Breaking Barriers: How imposter syndrome affects ethic minority and students from low-income backgrounds.

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Abstract:

This paper will focus on ways imposter syndrome affects students from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds' University experience and personal development. The first piece of literature that recognised imposter syndrome was in high achieving woman by Clance and Imes but was later adapted by (Harvey, 1982) to include all genders in despite of their success (Clance and Imes, 1978, 1987). Imposter syndrome is not classified as a clinical condition however it can still have overlapping symptoms with other mental health issues. Some of these symptoms include psychological distress, anxiety, and dismissal of positive feedback (Bess, 2023). Imposter syndrome does not discriminate however it may affect marginalised groups more often due to systematic challenges as suggested by current research. The research was conducted using an online questionnaire where participants self-recruited using volunteered sampling. The questionnaire was advertised using an invitation email that was send to relevant university bodies with a link that directed participants to the questionnaire. All participants were informed of the ways in which their data would be stored and collected via the participation information leaflet. Informed consent was given as one of the first questions in the questionnaire. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analysed. The research found that all participants have experienced at least one of the recognised themes of imposter syndrome, either directly or indirectly as only 12 of 17 participant knowingly classified their experiences as imposter syndrome while the rest, despite not classifying these experiences, also had experiences associated with imposter syndrome. Therefore, participants have mixed personal and academic experiences because of this. Some participants raised concerns about the understandability of the questionnaire and therefore this limits the validity of the findings. Universities should make a more conscious effort to support students from Widening participation backgrounds in settling into the prestige of university whilst maintaining their self-esteem and personal experiences.

Introduction:

You may have noticed that when you are in a particular environment you feel as if you do not belong and despite your credentials you feel like an 'imposter' who does not deserve to be there. Imposter syndrome refers to an internal state of unsuitability a person has towards a role despite their successes to prove their suitability. Therefore, imposter syndrome and systematic challenges can cause individuals to have low self-efficacy and reduce their professional development and in turn reduce their quality of life. With the current difficulties that ethnic minority and low-income students face to make it to university, it is important to understand how these challenges have the potential to manifest into feelings of self-doubt and unworthiness of their positions. Therefore, this study will focus on whether imposter syndrome affects their university experience. Addressing imposter syndrome is crucial for fostering a more inclusive academic environment because it can improve the experiences of ethnic students by making a conscious effort to praise them and provide continuous support to allow them to transition more fluently into an unfamiliar culture. By having robust literature that supports the claims of imposter syndrome stressors, universities and academic institutions can significantly enhance the academic and personal success of its students and provide them with an environment to grow and develop to their full potential. This report will highlight the experiences of ethnic minority and students from low-income backgrounds in university and will use empirical evidence, in the form of a questionnaire, to support claims and encourage institutions to make conscious changes. Based on participants' experiences, the research finds that participants had varied experiences with common themes of imposter syndrome, with some having more feeling of inadequacy than others. A systematic review of 62 studies showed the prevalence of imposter syndrome to be 56% to 82% in graduate students, university students, nurses, medical students and others (Bess, 2023). Imposter syndrome does not discriminate and can be a possibility for any individual, however it may affect marginalised groups more frequently due to systematic challenges like racism, microaggressions and difficulty assimilating to different cultures, which could lead to cultural isolation (Cokley, 2013). Some cultural differences like the prestige environment of university in contrast to the culture of their state schools and home areas may exacerbate feelings of imposter syndrome. This is demonstrated by Bernard et al who found that African American women who faced high levels of racial discrimination in a predominantly white institution were more vulnerable to negative consequences to their mental health like imposter syndrome (Bernard et al. 2017). These stressors exacerbate feeling of inadequacy and lead to imposter syndrome. In addition, the unique pressures that students from low socio-economic backgrounds face like financial burdens and balancing academic life with paid work can contribute to the likelihood of developing imposter syndrome, in contrast to more financially secure counterparts (Phelan, 2024). In addition, systemic discrimination makes it easier to manifest feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy and allows researchers to spot trends in Widening Participation students easier and assume marginalisation to be a risk factor of imposter syndrome. Some of the compounded effects of imposter syndrome can result in lower academic achievement, poorer wellbeing in particular mental health and lastly higher rates of burn out from Widening participation groups (Martin. R et al. 2023).

