



When Perfection Feels Like A Lie: Self-Efficacy As A Bridge Between Perfectionism And Impostor Syndrome

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome in college students, with a focus on self-efficacy as a mediating factor. Data from 300 participants aged 18 to 25 were collected using FMPS, CIPS, and GSE scales. Findings indicate a strong positive link between perfectionism and impostor syndrome, with self-efficacy partially mediating this relationship. Female students reported lower self-confidence and higher impostor feelings than males. The results highlight the importance of interventions that enhance Resilience, Motivation, and Self-Belief, promote achievable goal setting, and address gender-specific Academic Pressures. Such strategies are essential for supporting Academic Outcomes, Emotional Well-Being, and overall Mental Health, thereby fostering Student Success in Higher Education through the Mediation Model.

Key Words: Perfectionism, Impostor Syndrome, Self-Efficacy, College Students, Gender Differences, Academic Stress, Psychological Well-Being, Mental Health, Resilience, Motivation, Academic Performance, Self-Confidence, Mediation Model, Higher Education, Student Success.

Introduction

Perfectionism is widely recognized as a complex psychological construct that significantly influences emotional and behavioural functioning across personal, academic, and professional domains. It is often shaped by early life experiences such as trauma, neglect, or familial conflict, where individuals may internalize the belief that being flawless can prevent adverse outcomes. Over time, this coping mechanism manifests in persistent high self-expectations and critical self-evaluation, particularly in areas such as academic achievement, social behaviour, and personal appearance. Defined by an ongoing pursuit of high standards and self-scrutiny, perfectionism has been linked to both positive and negative mental health outcomes (Fang & Liu, 2022). Scholars distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive forms; while adaptive perfectionism may drive goal achievement, maladaptive perfectionism is associated with increased stress, emotional strain, and dissatisfaction, especially when standards are not met (BENSON,

2003). Perfectionism holds significant importance in psychology due to its impact on psychological adaptation and maladaptation. Its influence is crucial in understanding both positive and negative mental health outcomes (Guy-Evans, 2024). This distinction is essential in understanding how perfectionism may contribute to impostor syndrome, which similarly involves feelings of inadequacy despite evident success. Additionally, self-efficacy has been found to moderate the effects of perfectionism, with higher self-belief buffering against stress and burnout (J Karami, 2016). Therefore, exploring these relationships is vital to understanding the psychological experiences of college students.

Impostor syndrome is a psychological experience marked by pervasive self-doubt and the inability to internalize personal accomplishments, despite clear evidence of competence. Individuals experiencing this phenomenon often feel fraudulent, attributing their success to luck or deception rather than skill or effort. It is widely prevalent, with up to 82% of people including highly successful figures like Albert Einstein reporting such feelings at some point in their lives (Booth, 2025). While initially studied in high-achieving women, research has shown that impostor syndrome affects people across all genders, often going unrecognized in men due to social and cultural expectations (Azab, 2023). The roots of impostor syndrome are multifactorial, involving psychological variables like perfectionism, low self-esteem, fear of failure, and difficulty accepting success, along with sociocultural pressures and competitive environments (Barron, 2023). These dynamics are especially pronounced in academic settings, where external expectations and internal self-criticism converge. Personality traits such as perfectionism and low self-efficacy frequently co-occur, intensifying feelings of inadequacy and emotional strain (imposter syndrome, 2024). This study examines impostor syndrome as a key psychological outcome, exploring how it may be influenced by perfectionism and mediated by self-efficacy among college students.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to organize and execute actions necessary for achieving specific goals (Lopez-Garrido, 2025). These beliefs influence motivation, persistence, and performance outcomes, regardless of actual skill level (Jr, 2012). In the context of impostor syndrome, self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in moderating how perfectionistic tendencies translate into self-doubt. While perfectionism can impose unrealistically high standards, self-efficacy can counterbalance its detrimental effects by fostering confidence and adaptive coping mechanisms (Cervone, 2000) (Farmer, Xu, & Dupre, 2022). Unlike broader self-concept, self-efficacy is domain- and task-specific, making it particularly relevant in academic settings where college students evaluate their competence based on discrete performance outcomes (Michael P. Carey & Forsyth, 2009). As a mediating variable, self-efficacy serves as the cognitive mechanism through which perfectionistic standards either contribute to or mitigate impostor feelings. Higher self-efficacy may reduce the internalization of failure or inadequacy, while lower self-efficacy can amplify impostor-related anxiety despite external success (Gecas, 1989). Thus, self-efficacy not only influences behavioural motivation but also acts as a psychological buffer in the perfectionism–impostor syndrome dynamic.

