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Assessing the Influence of the Imposter Phenomenon on Critical Leadership Competencies: Conceptual Framework Proposal

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Keywords

Decision-making efficacy, imposter phenomenon, innovative work behaviour, leadership competencies, self-efficacy and self-esteem



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Abstract

Will the imposter phenomenon influence critical leadership competencies, specifically decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior? This prospective study will propose a framework to investigate the impact of the imposter phenomenon on essential leadership skills, focusing on exploring whether self-esteem acts as a mediating factor. The research will seek to evaluate the potential effects of the imposter phenomenon on leadership competencies, such as innovative work behavior and decision-making self-efficacy, among managers in South Africa. The significance of this proposed investigation stems from a recognized gap in previous studies addressing the relationship between the imposter phenomenon and these leadership skills within the South African context. By adopting a quantitative approach through a cross-sectional correlational survey design, the study aims to achieve its objectives by testing hypotheses and addressing pertinent research questions. The target population will comprise managers from both the public and private sectors in South Africa, and purposeful sampling will be employed to ensure a representative sample of leaders and managers. Analytical tools will be used for data analysis, including descriptive statistics, Cronbach alpha coefficients, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, and structural equation modeling. The anticipated results are expected to reveal whether the imposter phenomenon has a detrimental effect on decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior, with self-esteem as a mediating variable. The findings from this prospective study are anticipated to contribute to a heightened awareness of the imposter phenomenon, providing valuable insights for the better management and mitigation of its effects. The enhanced understanding of the imposter phenomenon can empower managers and leaders to make more effective decisions and exhibit innovative behavior.

Keywords: Decision-making efficacy, imposter phenomenon, innovative work behavior, leadership competencies, model, self-efficacy, self-esteem

Introduction

The imposter phenomenon (IP) manifests as feelings of inadequacy, a questioning of belonging, and a perception of being fraudulent (King & Cooley, 1995). Coined by Suzanne Imes and Pauline Clance in the mid-1970s, the term distinguishes this phenomenon from a neurological disorder. Individuals experiencing IP attribute their success to luck or connections rather than intelligence or competence, believing they have deceived others into perceiving them as brilliant and capable (Clance & Imes, 1978). Common emotions associated with the imposter phenomenon include nervousness (Topping, 1984), low self-esteem (Sonnak & Towell, 2001), despair (McGregor *et al.*, 2008), and feelings of low self-worth (Roskowski, 2010). Those with imposter tendencies often perceive themselves as less capable than their peers, doubting their intelligence and abilities (Leary *et al.*, 2000).

The IP can adversely affect individuals' work-life balance (Casselmann *et al.*, 2006), motivating them to work harder and leading to self-defeating behaviors such as discouragement and a sense of uselessness (Parkman, 2016). These emotions may hinder individuals from reaching their full potential for success, causing psychological discomfort, self-monitoring, self-doubt, and a fear of failure. An overemphasis on a perceived lack of ability can harm careers (Lane, 2015), resulting in burnout and inefficiency, and individuals may miss out on opportunities due to a perceived lack of competence. Prioritizing work over personal life can strain relationships as individuals sacrifice their well-being for professional success (Lane, 2015). Leaders facing the imposter phenomenon may experience dread and despair, hindering their ability to make critical decisions and impacting organizational performance (Mount & Tardanico, 2014). Consequently, the imposter phenomenon can benefit and harm organizations and individuals, as those fearing mistakes may refrain from taking the necessary actions for personal and professional growth, including presenting innovative ideas (Cacciotti *et al.*, 2016).

Fear of failure, a consequence of the imposter phenomenon, has been extensively studied across various occupations and contexts. Studies have explored how business leaders cope with failure when initiating new ventures, projects, or ideas (Sosna *et al.*, 2010). Characteristics of the organizational imposter phenomenon and personal fear of failure have been identified. Leaders fearing failure may hesitate to implement changes that could enhance organizational performance, risking failure without growth (de Souza & Tomei, 2016). Despite potential

drawbacks, some employees may appreciate leaders who fear failure due to heightened attention to detail and avoidance of performance defects (Morgan & Sisak, 2016). However, this fear can impede personal and organizational progress, hindering decision-making and creativity – essential skills for professional growth and organizational success (Dixon *et al.*, 2010).

