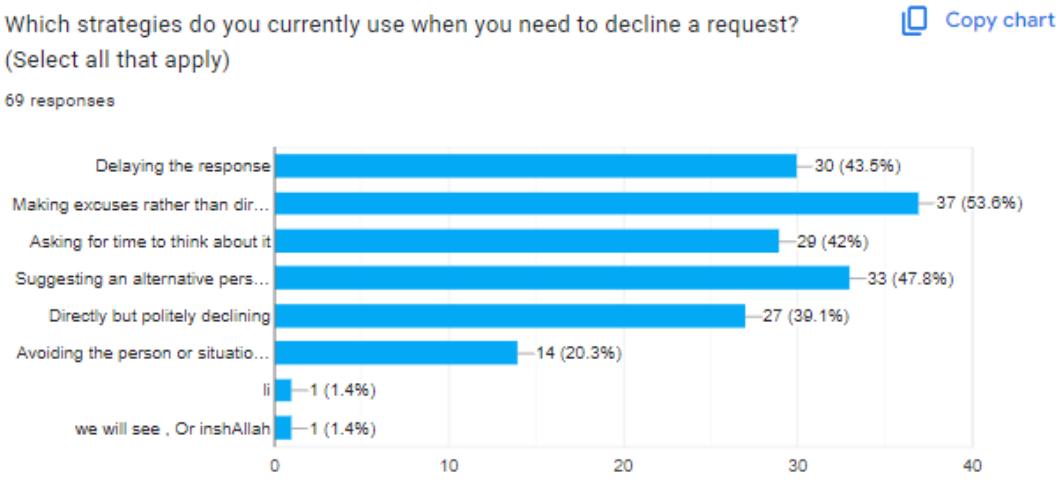


Coping Strategies and Skills

Current Strategies Used to Decline Requests

- Delaying the response: 30 (43.5%)
- Making excuses rather than direct refusal: 37 (53.6%)
- Asking for time to think about it: 29 (42%)
- Suggesting an alternative person or solution: 33 (47.8%)
- Directly but politely declining: 27 (39.1%)
- Avoiding the person or situation: 14 (20.3%)
- Other strategies: 2 (2.8%)

Making excuses emerged as the most common strategy (53.6%), followed by suggesting alternatives (47.8%) and delaying responses (43.5%). Direct but polite refusal was used by only 39.1% of respondents.

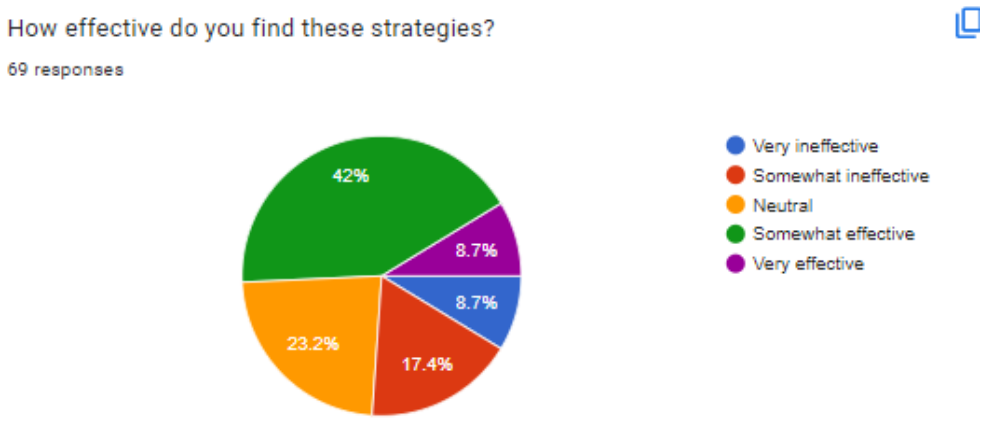


Effectiveness of Current Strategies

- Very ineffective: 8.7%
- Somewhat ineffective: 17.4%

- Neutral: 23.2%
- Somewhat effective: 42%
- Very effective: 8.7%

Half of the participants (50.7%) find their current strategies at least somewhat effective, while 26.1% find them ineffective.

