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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WEAPONIZED INCOMPETENCE: LINKS WITH PASSIVE AGRESSION AND SELF-PERCEIVED COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Weaponized incompetence refers to the strategic presentation of oneself as incapable or helpless in order to avoid responsibility or shift tasks onto others. Despite its growing visibility in public discourse, empirical examination of this construct remains limited. Using.*

Objectives: *Present study explored the relationship between weaponized incompetence, passive-aggressive behavior, and perceived competence among adults in Lahore, Pakistan.* ***Method:*** *this article is extracted from a large scale study on weaponized incompetence. A cross-sectional design was employed, data were collected from 99 participants aged 18 to 28 who completed the Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale (FWIS), the Passive Aggressive Scale (PAS), and the Perceived Competence Scale (PCS).*

Results: *Descriptive statistics revealed substantial variability in weaponized incompetence scores, with men and women revealing different pattern of scores across deliberate sabotage, passive resistance and feigned helplessness. Correlational analysis indicated a strong positive association between weaponized incompetence and passive-aggressive behavior, and a significant inverse association between weaponized incompetence and perceived competence. These findings suggest that weaponized incompetence may function as a relational strategy overlapping with covert resistance and indirect hostility, particularly in cultural contexts where direct confrontation is discouraged. Moreover, habitual use of such behaviors may contribute to the internalization of low self-efficacy. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of weaponized incompetence as a culturally shaped, psychologically complex form of impression management with implications for interpersonal relationships, workplace dynamics, and psychological well-being.*

Keywords: *weaponized incompetence, feigned incompetence, passive aggression, perceived competence.*

INTRODUCTION

In interpersonal and social dynamics, behaviors and strategies that shape perceptions of competence and responsibility play a pivotal role. One such behavior that has drawn increasing attention is weaponized incompetence, a term that has recently gained traction on social media and in public discourse, especially in relation to the gendered and relational dynamics through which these behaviors present themselves in both domestic and organizational settings. Individuals have shared personal accounts of how romantic partners, family members, or coworkers, intentionally take on a helpless role to shift responsibility onto others, impacting division of labor across multiple settings. Weaponized Incompetence involves a strategic, often manipulative, behavioral pattern through which individuals pretend to be incapable, helpless, or

ignorant when given a task or responsibility. Unlike genuine skill deficit, weaponized incompetence is deliberate underperformance, typically emerging as a pattern (Yeomans, 2022). Such performative behaviors are often used to avoid responsibilities, manipulate power dynamics, lower expectations, or maintain social expectations (McLuhan 2020a).

A closely related concept, the cloak of incompetence, was characterized by McLuhan (2020b) into three overarching categories: avoidance, in which individuals withhold effort or knowledge to evade tasks; performance, whereby individuals actively present themselves as incapable; and neutralization, where external factors like luck are used to downplay actual competencies and align self with an image of incompetence.

In contrast, certain individuals go above and beyond to appear competent or dependable in the eyes of others. Perceived competence is defined as the degree to which individuals are perceived as competent, by others or themselves, playing a critical role in interpersonal perceptions and behaviors (Fiske et al., 2007). Abbas et al. (2018) found that individuals with low perceived competence were more likely to engage in impression management strategies to compensate for perceived deficiencies and maintain a favorable social image. Cuddy et al. (2007) provide one explanation for the social value of wanting to maintain an appearance of competence: individuals who are seen as competent are more likely to be respected, granted higher status and entrusted with greater responsibilities. Whereas those perceived as incompetent are often excluded, have diminished influence, and are seen as unreliable.

This dynamic highlights the broader social consequences of competence perceptions and lends to our understanding of how some individuals may intentionally influence these perceptions for their personal gains. While impression management usually involves efforts to elevate oneself in front of others, weaponized incompetence takes a different approach in that individuals deliberately present themselves as unreliable or ineffective using subtle performative strategies to manipulate work distribution and evade responsibilities (Connelly et al., 2012).