By examining the relationship between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and self-efficacy. This study seeks to investigate how perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome interact among college students, with a particular focus on gender differences. Perfectionism, marked by fear of failure and excessive self-criticism, often aligns with impostor feelings, where individuals doubt their success and fear being exposed as frauds. Low self-efficacy may intensify these feelings by undermining confidence in one's abilities, making it a potential mediator in the perfectionism–impostor syndrome relationship. Gender is another critical factor, as women may be more prone to impostorism due to societal expectations and internalized perfectionistic ideals. This research is driven by three key goals: to fill gaps in literature by exploring these variables collectively, to better understand the psychological pressures college students face, and to inform gender-sensitive interventions aimed at improving mental health and academic outcomes. The findings aim to support more nuanced strategies for fostering student resilience and addressing impostor-related challenges.

Methodology

Aim: Investigating the Link Between Perfectionism and Impostor Syndrome: The Role of Self-Efficacy as a Mediator Among College Students.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome.
2. To evaluate the role of self-efficacy as a mediator in the association between perfectionism and impostor syndrome.
3. To analyse how gender influences the association between perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome.

Hypotheses:

1. There is a direct positive relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome.
2. Self-efficacy acts as an inverse mediator, reducing the impact of perfectionism on impostor syndrome.
3. The interplay between perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome varies by gender, with women showing more pronounced connections between these variables.

Research design:

This research utilizes a quantitative, cross-sectional, and correlational design, collecting data through standardized self-report measures administered at one specific time. The study seeks to examine the relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome among college students, with a particular focus on determining whether self-efficacy functions as a mediating factor in this association.

Sampling:

The study will include 300 participants, ensuring a robust sample size for accurate and meaningful analysis. A sample of this size will help ensure reliable data and provide sufficient statistical power to examine the association between perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome among college students.

Variables:

- **Perfectionism (Independent Variable):** Involves setting excessively high standards and harsh self-criticism, potentially triggering impostor syndrome.
- **Impostor Syndrome (Dependent Variable):** Marked by persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud, influenced by perfectionism and moderated by self-efficacy.
- **Self-Efficacy (Mediating Variable):** Reflects belief in one's ability to succeed; it mediates the relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome by either buffering or amplifying its effects.

Data Collection Tools:

1. **Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS):** This scale assesses various aspects of perfectionism, including self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism.
2. **Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS):** This instrument evaluates the degree to which an individual experiences feelings of impostor syndrome and self-doubt.
3. **General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE):** This scale measures an individual’s confidence in their ability to manage challenges, potentially serving as a mediator between perfectionism and impostor syndrome.

Statistical analysis:

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design and utilized non-parametric statistical techniques, as the data exhibited non-normality and continuous distribution. Analyses were conducted using Jamovi software (Version 2.6). Descriptive statistics were calculated, and Pearson’s correlation was used to examine the associations between perfectionism, impostor syndrome, and self-efficacy. Additionally, the Mann–Whitney U test assessed gender-based differences. A mediation analysis was performed to evaluate the role of self-efficacy in the relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome. Findings also explored gender-specific variations, revealing stronger associations among these variables in female participants.

Presented here is the statistical depiction of the gathered data.

