

Imposter Phenomenon and Career Anxiety in Final-Year Students

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Abstract: *The present study examined the relationship between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety among final-year students in India. A quantitative correlational design was adopted with a sample of 36 final-year students (10 males, 26 females) selected through convenience sampling. Standardized measures included the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale and a self-constructed Career Anxiety Scale. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and independent-samples t-tests. Results revealed a significant moderate positive correlation between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety ($r = .45, p = .006$). Female students reported slightly higher scores on both constructs, but gender differences were not statistically significant ($p > .05$). Findings suggest that imposter feelings contribute to career anxiety and may inform career counselling interventions in college settings.*

Keywords: Imposter Phenomenon, Career Anxiety, Final-Year Students, Gender Differences, Career Counselling

1. Introduction

The transition from student to working professional represents a critical developmental period marked by uncertainty, high expectations, and consequential decision-making. Final-year students confront multiple career pathways, including higher education, employment, and competitive examinations. In the Indian context, this pressure is intensified by family expectations, peer comparison, and a highly competitive job market.

Imposter phenomenon, first described by Clance and Imes (1978), refers to a psychological pattern wherein high-achieving individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed as frauds. Despite objective evidence of competence, affected individuals attribute success to luck or external factors rather than ability. This pattern is particularly prevalent among students in competitive academic environments (Bravata et al., 2020).

Career anxiety encompasses worry, uncertainty, and fear related to career choices, employment, or professional performance. For final-year students, it may manifest as rumination about the future, avoidance of career decisions, or physical symptoms such as sleep disturbance. The growing uncertainty in the job market and pressure to secure stable employment contribute to heightened career anxiety.

While imposter phenomenon has been studied extensively in Western contexts, Indian research remains limited. Studies by Sharma and Singh (2020) and Kumar and Gupta (2022) have begun to address this gap, but no study has specifically examined the relationship between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety among final-year students in India. Most existing research has focused on working professionals (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016), with limited attention to students on the verge of entering the workforce. The present study addresses this gap.

2. Review of Literature

Kumar and Gupta (2022) examined the relationship between imposter phenomenon and mental health among postgraduate

students in Delhi, finding a positive correlation between imposter phenomenon and anxiety. Bravata et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review reporting that imposter phenomenon affects approximately 30–50% of college and graduate students and is associated with increased anxiety, depression, and burnout. Sharma and Singh (2020) found imposter phenomenon to be prevalent among Indian engineering students and significantly associated with higher academic stress.

Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) reported that imposter feelings predicted lower career self-efficacy and higher career-related distress, acting as an inner barrier to career development. Cokley et al. (2017) found imposter phenomenon positively correlated with anxiety, depression, and burnout among university students.

Theoretical foundations for the present study include Clance and Imes's (1978) imposter phenomenon theory, which proposes that imposter feelings arise from family dynamics, attributional styles, and perfectionistic standards; the cognitive-behavioural model of career anxiety, which suggests maladaptive thought patterns maintain career-related distress; and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, which posits that low self-efficacy contributes to avoidance and anxiety.

Despite this foundation, critical gaps remain: Indian research on imposter phenomenon and career anxiety among final-year students is scarce; career anxiety has rarely been examined as a distinct construct in relation to imposter phenomenon; and gender differences findings are mixed with almost no Indian data.

3. Methodology

Statement of the Problem

This study examines the relationship between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety among final-year students in India, addressing the gap in Indian literature and exploring gender differences in both constructs.

Objectives

- 1) To assess levels of imposter phenomenon and career anxiety among final-year students
- 2) To examine the relationship between the two constructs
- 3) To examine gender differences in imposter phenomenon; and
- 4) To examine gender differences in career anxiety.

Hypotheses:

- H1: There is a significant positive correlation between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety.
- H2: Female students will report higher levels of imposter phenomenon compared to male students.
- H3: Female students will report higher levels of career anxiety compared to male students.

Variables: Independent variable: Imposter Phenomenon. Dependent variable: Career Anxiety. Demographic variable: Gender. Control variable: Educational level (final-year undergraduate/postgraduate).

Research Design: Quantitative, correlational design.

Sample: The sample comprised 36 final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students (10 males, 26 females) from colleges in India, selected through convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria required current final-year enrollment and informed consent. Exclusion criteria excluded first- and second-year students, those undergoing psychological treatment for anxiety disorders, and incomplete responses.

Tools:

- 1) *Demographic Data Sheet*: Self-constructed, collecting gender, educational level, and stream of study.
- 2) *Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS)* (Clance, 1985): 20 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all true to 5 = Very true). Scores range from 20–100, with higher scores indicating greater imposter feelings. Internal consistency $\alpha = 0.92$.
- 3) *Career Anxiety Scale*: 10 items rated on a 4-point scale (1 = Never to 4 = Always). Scores range from 10–40, with higher scores indicating greater career anxiety. The scale was refined from an initial pool of 18 items.