Methods

While current literature already highlights the significant effect imposter syndrome has on students, this research focuses on how it effects their university experience as a whole and whether it causes any limitations to their academic and personal development, particularly in ethnic minority students and students from low-income backgrounds.

Design:

The design that was used to collect my data was an online survey using Microsoft form. Following consent statements and participant eligibility criteria the rest of the survey consisted of 3 main themes: Accepting Praise, Likelihood to seek Help and Comparisons and peer relationships. These themes highlight some of the main consequences of imposter syndrome and frequent in students who may suffer from Imposter syndrome. However, it was important to make all language used was neutral and did not presume the students' experiences by using leading language. Participants were all anonymous and in total 17 responses were gathered. The survey was a combination of some open-ended questions and Likert scale statements, to give participants a variety of question styles to keep them engaged as well as room to expand on their personal experiences. The average completion time for the online questionnaire was 20 minutes and 55 seconds.

Data Analysis:

The data has been analysed using two different methods, graphs and a thematic analysis. All Likert scale questions were analysed using a graph to show the percentages of participants who selected different answers. All open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis, with guidance from (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', 2008). Using thematic analysis on qualitative data on imposter syndrome is beneficial because it helps uncover detailed and meaningful insights from participants' experiences. This method identifies and examines patterns or themes in qualitative data, providing a deeper understanding of the thoughts and feelings associated with imposter syndrome.

Sample Gathering:

All participants were recruited using volunteer sampling, through an invitation message I sent out to relevant University societies and friends at university. The students sampled came from various courses as well as all academic year groups, providing a variety in data.

Ethics:

Participants were reassured that all their data would be anonymised, and participation was completely voluntary. Participants were not incentivised and were made aware of how their data would be stored and used via a Participant information leaflet.

Participant Criteria and Makeup:

All participants met at least one relevant category to be eligible to complete the questionnaire. 17 of 17 of participants were from an ethnic minority group. 8 of 17 participants were eligible for or received free school meals at any point during compulsory education. 4 of 17 participants received a university contextual offer. 6 of 17 participants went to a non- selective state school. These categorises ensured that the participants who completed the survey were from a Widening Participation background, which was crucial to the research question. 14 of 17 participants were Female and only 3 of 17 were male. 5 of 17 participants were in their 1st year of university while 7 of 17 were in their penultimate year. 4 of 17 were in their last academic year. Participants studied various different course at university, some examples are Philosophy and Global Sustainable Development, Law and Biomedical Sciences. This demonstrates a variety of student makeup and diversity within the answers gathered.

Legend	Value
🔵 I am from an ethnic minority gr...	17
🟠 I was eligible for or received fre...	8
🟢 I received a university contextu...	4
🔴 I went to a non-selective state s...	6

(Pie Chart of Participation Criteria)

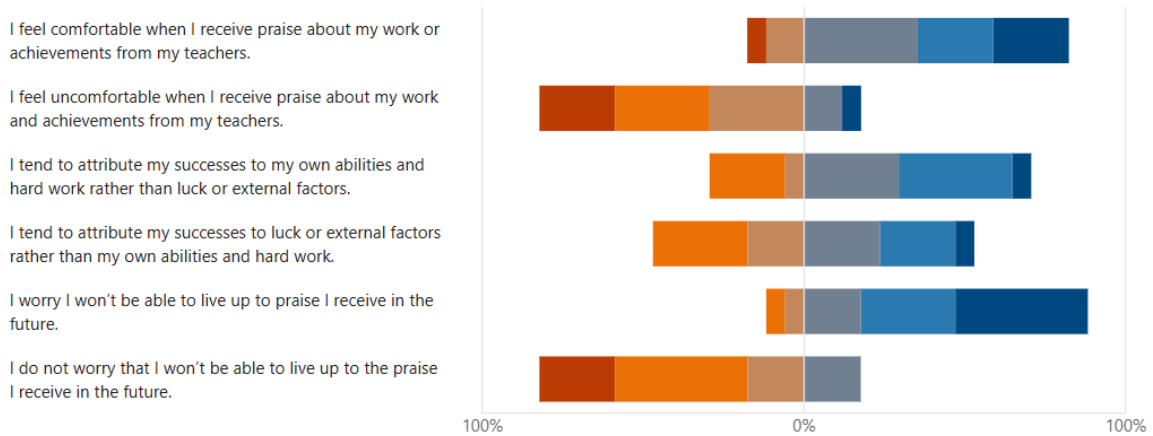|		
● Female	14	
● Male	3	
● Other	0	
● Prefer not to say	0	
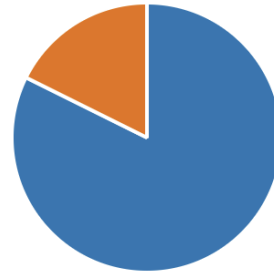
(Pie Chart of Participation Criteria)