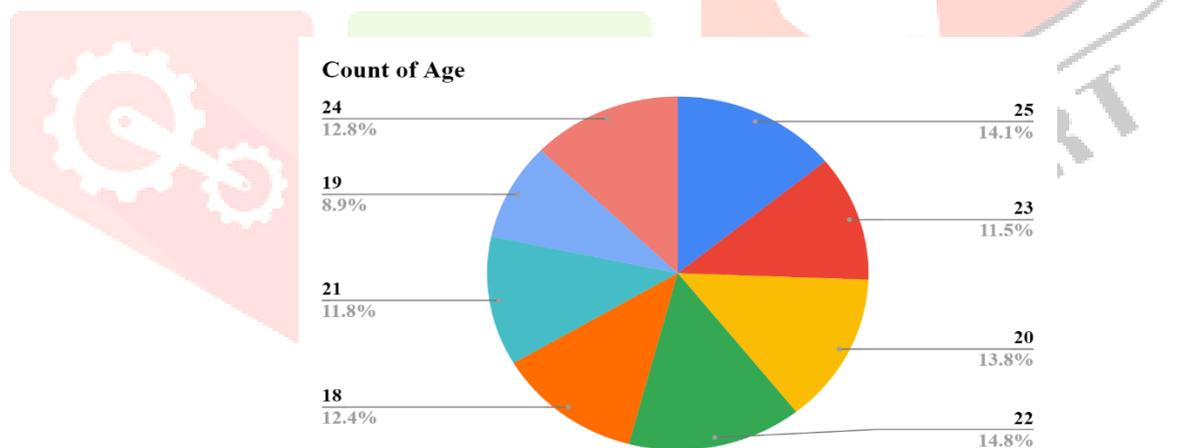


Figure 1. Source: Cumulative Responses received online and offline.

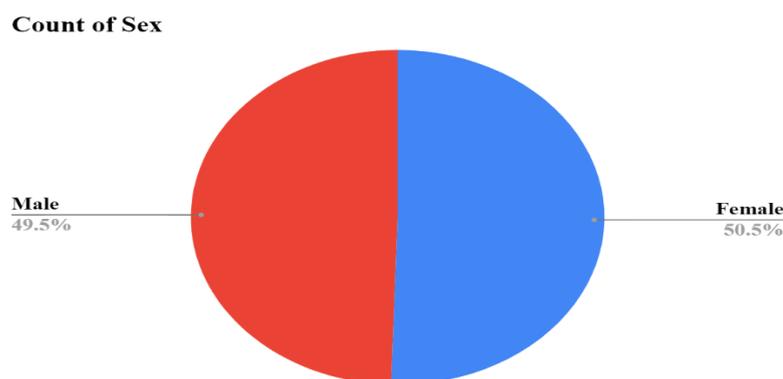


Figure 2. Source: Cumulative Responses received online and offline.

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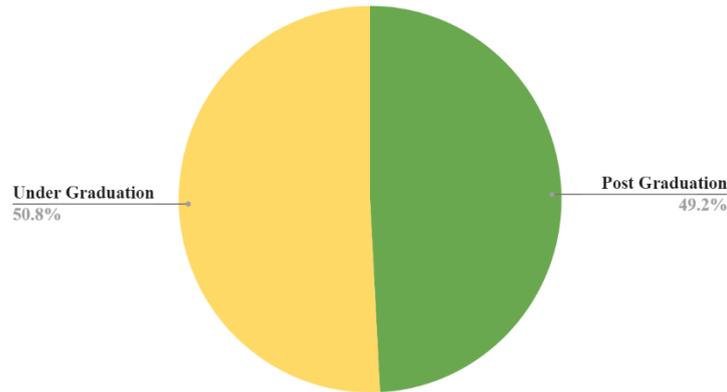


Figure 3. Source: Cumulative Responses received online and offline.

Result

Sr No.	Variables (FMPS vs IP_Total_Score)	R (Correlation Coefficient)	Z Score (Standard Score)
1	Perfectionism vs Impostor Syndrome	0.957	1.913

Table 1: Correlation between Perfectionism and Impostor Syndrome justifying hypothesis 1.

This study analysed the overall scores of perfectionisms and impostor syndrome to investigate their relationship. A correlation coefficient of 0.957 was observed, indicating an exceptionally strong positive association between the two. This suggests that individuals exhibiting higher levels of perfectionistic traits are significantly more prone to experiencing impostor-related thoughts and feelings.

Moreover, the Z Score of 1.913 reinforces the robustness of the correlation, suggesting that the likelihood of this relationship occurring by random chance is minimal. Since a Z Score exceeding 1 typically denotes statistical significance, this finding affirms that the connection between the variables is both meaningful and reliable.

These findings suggest that individuals with high perfectionistic tendencies often grapple with persistent self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as frauds central features of impostor syndrome. The strong positive correlation implies that perfectionism may not only coexist with but could also exacerbate feelings of impostor syndrome. The results emphasize the significant and positive connection between these two constructs, highlighting the importance of addressing perfectionistic attitudes in efforts to mitigate impostor syndrome and promote healthier self-perception

Mediation Estimates							
			95% Confidence Interval				
Effect	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	Z	p	% Mediation
Indirect	0.0728	0.0247	0.0245	0.121	2.95	0.003	10.0
Direct	0.6530	0.0276	0.5990	0.707	23.69	<.001	90.0
Total	0.7258	0.0127	0.7010	0.751	57.26	<.001	100.0

Table 2: Mediation of Self Efficacy on Perfectionism (IV) and Imposter Syndrome (DV) justifying hypothesis 2.