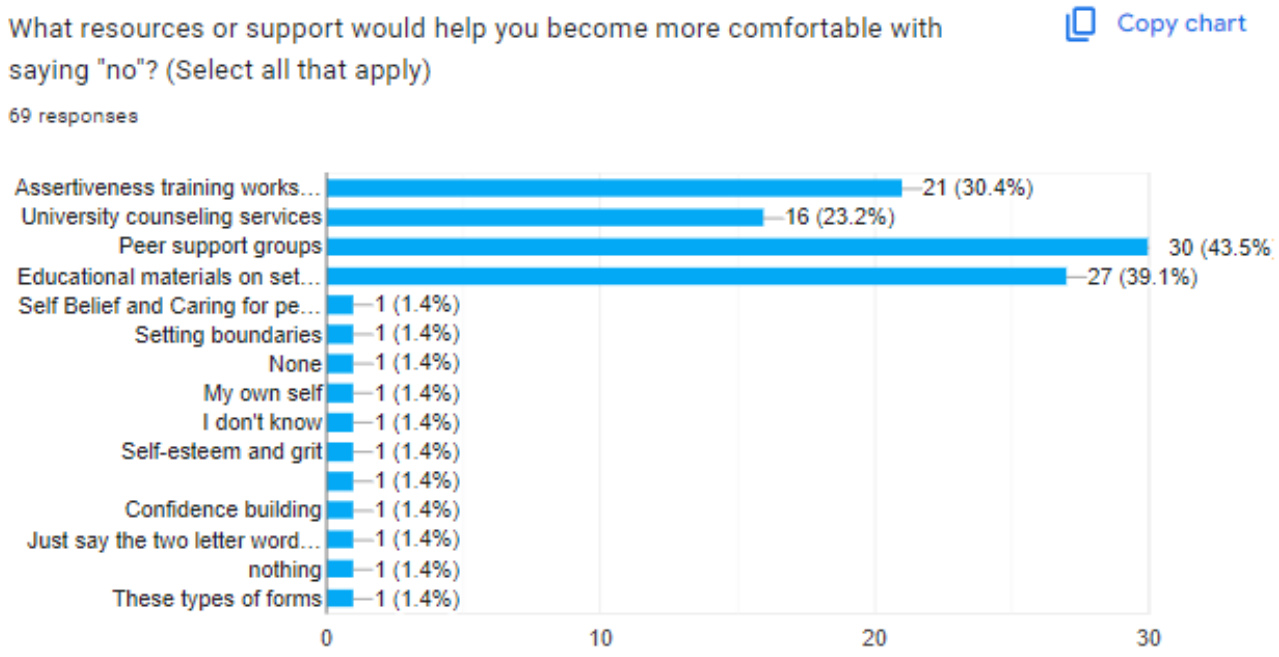


Desired Support Resources

Respondents identified several resources that would help them become more comfortable with saying "no":

- Assertiveness training workshops: 21 (30.4%)
- University counseling services: 16 (23.2%)
- Peer support groups: 30 (43.5%)
- Educational materials on setting boundaries: 27 (39.1%)
- Other resources: 9 (13%)

Peer support groups were the most desired resource (43.5%), followed by educational materials on setting boundaries (39.1%) and assertiveness training workshops (30.4%).



Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

The survey included two primary open-ended questions that provided rich qualitative insights into participants' experiences with refusing requests and the cultural context influencing these experiences.

Question 1: Difficult Situations for Saying "No"

When asked to describe a specific situation where they found it particularly difficult to say "no" and what made it challenging, several key themes emerged:

1. Social Pressure and Peer Dynamics

Many respondents described situations involving friends and social groups where saying "no" was particularly difficult due to persistent pressure:

"I was asked to go on a trip to Lahore. And was pressurised into going via a plethora of techniques including convincing my parents. The fact that the group of 4 people were not willing to take no for an answer and that I had agreed initially as to not appear a spoilsport."

"My classmates repeatedly ask me to go out with them. If i decline, they don't let me go but ask again and again. They even ask me personal qs and want to know why i am declining. They need to know the personal boundaries, if I don't WANT to go, it's simply enough of a reason."

2. Academic and Educational Pressures

A significant number of responses related to academic situations, particularly helping classmates:

"Classmates asking me to help them study for exams even though i have to study too just because i get good grades. it was challenging because the way they asked made it seem like i was someone who knew everything and if i declined then it would be just because i didn't want to help them succeed."

"My close friend asked for my assignment, which I prepared after spending two days."

3. Parental Authority and Family Expectations

Several respondents mentioned challenges with refusing family members, especially parents:

"When faced with the question of choosing my field of study in intermediate education, I found it difficult to say no to my parent's decision. It was challenging because in doing so I felt like I was disobeying my parents."

"Parents asked me to choose CS and I was leaning towards Law."

"Request from parent. What made it challenging was that i'd get beat up lmao."

4. Authority Figures

Difficulty refusing requests from those in positions of power was another common theme:

"When Secretary of my Department directed to favor someone."