The imposter phenomenon (IP), characterized by chronic self-doubt and feelings of fraudulence, poses a significant obstacle to leadership efficacy in the workplace. Research indicates a correlation between leadership competencies and IP characteristics, such as fear of failure, poor self-efficacy, and perceived deception (Jackson, 2018; Vergauwe *et al.*, 2015), undermining leadership capabilities and fostering uncertainty and self-deprecation. A less explored but potentially consequential aspect of IP is its relationship with innovative work behavior. Preliminary studies suggest that individuals plagued by IP may engage in innovative work behavior as a coping mechanism to counteract their inherent self-doubt and insecurity (Chakraverty, 2022). This seemingly paradoxical drive to innovate may stem from a deep-seated fear of exposure as an imposter, prompting individuals to exceed their prescribed roles. Moreover, IP has been linked to compromised decision-making, fostering self-doubt, and promoting a harsh self-critical stance (KH & Menon, 2022), resulting in hesitation, indecision, and a reluctance to take risks – adversely affecting effective leadership.

Considering the extensive challenges emphasized in the current body of literature regarding the adverse outcomes associated with the imposter phenomenon (IP), this conceptual academic article outlines the problem statement for a forthcoming investigation. The research explores how IP potentially impacts critical leadership competencies, specifically decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior, emphasizing self-esteem as a mediating factor in this relationship. The forthcoming research aims to conduct a comprehensive examination to comprehend the detrimental repercussions of IP better.

To effectively address this research problem, a deep understanding of the adverse effects of IP is crucial. This understanding will serve as the cornerstone to develop targeted interventions and strategies to alleviate the imposter phenomenon's negative impact on leadership competencies. The research will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the imposter phenomenon by providing empirical insights into its implications for critical leadership attributes and offering practical recommendations to mitigate its adverse effects.

Rationale and significance of the study

The imposter phenomenon (IP) is anticipated to challenge effective leadership substantially. It underscores the need to comprehensively explore its implications for critical leadership competencies, including innovative work behavior and decision-making self-efficacy. This impending research aims to provide essential insights for leaders and managers in both the private and public sectors, aiding them in recognizing, comprehending, managing, and controlling the influences of IP.

To delve into the intricacies of this complex dynamic, the study will propose using a quantitative cross-sectional survey methodology. This approach is designed to meticulously scrutinize the repercussions of IP on innovative work behavior and decision-making self-efficacy. The research will offer a nuanced understanding of IP's role in shaping leadership efficacy by explicitly establishing connections between IP and these pivotal leadership competencies.

A pivotal aspect of this forthcoming study involves the examination of self-esteem as a mediating factor in the relationship between IP, innovative work behavior, and decision-making self-efficacy. Unraveling the mediating role of self-esteem is expected to shed light on additional strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of IP. By elucidating the intricate dynamics of IP and its impact on leadership, this research provides leaders with the knowledge necessary to assess the potential impact of IP-related characteristics. This understanding can aid leaders in comprehending the influence of IP on their ability to lead, make decisions, take risks, and exercise effective leadership overall.

Another critical objective of the study is to underscore the role of self-esteem as a mediating element in this intricate relationship. This dual focus is intended to ensure that the research maintains theoretical and practical relevance, thereby enhancing its value to various stakeholders. The practical implications of this research are anticipated to be far-reaching. The findings and recommendations derived from this study are poised to empower leaders to identify, analyze, and manage the effects of IP on their decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior more adeptly. In doing so, leaders are expected to effectively mitigate the negative impact of IP and enhance their overall leadership effectiveness.

The forthcoming research will explore the imposter phenomenon, characterized by persistent feelings of inadequacy and a fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evident

accomplishments, and its potentially significant impact on a leader's self-esteem. This, in turn, is anticipated to have profound implications for critical leadership competencies such as decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior. When leaders perceive themselves as imposters, they may doubt their abilities to make effective decisions, fearing that their choices are mere luck rather than informed judgment. This is expected to lead to hesitancy, over-analysis, or a reluctance to take risks, hampering their decision-making self-efficacy.

The imposter phenomenon is expected to stifle leaders' inclination to explore new and innovative approaches, as they may hesitate to showcase their ideas out of fear of being exposed as fraudulent if those ideas fail. This apprehension is anticipated to hinder their willingness to encourage a culture of innovation among their teams and can discourage the pursuit of novel strategies or solutions. In the real world, this issue is expected to lead to inhibited organizational growth, diminished creativity, and reduced agility in a rapidly evolving business landscape as leaders struggle to make confident decisions and foster innovative environments due to the negative impact of imposter feelings on their self-esteem.

This research will encompass both theoretical and practical dimensions. By enhancing the understanding of the impact of the imposter phenomenon, a leader can determine the consequences of the characteristics manifested by this phenomenon if managed incorrectly. It is expected to assist a leader in comprehending its impact on their capacity to lead, make decisions, take risks, and be innovative, all of which are anticipated to influence their overall leadership abilities. The findings in this study are expected to enable leaders to acknowledge the influence of the imposter phenomenon and, as a result, make more effective decisions and demonstrate innovative behavior despite the phenomenon's influence.

