



A Study on association between Perfectionism, Impostor Syndrome and Mental Wellbeing among University Students

Sayali Puri, *Bachelor of Arts, Psychology (Hons.)*

[sayalipuri98@gmail.com](mailto:syalipuri98@gmail.com)

Abstract: The factors affecting mental wellbeing of university students have been studied by various researchers in the past. Perfectionism and impostor syndrome are some of the factors affecting the mental wellbeing of college students. Perfectionism is a tendency to strive for flawlessness and to criticize yourself harshly. Impostor syndrome is where high-achievers ascribe their success to luck rather than competence and feel like a fraud. Mental wellbeing is a state of being where one feels, thinks and acts in ways to enhance their quality of life. The current study investigated the association between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing among university students. Standardized scales were used to measure perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing. The sample included 34 participants who were university students belonging to the age group 18-25. The findings showed significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and perfectionism, as well as significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and impostor syndrome. The results also revealed significant positive relationship between impostor syndrome and perfectionism. The findings suggested that students should be encouraged to practice unconditional self-acceptance and self-compassion and counselling centers and peer support groups should be established in universities to help students deal with perfectionism and impostor syndrome.

Keywords: *Perfectionism, Impostor Syndrome, Mental Wellbeing, University Students*

1. Introduction

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

Carl Rogers

Individuals with perfectionism often set high standards for themselves. They overly criticize themselves for making mistakes. They experience fear of failure and they seek approval and validation from others. Perfectionism manifests in three domains known as self-oriented perfectionism (imposing unrealistic standards of perfectionism on oneself), other-oriented perfectionism (imposing unrealistic standards of perfectionism on others) and socially prescribed perfectionism (perceiving unrealistic expectations of perfection from others).

Individuals struggling with impostor syndrome believe that they are undeserving of their achievements. They feel they aren't as competent as people think and soon people will find out that they are a fraud. People experiencing impostor syndrome attribute their accomplishments to external causes such as luck, not acknowledging their capabilities and efforts. Impostor syndrome is interconnected with perfectionism, it can be helpful for people to change their perspective towards perfectionism when dealing with impostor syndrome. Mental wellbeing is a concept used to understand how we feel and how well we are coping with daily stressors in our life.

Molnar et al. (2011) conducted a study on 538 undergraduate students assessing the relationship between self-reported health and self-oriented perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism. The authors found out that socially prescribed perfectionism was associated with poorer physical health and this relationship was fully mediated by higher levels of perceived stress and lower levels of perceived social support. The data revealed that self-oriented perfectionism was related to poorer health via higher levels of perceived stress and was also related to better health via higher levels of perceived social support.

Hu, Chibnall and Slavin (2019) conducted a study on first year medical students of Saint Louis University. The purpose of the study was to examine the contribution of dysfunctional thoughts like maladaptive perfectionism and imposter phenomenon and negative feelings like shame, embarrassment and inadequacy to poor mental health in pre-clinical medical students. The results found out that significant associations between dysfunctional thinking patterns of maladaptive perfectionism and imposter phenomenon and negative feelings of shame, embarrassment and inadequacy. The data also revealed significant associations between these negative feelings and symptoms of depression and anxiety.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *Perfectionism*

According to Flett, Hewitt and Dyck (1989) perfectionism is defined as “the tendency to have high goals and standards for oneself.” Frost et al. (1990) defined perfectionism as “the setting of excessively high personal standards of performance.” “Perfectionism is the practice of demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation” (Hollender, 1965).

According to a study conducted by Holden, Wright, Herring and Sims (2021) on first- and continuing-generation college students exploring the relationships among imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and stress among first- and continuing-generation college students found out that levels of imposter syndrome and stress are similar between first- and continuing-generation students. The findings suggested a significant correlation between imposter syndrome and stress for both groups. The data revealed a strong association of imposter syndrome and stress among first-generation students.

Another study was conducted by Wang, Sheveleva and Permyakova (2019) on 169 college students in Russia investigating the mediating and moderating effects of imposter syndrome on the link between perfectionism and psychological distress. The researchers found out that imposter syndrome completely mediated the relationship between perfectionism and anxiety. Further, it was also found out imposter syndrome also moderated the relationship between perfectionism and depression. The data revealed that imposter syndrome had a significant moderation effect in the relationship between perfectionism and depressive mood.