"I had to decline an academic project request from my supervisor because it was unpaid work and I didn't have time."

5. Personal Space and Boundaries

Some respondents highlighted challenges in maintaining personal boundaries:

"When whole family wanted to go out but i did not, as i wanted to be left alone."

"When i dont want to a part of a specific group but i cant say no to my friends."

Question 2: Feelings After Unwilling Agreement and Cultural Impact

The second question asked about feelings after agreeing unwillingly and how Pakistani culture affects their ability to say "no," yielding insights into emotional impacts and cultural influences:

1. Emotional Aftermath

Respondents described a range of negative emotions after unwillingly agreeing:

"I feel a bit unhappy with myself after agreeing to something unwillingly."

"I feel guilty and pressurized and as if i am rude selfish and uncaring of others."

"I feel conflicted and the conflict adversely effects my mood."

"After agreeing to someone unwillingly, I fulfil the matters i have agreed to, but I consider it a mistake — not saying no— from my side and use it to be more confident for the next time such a circumstance occurs."

"I feel bad cause it could be me asking for help but life works only like that if I refuse, the person will keep roasting me /ignoring me in front of others."

2. Cultural Expectations and Perceptions

Many respondents directly addressed how Pakistani culture impacts their ability to refuse:

"Pakistani culture often sees 'saying no' as disrespectful in most of the cases; for example dealing with teachers, parents, relatives and elders. Our society fails to distinguish between being disrespectful and having boundaries."

"Our friend culture is so that there is a considerable amount of peer pressure and bullying in regards to saying no. Same goes for family who take it as insulting and misdemeanor to negate having to attend a family event or spending time with them."

"The Pakistani culture itself is pretty judgmental in this regard, which forces you to sometimes change your decision based on what someone would say."

"In our culture people dont respect or understand the perspective of others."

3. People-Pleasing and Relationship Maintenance

Several responses highlighted the tendency to prioritize others' needs over personal comfort:

"Sometimes i merely agree to go out with someone, or help them with study, or agree to study with them, because i feel guilty by saying no as it might hurt that person who is so willing to spend time with me, i myself am not comfortable after agreeing to it, but i prefer making people, who are important to me, 'happy', at the cost of my own comfort."

"I feel like I had done something bad."

"U can't particularly say no to relatives even if u dislike them."

4. Advice on Setting Boundaries

Many respondents offered thoughtful advice for others struggling with saying "no":

"My advice to handle such situations is that one should start building confidence by giving reasons and alternatives. Later when a person has enough confidence to say no, they can do it without any explanations."

"Learn some boundaries. stop people pleasing and overstretching yourself."

"I would suggest to set your boundaries and only listen to yourself."

"If you decline politely with a smile on your face, people usually don't mind. If you do it lightheartedly in a humourous manner, that makes it a lot easier. Baaqi it's impossible to make everyone happy so we ought not to worry about that. If you don't set boundaries, people start taking you and your time for granted."

"Don't care about people.. you have to live your life the way you want. be prideful of yourself!"

Summary of Key Findings

1. A significant majority (85.5%) of participants sometimes, often, or very often agree to things unwillingly.
2. Family requests (56.5%), academic commitments (50.7%), and interactions with authority figures (49.3%) present the most challenging contexts for saying "no."
3. Fear of disappointing others (73.9%) and worry about being perceived as selfish (66.6%) are the strongest psychological factors influencing the inability to refuse.
4. The most common consequences include physical exhaustion (66.6%), reduced self-worth (66.6%), and decreased academic performance (59.4%).
5. A substantial 86.9% of participants have experienced burnout or mental health challenges due to taking on too many commitments.
6. Making excuses (53.6%) is the most common coping strategy, while direct refusal (39.1%) is less frequently employed.
7. Peer support groups (43.5%) and educational materials on setting boundaries (39.1%) are the most desired resources for developing better refusal skills.
8. Cultural and social pressures in Pakistani society significantly impact individuals' ability to decline requests, with many reporting that refusal is often viewed as disrespectful or selfish.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings presented in Chapter 4, interpreting their significance within the context of existing literature and the research objectives established at the beginning of this study. The primary aim of this research was to understand why individuals, particularly university students, frequently say "yes" when they genuinely want to say "no," and to explore the psychological, emotional, and cultural factors contributing to this behavior. The discussion builds upon the empirical data collected from 69 respondents at NUST, examining patterns, relationships, and implications of the findings.