A mediation analysis was performed to determine whether self-efficacy plays an intermediary role in the link between perfectionism and impostor syndrome. The results showed a notable indirect effect, with a value of 0.0728 ($p = 0.003$), signifying that self-efficacy significantly mediates this relationship. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect path excluded zero, further validating the statistical significance of the mediation effect.

The direct effect of perfectionism on impostor syndrome remained strong and significant, with an estimate of 0.6530 ($p < .001$). The total effect, which includes both direct and indirect influences, was 0.7258 and highly significant ($p < .001$).

Around 10% of the overall impact of perfectionism on impostor syndrome was explained through self-efficacy, while the remaining 90% represented a direct influence. These findings align with the proposed hypothesis that self-efficacy serves as a partial mediator in this relationship. They imply that individuals with perfectionistic traits are more prone to experiencing heightened impostor feelings, particularly when their sense of self-efficacy is diminished.

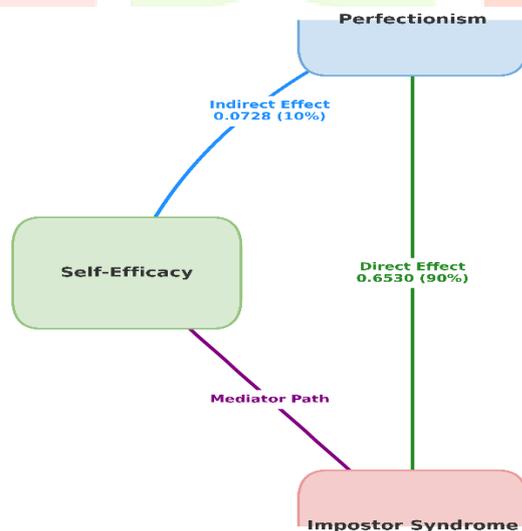


Figure 1: Mediation Model Testing Hypothesis (Self-Efficacy mediating between Perfectionism and Impostor Syndrome)

Variable	U-statistic	p-value	Interpretation
FMPS_Score	12632.5	0.0509	Not significant (just above 0.05)
GSE_Score	8822	0.0015	Significant ($p < 0.05$)
IP_Total_Score	12928	0.0188	Significant ($p < 0.05$)

Table 4: U-Test results justifying hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that the relationship between perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome would vary by gender, with women expected to exhibit stronger correlations among these variables. To evaluate this, a Mann-Whitney U Test was performed on the scores for perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome.

For perfectionism (measured by FMPS), the U-statistic was 12632.5, and the p-value was 0.0509. Since this p-value exceeds the conventional 0.05 threshold, no significant gender difference was observed. However, the result was marginally close to significance, suggesting the possibility of a trend that warrants further exploration. Regarding self-efficacy (assessed with the GSE), the U-statistic was 8822, and the p-value was 0.0016, which is well below 0.05. This indicates a significant gender difference in self-efficacy scores, highlighting that gender has a considerable influence on individuals' beliefs about their capabilities. For impostor syndrome (measured by the total CIPS score), the U-statistic was 12928, and the p-value was 0.0188, also indicating a significant gender difference. This suggests that women may experience impostor feelings more intensely than men.

In conclusion, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. Gender had a significant impact on self-efficacy and impostor syndrome, but no significant gender difference was found for perfectionism. While the difference in perfectionism was not statistically significant, it was close enough to suggest further investigation is warranted. These findings underscore the importance of considering gender in psychological research, particularly when examining self-efficacy and impostor syndrome.