This study is significant as, at the time of its initiation, no known research has investigated the relationship between the imposter phenomenon and innovative work behavior and decision-making self-efficacy within the South African leadership context. The theme of this study has yet to be empirically investigated, making its exploration crucial. The anticipated results of this study are expected to create awareness and propose strategies to overcome the imposter phenomenon. It is expected to establish a new and substantial connection between the identified leadership constructs and the imposter phenomenon. If not managed, the influence of the imposter phenomenon on leader behaviors, specifically related to leadership decision-making

self-efficacy and innovative work behavior, will be highlighted. The influence of the imposter phenomenon on leadership competencies, namely innovative work behavior and decision-making self-efficacy, will be determined for leaders to identify, understand, manage, and control the impact of this phenomenon.

Aparna and Menon (2020) argued that the existing body of evidence on the association between the imposter phenomenon and leadership competencies needs more sufficiency (Aparna & Menon, 2020). Nevertheless, their scholarly investigation formulates inferences concerning potential correlations between the imposter phenomenon and fundamental leadership compartments, notably encompassing the realms of decision-making and innovative work behavior. The gap wherein these postulated connections still need to be empirically tested is noteworthy. This study, in response, will undertake the imperative task of experimentally examining and substantiating these hypothesized relationships, thereby effectively bridging this scholarly gap.

Therefore, this study will address a significant gap in the existing body of knowledge. Despite the growing recognition of the imposter phenomenon's impact on individuals' psychological well-being and professional development, there still needs to be more research exploring its intersection with innovative work behavior and decision-making self-efficacy, specifically within the South African leadership context. By delving into this uncharted territory, this study will not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex psychological dynamics within leadership in a unique cultural and socio-economic setting, but it will also offer invaluable insights into how the imposter phenomenon might influence critical drivers of organizational success, such as innovation and effective decision-making. In a rapidly evolving global landscape, where diverse leadership strategies are essential for thriving organizations, unraveling these connections is expected to make a significant scholarly contribution.

Objectives, Questions, and Hypotheses

This study will explore the influence of the imposter phenomenon (IP) on leadership competencies, explicitly concentrating on decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior while considering self-esteem as a mediating variable. The research objectives will revolve around evaluating the levels of IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior among managers and leaders in South Africa. Furthermore, the study

will endeavor to establish the validity and reliability of the measuring instruments employed for these constructs within the specific context of South Africa.

In pursuit of these objectives, the research will pose the following questions:

- How does the imposter phenomenon affect managers' and leaders' self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior levels?
- Are the measuring instruments for IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior valid and reliable in South Africa?
- Are there differences in behavior based on gender, age groups, managerial levels, and sectors concerning IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior?
- Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between IP, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior?
- Is there a relationship between IP, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior among South African managers and leaders?

To address these inquiries in the upcoming research, the following hypotheses will be formulated:

- H1₀: The measuring instruments for IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior are not valid and reliable in South Africa.
- H1_a: The measuring instruments for IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior are valid and reliable in South Africa.
- H2₀: There are no differences in IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior based on gender, age groups, years of experience, management roles, and sectors.
- H2_a: There are differences in IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior based on gender, age groups, years of experience, management roles, and sectors.
- H3₀: Self-esteem does not mediate the relationship between IP, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior.
- H3_a: Self-esteem mediates the relationship between IP, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior.

H4₀: IP does not negatively influence leadership competencies, namely, decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior.

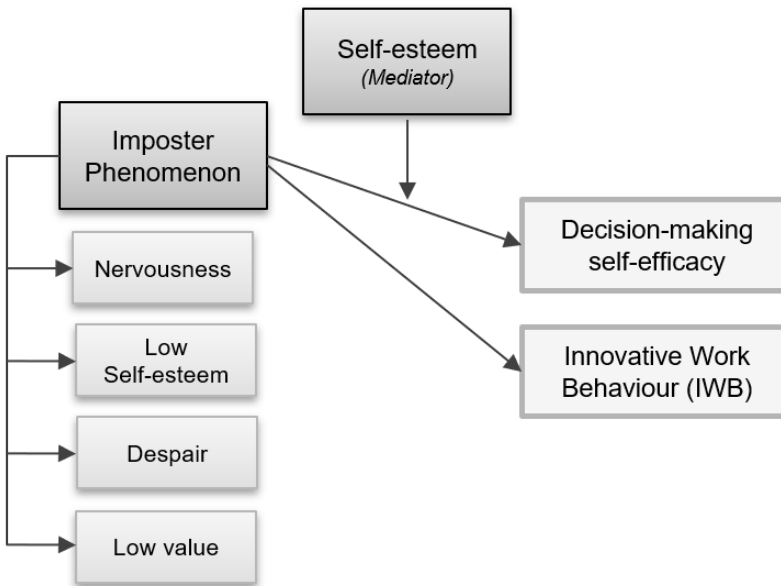
H4_a: IP negatively influences decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior.