5.2 Summary and Interpretation of Key Findings

5.2.1 Prevalence and Contexts of Unwanted Agreement

The finding that 85.5% of participants sometimes, often, or very often agree to things unwillingly demonstrates the pervasiveness of this phenomenon among university students. This high prevalence aligns with Perlow's (2003) concept of the "silent spiral," where individuals suppress their true feelings to maintain social harmony. The contexts identified as most challenging for refusal—family requests (56.5%), academic commitments (50.7%), and interactions with authority figures (49.3%)—reflect the hierarchical and collectivist nature of Pakistani society, where respect for authority and family obligations are deeply ingrained cultural values.

The difficulty in refusing family requests particularly resonates with Rodriguez's (1996) observations about collectivist cultures, where group harmony is prioritized over individual preferences. As one respondent noted, "Pakistani culture often sees 'saying no' as disrespectful in most of the cases; for example dealing with teachers, parents, relatives and elders. Our society fails to distinguish between being disrespectful and having boundaries." This comment illustrates how cultural expectations create significant barriers to assertiveness, especially within family dynamics.

5.2.2 Psychological and Emotional Factors

The psychological factors identified in this study—fear of disappointing others (73.9%), worry about being perceived as selfish (66.6%), and guilt after refusing (62.3%)—strongly correspond with Beck et al.'s (1983) concept of sociotropy, characterized by excessive concern about others' approval. These findings also support Fuentes' (2023) research on people-pleasing tendencies stemming from deep fears of rejection or not being "good enough."

The emotional aftermath of unwilling agreement reported by participants—feeling "unhappy," "guilty," "pressurized," "conflicted," and experiencing reduced self-worth—aligns with Martin's (2021) observation that saying "yes" unwillingly often leads to resentment and exhaustion. These negative emotional consequences help explain why 86.9% of participants reported experiencing

burnout or mental health challenges due to excessive commitments, confirming the substantial psychological cost of chronic acquiescence described in the literature.

5.2.3 Coping Strategies and Their Effectiveness

The preference for indirect refusal strategies—making excuses (53.6%), suggesting alternatives (47.8%), and delaying responses (43.5%)—over direct but polite declining (39.1%) reflects the conflict-avoidant behavior typical in collectivist cultures as described by Rodriguez (1996). These findings also align with meta-analytic evidence linking agreeableness to avoidance and obliging strategies in conflicts (Tehrani & Yamini). The relatively low effectiveness of these strategies (only 50.7% find them somewhat or very effective) suggests that while these approaches may temporarily alleviate social discomfort, they fail to adequately address the underlying issue of boundary-setting.

5.2.4 Cultural Context and Its Influence

The qualitative responses regarding Pakistani culture's impact on refusal abilities provide rich insights into the societal pressures faced by young adults. Comments such as "Our friend culture is so that there is a considerable amount of peer pressure and bullying in regards to saying no" and "In our culture people don't respect or understand the perspective of others" highlight how social norms can perpetuate the difficulty of asserting personal boundaries. These findings resonate with the literature on cultural and communicative norms, particularly regarding power distance and face-saving behaviors that make direct refusal especially challenging in hierarchical societies.

5.3 Comparison with Previous Research

5.3.1 Alignment with Existing Literature

The findings of this study strongly align with previous research on the difficulty of saying "no." The high prevalence of unwilling agreement among participants confirms Cloud and Townsend's (2017) assertion that weak personal boundaries lead to outward agreement accompanied by internal resentment. The psychological factors identified—particularly fear of disappointing others and worry about being perceived as selfish—mirror Cialdini's (2009) description of social influence principles that foster almost automatic compliance.

The reported consequences of saying "yes" unwillingly—physical exhaustion (66.6%), reduced self-worth (66.6%), and decreased academic performance (59.4%)—substantiate Adams' (2024) observation that habitual self-sacrifice often results in inner conflict and resentment. This correlation between unwilling agreement and negative outcomes reinforces the clinical literature linking people-pleasing to stress, depression, and burnout.

5.3.2 New Insights and Contributions

This study contributes several new insights to the existing body of knowledge. First, it provides empirical data on the specific contexts that Pakistani university students find most challenging

for refusal, highlighting the unique interplay between academic pressures, family expectations, and cultural norms in this population. Second, the research quantifies the prevalence of various psychological factors and consequences, offering a more nuanced understanding of the relative importance of different motivations for unwilling agreement.

Additionally, the study reveals a notable disconnect between participants' awareness of the negative consequences of unwilling agreement and their continued reliance on indirect refusal strategies. This suggests that knowledge alone is insufficient to change deeply ingrained behavioral patterns, pointing to the need for practical skill-building interventions as suggested by Schlund et al. (2024).