Pákozdy et al. (2023) conducted a study on 261 university students examining the relationship between impostor phenomenon and self-efficacy, maladaptive perfectionism and happiness in university students and whether these variables differ between females and males. The results found out negative correlation of impostor phenomenon with self-efficacy and happiness whereas it was positively correlated with perfectionism in both the sexes. Further, it was also found out that impostor phenomenon wasn't related to participant's sense of belonging at their institution and perceived academic competition.

2.2 *Impostor syndrome*

According to Kolligian and Sternberg (1991) imposter syndrome is defined as “subjective experience of perceived intellectual phoniness that is held by certain high-achieving adults who,

despite their objective successes, fail to internalize these successes.” Clance and Imes (1978) defined impostor syndrome as “the psychological experience of believing that one's accomplishments came about not through genuine ability, but as a result of having been lucky, having worked harder than others, or having manipulated other people's impressions.” Imposter syndrome is the “attribution of one's successes not to their abilities but to external circumstances or to factors unrelated to actual talent and reporting feelings of being fake” as defined by Langford and Clance(1993).

King and Cooley (1995) conducted a study on 127 undergraduate students examining the relationships between impostor phenomenon, family achievement orientation and achievement-related behaviors where the results found out the association between greater family achievement orientation and high levels of the imposter phenomenon. Further, it was also found out that higher levels of imposter phenomenon were linked with higher GPA. The data also revealed that higher levels of imposter phenomenon were linked to longer time occupied by academic endeavors in females.

Another study was conducted by Shinawatra et al. (2023) on 228 undergraduate clinical medical students in Thailand evaluating the prevalence and associated factors of the imposter phenomenon among medical clinical students. The results found out that significant correlation with stress, anxiety and depression and heightened risk of occurrence of the imposter phenomenon.

Villwock et al. (2016) conducted a study on 2,612 medical students in America exploring the levels of burnout and impostor syndrome in medical students. The results found out that significant relationship between imposter syndrome and burnout. Further, it was also found out that students with impostor syndrome had significantly increased levels of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and depersonalization. The data also revealed that female gender had a significant correlation with imposter syndrome.

2.3 Mental wellbeing

According to Keyes (2006) mental well-being is defined as “our perception and evaluation of our life.” Gautam et al. (2024) defined mental wellbeing as "a positive state of emotional, psychological, and social health, characterized by a sense of contentment, resilience, and the ability to effectively cope with life's challenges." “Mental wellbeing is a state of positive mental health” as defined by Cates et al. (2015).

Khallad and Jabr (2015) studied Jordanian and Turkish college students analyzing the effects of perceived social support and family demands on college students' mental well-being. The results found out that perceived family support predicted mental well-being for Jordanian students whereas perceived support from friends predicted mental well-being for Turkish students. Further, it was also found out that Jordanian and Turkish students who considered their families to be more demanding reported higher depression and stress levels.

Slimmen et al. (2022) inspected the relationship between underlying stressors and perceived stress and mental wellbeing, in a cross sectional study, on 875 university students where the results found out that perceived stress had negative correlation with mental well-being. The data also revealed that the academic pressure, family pressure, side activity pressure and financial pressure had a negative effect on mental well-being.

Covarrubias, Romero and Trivelli (2014) conducted a study on 255 undergraduate students examined the link of college students' mental health with family achievement guilt, where the results found out that high family achievement guilt had significant relationship with more depressive symptoms and low self-esteem. Further, it was also found out that first generation students showed more depressive symptoms and high family achievement guilt corresponding to other students.

3. Purpose

The purpose is to investigate the association between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing among university students.

4. Hypothesis

H1: There will be significant negative relationship between mental well-being and perfectionism.

H2: There will be significant negative relationship between mental well-being and impostor syndrome.

5. Method

5.1 Sample

A total sample of (N = 34) of university students belonging to the age group 18-25 years was collected via convenience sampling from the city of Pune.