Data Analysis:

All Likert scale questions, quantitative data, were analysed using graphs and a description of percentages.
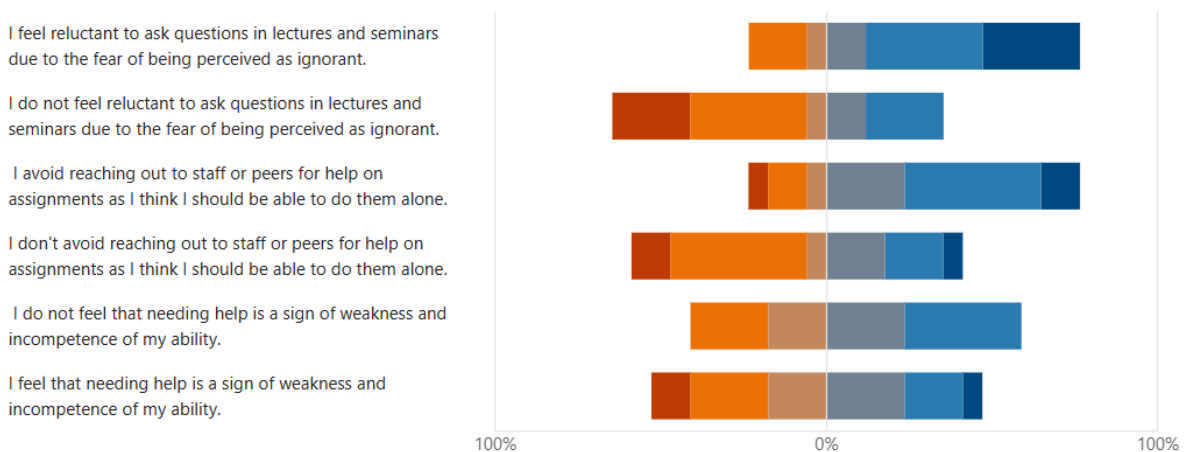
Theme 1: Accepting Praise

In statement 1 most participants selected Somewhat agree, at 35.3%. In statement 3 most participants selected Agree, at 35.3%. Lastly in statement 5 most participants selected Strongly agree, at 41.2%. Overall, the data suggest that while there is some consistency in responses, particularly for Statements 5 and 6, there is notable variability in how respondents perceive the other statements. These results indicate that in this theme as a whole, participants do not struggle with accepting praise to an extent that implies they suffer with imposter syndrome as well as attributing their successes to their hard work. However, they do worry about living up to the standards the praise has set for them in the future.
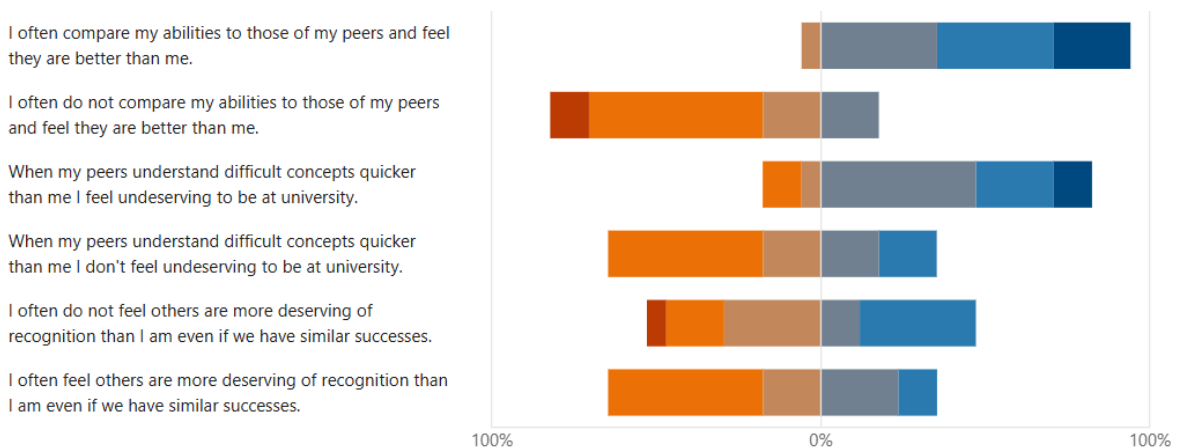
Theme 2: Likelihood to seek help