By testing these hypotheses, the study aspired to enhance our comprehension of the link between the imposter phenomenon (IP) and leadership competencies within the South African context. This investigation sought to provide insights contributing to theoretical and practical applications.

Literature Review

The upcoming literature review will delve into the imposter phenomenon (IP) and its intricate connections with the constructs under examination in this research. The primary focus will be on comprehending the nuanced relationship between IP, decision-making self-efficacy, innovative work behavior, and the mediating role of self-esteem within this context. In this forthcoming study, the IP will be treated as the independent variable, embodying the principal influencing factor in the proposed model. Simultaneously, self-esteem will operate as the mediating variable, potentially influencing the direction and strength of the relationship between the IP and the dependent variables. The dependent variables in this study, representing the leadership competencies expected to be impacted by the IP, will be decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior.

The conceptual framework of this impending study, visually depicted to showcase the proposed relationships among these variables, will be presented in Figure 1. This framework will serve as a guiding model for the investigation, providing a schematic representation of the anticipated associations, thereby facilitating a more organized and focused analysis of the research problem.

Figure 1*Conceptual framework***Imposter Phenomenon**

Individuals who experience imposter tendencies often contend with self-doubt, questioning their abilities and achievements, and harboring fears of exposure as fraudulent (Clance & Imes, 1978). In the corporate realm, managers are perceived as elite, characterized by academic competence and a pursuit of success (Kennedy, 2019). Even assuming they are top performers and unwavering leaders, managers may only sometimes possess the right solutions (Wiig, 1997). The United States leads in efficiency, as per the World Economic Forum's Competitiveness Report, a success attributed to collaborative efforts from business leaders, academic institutions, research agencies, and start-ups (Schwab, 2019). However, the demanding nature of managerial roles may breed maladaptive perfectionism, resulting in persistent concerns about performance and susceptibility to the psychological distress, self-doubt, and anxiety associated with IP.

The challenges of the 21st-century workplace are formidable (Noe *et al.*, 2014). Employment concerns extend beyond task execution, with anxieties about career growth and stability becoming increasingly existential. The imminent digital transition, featuring automation

and artificial intelligence, introduces uncertainty about the future of professions (Annunziata & Bourgeois, 2018). Global competition necessitates leaders to exert more effort, dedicate longer hours, and foster innovative work processes. Elevated technical demands and external expectations may lead leaders to question their capabilities and performance (Macky & Boxall, 2008). A study titled *What CEOs are Afraid of*, by consultant Roger Jones, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, explores the impact of IP on leadership (Jones, 2015). Based on 116 CEOs and senior executives, the study concludes that leaders, despite their status, harbor fears of underperformance, vulnerability, internal politics, and appearing incompetent. The prevalence of IP traits among leaders, as revealed in the study, suggests potential self-doubt, insecurity, and fragility.

Consequently, IP-associated traits may permeate an organization. Insecure leaders may struggle to overcome challenges or drive organizational growth, leading to fear-driven decision-making, organizational risks, process deficiencies, and undesirable behaviors (Walker, 2002). Job insecurity, loss of competitive advantage, and professional recognition may exacerbate the issue, resulting in defensive authoritarianism (Bahadori *et al.*, 2018).

Previous research underscores a connection between IP and dysfunctional occupational behaviors, with potentially detrimental consequences if these behaviors persist within an organization. The impact can manifest as both harassing and discriminatory. Therefore, awareness of IP can significantly influence leaders. To mitigate its impact on self-esteem, leaders need to recognize, assess, and manage the influence of IP on leadership competencies, specifically decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior (IWB).

Self-esteem

In psychology, self-esteem denotes an individual's comprehensive emotional evaluation of their worth, encompassing self-perceptions across various dimensions such as value, aptitude, relevance, effectiveness, and acceptance or rejection propensity (Coetzee *et al.*, 2006; Garrety *et al.*, 2003; Leary, 1999a, 1999b). It represents a holistic construct comprising cognitive, behavioral, evaluative, and affective components. Notably, self-esteem is socially defined, capturing emotions and experiences linked to diverse self-concepts and self-images, primarily driven by an individual's psychological need for affirmation and connectedness within their social group (Battle, 1992; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Coetzee *et al.*, 2006).

