

Impostor phenomenon among human resource professionals in South Africa: Exploring prevalence and demographic differences



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Orientation: Although the impostor phenomenon has been widely examined internationally, empirical evidence on its prevalence and demographic variation among human resource (HR) professionals in South Africa remains limited, despite the strategic role of this group in organisational functioning and transformation.

Research purpose: This study aimed to determine the prevalence of the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals and to examine differences across self-identified gender and racial groups.

Research approach/design and method: A positivist, quantitative research design was employed. Data were collected from a voluntary sample of 317 HR professionals across multiple industry sectors. Impostor phenomenon was measured using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, independent-samples t-tests and analysis of variance were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 29, IBM Corp.

Main findings: The findings indicate a high prevalence of the impostor phenomenon, with the majority of participants (83%) reporting moderate to high levels. No statistically significant differences were observed based on gender. However, significant differences emerged across racial groups, with moderate effect sizes, suggesting the influence of contextual and social identity-related factors.

Practical implications: The results highlight the need for targeted organisational interventions, including professional development initiatives, mentoring, psychological support and awareness programmes aimed at addressing impostor experiences and strengthening HR professionals' confidence and effectiveness.

Contribution/value-add: This study provides context-specific empirical evidence on the impostor phenomenon within South African HR practice. By integrating self-efficacy and social identity perspectives, the study extends existing theory beyond Western contexts and informs evidence-based HR development strategies focused on professional well-being, inclusion and organisational effectiveness.

Keywords: anxiety; human resource management; impostor; impostor phenomenon; perceived incompetence.

Introduction

The impostor phenomenon, first conceptualised by Clance and Imes (1978), refers to persistent feelings of self-doubt and perceived intellectual fraudulence despite objective evidence of competence. Individuals experiencing this phenomenon tend to attribute success to external factors such as luck while internalising failure as personal inadequacy. Prior research has linked the impostor phenomenon to adverse psychological and career-related outcomes, including anxiety, reduced self-efficacy, burnout, and impaired career progression (Mak et al., 2019; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016).

Although the impostor phenomenon has been widely examined in international contexts, empirical research within the South African workplace remains limited, particularly among human resource (HR) professionals. Emerging studies in the South African context have begun to examine the impostor phenomenon among professionals, such as educators and corporate workers, although none have specifically investigated HR professionals (Bowen & Botha, 2023; Fisher, 2019). This gap is notable, given the strategic role of HR professionals in shaping

organisational culture, employee well-being, leadership development, and performance management. Persistent impostor feelings within this group may undermine professional confidence, leadership credibility, and decision-making effectiveness, with implications for organisational functioning.

South Africa's socio-historical context, marked by racial inequality, transformation imperatives, and increasing workforce diversity, further underscores the need for context-specific investigation. Experiences related to race, gender norms, and historical disadvantage may intensify impostor feelings through mechanisms associated with social identity theory, stereotype threat, and self-efficacy processes (Heslop et al., 2023). These dynamics are particularly salient for HR professionals, who are often positioned at the forefront of organisational transformation and inclusion initiatives.

Despite these contextual considerations, little is known about the prevalence of the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals or whether impostor experiences differ across demographic groups. This lack of empirical evidence limits theoretical understanding of the impostor phenomenon within a non-Western professional context and constrains the development of evidence-based organisational interventions.

Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by examining the prevalence of the impostor phenomenon among HR professionals in South Africa and by assessing whether the impostor phenomenon differs across self-identified gender and racial groups. In doing so, the study contributes to a contextually grounded understanding of the impostor phenomenon and informs HR practice aimed at supporting psychological well-being and professional effectiveness.

A quantitative approach is particularly valuable in this context, as it enables the systematic measurement of the impostor phenomenon prevalence and the identification of demographic patterns within the HR profession. While qualitative research provides rich insight into lived experiences, quantitative evidence is essential for establishing the scope of the problem, comparing subgroup differences, and informing targeted organisational interventions and policy responses.

Problem statement and research objectives

Research problem

Although the impostor phenomenon has been extensively investigated internationally, empirical research that focuses specifically on HR professionals within the South African context is still limited. This gap limits theoretical understanding of how impostor feelings manifest in HR roles, which are characterised by advisory authority, ethical responsibility, and organisational influence. From a practical perspective, the absence of such knowledge constrains the development of evidence-based interventions aimed at supporting HR professionals' psychological well-being and

professional effectiveness. Addressing this gap is therefore critical for both advancing the impostor phenomenon theory in non-Western contexts and informing HR practice.

The overarching goal of this study is to generate empirically grounded, context-specific evidence on the prevalence and demographic distribution of the impostor phenomenon among HR professionals in South Africa in order to inform both theory development and human resource management practice.