From a theoretical perspective, weaponized incompetence shares some overlap with passive aggressive tendencies. Roache (2024) characterizes passive aggressive behavior as an indirect and ambiguous expression of hostility that allows one to avoid direct confrontation while still undermining the target. BiÇer (2020) provided a detailed conceptual analysis of passive-aggressive behavior among employees, identifying common tactics such as stalling, sarcasm, procrastination, the silent treatment, and withholding information. He argued that these behaviors are intentionally used to avoid direct conflict while still expressing covert hostility. This mirrors weaponized incompetence in its use of feigned incapacity, as individuals repeatedly underperform or appear incapable to shift tasks onto others without open refusal. He observed that such indirect tactics are particularly effective in regulated or hierarchical environments, where explicit resistance carries professional risk. Like passive aggression, weaponized incompetence functions to maintain control and power in interpersonal settings while maintaining plausible deniability.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that weaponized incompetence shares behavioral similarities with passive aggression, particularly in its use of indirect strategies to avoid direct confrontation. In relation to perceived competence, weaponized incompetence appears to function through the intentional downplaying of one's abilities, which may ultimately reduce how competent the individual is seen by others. These patterns point to meaningful associations between weaponized incompetence, passive aggressive tendencies, and perceived competence, warranting empirical investigation.

Despite growing public awareness of weaponized incompetence, academic research on the construct and its implications remains limited, as available information is largely anecdotal instead of empirical. To explore weaponized incompetence, it is necessary to understand its interplay with related but distinct psychological concepts. The current research aims to fill this

gap in literature by empirically analyzing weaponized incompetence in relation to passive aggression and perceived competence and moving from theory to concrete results.

Methodology

Research Design - The present study was a part of a large scale research and dealt as one of the independent studies within that project. This study employed cross sectional research design to investigate the study objectives.

Sample - sample was selected through convenience sampling and consisted a total of 99 individuals with age range of 18 to 28 years.

Measures – The study measures included demographic sheet, weaponized incompetence scale, perceived competence scale and passive aggression scale. The details of these measures are given below

Demographic Sheet- The demographic sheet was used to collect participants' personal and familial details including gender, age, education, employment status, family income, and family system. Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale (FWIS) - the Forman Weaponized Incompetence scale developed by Imtiaz and Nazim (2025) was employed to measure behaviors constituting weaponized incompetence. This newly developed tool demonstrates adequate psychometric properties with internal consistency ranging from .89-.97. The instrument consists of 35 items distributed across four subscales: deliberate sabotage, passive resistance, feigned helplessness, and deflecting responsibility. Items are rated using a seven point Likert scale, where 1 indicates strongly disagree and 7 indicates strongly agree. Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) - the Perceived Competence for Learning Scale (PCS; Williams & Deci, 1996) was selected as a measure of individuals' genuine self-assessed abilities to learn and master tasks, reflecting intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. Psychometrically, the PCS is a concise, 4-item instrument with demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha > 0.80) across various studies and populations, ensuring reliable measurement of perceived competence (Williams & Deci, 1996; Williams et al., 2006; Reynolds et al., 2009). Passive Aggressive Scale (PAS) - the passive-aggressive scale developed by Lim and Suh (2022) was selected as a measure of passive aggressive behaviors. This scale includes 21 items distributed across three subscales: inviting criticism, avoiding/ignoring, and sabotaging. The scale demonstrates strong construct validity, with indices ranging from .60 to .90. Internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's α, is above .90 for all subscales. Responses are gathered using a six-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates not true at all and 6 indicates very true.

Procedure

Permissions from ethical review committees and data collection were sought and obtained. Individuals from sample sites were approached for voluntary participation in the study and provided with a brief overview of the study aims through informed consent sheet. For Sample A, participants were provided with a set of questionnaires consisting of a consent sheet, demographic sheet, FWIS and the PCS. Participants from sample B were provided with the same consent sheet, demographic sheet, FWIS but were asked to fill the PAS. The sequence of administrating the items remained same for all participants. Participants engaged in random responding were either stopped or their forms were discarded. Similarly, forms with 10% missing information were discarded. As a result, data was collected and entered to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for further analyses.