Furthermore, self-esteem is intricately connected to the desire for efficient and credible functioning, competence, and accomplishment. It is crucial in personal achievement and an individual's social group context. Individuals with high self-esteem typically maintain positive feelings about themselves, irrespective of their evaluations of specific abilities or skills, demonstrating resilience and steadfastness in their self-worth. Conversely, those with low self-esteem often harbor negative thoughts about themselves, even when acknowledging specific competencies (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Park *et al.*, 2018).

In the imposter phenomenon (IP) realm, empirical research has yielded varied results on the relationship between IP and self-esteem. However, it is generally accepted that issues related to self-esteem are intrinsically linked to IP (Harvey, 1981; Schubert & Bowker, 2019; Topping, 1983). Mainly, self-esteem, representing an individual's most profound thoughts and feelings about self-worth, significantly influences imposters' self-esteem. Imposters, despite accomplishments, struggle to internalize their success, fearing exposure as frauds. This is particularly relevant as individuals with IP often experience low self-esteem despite evidence to the contrary in their performance or abilities, perpetuating a cycle of self-deprecation and doubt (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016).

The association between the imposter phenomenon (IP) and perfectionism is complex, with self-esteem posited as a mediator in this relationship. Improved self-esteem may reduce the gap in the perfectionism-imposter relationship, alleviating imposter feelings. Conversely, high standards inherent in perfectionism can lower self-esteem and exacerbate imposter feelings, highlighting the intricate interplay among these constructs (Cokley *et al.*, 2018).

The impact of self-esteem extends to leadership and imposterism, as asserted by Langford and Clance (1993). Imposters, lacking the supportive environment necessary to foster self-esteem, pursue self-perfection as a coping mechanism. Healthy self-esteem, characterized by adaptability, positive self-evaluations, and independence from constant validation and defense, mitigates self-esteem issues. Individuals with healthy self-esteem are not compelled to prove themselves incessantly, unlike those exhibiting imposter symptoms driven by self-preservation and self-improvement. The latter group relentlessly strives for personal achievement, seeking to validate perceived intellectual superiority (Langford & Clance, 1993).

Imposters tend to avoid situations that may result in negative feedback about their competence, while individuals with stable self-esteem accept themselves, flaws included. This acceptance promotes resilience and personal growth, underlining the multifaceted influence of self-esteem on psychological well-being and professional conduct, with implications for leadership and imposter behavior.

Furthermore, the impact of self-esteem extends to decision-making self-efficacy, a fundamental aspect of leadership. Leaders, who often serve as decision-makers, are confronted with the continual task of evaluating options and making informed decisions, making sound leadership skills vital. The imposter phenomenon (IP) significantly influences decision-making, shaping leaders' choices based on personality and other IP-related characteristics. Inclusive leadership, fostering employee participation in decision-making, aligns with innovative work behaviors (IWB) and can be affected by the imposter phenomenon. IP can impact decision-making self-efficacy, influencing adaptive readiness, career adaptability resources, career planning, and vocational self-efficacy responses.

Self-efficacy is one's belief in their ability to succeed and achieve desired outcomes, plays a crucial role in shaping decisions, effort, and emotional responses. Individuals with high self-efficacy tend to undertake challenging tasks, promoting creativity and innovation. In contrast, individuals with the imposter phenomenon often experience low self-efficacy, potentially leading to professional difficulties. Supportive organizations can mitigate the effects of the imposter phenomenon and alleviate some negative impacts of low self-efficacy.

The nuanced interplay among self-esteem, perfectionism, and the imposter phenomenon requires careful consideration in interventions targeting these constructs. Understanding the dichotomy between ordinary and neurotic perfectionism is crucial, as ordinary perfectionists aim for excellence without compromising mental health, while neurotic perfectionists set nearly impossible goals, leading to continual distress.

In conclusion, self-esteem's role in the imposter phenomenon and its impact on leadership, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behaviors underscore its multifaceted influence on psychological well-being and professional conduct. Recognizing and managing the effects of the imposter phenomenon and promoting healthy self-esteem can contribute to more effective leadership and organizational outcomes.