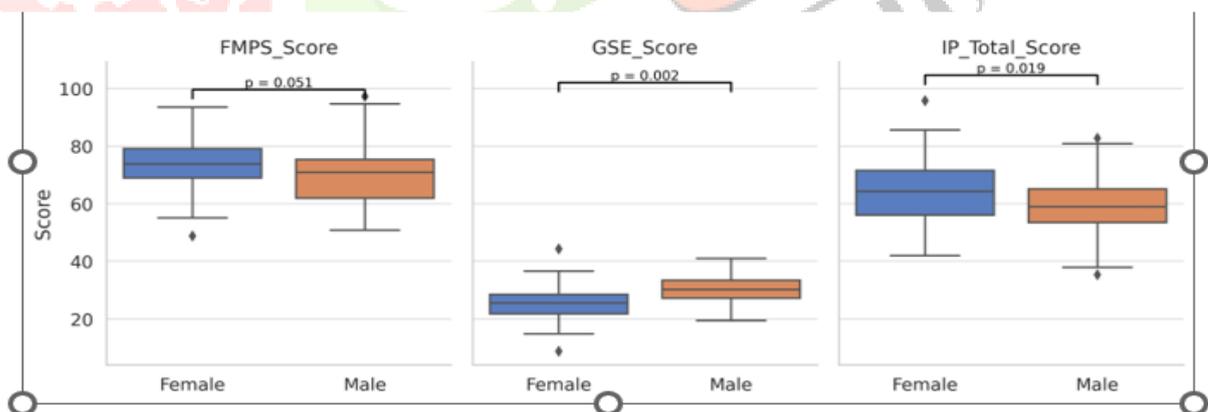


Figure2: Gender Differences in FMPS, GSE, and IP Scores; Mann-Whitney U Tests

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how perfectionism is connected to impostor syndrome among college students, placing particular emphasis on whether self-efficacy plays a mediating role in this relationship. The research was guided by three core objectives: to analyse the direct association between perfectionism and impostor experiences, to determine if self-efficacy influences this connection, and to assess whether these patterns differ across genders. The results provide meaningful contributions to the broader psychological understanding of these interrelated constructs.

The first aim of the study was to investigate the direct link between perfectionism and impostor syndrome, which corresponded with Hypothesis 1: a positive association exists between these two constructs. The data provided strong evidence in support of this hypothesis, revealing a remarkably high positive correlation coefficient ($R = 0.957$), suggesting a near-perfect relationship. Furthermore, the Z Score of 1.913 confirmed the statistical reliability of this finding, indicating that the correlation is unlikely to be a result of random variation. These outcomes imply that individuals exhibiting elevated perfectionistic traits are significantly more likely to experience impostor-related thoughts and feelings.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the harmful psychological effects of maladaptive perfectionism. For instance, (Martin M. Smith, et al., 2018) showed that socially prescribed perfectionism, where individuals feel pressured by external expectations, is closely linked to psychological distress and feelings of fraudulence. Similarly, (Wang, Marina S. Sheveleva, & Permyakova, 2019) found that perfectionistic students tend to experience self-doubt and fear of failure, which are characteristic of impostor syndrome. Additionally, (Stoeber Joachim, 2017) distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism highlights how maladaptive perfectionism, marked by harsh self-criticism and a fear of making mistakes, is linked to impostor feelings. Therefore, this study affirms that perfectionism serves as a psychological vulnerability, increasing the likelihood of experiencing impostor syndrome.

The study assessed perfectionism using the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS), a well-established instrument developed by Frost and colleagues in 1990. Recognized for its strong reliability and validity, the FMPS evaluates multiple facets of perfectionism, such as fear of making mistakes, high personal standards, and perceived parental pressure. Its inclusion enabled the research to examine both the beneficial and detrimental components of perfectionism, providing a nuanced perspective on how these traits are linked to the development of impostor feelings.

The second objective focused on investigating whether self-efficacy mediates the link between perfectionism and impostor syndrome, leading to Hypothesis 2: self-efficacy negatively mediates this relationship. The findings supported this hypothesis, demonstrating that individuals with higher self-efficacy experienced a weaker association between perfectionism and impostor syndrome. These individuals were less prone to feelings of being an impostor, even when exhibiting strong perfectionistic traits. This suggests that self-efficacy serves as a protective factor, helping to mitigate the negative consequences of perfectionism.

This finding aligns with (James E. Maddux & Evan M. Kleiman, 2016) theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of self-efficacy in influencing motivation, persistence, and emotional well-being. High self-efficacy helps individuals view challenges as manageable rather than overwhelming, enabling them to cope with perfectionistic standards more effectively. (Bandura, 2015) similarly highlighted that strong self-efficacy beliefs foster resilience and optimism, which mitigate vulnerability to anxiety and self-doubt. (Haghighi & Akram Ghorbali, 2022) also demonstrated that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between academic self-concept and impostor syndrome, further supporting the interconnectedness of these constructs.