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

I feel reluctant to ask questions in lectures and seminars due to the fear of being perceived as ignorant.

I do not feel reluctant to ask questions in lectures and seminars due to the fear of being perceived as ignorant.

I avoid reaching out to staff or peers for help on assignments as I think I should be able to do them alone.

I don't avoid reaching out to staff or peers for help on assignments as I think I should be able to do them alone.

I do not feel that needing help is a sign of weakness and incompetence of my ability.

I feel that needing help is a sign of weakness and incompetence of my ability.

100%   0%   100%

In statement 1 most participants selected Agree, at 35.3%. In statement 3 most participants selected Agree, at 41.2%. Lastly in statement 5 most participants selected Agree, at 35.3%. Overall, the the data suggest that while there is some consistency in responses, particularly for Statement 5, there is notable variability in how respondents perceive the other statements. This variability highlights differing opinions among respondents, especially for Statements 2 and 4. Participants results have suggested more struggles with theme 2, despite some contradicting answers.

Theme 3: Comparison and peer relationships

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

I often compare my abilities to those of my peers and feel they are better than me.

I often do not compare my abilities to those of my peers and feel they are better than me.

When my peers understand difficult concepts quicker than me I feel undeserving to be at university.

When my peers understand difficult concepts quicker than me I don't feel undeserving to be at university.

I often do not feel others are more deserving of recognition than I am even if we have similar successes.

I often feel others are more deserving of recognition than I am even if we have similar successes.

100%   0%   100%

In statement 1 most participants selected Somewhat agree and Agree, at 35.3% for both. In statement 3 most participants selected Somewhat Agree, at 47.1%. Lastly for statement 5 most participants selected Agree, at 35.3%. Overall, whilst participants had various answers, there was a consensus in how their comparative behaviours with their peers' results in less self-efficacy. Participants also showed they doubted their place in university when their peers understood difficult concepts quicker than they did.

Bonus Questions:

Two bonus question assessed whether participants Self-Esteem and in class participation were compromised due to feelings of imposter syndrome. Statement 1 stated 'My self-esteem affects how often I contribute to class even if I know the correct answers' showed 42% of participants agreed with the statement, 24% somewhat agreed, 30% strongly agreed and only 6% disagreed. Statement 2 stated 'I feel able to contribute to class' showed the largest percentage of participants at 30% somewhat disagree followed by 24% who disagreed. These results show participants self esteem limits their ability to contribute to class more than it doesn't.
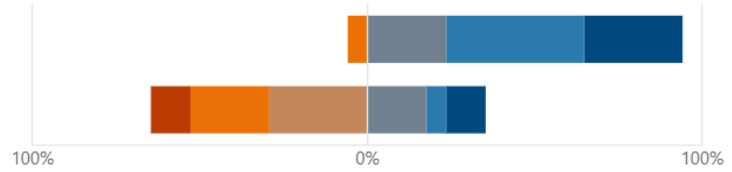
Thematic Analysis:

The Table below refers to the thematic themes and codes used to analyse and assess the data provided by participants for open ended questions, qualitative data:

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Initial codes
Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	**Cultural and Identity Misalignment** **Understanding your Mindful identity**	Don't belong, assimilate into a new environment, First-generation immigrant, Depends on different cultural environments, Personal Identity Open-minded/Closed-minded
Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	**Undervaluing Success** **Representation of Achievements**	Undeserving, feeling less than, not as good as people perceive you, Others do but not me, Expected therefore not praiseworthy, Lucky because of COVID Physical/Visual representation of success
Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	**Performance Anxiety** **Expectation Vs Reality**	Anxious of ability to complete tasks, despite being capable, not smart enough/Less able to complete tasks Merit/Hard work, Efforts and rewards, feeling down and disappointment when goals are not met, Room for improvement
Comparative Disadvantage and Unfair Opportunity Gaps	**Inequality in Opportunities** **Pressure of Prestige**	Less opportunity than counterparts, do not have social, financial, or educational advantages Yes, I go to a Russell Group University,
Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	**Perception of Achievements in accordance to statements**	Neutral, Satisfied, In agreement/disagreement with the statement.

Table 1: Question of Participants understanding of Imposter syndrome, 'In a few lines describe your understanding of what imposter syndrome is'.

Participant Responses	Main Theme	Sub-theme
Imposter syndrome is when you feel as though you are not apart or good enough for people and constantly feel like you're "interrupting" or disturbing them with your presence.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Cultural and Identity Misalignment
Imposter syndrome is when you have been accepted into a space (usually institutional/academic/corporate etc but can be personal like friend groups) and you constantly feel like you shouldn't be there, or you don't belong, or other people don't feel like you should be there.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Cultural and Identity Misalignment
The feeling that you are being accepted or praised for something you don't believe you truly are.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
In my perspective, imposter syndrome is feeling like you are not deserving of something you achieved through personal efforts or feeling out of place. For instance, feeling out of place at a high standard university or job, like you don't fit it despite your hard work to reach that point.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Undervaluing Success Cultural and Identity Misalignment
Feeling like you do not belong in places despite your hard work to be there.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Cultural and Identity Misalignment Undervaluing Success
Feeling like your success isn't warranted based on your merit.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
Feeling out of place in a particular environment.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Cultural and Identity Misalignment
Constantly feeling like you're not good enough.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
Imposter syndrome is when you believe you are not actually as good as people perceive you be.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
When you feel like you shouldn't be in a place/ don't belong/ feel like you don't deserve to be there despite being capable.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Cultural and Identity Misalignment Undervaluing Success
Feeling like you aren't deserving of your rewards and positive things that happen to you, feeling like it should be to someone else and constantly feeling afraid and anxious of your ability to complete tasks correctly.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict Anxiety and pressure to perform	Undervaluing Success Cultural and Identity Misalignment Performance Anxiety
Feeling less than	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
Feeling as thought you don't belong or fit in and feel undeserving of being there even though you've earnt it.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Cultural and Identity Misalignment Undervaluing Success
Feeling like you are a fake and do not deserve your achievements	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success

Findings:

Overall, participants shared a consistent understanding of imposter syndrome, with the two dominant sub-themes being undervaluing success and cultural and identity misalignment. Fourteen participants responded to this question, following an earlier prompt that asked whether they were familiar with imposter syndrome. Those who answered "yes" were then prompted to elaborate. Ensuring that participants had a clear understanding of imposter syndrome helps ensure valid responses, as it reduces the risk of confusion or incorrect answers.

Table 2: Question about participant general self-esteem, 'In a few lines explain whether you feel as though you are a person of worth and on equal plane fields with other'.