Innovative Work Behaviour

In tandem, the imposter phenomenon (IP) influences decision-making processes, potentially impacting a leader's engagement in innovative work behavior (IWB). IWB is characterized by the purposeful creation, introduction, and application of novel ideas within a work role, group, or organization to enhance overall performance (Ramamoorthy *et al.*, 2005). This behavioral aspect involves the generation, promotion, and implementation of ideas. The intricate dynamics of knowledge, encompassing explicit and tacit knowledge, play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of those experiencing IP (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Explicit knowledge, being language-based and readily transferable, contrasts with the more challenging-to-express tacit knowledge, which includes subjective insights, intuitions, and hunches acquired through direct experience.

For individuals grappling with the imposter phenomenon, explicit knowledge significantly influences their perceptions, shaping their self-concept and social behavior. Psychological empowerment is a prerequisite for employees to engage in IWB and navigate its intricate processes, providing autonomy, meaning, competencies, and feedback (Kraimer *et al.*, 1999). Research indicates that intrinsic motivation facilitates individuals' experiences of autonomy, competence, purpose, and feedback in their work roles (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In an innovative environment, employees are likely to assess their surroundings based on support for IWB, with a supportive atmosphere fostering increased engagement in IWB (Javed *et al.*, 2019). It is essential to note that IWB should not be confused with creativity; while creativity involves generating new ideas, IWB encompasses the broader aspects of promotion and implementation. Inclusive leaders, characterized by openness, availability, and accessibility, are pivotal in fostering psychological empowerment among employees (Javed *et al.*, 2019).

Amid the rapid evolution of the business environment, organizations face intense pressures and must innovate to stay competitive, relying on employees to drive innovation in processes, strategies, and operations. Employee participation in IWB offers substantial benefits to organizations, including enhanced performance and socio-psychological benefits for employees. Job design research highlights that flexible and autonomous employees are likelier to be creative and innovative (Ramamoorthy *et al.*, 2005). IWB, involving introducing novel ideas into work roles, groups, or organizations, seeks to enhance performance through purposeful efforts.

Innovations yield dividends such as improved organizational performance and socio-psychological benefits for employees, fostering better alignment of job demands with employee resources, heightened workplace satisfaction, and improved interpersonal communication (Janssen, 2000).

Furthermore, employee engagement in IWB can benefit organizations, groups, or individual employees by facilitating more efficient job performance. The decision to engage in IWB is influenced by employees' intrinsic motivations and perceptions of psychological contract fulfillment within their organizational roles (Ramamoorthy *et al.*, 2005). The definition of IWB has evolved to conceptualize it as an individual's deliberate behavioral initiative to introduce novel and valuable ideas, processes, goods, or procedures. IWB involves three distinct behavioral activities: idea generation, promotion, and implementation. Individual innovation typically involves generating novel and valuable ideas in response to workplace problems, inconsistencies, discontinuities, or emerging trends (Janssen, 2000).

Within the context of managers or leaders experiencing the imposter phenomenon (IP), research indicates a negative self-perception of their abilities, influencing managerial task delegation decisions (Rohrmann *et al.*, 2016). Imposters need to be more proactive in exploring alternative job opportunities due to diminished recognition of their traits and talents. They often attribute their employment opportunities to chance or external factors, hindering proactive career advancement. Additionally, the IP can negatively impact occupational self-efficacy, leading imposters to struggle to envision themselves in alternative, potentially more successful, professional situations (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Research involving doctoral candidates has identified a negative correlation between IP and self-efficacy (McDowell *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, IP is posited to negatively correlate with career planning, career exploration, and occupational self-efficacy, while it is positively associated with career decision-making difficulties (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2017).

Research Philosophy

The underlying philosophy guiding this upcoming research revolves around the principles governing collecting, analyzing, and utilizing data related to a specific phenomenon. It will encompass various research methodologies, including epistemology, which is concerned with known accuracy, and doxology, which focuses on believed accuracy. The study employed

constructivist and interpretivist paradigms to comprehend, interpret, and evaluate the impact of the imposter phenomenon (IP), enabling participants to construct meaning and integrate new knowledge into their understanding actively.

Constructivism, from a philosophical standpoint, posits that individuals actively construct knowledge rather than passively absorbing information. Interpretivism, conversely, involves epistemologies prioritizing interpreting the meanings individuals attach to their actions. This forthcoming research, designed to comprehend and evaluate the effects of the IP on leaders, will analyze leaders' innovative work behaviors (IWB) and decision-making self-efficacy within the leadership context. The underlying paradigm suggests that reality can be understood in multiple ways, aiming to explore how individuals construct their reality within their social environment, thereby influencing the reality of their environment.

