

Impostor Syndrome Paradox: Exploring the Link between Academic Productivity and Personal Effectiveness Among High Achiever Students

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Abstract

High-achiever students often grapple with an internal struggle, questioning their accomplishments and fearing that their success is unearned, despite evidence to the contrary. This study examined the relationship between impostor syndrome, academic productivity, and personal effectiveness among high-achiever students at St. Michael's College. A correlational research design was employed, utilizing standardized questionnaires distributed to 130 students selected based on specific criteria. The findings revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between avoidance behavior and academic productivity, indicating its detrimental impact, whereas over-preparation and perfectionism had minimal effects. Additionally, over-preparation and perfectionism showed statistically significant positive correlations with personal effectiveness, while avoidance behavior demonstrated a weak positive correlation that was not statistically significant. Based on these findings, a Self-Esteem Training and Development Program was developed to address impostor syndrome among high achievers. This program aims to enhance self-worth and improve academic and personal outcomes through competency evaluations, lectures, focus group discussions, consultations, and experiential activities designed to cultivate self-efficacy and perseverance in academic pursuits.

Keywords: *academic productivity, impostor syndrome, personal effectiveness*

1.0 Introduction

Imagine navigating a challenging academic landscape where persistent feelings of intellectual fraudulence overshadow your accomplishments. This phenomenon, known as impostor syndrome – first defined by Clance and Imes in 1978 – refers to the psychological experience of feeling like a fraud despite evidence of success (Mak et al., 2019). Many high achievers affected by impostor syndrome fear that others

overestimate their abilities, dread evaluation, and worry about being exposed as incompetent (Kleitman et al., 2021). Impostor syndrome is associated with anxiety, perfectionism, and procrastination—behaviors that undermine academic performance and personal development (Schock, 2019; Sethi et al., 2021).

In educational settings, personal effectiveness and academic productivity depend heavily on students' self-confidence and their ability to cope with challenges. Yet, for students grappling with impostor syndrome, these factors can become significant barriers to motivation and engagement (Hudig, 2022). Despite the prevalence of studies on impostor syndrome, there is a limited amount of research specifically investigating its link to academic productivity and personal effectiveness among high-achiever students. Existing studies tend to concentrate on professionals' productivity, primarily focusing on Western countries (Bravata et al., 2019), leaving a critical gap in understanding how this phenomenon influences students' academic lives.

This study aims to examine the correlation between impostor syndrome and the academic productivity and personal effectiveness of high-achiever students at St. Michael's College. By examining this relationship, the study seeks to uncover how impostor syndrome may be associated with the ability of high achievers to perform academically and professionally. Furthermore, the research will lead to the development of an intervention program designed to support these students in managing their productivity and effectiveness, with the ultimate goal of enhancing their overall academic and professional success. The study will take place during the first semester of the Academic Year 2024-2025.

2.0 Theoretical

These resources are used to lay the theoretical foundation for this study. The following theories were utilized: The Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Richards Lazarus in 1984, the Expectancy-Value Theory of Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Allan Wigfield in 1964, and the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan in 1985.

According to Richard Lazarus' Cognitive Appraisal Theory, this examines how individuals interpret events, shaping emotional reactions. It suggests that emotions result not just from external stimuli but from one's cognitive assessment of a situation, considering its relevance to goals, impact on well-being, and potential actions. In this study, Lazarus' theory is used to explore how cognitive appraisals influence emotional experiences in students dealing with impostor feelings (Pz-Prince, 2024).

The Expectancy-value model states that this theory emphasizes how important it is for students to drive within a certain domain to accomplish a task and achieve a goal (Spott, 2022). The review focuses on two issues: (1) changes in children's and adolescents' abilities views, expectations for success, and personal values, and (2) the relationships between children's and adolescents' ability-expectancy views and subjective value systems for tasks and their performance and activity choices.

The Self-Determination Theory means that individual differences and social contexts influence various motivational styles, notably controlled and autonomous motivation, which in turn predict psychological health, performance, learning, and experience. The theory suggests that while these motivations may drive people to action, their effects on output and well-being may differ (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

3.0 Research Objectives

This study explored the impostor syndrome paradox, examining the intricate relationship between academic productivity and personal effectiveness among high-achiever students. It delves into the experiences of students who, despite their exceptional accomplishments, grapple with feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, shedding light on how these internal conflicts impact their academic and personal success. This research aims to determine if there is a correlation between impostor syndrome, academic productivity, and personal effectiveness. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of impostor syndrome among the respondents in terms of:
 - 1.1 Avoidance;
 - 1.2 Over-preparation; and
 - 1.3 Perfectionism?
2. What is the level of academic productivity among the students?
3. Is there a significant relationship between impostor syndrome and individuals' academic productivity?
4. What is the level of personal effectiveness among the students?
5. Is there a significant relationship between impostor syndrome and personal effectiveness?
6. What intervention program could be crafted based on the findings of the study?