Research objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- Determine the prevalence of impostor phenomenon feelings among HR professionals in South Africa
- Examine whether the impostor phenomenon scores differ according to self-identified gender
- Explore the implications of the impostor phenomenon for HR professionals' psychological well-being and professional functioning.

Literature review

Research on the impostor phenomenon has demonstrated that feelings of intellectual fraudulence are shaped by a complex interaction of psychological, social, and contextual factors. Early conceptualisations emphasised developmental and interpersonal antecedents, while later scholarship foregrounded the role of gender norms, racialised identities, and organisational contexts. Within the South African context, recent research has highlighted the relevance of racial and transformation dynamics in shaping professional self-concept (Bowen & Botha, 2023; Folabit & Jita 2024; Ojetimi, 2025), although studies specific to HR remain scarce. This section reviews the literature thematically, focusing on psychological antecedents, gender dynamics, racial identity and stereotype threat, and organisational context, to establish the conceptual foundation for examining the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals.

Psychological antecedents of the impostor phenomenon

Early research suggests that impostor fears often originate in early family environments and are reinforced through socialisation processes. Sakulku and Alexander (2011) argue that family dynamics characterised by high achievement expectations may contribute to the development of impostor feelings, which are later reinforced by societal pressures as individuals progress into adulthood. Similarly, Clance et al. (1995) propose that the impostor phenomenon is rooted in interpersonal and social environments, with family and societal messages acting as key triggers. Hellman and Caselman (2004) further contend that perceptions of success-oriented family cultures are characteristic of individuals experiencing the impostor phenomenon, suggesting that these feelings are embedded early and persist across life stages.

At a psychological level, the impostor phenomenon has been linked to maladaptive attribution styles and reduced self-efficacy, whereby individuals discount internal competence

and attribute success to external factors. These patterns create vulnerability to chronic self-doubt, particularly in performance-driven environments, and provide a foundation for understanding impostor experiences in professional contexts.

Gender dynamics and the impostor phenomenon

A substantial body of literature highlights the impact of societal expectations and gendered norms on impostor experiences. Girls and females are often socialised under stricter evaluative standards than boys are, particularly in relation to intellectual competence and appearance, fostering perfectionism and self-criticism (Mann, 2019). As perfectionism has been identified as a key antecedent of the impostor phenomenon, these gendered expectations may increase women's vulnerability to impostor feelings.

Gender role incongruity theory further explains how success can paradoxically trigger negative evaluations when it violates traditional gender norms. Heilman and Wallen (2010) demonstrate that both male and female are penalised for success in gender-incongruent roles, although the nature of these penalties differs. Females succeeding in male-dominated roles tend to experience interpersonal derogation, while males in female-dominated roles face diminished respect and perceptions of inefficiency. Consequently, individuals who succeed in roles misaligned with societal gender expectations are often perceived as less desirable leaders.

Traditional gender stereotypes position females as communal, nurturing, and relational, whereas leadership roles are associated with agentic traits such as assertiveness and dominance (Abraham, 2020). This perceived mismatch contributes to negative evaluations of female leaders and may intensify impostor feelings among females in leadership or advisory roles. Harvey and Katz (1985) further observed that females may avoid success because of fears of social rejection or being perceived as unfeminine, while leadership behaviours that are rewarded in males are often viewed negatively in females (Ibarra et al., 2010). Although contemporary workplaces are more inclusive, negative attitudes towards female leadership persist and may continue to reinforce impostor experiences (Hoang, 2013).

Racial identity, disadvantage, and stereotype threat

Beyond gender, the impostor phenomenon has been associated with racialised experiences and historical disadvantage. Individuals from previously marginalised backgrounds frequently report persistent feelings of inadequacy despite evidence of competence (Nadal et al., 2021). These experiences are often intensified by stereotype threat, a situational phenomenon in which awareness of negative group stereotypes undermines performance and psychological safety (Steele, 1997).

Stereotype threat does not require internalisation of stereotypes to exert its effects; rather, the contextual

salience of group identity can heighten anxiety and self-doubt, reinforcing impostor feelings (Nadal et al., 2021). In societies marked by historical exclusion and inequality, such as South Africa, these dynamics may be particularly pronounced. Racial identity, representational pressure, and perceptions of legitimacy may therefore play a crucial role in influencing impostor experiences among professionals working in transformation-oriented environments.

Organisational context and professional roles

Within organisational settings, the impostor phenomenon has been associated with lower levels of job satisfaction and higher levels of burnout, diminished leadership confidence, and impaired decision-making. For professionals occupying advisory and governance-related roles, such as HR practitioners, these effects may extend beyond individual well-being to influence organisational effectiveness. Human resource professionals are expected to provide strategic guidance, manage sensitive employee relations, and champion transformation and inclusion. Persistent impostor feelings may therefore undermine professional credibility, confidence, and effectiveness in fulfilling these responsibilities.