The study will adopt a naturalistic approach, wherein the researcher will seek to understand phenomena in their naturally occurring states, emphasizing authenticity and ecological validity. The researcher will refrain from manipulating or controlling the environment, participants, or phenomena of interest. Instead, they will immerse themselves in the context to gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study. Consequently, the study will involve in-depth analyses and interpretations of leaders' experiences with the IP, IWBs, and decision-making self-efficacy in their natural, real-world settings.

Research Method

In the impending research, a quantitative research strategy will be employed to scrutinize the conditions or events influencing leaders affected by the imposter phenomenon (IP), aiming better to understand the social environment through systematic data collection. This research approach will facilitate the generation of objective facts, which will be effectively communicated through statistical presentations and numerical figures. By embracing this rigorous scientific inquiry style, the anticipated findings will hold the potential for replication, thereby augmenting the reliability and validity of the research. The data derived from this study will undergo analysis to reveal patterns, trends, and averages related to the imposter phenomenon, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behaviors. The conclusions drawn from the data analysis process will play a pivotal role in predicting and exploring causal relationships among these areas.

Quantitative research adheres to the structure of the scientific method. Following observing the investigated situation, hypotheses will be formulated using deductive reasoning, predicting how the data would appear if the theory were accurate. Confirmation or refutation of the hypothesis will occur upon the collection and analysis of data. In this study, correlational analysis will scrutinize the data, examining relationships between quantified and recorded research variables. The interconnected variables in this study, particularly the imposter phenomenon and leaders' decision-making and innovative work behaviors, will be subject to this technique to identify patterns and trends in the data.

Research Design

A cross-sectional correlational survey design will be deemed appropriate to address the research questions and test hypotheses in the upcoming study. This design involves cohort studies with a single comparison between exposed and unexposed subjects, considering the outcomes and associated characteristics at a specific time (Lau & Kuziemy, 2016). Cross-sectional studies, characterized by gathering data at a particular moment, are often anticipated to be more cost-effective and less time-consuming than other research types. This methodology will examine individual differences by collecting data from diverse participants.

A research design constitutes a logically connected set of configurations, and researchers will select the most suitable one based on their study's objectives. Depending on the study's goals, researchers will decide whether to conduct a descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory analysis (Babbie, 2016). Exploratory research is commonly anticipated to be employed in the social sciences to investigate subjects or when researchers delve into a new interest to gain a deeper understanding of the subject (Babbie, 2016). For example, exploratory research may be necessary to assess and formulate a hypothesis for a problem with limited prior knowledge, a new area of interest, or when exploring and developing a hypothesis in an underexplored domain.

Target Population, Sample Method, and Sample Size

The forthcoming study will focus on leaders and managers in South Africa across supervisory, middle, and top-management levels, encompassing both the public and private sectors. A non-probability sampling technique was employed to align with the demographics and research goals, precisely, a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on their knowledge, relationships, or experiences related to the research

subject. This method will enable researchers to target specific population subsets that can offer valuable insights for the study.

Measuring Instruments

The upcoming study will center on leaders and managers in South Africa, spanning supervisory, middle, and top-management levels in both the public and private sectors. A non-probability sampling approach, precisely the purposive sampling method, will be utilized to align with demographic considerations and research objectives. Purposive sampling entails selecting participants based on their knowledge, relationships, or experiences relevant to the research subject. This method will empower researchers to pinpoint specific population subsets that can provide valuable insights for the study.

Table 1

The subscale expression impostor-profile (IPP31)

Scale	Scale name	Items
-	Total score	1-30
1	Competence doubt	11 items
2	Working style	6 items
3	Alienation	3 items
4	Other-self divergence	4 items
5	Ambition	3 items
6	Need for sympathy	3 items

The self-esteem scale comprises ten items rated on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) *strongly agree* to (4) *strongly disagree*. Developed by Rosenberg in 1965, the scale assesses an individual's overall level of esteem, emphasizing global self-esteem through a ten-item self-assessment that addresses a person's general sense of value or acceptability.

Additionally, the study will utilize the Managerial Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (MDMSEQ) to evaluate leaders' self-efficacy in making managerial decisions. This questionnaire gauged managers' confidence in decision-making on a 100-point scale, with the first activity involving nine components and the design phase comprising 12, including systematic data collection and discussion.