Participant Responses	Main Theme	Sub-theme
I do believe I am worthy however sometimes the situation doesn't align with my worth.	Anxiety and pressure to perform	Expectation vs Reality
I do definitely feel like I'm on an equal playing field with others logically but often times in the back of my mind I don't feel like I'm smart enough to be in spaces or I feel like I'm less able to complete tasks as others.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and pressure to perform Perception of Belonging and Identity conflict Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to statements Expectations vs Reality Understanding your Mindful Identity Undervaluing Success Performance Anxiety
I feel that I am a person of worth but oftentimes I feel like signifying aspects of my identity warp others perception of me, making it difficult to achieve things I believe I can.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Perception of Belonging and Identity conflict Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Cultural and Identity Misalignment Performance Anxiety
It has taken lot of inner work, but I do now feel like I am worthy of the opportunities I get. Being a first-generation immigrant, it was always very difficult to acclimate to a new environment without feeling like i'm intruding or undeserving. However, I've started to train myself to embrace my opportunities and congratulate myself. I don't think I have an equal playing field with others, specifically with people men or white people because I think they are at an advantage socially and academically. Being from a working-class background also puts me at a disadvantage in comparison to those who have more opportunities to advance socially.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Perception of Belonging and Identity conflict Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt Comparative Disadvantages and Unfair Opportunity Gaps	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Cultural and Identity Misalignment Undervaluing Success Understanding your Mindful Identity Inequality in Opportunity
I feel like I am a person of worth because I am deserving of living with a good quality of life like everyone else. However, I am definitely not on an equal plane field because of my personal identities that are discriminated against. I did not have the opportunity to be privately educated or simply I am not white. All these things contribute to accessibility of being on an equal plane field.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Cultural and Identity Misalignment Inequality in Opportunity
I would say I feel like I'm a person of worth based on the effort I put in and I don't necessarily feel I'm on an uneven playing field as everyone's academic journey is different and if I truly put in the time and effort, I'm sure I'd end up in the same place as my counterparts.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and Pressure to Perform Comparative Disadvantages and Unfair Opportunity Gaps	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectation vs Reality Inequality in Opportunity
I do feel as though I am a person of worth and on an equal plane field with others.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I feel as if these feeling changes depending on the environment I am in. When I am at home/ in my hometown I feel as if I do have an equal plane field with others but this changes when I go to uni/into the workplace.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Cultural and Identity Misalignment
I never feel like I am good enough. Always questioning myself.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I feel I am mostly on an equal playing field with others because I see progress as something achieved through hard work.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and pressure to perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectation vs Reality

It depends on circumstance.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I feel as though I'm of worth but am not on an equal playing field to those who have parents in a middle- or upper-class background.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Comparative Disadvantages and Unfair Opportunity Gaps	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Inequality in Opportunity
My worth depends on how my skills and advantages due to my socioeconomic status compares to others.	Comparative Disadvantages and Unfair Opportunity Gaps	Inequality in Opportunity
I feel like I am a person of worth, however to a limited extent. I think some people are more deserving of opportunities and rewards than I am because I know my mindset and my abilities and know that other people do perform more and desire better rewards so they should be deserving of it. I feel like people who aim high and genuinely desire a certain goal are more rewarding of it rather than I who is someone who performs possibly equally as well but have a lax mindset.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict Anxiety and pressure to perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Understanding your Mindful Identity Expectation vs Reality
I am of worth but not on equal field as others who are white and rich.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Comparative Disadvantages and Unfair Opportunity Gaps	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Inequality in Opportunity
I do now, I think it's about constant reminders by who you're surrounding yourself with and mindset.	Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Understanding your Mindful Identity
Yes, I do.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements

Findings:

Overall, participants had different answers with varying themes, which are fairly evenly distributed in sub-themes. All participants had different experiences with their worth, however a slight majority showed more participants felt like there was room for improvement, suggesting a feeling of inadequacy.

Table 3: Theme 1, Accepting Praise: 'In a few lines explain whether you feel as though you have much to be proud of in your academic life.'

Participant Responses	Main Theme	Sub-theme
Others would say I do but I truly don't feel like there is anything to be proud of until it's all done.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
Sometimes I think I do when I have all my achievements laid out in front of me like in a CV/LinkedIn format but not always.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Representation of Achievement
I don't really think I have achieved what others have not, it is hard to feel proud of something which is expected.	Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Undervaluing Success
Yes, I feel as though I have achieved a lot through my academic life. From getting excellent gcse grades and a levels grade to now moving towards 3rd year with great results as well, I am very proud of how far I've come. Knowing how hard my parents worked to immigrate to this country and build a better life for my family, I am really proud and grateful for how much I've achieved.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Cultural and Identity Misalignment
I do believe I am proud of my academic achievements because doing my A levels in the midst of covid slowing down was extremely challenging, but I often think I only got good a level because the examiners where being lenient on my cohort because of the pandemic. Therefore, I was kind of lucky.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Undervaluing Success
Well, I know I could have done better in areas but even if I wasn't proud, it wouldn't be because of imposter syndrome it would be because of my own standards so I guess you could say I'm somewhat proud, but I think proud is the wrong word.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements

Participant Responses	Main Theme	Sub-theme
I feel proud to get as far as I have in my academic life.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I am proud as I go to a Russel group university and based on my background this may not have been possible if I didn't work hard so I am happy about the grades I have received and where it got however this year I have not performed as well as I could have.	Comparative Disadvantage and Unfair Opportunity Gaps Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Pressure to Prestige Cultural and Identity Misalignment Expectations Vs Reality
I don't think I am proud of myself.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I feel I do have some things to be proud of, such as the university I got into.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform Comparative Disadvantage and Unfair Opportunity gaps	Expectation Vs Reality Pressure to Prestige
Yes.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I have much to be proud of as I am very close to achieving a first.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectations Vs Reality
I feel that I don't feel proud of my academic life as I don't think I have done enough.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Expectations Vs Reality
I don't think I have much to be proud of. I prefer not to count my achievements and losses because I don't want to be disappointed about my performance in academia. I don't think I have anything to be ashamed of, however nothing particularly to be proud of.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Undervaluing Success
I got into university and my family has not further education.	Comparative Disadvantage and Unfair Opportunity Gaps Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Pressure to Prestige Cultural and Identity Misalignment
Yeah, I know I try my best even if it's not going to get 100% marks.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	
Yes, I do since in high school I achieved high grades.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements

Findings:

Overall, the most common theme in this question were: Perception of achievement in accordance to statements, Undervaluing success and Exceptions vs Reality. Participants show a positive shift in their answers, with more participants suggesting they are proud of their academic achievements to one extent or another.

Table 4: Theme1, Accepting praise: 'In a few lines explain whether you are satisfied with yourself overall.'

Participant Responses	Main Theme	Sub-theme
Not yet no.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I am generally relatively satisfied but always feel like there's room for improvement.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectations Vs Reality
I feel as though I could achieve so much more than I have done, I am not satisfied.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectations Vs Reality
I am happy with what I've achieved but I am only somewhat satisfied because I believe I have so much more to offer academically. I think i can push myself a lot more than I am currently.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectations Vs Reality
I am not, I have a lot to work on academically and personally and I am working towards a more open mindset to help reduce negative self-talk.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict	Expectations Vs Reality Understanding your Mindful Identity

Somewhat satisfied cause it could have been worse.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectations Vs Reality
I am neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Expectations Vs Reality
Yes and no, I do so well for myself, and I try my best to make the most out of my academic and work experiences, but I feel a bit down when I don't get the results I would like to achieve.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt	Expectations vs Reality Undervaluing Success
No because I feel like I can do more.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements Expectations Vs Reality
I am quite satisfied with myself.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
Yes, but there is still room for growth.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Expectations Vs Reality
I am satisfied with myself but have much more to accomplish.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Expectations Vs Reality
Yes, I am satisfied.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
I am somewhat satisfied of where I am currently.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
Yes, I feel confident about my abilities.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
Yeah, I think I'm trying the best I can with what I know at the time and circumstances I'm in.	Uncertainty, Neutrality and Decisiveness in answers	Perception of Achievements in accordance to Statements
Sometimes no because I feel like I can improve.	Anxiety and Pressure to Perform	Expectations Vs Reality

Findings:

Overall, the main sub-theme in this question is expectation vs Reality and Perception of achievement. This highlights that participants are satisfised with themselves to a certain extent as the next most common theme focuses on how participants feel like there is room for improvement and further levels of self-satisfaction to reach.

Why Thematic Analysis and what It helped me Discover?

A thematic analysis of the provided answers of the participants is a crucial way in understanding how imposter syndrome affects ethnic and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds particularly in the context of their academic experiences and personal development. The themes identified—Perception of Belonging and Identity Conflict, Devaluation of Achievements and Self-Doubt, Anxiety and Pressure to Perform, Comparative Disadvantage and Unfair Opportunity Gaps, and Uncertainty, Neutrality, and Decisiveness in Answers—highlight the complex interplay of emotions and perceptions these students face.