4.0 Methodology

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between impostor syndrome, academic productivity, and personal effectiveness. This design is appropriate as it utilizes the correlation statistical test to describe and measure the degree of association between two or more variables. The study involved 130 high-achiever students from St. Michael's College, who were purposively selected based on specific criteria: [1] must be a college student enrolled in the S.Y. 2023-2024; [2] must be first-year to third-year students from different college programs; and [3] must be a dean's lister from the second semester of the S.Y. 2023-2024. A standardized test was administered to assess impostor syndrome, academic productivity, and personal effectiveness. By involving students across different academic years, the study aimed to provide comprehensive insights into how impostor syndrome influences academic productivity and personal effectiveness.

5.0 Results and Discussion

Summary of Respondents' Perceived Level of the Impostor Syndrome

Factors	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Description
Avoidance	1.00	5.50	3.50	0.93	<i>Average</i>
Over-Preparation	1.60	6.00	4.18	0.85	<i>Average</i>
Perfectionism	1.80	5.80	3.42	0.77	<i>Below Average</i>

This table provides a summary of the perceived levels of Impostor Syndrome among high-achiever students, focusing on Avoidance, Over-preparation, and Perfectionism, key behaviors often associated with impostor syndrome coping mechanisms. The data reveals that Avoidance scores with an average mean of 3.50 and a standard deviation of 0.93, suggesting that respondents exhibit average levels of avoidance, potentially as a response to feelings of inadequacy. This aligns with previous research by Kolligian and Sternberg (2019), who found that avoidance behaviors are common in individuals experiencing impostor syndrome, driven by fear of failure or being exposed as a "fraud" (Nguyen & Shigeto, 2020). High achievers in this context may avoid challenging situations to protect their perceived competence, which reflects the findings of this study. Similarly, the Over-preparation subscale, with a mean score of 4.18 and a standard deviation of 0.85, suggests that students engage in excessive preparation, though not to an extreme extent. Bright (2021) observed that

over-preparation is a compensatory behavior in individuals with impostor syndrome, aimed at covering perceived inadequacies. The moderate levels reported here suggest a balancing act, where students feel the need to overcompensate but also recognize their competence, a concept explored by Nguyen (2020). The highest score on this subscale reflects how students may feel a strong need to ensure their success, yet still have some awareness of their abilities, rather than entirely doubting themselves. This points to over-preparation as a coping mechanism that is not excessively extreme but still significant. While this behavior may help boost confidence, reliance on it over time could lead to inefficiency or burnout. This moderate over-preparation may also indicate that students are gradually finding a balance between self-doubt and their capabilities, possibly paving the way for the development of more adaptive coping strategies in the future. Addressing such behaviors is crucial to prevent negative impacts on academic performance and mental well-being.

Interestingly, the Perfectionism subscale recorded a lower mean score of 3.42 with a standard deviation of 0.77, which contrasts with the traditional association between impostor syndrome and high perfectionism. While earlier research, such as Yue et al. (2021), linked impostor syndrome with perfectionistic tendencies, more recent studies like Holden et al. (2021) suggest that not all high achievers exhibit such traits. This may reflect a shift towards focusing on preparation and effort rather than perfection. Overall, these results suggest that interventions for high-achieving students should prioritize managing avoidance and over-preparation behaviors, rather than focusing solely on perfectionism. Literature supports adopting cognitive-behavioral techniques and self-compassion strategies to help students balance their achievements with healthier coping mechanisms (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2019).

Relationship Between Levels of Perceived Impostor Syndrome and Individuals' Academic Productivity

Level of Academic Productivity	Correlation Coefficient (rho)	p-value
Avoidance	-0.250**	.004
Over-Preparation	0.089	0.31
Perfectionism	-0.049	0.582

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The table shows the analysis of the respondents' level of impostor syndrome and academic productivity. The results demonstrate a significant negative relationship between avoidance behavior and academic productivity, with a correlation of -0.250 and

a p-value of 0.004. This indicates that as respondents invest more effort in academic productivity, their avoidance behavior increases.

These findings underscore the importance of addressing self-doubt and related behaviors to support academic achievement. This is also supported by the research that indicates that impostor syndrome can contribute to avoidance behaviors negatively affecting academic productivity which, as examined by Bravata et., al. (2020), individuals who suffer from impostor syndrome often avoid jobs that test their perceived lack of skill, which can lead to a decrease in productivity. Moreover, studies conducted by Parkhill (2023) revealed that individuals experiencing impostor syndrome, particularly high achievers students and student leaders, commonly fear failure, which inhibits them from embracing new challenges or ventures. This implies the fear often results in a reluctance to venture beyond their comfort zone and an aversion to receiving constructive criticism. As noted by Clance and Imes, who were the first to describe impostor syndrome, individuals often resort to avoidance to mitigate anxiety related to their perceived inadequacies (Tewfik, 2021).