APA guidelines for ethical research practices were stringently followed. Approval was obtained from the Board of Studies (BoS), Ethical Review Committee (ERC), Board of Advanced Study and Research (BASR), and Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the commencement of the research. Participants were informed about the study's objectives and provided consent through an informed consent form. Their rights, including the option to withdraw without consequences, were respected to uphold their autonomy. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured through secure data storage and the coding of responses. Participants' questions or concerns

were addressed to the best of the researcher's ability. While no harm was anticipated, psychological assistance was made available if needed. The findings of the research were reported with honesty and accuracy.

Results

Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25. Descriptive and inferential analysis were run, the results of which are presented below. The age ranged from 18 to 28 years (M = 22.25, SD = 2.53). Family income ranged from 50,000 to 1,000,000 rupees per month. There were78 percent women and majority were students (88 percent). Regarding educational attainment, 7 % of participants had completed secondary education, 60 % held an undergraduate degree, and 27 % had completed postgraduate education. Majority of the sample (86 %) was residing in urban areas and almost 62 percent were living in nuclear family system.

The descriptives of the main study variables are presented in the table below.

Table 1

Ranges, Means, & Standard deviations for Study Variables

	Range	M	SD
Total FWIS	35-199	88.14	39.45
Deliberate Sabotage	13-80	29.15	15.33
Passive Resistance	9-54	23.96	11.57
Feigned Helplessness	6-39	15.31	7.88
Deflecting Responsibility	7-46	19.72	9.26
Total PCS	9-28	96.09	5.00
Total PAS	21-107	61.66	20.30
Inviting Criticism	7-29	15.84	6.90
Avoiding/Ignoring	7-42	27.02	8.94
Sabotaging	7-39	18.80	8.67

Note. FWIS= Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale, PCS= Perceived Competence Scale, PAS= Passive Aggressive Scale.

The total score on the Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale (FWIS) ranged from 35 to 199 (M = 88.14, SD = 39.45). Subscale scores included Deliberate Sabotage (M = 29.15, SD = 15.33), Passive Resistance (M = 23.96, SD = 11.57), Feigned Helplessness (M = 15.31, SD = 7.88), and Deflecting Responsibility (M = 19.72, SD = 9.26).

The Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) total score ranged from 9 to 28, with a mean of 96.09 (SD = 5.00). The Passive Aggressive Scale (PAS) total score ranged from 21 to 107 (M = 61.66, SD = 20.30), with subscale means of Inviting Criticism (M = 15.84, SD = 6.90), Avoiding/Ignoring (M = 27.02, SD = 8.94), and Sabotaging (M = 18.80, SD = 8.67).

Table 2

Ranges, Means, Standard deviations for Study Variables by Gender

	Men			Women		
	Range	M	SD	Range	M	SD
Total FWIS	35-183	88.74	42.32	35-199	86.44	37.97
Deliberate Sabotage	13-71	30.91	16.41	13-80	27.83	14.46
Passive Resistance	9-49	24.27	11.91	9-54	23.68	11.57
Feigned Helplessness	6-36	14.39	7.60	6-39	15.28	7.85
Deflecting Responsibility	7-42	19.18	9.88	7-46	19.66	9.03
Total PCS	15-28	21.23	4.48	10-28	21.65	4.83

Total PAS	37-86	64.00	16.50	21-107	61.66	20.30
Inviting Criticism	8-27	16.67	6.77	7-29	15.84	6.90
Avoiding/Ignoring	19-41	28.25	6.69	7-42	27.02	8.94
Sabotaging	9-30	19.08	7.94	7-39	18.80	8.67

Note. FWIS= Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale, PCS= Perceived Competence Scale, PAS= Passive Aggressive Scale.