Procedure: Data were collected via Google Forms. Informed consent was obtained, clear instructions provided, and participants debriefed after completion.

Ethical Considerations: Participation was voluntary; informed consent was obtained; responses were kept confidential and anonymised; participants retained the right to withdraw; data were used for academic purposes only.

Analysis: Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, frequency) were computed. Pearson's correlation examined H1. Independent-samples t-tests compared male and female scores for H2 and H3. Significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

4. Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 36)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Imposter Phenomenon (CIPS)	60.14	17.96	21	90
Career Anxiety (CAS)	22.25	7.5	9	36

The mean CIPS score of 60.14 (SD = 17.96) indicates moderate-to-high levels of imposter phenomenon. The mean CAS score of 22.25 (SD = 7.50) indicates moderate career anxiety.

Table 2: Pearson's Correlation Between Imposter Phenomenon and Career Anxiety

Variables	r	p
CIPS Total & CAS Total	0.45	.006*

*Note: $p < .01$

A significant moderate positive correlation was found ($r = .45$, $p = .006$), supporting H1. Students with higher imposter feelings tended to report higher career anxiety.

Table 3: Gender Differences

Variable	Male (n = 10) M $\pm$ SD	Female (n = 26) M $\pm$ SD	t(34)	p
CIPS Total	52.90 $\pm$ 22.40	62.92 $\pm$ 15.55	-1.53	0.135
CAS Total	20.40 $\pm$ 7.66	22.96 $\pm$ 7.49	-0.91	0.369

Female students reported higher CIPS scores (M = 62.92) than males (M = 52.90), but the difference was not significant, $t(34) = -1.53$, $p = .135$. H2 was not supported. Similarly, female students reported slightly higher CAS scores (M = 22.96) than males (M = 20.40), but the difference was not significant, $t(34) = -0.91$, $p = .369$. H3 was not supported.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing:

Hypothesis	Result	Status
H1: Positive correlation	$r = .45$, $p = .006$	Supported
H2: Females higher in IP	$t(34) = -1.53$, $p = .135$	Not supported
H3: Females higher in CA	$t(34) = -0.91$, $p = .369$	Not supported

5. Discussion

The significant moderate positive correlation between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety supports the theoretical framework integrating imposter phenomenon theory, the cognitive-behavioural model of career anxiety, and self-efficacy theory. Individuals with imposter feelings attribute success to external factors and fear exposure; when facing career decisions, these individuals may experience heightened anxiety due to the perceived risk of exposure. Low career self-efficacy further contributes to avoidance and distress.

The finding aligns with Kumar and Gupta (2022), who reported positive correlations between imposter phenomenon and anxiety, and Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), who found imposter feelings predicted career-related distress. The prevalence of imposter phenomenon in this sample (mean CIPS = 60.14) is consistent with Sharma and Singh (2020).

The lack of significant gender differences in imposter phenomenon was unexpected given Clance and Imes's (1978) original identification among women. However, this is consistent with more recent research reporting mixed findings (Bravata et al., 2020; Cokley et al., 2017). Possible explanations include the small sample size (10 males, 26 females), which limited statistical power, and changing social dynamics. The lack of gender differences in career anxiety similarly aligns with mixed literature.

6. Implications

Career counsellors should be aware that students with high imposter feelings may be particularly vulnerable to career anxiety. Screening for both constructs and interventions targeting imposter feelings—such as cognitive restructuring and self-compassion training—may help reduce career anxiety. Educational institutions should integrate mental health support addressing these constructs and train faculty to recognize warning signs.

7. Limitations

The small sample size ($N = 36$) limits generalizability and statistical power. Convenience sampling may introduce selection bias. Self-report measures are subject to social desirability and recall bias. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causality. The Career Anxiety Scale was self-constructed and not extensively validated. Some responses from graduates may affect sample homogeneity.

8. Future Scope

Larger stratified samples, longitudinal designs tracking students through workforce transition, mixed-methods approaches, intervention studies, and validation of the Career Anxiety Scale in diverse samples are recommended.

9. Conclusion

The present study revealed a significant moderate positive correlation between imposter phenomenon and career anxiety among final-year students ($r = .45$, $p = .006$), indicating that students with higher imposter feelings tend to report greater career anxiety. Gender differences were not statistically significant. The study contributes to the limited body of Indian research on these constructs and highlights the importance of addressing imposter feelings in career counselling interventions for final-year students.

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