Relationship Between Levels of Perceived Impostor Syndrome and Personal Effectiveness

Level of Personal Effectiveness	Correlation Coefficient (<i>rho</i>)	p-value
Avoidance	0.054	0.539
Over-Preparation	0.179*	0.041
Perfectionism	0.227**	0.009

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

The table presents the relationship between the independent variable, impostor syndrome, and its subdomains—avoidance, over-preparation, and perfectionism—and the dependent variable, personal effectiveness. The results indicate that high achievers' avoidance behavior ($r_s = 0.054$, $p = .539$) shows a weak positive correlation with personal effectiveness; however, this correlation is not statistically significant. Conversely, over-preparation ($r_s = 0.179$, $p = 0.041$) and perfectionism ($r_s = 0.227$, $p = 0.009$) both show weak significant positive correlations with personal effectiveness.

The findings between over-preparation and personal effectiveness shows weak but significant positive correlation. This result shows that respondents tend to over-prepare, possibly as a coping mechanism to counteract feelings of inadequacy while perfectionism emerged as the highest correlate with personal effectiveness. This is supported by the study of Kumar and Jagacinski (2006) who discovered that

individuals with impostor syndrome frequently engage in over-preparation as a means to avoid failure or criticism, resulting in moderate improvements in performance and perceived effectiveness.

The correlation between perfectionism and personal effectiveness is also weak but statistically significant. Respondents who have perfectionistic tendencies are more likely to feel effective in their academic performance. However, the relationship remains weak, suggesting that perfectionism may contribute to perceived effectiveness, it does not always guarantee or sustainable academic success. In connection, perfectionism is frequently linked to high levels of achievement and personal effectiveness, particularly in academic and professional settings. Lee et al. (2020), found that "perfectionistic strivings," which emphasize high standards and diligent effort, correlate positively with effectiveness and performance. This further implies that high achiever students with avoidance behaviors stemming from impostor syndrome are commonly not associated with over-preparation and perfectionism but do not necessarily translate into improved performance or effectiveness. Therefore, while perfectionism and over-preparation can be advantageous for personal effectiveness, they may simultaneously reinforce a cycle of self-doubt among high achievers.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study delves into the complex relationship between impostor syndrome, academic productivity, and personal effectiveness among high-achiever students. The findings underscore that avoidance behavior significantly hampers academic productivity, suggesting that students who avoid challenges are less likely to maintain high performance. In contrast, while over-preparation and perfectionism show weak correlations with productivity, they do not significantly affect it, implying that pursuing perfection does not always equate to increased academic output. However, these traits are positively associated with personal effectiveness, indicating that they may drive personal achievement and growth in other domains despite their potential to undermine academic performance. To address these challenges, a self-esteem development program was created to help students manage impostor syndrome by fostering self-worth and resilience. By enhancing students' self-efficacy, this program seeks to bolster both academic success and personal growth. The study highlights the urgent need for further research into the dynamic interplay between these behaviors and their long-term effects on personal development. Furthermore, academic institutions have a pivotal role in creating environments that balance high productivity

with emotional well-being, ensuring that students can thrive academically and personally in the long run.

Given the scope of the research location, the target respondents, and the methodology used in this study, the researchers suggest the following recommendations to enhance existing programs for these particular groups of individuals and to ensure increased validity and relevance in future replications of this study.

School Administrators. They may support programs that enhance students' self-esteem and self-worth to help them manage impostor syndrome that promote belonging and self-acceptance. They may provide accessible mental health resources, such as counseling services and awareness campaigns, can further support students in managing academic pressures.

School Guidance Personnel. They may be able to implement an intervention program that addresses the specific experiences and behaviors of high achievers dealing with impostor syndrome. They may offer workshops on time management and study skills to equip students with practical strategies for managing academic workloads, reducing over-preparation tendencies, and enhancing academic productivity.

Faculty. They may integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) principles into the curriculum to enhance students' personal effectiveness and self-esteem. They may provide constructive feedback emphasizing growth and effort over academic performance to help students reframe their perceptions of success. They may assess students' well-being and academic stress levels through surveys or check-ins to identify those needing extra support.

Future Researchers. Future researchers may conduct longitudinal studies to explore how impostor syndrome and its associated behaviors evolve over time and affect academic and personal effectiveness in various educational settings. They may expand research to diverse populations and educational contexts may provide a broader understanding of impostor syndrome across different demographics and environments.

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