5.2 Measures

Big Three Perfectionism Scale - Short form (BTPS - SF): The Big Three Perfectionism scale was used to measure perfectionism among university students. The scale was developed by Feher et al.(2019). The scale consisted of 16 items and the rating scale included, Disagree Strongly (1), Disagree (2), Neither agree or disagree (3), Agree (4), Agree Strongly (5). It assesses three core dimensions: rigid perfectionism (questions 1 - 4), self-critical perfectionism (questions 5 - 10) and narcissistic perfectionism (questions 11 - 16).

Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (CIPS): The Clance Imposter Phenomenon scale was used to measure imposter syndrome among university students. The scale was developed by Clance (1985). The scale consisted of 20 items and the rating scale included, Not at all true (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), Very true (5).

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS): The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale was used to measure mental wellbeing among university students. The scale was developed by Tennant et al. (2007). The scale consisted of 14 items and the rating scale included None of the time (1), Rarely (2), Some of the time (3), Often (4), All of the time (5).

5.3 Procedures

The study was carried out by obtaining responses from participants using Google forms. Informed consent was secured from each participant and they were thanked for their cooperation. Standardized psychological measures were administered to the participants.

6. Analysis of Data

6.1 Results

Table 1: *N, Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Perfectionism	Impostor Syndrome	Mental wellbeing
N	34	34	34
Mean	46.2	57.0	47.4
Standard deviation	11.5	15.5	10.7

Table 2: *Correlation between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing*

	Perfectionism	Impostor Syndrome	Mental wellbeing
Perfectionism	—		
Impostor Syndrome	0.628***	—	
Mental wellbeing	-0.482**	-0.477**	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

7. Discussion of Results

The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing among university students. The results found out that impostor syndrome had significant positive relationship with perfectionism ($r = 0.62$, $p < .001$) whereas mental wellbeing has significant negative relationship with perfectionism ($r = -0.48$, $p < .01$) as well as impostor syndrome ($r = -0.47$, $p < .01$).

As our findings highlight significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and perfectionism. Hence, the first hypothesis that there will be significant negative relationship between mental well-being and perfectionism is accepted. The findings align with the study published by Juwono et al. (2022) in the International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction, which indicated that socially prescribed perfectionism was associated with low self-esteem and lower wellbeing. Similarly, our research study demonstrates negative association between mental well-being and perfectionism. We also found evidence for significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and impostor syndrome. Therefore, the second hypothesis that there will be significant negative relationship between mental well-being and impostor syndrome is accepted. It is interesting that we also found a significant positive relationship between impostor syndrome and perfectionism.

Students should be encouraged to view making mistakes as a sign of learning and progress. Universities should have counselling centers for them to develop unconditional self-acceptance and manage anxiety when dealing with perfectionism. Students having feelings of being an impostor should practice self-compassion and form different peer support groups where they feel connected and heard. One limitation of this study is that the results of this study that it has small sample size therefore the findings of the research should be interpreted with caution. Future

research should use larger samples to further investigate the relationship between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing.

Despite these limitations, the present study has enhanced our understanding of the relationship between mental wellbeing and perfectionism. We hope that the current research will stimulate further investigation of this important area.

8. Conclusion

The factors affecting mental wellbeing of university students have been studied by various researchers in the past. Perfectionism and impostor syndrome are some of the factors affecting the mental wellbeing of college students. Perfectionism is a tendency to strive for flawlessness and to criticize yourself harshly. Impostor syndrome is where high-achievers ascribe their success to luck rather than competence and feel like a fraud. Mental wellbeing is a state of being where one feels, thinks and acts in ways to enhance their quality of life. The current study investigated the association between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing among university students. Standardized scales were used to measure perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing. The sample included 34 participants who were university students belonging to the age group 18-25. The findings showed significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and perfectionism, as well as significant negative correlation between mental wellbeing and impostor syndrome. The results also revealed significant positive relationship between impostor syndrome and perfectionism.

The findings suggest that college students should change the standards from unrealistic to healthy and from all-or-nothing to good enough while doing a task. Practicing self-compassion, breaking down tasks into smaller steps and reframing mistakes as learning opportunities are a few strategies to reduce perfectionism in college students. Students should form support groups and separate feelings from facts when dealing with impostor syndrome. Embracing a growth mindset, cultivating self-compassion and unconditional self-acceptance are a few strategies to reduce impostor syndrome in college students. However, the findings of the research should be interpreted with caution as the study has small sample size. Future research should use larger samples to further investigate the relationship between perfectionism, impostor syndrome and mental wellbeing.