In completing the MDMSEQ, participants will perceive their self-efficacy beliefs concerning decision-making ability on a 100-point scale, ranging from 0 (*cannot do*) to 100 (*highly certain can do*) in 10-unit intervals. Each question is designed to reflect managers' behaviours that influence their tenacity, effort, accuracy, threat response, or self-discipline when consistently undertaking these activities amid adverse circumstances. Items measuring the same efficacy domain are aggregated to generate a mean self-efficacy subscale score, as outlined in Table 2 (Myburgh *et al.*, 2015)

Table 2

The subscale expression Managerial Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

Scale	Scale name	Items
1	Thought and affected control	12 items
2	Exploratory search and processing efficacy	8 items
3	Analytical and inferential efficacy	4 items
4	Social influence efficacy	6 items

In conclusion, the examination will evaluate the leader's innovative work behavior (IWB) using the IWB Scale developed by Ayoub *et al.* (2021). This scale captures the multidimensional metrics of an individual's innovative behavior. The survey will explore various facets, including opportunity exploration, idea generation, idea promotion, idea realization, and idea sustainability. A detailed representation of the scale can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

The subscale expression Innovative Work Behaviour Scale

Scale	Scale name	Items
1	Opportunity exploration	4 Items
2	Idea generation	5 Items
3	Idea promotion	6 Items
4	Idea realization	7 Items
5	Idea sustainability	5 Items

Following data collection in the upcoming research, an analysis will be conducted to classify respondents as leaders exhibiting imposter phenomenon (IP) characteristics. Subsequently, the analysis will delve into assessing the respondents' self-esteem. It will scrutinize the management decision-making characteristics and validate the respondent leader's innovative work behavior (IWB). Upon completing the data analysis, a comparative examination will be conducted between decision-making self-efficacy and IWB, distinguishing leaders with IP characteristics from those without. The analyzed findings will deduce the influence of IP on these aspects. Additionally, the mediating role of self-esteem will be explored and established.

Data Collection

Quantitative data will be gathered through an anonymous survey conducted on Google Forms, ensuring no direct interaction with the respondents. A gatekeeper facilitates the distribution of the questionnaire link, and participants are invited to voluntarily engage in the study by completing the survey.

Data Coding and Analysis

The quantitative data collected will be evaluated using the statistical software SPSS in the forthcoming research. Descriptive statistics will be employed to gauge the levels of the imposter phenomenon, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior among leaders. Reliability and validity assessments of the measuring instruments for the imposter phenomenon, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior in South Africa will be conducted through Cronbach's alphas and exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.

To examine potential variations in the imposter phenomenon, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior based on gender and sectors, independent-samples T-tests and Cohen's will be employed. For qualification, experience, and managerial role, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients will be calculated. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to investigate whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between the imposter phenomenon, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior. The study will also explore the relationships between the imposter phenomenon, self-decision-making efficacy, and innovative work behavior among leaders in South Africa.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher will adhere strictly to the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 and the ethical standards outlined by the university's EMS-REC Ethics Committee in the upcoming research. By voluntarily completing and submitting the questionnaire, respondents will consent to participate in the study, acknowledging the questionnaire's apparent purpose, voluntary participation, assured anonymity, and the reporting of responses in aggregate form. Respondents will not be individually identified in the study, ensuring confidentiality.

Participants are informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any point. The information provided by respondents will only be utilized in research studies and articles featured in recognized journals and conferences, with a guarantee that their identities will remain undisclosed. The institution will securely retain the collected data for five years.

Anticipated Findings

The expected findings in the forthcoming research suggest a negative influence of the imposter phenomenon on decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior, with self-esteem potentially mediating this relationship. The outcomes of this study contribute to the academic discourse, raise awareness, and propose practical strategies to mitigate the imposter syndrome. Ultimately, this knowledge will empower managers and leaders to enhance their decision-making capabilities and exhibit more innovative behaviors.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to develop a framework for assessing the influence of the imposter phenomenon (IP) on critical leadership competencies while determining the mediating role of self-esteem. The study will adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to investigate the association between the constructs. Based on the problem statement, the following research questions will be formulated: What are the levels of IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and innovative work behavior (IWB) among leaders? Are the measuring instruments for the IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and IWB valid and reliable within South African higher education? Are there differences in IP, self-esteem, decision-making self-efficacy, and IWB levels between genders, age groups, managerial levels, and universities? Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between the IP, decision-making self-efficacy, and IWB?

Furthermore, the study will investigate whether there is a relationship between the IP, decision-making efficacy, and IWB of leaders in South African higher education institutions. A cross-sectional correlational survey and a quantitative research method will be appropriate to achieve the aims, respond to the research questions, and test the hypotheses. Leaders from educational institutions will make up the populace. The problem will be investigated, the research questions addressed, the objectives met, and the hypotheses tested using descriptive statistics and structural equation modeling. High levels of IP are expected to harm these leadership skills, and simultaneously, self-esteem and self-efficacy are expected to mediate this relationship.

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