Overall, men and women reported comparable scores on the total Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale (FWIS), with men scoring slightly higher (M = 88.74, SD = 42.32) than women (t=0.25,df=97, p>0.05) but the difference was statistically insignificant. A similar pattern was observed across most FWIS subscales, with men reporting marginally higher scores on deliberate sabotage (t=0.87,df=97, p>0.05), passive resistance (t=0.21,df=97, p>0.05), and deflecting responsibility (t=0.22,df=97, p>0.05) however, the score difference was observed to be statistically insignificant across all subscales. Women reported slightly higher mean scores on feigned helplessness (t=0.49,df=97, p>0.05). For the Passive Aggressive Scale (PAS), men again scored slightly higher overall compared to women (t=0.50, df=97, p>0.05), with small differences across its subscales. For the Perceived Competence Scale (PCS), women reported slightly higher scores than men (t=0.37, df=97, p>0.05).

Table 3
Correlation between Scores of Study Variables

	DS	PR	FH	DR	FWIS
Deliberate Sabotage					
Passive Resistance	.69**				
Feigned Helplessness	.70**	.63**			
Deflecting Responsibility	.69**	.78**	.76**		
Total FWIS	.90**	.88**	.84**	.89**	
Total PCS	-.38**	-.32**	-.44**	-.35**	-.42**
Inviting Criticism	.67**	.63**	.51**	.56**	.69**
Avoiding/Ignoring	.20*	.43**	.33**	.39**	.37**
Sabotaging	.65**	.61**	.61**	.59**	.70**
Total PAS	.59**	.66**	.58**	.61**	.70**

Note. FWIS= Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale, PCS= Perceived Competence Scale, PAS= Passive Aggressive Scale. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the .005 level (2-tailed)

Total Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale (FWIS) scores were moderately negatively correlated with Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) scores (p< .01), suggesting that higher levels of weaponized incompetence were associated with lower perceived competence. Additionally, FWIS scores were positively correlated with the total Passive Aggressive Scale (PAS) score (p< .01), as well as with its subscales: Inviting Criticism (r=.69), Avoiding or Ignoring (r = .37), and Sabotaging (r=.70), all at statistically significant levels.

Discussion

Weaponized incompetence refers to the deliberate and strategic presentation of self as incapable as a means to avoid responsibilities and/or shift them onto someone else (Yeomans, 2022; McLuhan, 2014). While the topic remains popular on social media, there is little empirical

evidence that lends to the understanding of weaponized incompetence despite its apparent impact on division of labor, cognitive load, and power dynamics in relationships. The current study was designed to explore weaponized incompetence in the Pakistani population and investigate the relationship between weaponized incompetence, passive aggression, and perceived incompetence. Specifically, this study sought to prove that there would be a significant correlation between weaponized incompetence and passive aggression as well as a significant correlation between weaponized incompetence and perceived competence.

The descriptive statistics provide a comprehensive overview of demographics and distribution of core study variables, shedding light on the diversity of the indigenous sample and variability in key constructs. The sample consisted primarily of women, most of whom were students, with the majority identifying as single and residing in urban areas. Participants were young adults with ages ranging from 18 to 28 years, with a mean age of approximately 22.27 years. Majority of the sample represented the residential and familial settings reported in earlier studies in Pakistan (Nazim & Khalid, 2019). The age indicates that the sample was in its transitionary phase between late adolescents and early adulthood, during which identity development, role expectations, and interpersonal relationships undergo rapid changes (Alvi & Ahmad, 2018; Numan et al., 2024). Such a developmental context is relevant when considering behavioral strategies like weaponized incompetence and passive aggression, which are often employed to negotiate social roles, avoid emerging responsibilities, and assert control in interpersonal relationships (Loflin, 2018).

The demographic distributions of the main psychological variables under study, weaponized incompetence, perceived competence, and passive aggression, were also observed. The Forman Weaponized Incompetence Scale (FWIS) scores in the sample indicated a wide distribution in how participants engage in behaviors that reflect weaponized incompetence. Perceived competence scores, as measured by the Perceived Competence Scale (PCS), indicated a moderate level of self-perceived competence across participants. However, the relatively broad range suggests meaningful individual differences in how capable participants perceive themselves to be. The total Passive Aggressive Scale (PAS) scores depict a broad variability in the use of passive aggressive tactics. Among the PAS subscales, Avoiding/Ignoring, had the highest mean (M = 27.02) followed by Sabotaging (M = 18.80) and Inviting Criticism (M = 15.84). The prominence of avoidance behaviors is consistent with past research on Asian communication norms where emotional expression is often restrained, and assertive disagreement is viewed negatively (Koydemir & Essau, 2017). In such contexts, avoidance and withdrawal become culturally appropriate ways of expressing opposition.