References

- Covarrubias, R., Romero, A., & Trivelli, M. (2015). Family achievement guilt and mental well-being of college students. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(7), 2031-2037.
- De Cates, A., Stranges, S., Blake, A., & Weich, S. (2015). Mental well-being: an important outcome for mental health services?. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 207(3), 195-197.
- Flett, G. L., Hewitt, P. L., & Dyck, D. G. (1989). Self-oriented perfectionism, neuroticism and anxiety. *Personality and individual differences*, 10(7), 731-735.
- Frost, R. O., Marten, P., Lahart, C., & Rosenblate, R. (1990). The dimensions of perfectionism. *Cognitive therapy and research*, 14(5), 449-468.
- Gautam, S., Jain, A., Chaudhary, J., Gautam, M., Gaur, M., & Grover, S. (2024). Concept of mental health and mental well-being, it's determinants and coping strategies. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 66(Suppl 2), S231-S244.
- Holden, C. L., Wright, L. E., Herring, A. M., & Sims, P. L. (2024). Imposter syndrome among first-and continuing-generation college students: The roles of perfectionism and stress. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(4), 726-740.
- Hollender, M. H. (1965). Perfectionism. *Comprehensive psychiatry*, 6(2), 94-103.
- Hu, K. S., Chibnall, J. T., & Slavin, S. J. (2019). Maladaptive perfectionism, impostorism, and cognitive distortions: Threats to the mental health of pre-clinical medical students. *Academic Psychiatry*, 43(4), 381-385.
- Juwono, I. D., Kun, B., Demetrovics, Z., & Urbán, R. (2023). Healthy and unhealthy dimensions of perfectionism: Perfectionism and mental health in Hungarian adults. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 21(5), 3017-3032.
- Keyes, C. L. (2006). Subjective well-being in mental health and human development research worldwide: An introduction. *Social indicators research*, 77(1), 1-10.
- Khallad, Y., & Jabr, F. (2016). Effects of perceived social support and family demands on college students' mental well-being: A cross-cultural investigation. *International Journal of Psychology*, 51(5), 348-355.
- King, J. E., & Cooley, E. L. (1995). Achievement orientation and the impostor phenomenon among college students. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 20(3), 304-312.
- Kolligian Jr, J., & Sternberg, R. J. (1991). Perceived fraudulence in young adults: is there an'imposter syndrome'?. *Journal of personality assessment*, 56(2), 308-326.

- Langford, J., & Clance, P. R. (1993). The imposter phenomenon: Recent research findings regarding dynamics, personality and family patterns and their implications for treatment. *Psychotherapy: theory, research, practice, training*, 30(3), 495.
- Molnar, D. S., Sadava, S. W., Flett, G. L., & Colautti, J. (2012). Perfectionism and health: A mediational analysis of the roles of stress, social support and health-related behaviours. *Psychology & Health*, 27(7), 846-864.
- Pákozdy, C., Askew, J., Dyer, J., Gately, P., Martin, L., Mavor, K. I., & Brown, G. R. (2024). The imposter phenomenon and its relationship with self-efficacy, perfectionism and happiness in university students. *Current Psychology*, 43(6), 5153-5162.
- Shinawatra, P., Kasirawat, C., Khunanon, P., Boonchan, S., Sangla, S., Maneeton, B., ... & Kawilapat, S. (2023). Exploring factors affecting impostor syndrome among undergraduate clinical medical students at Chiang Mai University, Thailand: a cross-sectional study. *Behavioral sciences*, 13(12), 976.
- Slimmen, S., Timmermans, O., Mikolajczak-Degrauwe, K., & Oenema, A. (2022). How stress-related factors affect mental wellbeing of university students A cross-sectional study to explore the associations between stressors, perceived stress, and mental wellbeing. *PloS one*, 17(11), e0275925.
- Villwock, J. A., Sobin, L. B., Koester, L. A., & Harris, T. M. (2016). Impostor syndrome and burnout among American medical students: a pilot study. *International journal of medical education*, 7, 364.
- Wang, K. T., Sheveleva, M. S., & Permyakova, T. M. (2019). Imposter syndrome among Russian students: The link between perfectionism and psychological distress. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 143, 1-6.