The different themes capture the tension between students' internal identity and external perceptions, this identity conflict often leads to feelings of alienation and an internal struggle to reconcile their achievements with their sense of self. It also addresses the internalisation of imposter syndrome, where students devalue their accomplishments, believing their success is unearned. Themes also Highlights the anxiety and pressure to perform that accompanies imposter syndrome. This theme highlights the possible self-criticism and fear of failure that can hinder students, and their ability to fully engage with their academic opportunities. The themes also explore the impact of structural inequalities on students' experiences that illustrate how socio-economic and racial disparities contribute to feelings of inadequacy and reinforce imposter syndrome. The perception of an unequal playing field exacerbates these feelings, as students compare themselves to peers with more advantages.

Discussion:

Findings: The analysis reveals that while participants generally do not struggle with accepting praise or attributing success to their own efforts, many express concern about meeting future expectations, however the variability in responses, suggests differing experiences, with some participants struggling more with feelings of inadequacy than others. Social comparison emerged as a significant factor, with many participants reporting lower self-confidence when they perceived their peers as quicker to understand difficult concepts. This self-doubt also influenced their sense of belonging at university. Additionally, a substantial portion of participants indicated that low self-esteem hinders their willingness to contribute in class, highlighting the impact of imposter syndrome on classroom engagement. Not only do my findings support recent literature but it also contributes further to the phenomena of imposter syndrome, by identifying that these feelings of inadequacy do not stop once Widening participation students have successful achievements, rather they linger to maintain negative feelings that can hinder self-progression. This is supported by the findings where participants indicate there is room for improvement before they reach self-satisfaction, especially in Table 4 in my thematic analysis. Furthermore, some themes regarding different participant demographics showed that students who received Free School Meals (FSM) were more likely to experience feeling of imposter syndrome especially regarding seeking help and comparison with other peers, as oppose to their counterparts who experienced less systemic disadvantages. Overall, participants shared a clear understanding of imposter syndrome, with key themes including undervaluing success, cultural and identity misalignment, and a desire for self-improvement (as shown in thematic analysis). Despite these challenges, there was a positive shift in how participants viewed their academic achievements.

Conclusions: The research findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of imposter syndrome as experienced by participants. While some participants demonstrated a strong sense of self-worth and an ability to attribute their successes to hard work, others struggled with the pressure of living up to high expectations, suggesting that imposter syndrome manifests differently across individuals. The variability in responses, particularly regarding how participants compare themselves to their peers, indicates that social context plays a significant role in shaping feelings of self-efficacy and belonging. These findings suggest that imposter syndrome is not solely about undervaluing success but is also deeply connected to the cultural and identity-related challenges that individuals face, which can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy.

Moreover, the impact of imposter syndrome on classroom participation is a critical area of concern. The data indicates that self-esteem significantly affects how students engage in academic settings, potentially hindering their learning experience and academic performance. The consistency in understanding imposter syndrome among participants, emphasises the importance of addressing these issues in educational environments.

Limitations:
Whilst all but 2 Participants selected the survey was easy to understand, I received some personal feedback from participants who completed the survey stating that the opposing statements confused them in terms of selecting the right scale point that best described how they felt. While I understand, this was a crucial and intentional format of the survey as extra precaution was taken to make sure no statement was leading and presumed participant experiences this could cause some limitations as it could reduce the validity of the results provided by participants as the data collect could be reduced in accuracy due to comprehension barriers. This could potentially explain why some participants had contradicting answers.

Recommendations: Interventions that focus on boosting self-esteem, reducing social comparison, and fostering a more inclusive atmosphere could help mitigate the negative effects of imposter syndrome. For example, university spaces could host focus groups where students can come and share their experiences and be offered resources that can help reduce their negative experiences and foster more positive ones. Another practical way the effects of imposter syndrome can be reduced is through hosting special speaker events where external speakers encourage students to be self-motivated and have resilience through advocating for a more open mindset. Lastly, events and departmental award ceremonies could allow students to be celebrated can mitigate feelings of inadequacy, with a focus on widening participation students. By having these spaces where students can express their feelings and identify their emotions with accurate description, not only will they understand they are not alone, but they can also actively work to change them. Providing spaces is crucial to stimulate long term growth that will be beneficial even after university life, especially when developing a career. Overall, the findings underscore the need for continued research and targeted strategies to support individuals struggling with imposter syndrome, particularly in academic settings.

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