Self-efficacy was assessed using the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE), created by Schwarzer and Jerusalem in 1995. The GSE is well-regarded for its strong internal consistency and cross-cultural relevance, making it an appropriate tool for measuring individuals' belief in their ability to handle challenges. This instrument provided a dependable assessment of participants' self-efficacy and its connection to perfectionism and impostor syndrome. Hypothesis 3 suggested that gender would impact the relationship between perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome, with women exhibiting stronger correlations between these factors. The findings partially confirmed this hypothesis. The Mann-Whitney U Test showed significant gender differences in self-efficacy ($p = 0.0016$) and impostor syndrome ($p = 0.0188$), though no significant gender difference was found for perfectionism ($p = 0.0509$). While the result for perfectionism was not statistically significant, the p-value was close to the threshold, indicating a potential trend that warrants further exploration.

The observed gender differences in self-efficacy and impostor syndrome are consistent with prior research. (Breeze, 2018) argued that systemic inequalities in academic and professional settings disproportionately affect women, leading to heightened feelings of self-doubt and impostorism. (Chrousos, Alexios-Fotios A. Mentis, & Efthimios Dardiotis, 2020) similarly noted that underrepresented groups, including women, are more prone to impostor syndrome due to structural barriers and biases. The findings suggest that women may internalize societal pressures more strongly, leading to lower self-efficacy and stronger impostor feelings compared to men.

Impostor syndrome was assessed using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), created by Clance in 1985. This scale is a reliable tool for evaluating feelings of self-doubt, the fear of being exposed as a "fraud," and the sense of perceived inadequacy. Its strong internal consistency and validated factor structure made it a suitable choice for this study, ensuring comprehensive capture of the various dimensions of impostor syndrome.

In conclusion, this study successfully addressed its objectives. It confirmed a strong positive relationship between perfectionism and impostor syndrome, validated the mediating role of self-efficacy, and identified significant gender differences in self-efficacy and impostor feelings. The use of reliable psychometric scales FMPS, CIPS, and GSE ensured that the study's measurement of the constructs was valid and comprehensive, strengthening the reliability of the findings.

This research enhances understanding of the complex relationship between personality traits, belief systems, and emotional experiences. It underscores that perfectionism, when coupled with low self-efficacy, creates an environment conducive to impostor syndrome. Furthermore, the study reveals that contextual factors, such as gender, play a role in shaping these psychological experiences, highlighting the importance of considering individual differences in psychological interventions. The integration of robust psychometric tools also added methodological rigor to the study, ensuring the validity and reliability of its conclusions.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between perfectionism, impostor syndrome, and self-efficacy among college students, revealing that heightened perfectionism significantly contributes to impostor feelings. Students with high self-critical tendencies and unrealistic standards often struggled with persistent self-doubt and fear of failure. A central finding was the mediating role of self-efficacy, where students with stronger beliefs in their capabilities experienced fewer impostor-related symptoms, despite perfectionistic traits. This supports Bandura's theory, which identifies self-efficacy as essential to motivation, emotional regulation, and coping. Gender analysis showed that while perfectionism was equally prevalent across genders, women reported lower self-efficacy and higher impostor syndrome, indicating the impact of societal expectations on female students' self-perception.

The study's methodology, including the use of validated instruments (FMPS, CIPS, GSE) and a mixed-mode data collection from a sample of 300 students, ensured robust findings. These results have important implications for educational institutions, highlighting the need to promote adaptive perfectionism, foster self-efficacy, and implement gender-sensitive support systems. However, limitations include the cross-sectional design, which prevents causal conclusions, and reliance on self-reporting, which may introduce bias. Future research should adopt longitudinal and qualitative approaches and explore additional psychological factors. Overall, the study underscores the importance of psychological support in fostering student resilience, confidence, and academic success.

Limitations and Future Implications

his study faces several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation, underscoring the need for longitudinal research to understand variable interactions over time. Reliance on self-report measures may introduce biases like social desirability, affecting data accuracy. The sample, limited to college students, reduces generalizability to other age or professional groups. Additionally, potential gender imbalance may weaken the validity of gender-based comparisons. Cultural specificity limits the applicability of findings to global contexts. Lastly, the narrow focus on perfectionism, self-efficacy, and impostor syndrome omits other influential psychological variables such as anxiety or resilience.

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to establish causality and assess interventions targeting self-efficacy and perfectionism. Including broader psychological factors and expanding demographic diversity would enhance comprehensiveness and applicability. Qualitative methods like interviews can offer deeper insights into personal experiences. Cross-cultural and gender-specific studies are also vital for understanding how societal roles and cultural contexts shape impostor syndrome and related constructs

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