5.4 Implications of the Findings

5.4.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings extend existing theoretical frameworks by demonstrating how psychological, social, and cultural factors interact to influence assertiveness behaviors. The high correlation between fear of disappointing others and unwilling agreement supports social approval theories, while the prevalence of indirect refusal strategies confirms cultural communication theories about face-saving behaviors in collectivist societies.

Importantly, the research highlights the need for theoretical models that better account for cultural context in understanding assertiveness and boundary-setting. Traditional Western models of assertiveness may require adaptation to accommodate the complex social dynamics and hierarchical relationships prevalent in Pakistani society, where direct refusal can carry different social consequences than in more individualistic cultures.

5.4.2 Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for university students, educators, mental health professionals, and families:

1. **For Students**: Understanding that the difficulty of saying "no" is a common experience shared by the vast majority of peers (85.5%) may help normalize this challenge and reduce feelings of inadequacy or isolation. The clear connection between unwilling agreement and negative consequences (burnout, reduced self-worth, decreased academic performance) provides compelling motivation to develop better boundary-setting skills.
2. **For Universities**: The high percentage of students experiencing burnout or mental health challenges due to excessive commitments (86.9%) suggests an urgent need for institutional support systems. The preference for peer support groups (43.5%) and educational materials on setting boundaries (39.1%) indicates specific resources that universities could develop to address this issue effectively.
3. **For Mental Health Professionals**: The psychological factors identified—particularly fear of disappointing others and worry about being perceived as selfish—provide focus areas for therapeutic interventions. The finding that making excuses is the most common

but not necessarily effective coping strategy suggests a need for teaching more direct, honest communication techniques.

4. **For Families**: The identification of family requests as the most challenging context for refusal (56.5%) highlights the need for family awareness about the potential negative impact of pressure on young adults' mental health. Creating more open family communication cultures where refusal is not interpreted as disrespect could significantly improve young adults' ability to set healthy boundaries.

5.4.3 Societal and Cultural Implications

The research has broader societal implications, particularly within the Pakistani cultural context. The findings challenge the traditional view that compliance equals respect, suggesting instead that allowing for honest refusal may actually strengthen relationships by preventing resentment and burnout. As one respondent insightfully noted, "Our society fails to distinguish between being disrespectful and having boundaries," highlighting a critical cultural misconception that could be addressed through public discourse and education.

The prevalence of burnout and mental health challenges among participants suggests that the cultural emphasis on compliance may have unintended consequences for young adults' wellbeing. This points to the need for a cultural shift that balances collective harmony with individual boundaries, perhaps by developing culturally-appropriate models of assertiveness that maintain respect while allowing for honest expression of preferences and limitations.

5.5 Recommendations for Various Stakeholders

5.5.1 Recommendations for Educational Institutions

1. **Develop Peer Support Programs**: Given that 43.5% of participants expressed interest in peer support groups, universities should establish structured peer support programs where students can discuss boundary-setting challenges and share effective strategies in a non-judgmental environment.
2. **Integrate Assertiveness Training**: Incorporate assertiveness training workshops (desired by 30.4% of participants) into orientation programs and regular student development activities, focusing specifically on academic and authority-related contexts identified as particularly challenging.
3. **Create Educational Resources**: Develop and distribute educational materials on setting boundaries (desired by 39.1% of participants), including practical guides, workbooks, and online resources tailored to the specific challenges faced by Pakistani university students.
4. **Faculty Training**: Educate faculty members about the prevalence of unwilling agreement among students and encourage teaching practices that create safe spaces for students to express their limitations honestly without fear of academic consequences.

5.5.2 Recommendations for Students

1. **Recognize the Pattern**: Develop self-awareness about situations where you typically say "yes" unwillingly, and monitor the emotional and physical consequences of this behavior.

2. **Practice Direct but Respectful Communication**: Based on the finding that direct but polite refusal is underutilized (39.1%), students should practice clear, respectful communication phrases that maintain relationships while asserting boundaries.
3. **Seek Support**: Given the high prevalence of mental health challenges associated with excessive commitments (86.9%), students should proactively seek support from university counseling services when feeling overwhelmed by obligations.
4. **Reframe Refusal**: Work on reframing the act of saying "no" as setting healthy boundaries rather than being selfish or disrespectful, as suggested by Ury's framework of the "Positive No."