Gender based analysis of distribution of FWIS, PCS, and PAS scores revealed subtle differences. Men scored slightly higher on FWIS (M = 88.74) than women (M = 86.44). This difference was specifically prominent on Deliberate Sabotage and Passive Resistance subscales of FWIS. In patriarchal societies, like that of Pakistan, men have more room to engage in uncooperative behaviors with a comparatively less risk of social disapproval (Ali et al., 2022). In contrast, women scored higher on Feigned Helplessness subscale of FWIS, which aligns with literature on social expectations that women must emulate feminine dependency and display non-competitiveness Weaponized incompetence in women may thus function as a strategy to conform to gender norms (Thorhauge & Gregersen, 2019) while simultaneously providing a subtle means of resisting inequitable labor expectations, particularly in relational or domestic contexts.

PCS scores showed women (M = 21.65) reporting slightly higher perceived competence than men (M = 21.23), contrary to existing literature which suggests that men tend to overestimate or overreport their abilities (Moraga-Pumarino et al., 2025). This marginal difference may reflect the academic nature of the sample, where women may possess increased confidence in intellectual domains. This may also indicate a shift in gender norms in urban Pakistani youth, with women

asserting more agency in professional and educational settings (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022).

Men scored slightly higher on PAS (M = 64.00) than women (M = 61.66), with the largest difference in Avoiding/Ignoring subscale. This is supported by previous literature suggesting Pakistani men are taught to avoid emotional expression or vulnerability, favoring indirect expressions of emotions (Munawar et al., 2025). However, the small gender differences may indicate that both men and women are employing passive aggressive behaviors due to shared cultural values that discourage direct confrontations in interpersonal settings (Ramzan & Amjad, 2017).

Building on descriptive trends, the inferential findings of the study support the hypothesized relationships between weaponized incompetence, perceived competence, and passive aggression. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between FWIS and the Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) scores, suggesting that higher engagement in weaponized incompetence behaviors is associated with lower perceived competence. Among the FWIS subscales, Feigned Helplessness showed the strongest negative correlation with PCS total score, followed by Passive Resistance, Deliberate Sabotage, and Deflecting Responsibility. These findings provide empirical evidence for the notion that individuals engaging in weaponized incompetence behaviors intend to downregulate competence related self-presentations by neutralizing their abilities (McLuhan, 2020b), particularly in contexts where overperformance may lead to greater demands. In South Asian cultures, where family and social expectations weigh heavily, this avoidance might also serve as a protective mechanism to maintain self-worth or sense of control in high-demand or low-autonomy environments (Khanam et al, 2022; Sadiq et al., 2024). Gender wise, women reported slightly higher PCS scores than men, while also scoring slightly higher on Feigned Helplessness subscale. The duality may reflect that on one hand women consider themselves capable but on the other hand, cultural expectations around humility, dependency, and domestic subservience may pressure women into performative helplessness or downplaying of skills to maintain social harmony. Alternatively, consistent displays of incompetency may have been internalized as genuine self-belief, even when the first performance was instrumental or strategic in nature. This is consistent with literature that posits that individuals develop attitudes and beliefs about their performance based on their own efforts or behaviors (Bem, 1972; Pindek,2020).

