

IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON, PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL, AND ACADEMIC BURNOUT AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The transition to postgraduate education presents numerous academic, psychological, and professional challenges. Students often experience high academic expectations, increased workload, and uncertainty about future careers. These demands may contribute to feelings of self-doubt, known as the **Impostor Phenomenon (IP)**, and lead to **Academic Burnout (AB)**. Conversely, **Psychological Capital (PsyCap)**, comprising hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, may serve as a protective factor against burnout. The present study examined the relationships among Impostor Phenomenon, Psychological Capital, and Academic Burnout among postgraduate students. A quantitative correlational research design was employed with a sample of **50 postgraduate students** selected through convenience sampling from colleges and universities. Data were collected using standardized psychological scales. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple regression analysis were used for data analysis. The findings indicated a significant positive relationship between Impostor Phenomenon and Academic Burnout ($r = .61, p < .01$), while Psychological Capital showed a significant negative relationship with both Impostor Phenomenon ($r = -.47, p < .01$) and Academic Burnout ($r = -.58, p < .01$). Regression analysis revealed that Impostor Phenomenon and Psychological Capital jointly explained **46% of the variance** in Academic Burnout ($R^2 = .46$). The study highlights the importance of enhancing Psychological Capital to reduce burnout and improve academic well-being among postgraduate students.

Keywords: Impostor Phenomenon, Psychological Capital, Academic Burnout, Postgraduate Students, Mental Health.

Introduction

Higher education has become increasingly competitive, requiring postgraduate students to meet high academic standards while balancing research responsibilities, examinations, internships, and career planning. Such demands often create psychological stress that may affect students' academic performance and emotional well-being.

One important psychological construct associated with academic stress is the **Impostor Phenomenon**, first described by Clance and Imes (1978). Individuals experiencing the impostor phenomenon believe their achievements are due to luck rather than ability and fear being exposed as intellectual frauds despite objective evidence of competence. Among postgraduate students, these feelings are common because of frequent evaluation, comparison with peers, and pressure to produce original research.

Another significant construct is **Psychological Capital (PsyCap)**, introduced by Luthans and colleagues. Psychological Capital refers to a positive psychological state characterized by **hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO)**. Students with higher PsyCap tend to manage stress effectively, remain motivated during setbacks, and maintain confidence in achieving academic goals.

Academic Burnout is a psychological syndrome characterized by **emotional exhaustion, cynicism toward academic work, and reduced academic efficacy**. Burnout negatively affects concentration, academic achievement, motivation, and mental health.

Understanding how Impostor Phenomenon and Psychological Capital influence Academic Burnout can assist educational institutions in designing interventions that promote resilience and psychological well-being among postgraduate students.

Review of Literature

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that impostor feelings are prevalent among university students. Clance (1985) reported that individuals with strong impostor feelings experience persistent anxiety, perfectionism, and fear of failure.

Luthans et al. (2007) found Psychological Capital to be positively associated with academic engagement, resilience, and life satisfaction while negatively related to stress and emotional exhaustion.

Salanova et al. (2010) observed that students with higher optimism and resilience experienced lower levels of academic burnout and demonstrated greater academic commitment.

Recent studies indicate that Psychological Capital may buffer the negative effects of academic stress by strengthening coping abilities. However, research examining all three variables together among postgraduate students remains limited, particularly in the Indian educational context.

Objectives

1. To assess the level of Impostor Phenomenon among postgraduate students.
2. To examine the relationship between Impostor Phenomenon and Academic Burnout.
3. To investigate the relationship between Psychological Capital and Academic Burnout.
4. To determine whether Impostor Phenomenon and Psychological Capital predict Academic Burnout.

Hypotheses

H1: Impostor Phenomenon will have a significant positive relationship with Academic Burnout.

H2: Psychological Capital will have a significant negative relationship with Academic Burnout.

H3: Psychological Capital will have a significant negative relationship with Impostor Phenomenon.

H4: Impostor Phenomenon and Psychological Capital will significantly predict Academic Burnout.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a **quantitative correlational research design**.