5.5.3 Recommendations for Mental Health Professionals

1. **Develop Culturally Sensitive Interventions**: Create assertiveness training programs that acknowledge and address the specific cultural challenges faced by Pakistani young adults, particularly regarding family obligations and respect for authority.
2. **Address Underlying Fears**: Focus therapeutic interventions on addressing the core fears identified in this research—fear of disappointing others (73.9%) and worry about being perceived as selfish (66.6%)—to help individuals overcome psychological barriers to assertiveness.
3. **Teach Practical Scripts**: Following Schlund et al.'s (2024) finding that explicit refusal scripts increase feelings of empowerment, provide clients with culturally appropriate, specific phrases for declining requests in various contexts.
4. **Group Interventions**: Consider establishing group therapy or workshop formats that leverage the preference for peer support (43.5%) while providing professional guidance on boundary-setting techniques.

5.5.4 Recommendations for Parents and Families

1. **Create Safe Communication Cultures**: Foster family environments where honest communication is valued and respected, and where saying "no" does not automatically equate to disrespect.
2. **Recognize Impact**: Be aware that pressure to comply with family requests can contribute to students' stress, burnout, and mental health challenges, as indicated by the high prevalence of these issues among participants.
3. **Model Healthy Boundaries**: Demonstrate healthy boundary-setting within family relationships to provide young adults with positive examples of assertive communication.
4. **Respect Individual Differences**: Acknowledge that different family members may have different capacities and preferences, and avoid interpreting refusal as rejection or lack of family loyalty.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this research:

1. **Sample Characteristics**: The sample consisted primarily of students from SEECS department at NUST (55.1%) and was predominantly male (68.1%), which may limit the

generalizability of the findings to other academic departments, universities, or demographic groups.
2. **Self-Reporting Bias**: The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases related to social desirability or limited self-awareness, potentially affecting the accuracy of responses about personal behaviors and motivations.
3. **Cross-Sectional Design**: The cross-sectional nature of the study captures participants' experiences at a single point in time, limiting our ability to observe how the tendency to agree unwillingly might evolve over time or in response to different life circumstances.
4. **Depth of Qualitative Data**: While the open-ended questions provided valuable insights, the absence of in-depth interviews may have limited the richness of qualitative data about participants' lived experiences and the nuanced ways in which cultural factors influence their behavior.
5. **Limited Exploration of Solutions**: The study focused primarily on identifying problems rather than testing interventions, limiting our understanding of which approaches might effectively improve assertiveness in this population.

These limitations suggest avenues for future research, including more diverse sampling, longitudinal designs, and intervention studies to test the effectiveness of different approaches to building assertiveness skills.

5.7 Directions for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several promising directions for future research emerge:

1. **Intervention Studies**: Design and evaluate the effectiveness of different interventions for improving assertiveness skills among Pakistani university students, particularly comparing culturally-adapted approaches with standard assertiveness training programs.
2. **Gender Differences**: Conduct more in-depth analyses of how gender influences the experience of saying "no" in Pakistani culture, given the different societal expectations often placed on men and women regarding compliance and assertiveness.
3. **Longitudinal Studies**: Implement longitudinal research to track how assertiveness skills develop over time and how they relate to long-term outcomes such as academic success, career advancement, and psychological wellbeing.
4. **Cross-Cultural Comparisons**: Compare the experiences of Pakistani students with those from different cultural backgrounds to better understand the specific impact of cultural factors on assertiveness and boundary-setting.
5. **Family Dynamics**: Investigate family communication patterns and their relationship to young adults' assertiveness skills, particularly examining how different parenting styles might influence the development of healthy boundary-setting.
6. **Organizational Factors**: Explore how institutional policies and educational environments might contribute to or alleviate pressure on students to agree unwillingly, potentially identifying systemic changes that could support healthier communication patterns.

7. **Effective Refusal Strategies**: Research which specific refusal strategies work most effectively in different contexts within Pakistani culture, developing evidence-based recommendations for culturally appropriate assertiveness.

5.8 Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the prevalence, contexts, psychological factors, and consequences of saying "yes" when meaning "no" among university students in Pakistan. The findings highlight the complex interplay between individual psychology, social pressures, and cultural norms that make assertive refusal challenging for many young adults. The high percentage of participants experiencing unwilling agreement and its associated negative consequences underscores the importance of addressing this issue through targeted interventions and support systems.

The research contributes to existing literature by providing empirical data on this phenomenon within a specific cultural context, confirming many theoretical concepts while also revealing unique patterns related to the Pakistani educational and social environment. The practical implications and recommendations offered provide a foundation for developing more effective approaches to building assertiveness skills among university students.