A core finding was the strong positive correlations between the scores of FWIS and PAS total scores and individual subscales. Total FWIS scores were significantly correlated with total PAS scores, as well as the Inviting Criticism, Avoiding/Ignoring, Sabotaging subscales. Subscale-level analysis revealed that Deliberate Sabotage and Passive Resistance were most strongly correlated with PAS dimensions, especially Sabotaging and Inviting Criticism. These correlations suggest that these forms of weaponized incompetence function not just to shirk duties, but also to exert covert control in interpersonal settings. Furthermore, the alignment with passive-aggressive behavior patterns suggests that weaponized incompetence may operate within a wider behavioral framework aimed at preserving power and control while sidestepping direct confrontation or responsibility (Lim & Suh, 2022). This supports the theoretical proposition that weaponized incompetence, far from being passive or innocent, is a sophisticated relational tactic involving elements of manipulation and indirect power assertion (Yeomans, 2022). Strong association between FWIS and Sabotaging subscale of PAS implies that some individuals may not simply be avoiding responsibility but may be engaging in performative incompetence that serves to deflect responsibility while simultaneously undermining others' efforts, reinforcing power through non compliance masked as inability (Stadnicka, 2024; Khan et al., 2022). This indicates one aspect of passive aggressive theory, covert obstructionism, which allows individuals to express resentment and assert control while maintaining social plausibility and avoid direct confrontation (Roache, 2024). Likewise, the strong relationship

with Inviting Criticism may suggest that individuals using weaponized incompetence may be subtly provoking confrontation or drawing negative attention, most likely through deliberate sabotaging behaviors of weaponized incompetence, as indicated by the correlations. Such behaviors align with passive aggressive tendencies where hostility is covertly expressed through intentional underperformance that elicits criticism without overt defiance (Johnson & Klee, 2007). The correlation between FWIS and Avoiding/Ignoring are although low but still significant. It may imply that weaponized incompetence shares overlap with passive withdrawal, silence, or non-cooperation. In south Asian contexts, these behaviors are learned and enforced as the dominant communication pattern when it comes to conflict resolution with the underlying goal of maintaining interpersonal harmony in a socially acceptable manner (Rehman, 2024).

To summarize, this study examined the relationship between weaponized incompetence, passive-aggressive behavior, and perceived competence among emerging adults in Pakistan. Correlational analyses revealed a strong positive relationship between weaponized incompetence and passive-aggressive behaviors, suggesting that individuals who engage in strategic underperformance also tend to use indirect forms of resistance and hostility. A significant negative correlation was observed between weaponized incompetence and perceived competence, indicating that frequent use of such behaviors is associated with lower self-assessed capability.

These findings position weaponized incompetence as a socially strategic and culturally embedded behavior, especially in collectivist South Asian contexts where indirect communication and conflict avoidance are normative. The study highlights how weaponized incompetence serves both as a form of covert control and as a way to navigate relational and societal expectations, offering new empirical insight into its psychological and cultural dimensions.

While the study provides critical insights into the behavioral manifestations of weaponized incompetence in the Pakistani context, the limitations of the study must be acknowledged. Despite efforts the samples used in the study were relatively small and not heterogenous, depicting the behaviors and attitudes of a certain group of the population. It is recommended that future studies investigate weaponized incompetence in a larger more representative sample.

The study has implications for both theoretical understanding of weaponized incompetence and applied practice. At a conceptual level, the study contributes to literature on weaponized incompetence through empirical evidence. The study also emphasizes the cultural context in understanding interpersonal behaviors, highlighting how cultural, social, and gender norms may influence the presentation of weaponized incompetence, passive aggression, and perceived competence. It also carries implications for the organizational contexts as weaponized incompetence, passive aggression, and perceived competence may interact in many ways to impact work dynamics, team building, and distribution of workload. Additionally, mental health practitioners may better understand and address the role of weaponized incompetence in relational dynamics. Lastly, the present research may open the door for future research on this relatively new construct.

To conclude, the study contributes to the emerging empirical understanding of weaponized incompetence by examining the associations with passive aggression and perceived competence in a sample of young adults in Pakistan. The results suggest that weaponized incompetence operates as a covert strategy that may serve both manipulative and self-protective functions. Its strong correlation with passive aggressive behaviors highlights its role in indirect interpersonal control, while its inverse relationship with perceived competence may nod to the cost of habitual underperformance or to a pattern of diminishing competencies. Cultural norms around gender, communication patterns, and social harmony may shape how these behaviors manifest. These findings provide a foundation for future research on relational power dynamics and communication strategies

and offer practical implications for mental health practitioners and organizations in recognizing subtle forms of resistance and inequity in interpersonal contexts.

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