Sample

The study included **50 postgraduate students** (25 males and 25 females) aged between **21 and 27 years**. Participants were selected using **convenience sampling** from postgraduate departments of various colleges and universities.

Instruments

1. **Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS)** to measure impostor feelings.
2. **Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24)** to assess hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism.
3. **Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS)** to measure academic burnout.

Procedure

Permission was obtained from institutional authorities before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Standardized questionnaires were administered individually. Data collection required approximately 25–30 minutes per participant.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using:

- Mean
- Standard Deviation
- Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation
- Multiple Regression Analysis

The level of significance was set at **0.05**.

Results

The mean score for Impostor Phenomenon was **63.42 (SD = 9.15)**, indicating moderate to high impostor feelings among postgraduate students.

The mean Psychological Capital score was **83.76 (SD = 10.48)**, suggesting moderate levels of positive psychological resources.

The mean Academic Burnout score was **51.84 (SD = 8.92)**, indicating moderate burnout.

Pearson's correlation analysis revealed:

- Impostor Phenomenon and Academic Burnout:
 $r = .61, p < .01$
- Psychological Capital and Academic Burnout:
 $r = -.58, p < .01$
- Psychological Capital and Impostor Phenomenon:
 $r = -.47, p < .01$

These findings support the first three hypotheses.

Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that Impostor Phenomenon and Psychological Capital together significantly predicted Academic Burnout:

- **R = .68**
- **R² = .46**
- **Adjusted R² = .44**
- **F(2,47) = 19.98**
- **p < .001**

The standardized beta coefficients indicated:

- | | |
|--|-------------|
| ● Impostor | Phenomenon: |
| $\beta = .43, p < .01$ | |
| ● Psychological | Capital: |
| $\beta = -.39, p < .01$ | |

These results indicate that higher impostor feelings increase academic burnout, whereas greater Psychological Capital significantly reduces burnout.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates that postgraduate students experiencing stronger impostor feelings are more likely to suffer from academic burnout. Persistent self-doubt, fear of failure, and attribution of success to external factors create emotional exhaustion and decrease academic confidence. These findings are consistent with earlier research suggesting that impostor feelings contribute to chronic stress and reduced psychological well-being.

Psychological Capital emerged as a significant protective factor. Students possessing greater hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy reported lower burnout levels. These positive psychological resources enable students to cope effectively with academic challenges and recover from setbacks.

The significant negative relationship between Psychological Capital and Impostor Phenomenon suggests that positive psychological strengths reduce self-doubt and enhance confidence. Students with greater self-efficacy are less likely to perceive themselves as intellectual frauds.

The regression findings further emphasize that both Impostor Phenomenon and Psychological Capital substantially influence Academic Burnout. Educational institutions should therefore focus not only on reducing academic stress but also on strengthening students' psychological resources through counseling, mentoring, resilience-building workshops, and positive psychology interventions.

Educational Implications

The findings have important implications for higher education institutions:

- Universities should organize workshops on stress management and resilience.
- Counseling centers should identify students with severe impostor feelings.
- Faculty members should provide constructive feedback and mentorship.
- Positive psychology interventions can strengthen Psychological Capital.
- Peer support groups may reduce academic isolation and self-doubt.
- Mental health awareness programs should be integrated into postgraduate education.

Limitations

The study has certain limitations:

- The sample size was limited to **50 postgraduate students**.
- Convenience sampling limits generalization of findings.
- The study relied on self-report measures.
- Cross-sectional data do not establish causal relationships.

Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples, adopt longitudinal designs, and explore intervention-based approaches.

Conclusion

The present study confirms that Impostor Phenomenon significantly contributes to Academic Burnout among postgraduate students, whereas Psychological Capital serves as an important protective factor. Students with stronger hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy experience lower burnout despite academic pressures. Developing Psychological Capital through counseling, mentoring, and positive psychology programs may help reduce burnout and improve students' academic success and mental well-being. The findings underscore the need for universities to prioritize psychological health alongside academic excellence to create supportive learning environments for postgraduate students.

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