By advancing our understanding of why people struggle to say "no" and identifying potential pathways to more authentic communication, this research ultimately aims to support healthier psychological functioning, stronger relationships, and improved wellbeing for young adults navigating the complex demands of university life within the Pakistani cultural context.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study has revealed the widespread difficulty faced by university students in Pakistan when attempting to say "no." The survey data show that a striking 85.5% of participants reported sometimes or more frequently agreeing to something despite wanting to refuse. The situations most associated with this reluctance were family obligations, academic requests, and interactions with authority figures, reflecting the hierarchical, collectivist norms of Pakistani society. In many responses, students described how saying "no" is often perceived as disrespectful, underscoring how entrenched cultural expectations can severely constrain individual assertiveness. These findings confirm that social and cultural pressures play a dominant role in driving unwanted agreement.

The analysis also identified psychological and emotional factors that motivate this behavior. A majority of students endorsed fears such as disappointing others (73.9%) or being seen as selfish (66.6%) as reasons for compliance. These concerns often translate into negative emotions: participants commonly reported feeling guilty, conflicted, or diminished in self-worth when they acquiesce. Notably, the chronic strain of saying "yes" unwillingly has tangible consequences: 86.9% of respondents reported experiencing burnout or other mental health challenges due to over-commitment. Such outcomes underline the psychological cost of weak personal boundaries and confirm that guilt and resentment are frequent byproducts of this pattern.

In response to pressure, many students relied on indirect coping strategies. Over half of the respondents reported using tactics like making excuses (53.6%) or suggesting alternatives, rather than directly refusing. However, fewer than half of students found these indirect methods to be effective. This preference for avoidance-based responses reflects the conflict-avoidant communication style common in collectivist cultures, but the low success rates indicate that such strategies provide only temporary relief. In other words, by avoiding straightforward refusal, students often perpetuate the cycle of acquiescence without truly protecting their boundaries.

These results have broader implications for individuals, institutions, and cultural discourse. On a personal level, the linkage between routine unwilling agreement and symptoms like burnout and reduced self-esteem signals a clear threat to student well-being. Recognizing that this issue is almost universal among peers (85.5%) can help reduce stigma, but it also highlights a pressing need for tools that promote self-care and assertive communication. In educational settings, the pervasive nature of the problem suggests that universities and colleges should offer targeted support – for example, peer support groups, workshops, or curricula on boundary-setting – to help students develop healthier refusal skills. Culturally, the findings call for a shift in how refusal is viewed in Pakistani society. Rather than equating "no" with disrespect, public discourse and family education can reframe honest boundary-setting as a way to strengthen relationships and prevent resentment. As one participant insightfully noted, distinguishing respectful boundaries from mere obedience is essential. By fostering open conversations and culturally sensitive education about assertiveness, society can begin to balance traditional values with individual agency.

In conclusion, this study advances our understanding of why many people find it difficult to say "no," illuminating a complex interplay of emotional, psychological, social, and cultural factors. Although focused on a single university sample (which may limit broad generalization), the results offer valuable guidance for future research and practice. Subsequent work should investigate diverse populations and test specific interventions – for instance, culturally adapted assertiveness training programs – to see what effectively empowers students. Ultimately, equipping young adults with the skills and social support to decline unwanted requests promises significant benefits. As this research suggests, fostering authentic communication can lead to healthier psychological functioning, stronger relationships, and improved well-being. The hope is that over time, saying "no" will be accepted as a legitimate personal boundary, paving the way for more balanced, empowered lives and a cultural evolution that respects both harmony and individual rights.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

After carefully doing research on why university students say "yes" when they want to say "no," I've developed the following practical recommendations based directly on your findings:

1. **Establish Peer Support Networks** - Since 43.5% of participants desired peer support groups and 85.5% struggle with unwilling agreement, universities should create structured peer circles where students can practice refusal skills in a safe environment and share effective strategies.

2. **Develop Culturally-Sensitive Assertiveness Workshops** - Design workshops (wanted by 30.4% of respondents) that specifically address the Pakistani cultural context, teaching students how to decline requests respectfully while maintaining relationships, particularly with family members and authority figures.

3. **Create Digital Boundary-Setting Resources** - Develop mobile-friendly guides and interactive tools about setting boundaries (desired by 39.1% of participants) that include practical scripts for refusing requests in various contexts, especially for the three most challenging situations identified: family requests (56.5%), academic commitments (50.7%), and interactions with authority figures (49.3%).

4. **Integrate Refusal Skills into University Orientation** - Incorporate sessions on healthy boundary-setting during freshman orientation to address the finding that 86.9% of students experience burnout or mental health challenges due to excessive commitments.

5. **Launch "Healthy No" Awareness Campaign** - Implement a campus-wide campaign to normalize refusal and reframe it as self-care rather than selfishness, addressing the finding that 66.6% of students worry about being perceived as selfish when saying no.

6. **Train Faculty on Creating Pressure-Free Environments** - Educate professors about the prevalence of unwilling agreement in academic settings and train them to create classroom environments where students feel comfortable expressing limitations.

7. **Establish Family Communication Workshops** - Since family requests were the most difficult context for saying "no" (56.5%), develop workshops for interested parents and students to attend together, focusing on healthy communication patterns that respect both family values and individual boundaries.

8. **Enhance University Counseling Resources** - Expand mental health services specifically trained to address people-pleasing behaviors, focusing on the core fears identified in the research: disappointing others (73.9%), being perceived as selfish (66.6%), and guilt after refusing (62.3%).

Appendices:

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Section 1: Demographics

1. **Age:** □
    - 18-20
    - 21-22
    - 23-24
2. **Gender:**
    - Male
    - Female
    - Prefer not to say
3. **School/Department at NUST**:
    - SEECS
    - S3H
    - NBS
    - Other (please specify): _____

Section 2: Frequency of Difficulty Saying "No"

1. How often do you find yourself saying "yes" when you actually want to say "no"?
2. In which situations do you find it most difficult to say "no"?
    - Academic commitments (group projects, helping classmates)
    - Family requests or demands □ Social invitations from friends
    - Requests from authority figures (professors, seniors)
    - Extracurricular activities/leadership roles
    - Other (please specify): _____

Section 3: Psychological and Emotional Factors

1. Rate your agreement with the following statements:

a. I fear disappointing others if I refuse their requests.

b. I worry about being perceived as selfish if I say "no."

c. I feel guilty after refusing someone's request.

d. I fear conflicts that might arise from refusing requests.

e. I say "yes" to gain approval or validation from others.

f. I worry about damaging relationships if I refuse requests.

g. I feel I don't have the right to refuse certain requests.

Section 4: Cultural and Social Influences

1. To what extent do the following factors influence your ability to say "no"?
   a. Family expectations and upbringing

   b. Pakistani cultural norms about politeness and respect

   c. Academic environment pressures

   d. Gender expectations in society

   e. Social media and constant availability expectations

2. Do you feel cultural norms in Pakistan make it particularly difficult to refuse requests? □ Yes, significantly □ Yes, somewhat □ Not sure □ No, not really □ No, not at all

Section 5: Consequences of Not Saying "No"

1. How often do you experience the following after saying "yes" when you wanted to say "no"?

   a. Stress or anxiety

   b. Resentment toward the person who made the request

   c. Decreased academic performance

   d. Physical exhaustion

   e. Reduced self-worth or confidence

2. Have you ever experienced burnout or significant mental health challenges due to taking on too many commitments? □ Yes, frequently □ Yes, occasionally □ Yes, but rarely □ No, never □ Not sure

Section 6: Specific Scenarios

1. How comfortable would you feel saying "no" in the following situations?

   a. A friend asks you to help with their assignment when you have your own deadline approaching

   b. A professor asks you to take on additional work outside regular course requirements

   c. Family members expect you to attend a gathering during your exam preparation period

   d. Being asked to join a committee or leadership position when you're already overcommitted

e. Friends pressure you to go out when you need rest or study time

Section 7: Coping Strategies and Skills

1. Which strategies do you currently use when you need to decline a request?
   - Delaying the response
   - Making excuses rather than directly saying no
   - Asking for time to think about it
   - Suggesting an alternative person or solution
   - Directly but politely declining
   - Avoiding the person or situation entirely
   - Other (please specify): _____
2. How effective do you find these strategies?
   - Very ineffective
   - Somewhat ineffective
   - Neutral
   - Somewhat effective
   - Very effective
3. What resources or support would help you become more comfortable with saying "no"?
   - Assertiveness training workshops
   - University counseling services
   - Peer support groups
   - Educational materials on setting boundaries
   - Role models who demonstrate healthy boundary-setting
   - Other (please specify): _____

Section 8: Open-Ended Questions

1. Describe a specific situation where you found it particularly difficult to say "no." What made it challenging?
2. How do you feel emotionally after agreeing to something you didn't want to do?
3. In your opinion, how does Pakistani culture influence your ability to refuse requests compared to other cultures?
4. What advice would you give to someone struggling with saying "no"?