Despite this, limited empirical attention has been given to the impostor phenomenon within occupational groups such as HR professionals, particularly outside Western contexts. Most existing research has focused on student samples or elite professional groups, leaving a gap in understanding how the impostor phenomenon manifests among working professionals embedded in complex organisational and socio-historical environments.

Synthesis and conceptual gap

Overall, the literature suggests that the impostor phenomenon is influenced by a combination of psychological antecedents, gender norms, racialised identity processes, and organisational contexts. However, this body of research is predominantly situated within Western settings and student populations, with inconsistent findings regarding demographic differences, particularly gender and race. Limited attention has been paid to occupational groups such as HR professionals, whose roles require professional legitimacy, advisory authority, and identity negotiation within contexts of organisational transformation. Consequently, there remains a conceptual and empirical gap in understanding the prevalence and implications of the impostor phenomenon among HR professionals in South Africa. This study addresses this gap by providing a context-specific examination of the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals, thereby extending the impostor phenomenon theory and contributing to applied HR scholarship.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

This study is underpinned by three complementary theoretical perspectives: self-efficacy theory, attribution

theory, and social identity theory. Together, these frameworks provide an integrated explanation of how demographic identity factors may shape the impostor phenomenon among HR professionals in South Africa.

The theory of self-efficacy argues that beliefs in one's own competence affect motivational processes, emotional regulation, and performance. Lower perceived self-efficacy has been consistently associated with heightened impostor feelings, as individuals doubt their competence despite objective success. In this study, perceived self-efficacy is conceptualised as a key psychological mechanism through which the impostor phenomenon is experienced.

Attribution theory explains how individuals interpret success and failure. Impostor-prone individuals tend to attribute achievement to external factors like luck or chance, while internalising failure as a sign of individual inadequacy. These maladaptive attributional patterns weaken perceived self-efficacy and reinforce impostor feelings over time.

Taken together, self-efficacy and attribution theories provide a theoretical basis for examining the impostor phenomenon as a measurable psychological construct that varies in intensity across individuals and groups. These perspectives lend themselves to quantitative investigation, as they posit systematic relationships among internal beliefs, attributional patterns, and experienced impostor feelings that can be empirically tested across defined populations.

It is possible to explore how group membership, particularly related to gender and race, influences self-perception and experiences of legitimacy within professional contexts, using social identity theory. In societies characterised by historical inequality and transformation pressures, such as South Africa, identity-related dynamics may heighten self-doubt and vulnerability to the impostor phenomenon.

From a social identity perspective, quantitative analysis enables the examination of whether the impostor phenomenon is patterned along demographic lines, thereby allowing for empirical assessment of identity-based differences rather than relying on anecdotal or purely interpretive accounts. This is particularly relevant in the South African context, where race and gender remain salient dimensions of professional identity shaped by historical and structural inequality.

Drawing on these perspectives, the study conceptualises the impostor phenomenon as a psychological outcome influenced by demographic identity variables (gender and race), with perceived self-efficacy functioning as a central psychological mechanism linking identity-based experiences to impostor feelings. The framework recognises the organisational and socio-cultural context of HR professionals as a background condition shaping these relationships. Through operationalising these theoretically grounded constructs, the study adopts a quantitative approach to empirically test whether predicted patterns of

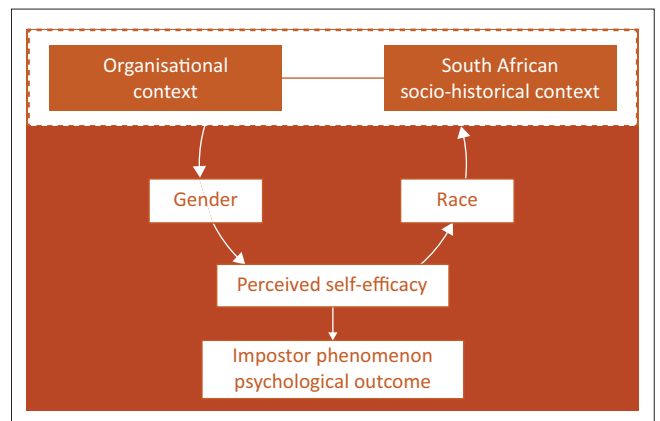


FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework of the impostor phenomenon among human resource professionals.

variation exist, thereby contributing to theory refinement and providing evidence to inform targeted organisational interventions (see Figure 1).

Guided by this framework, the study examines whether gender and race are associated with the impostor phenomenon and considers perceived self-efficacy as a theoretically relevant explanatory mechanism.

Hypotheses

Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses (H) were formulated:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the impostor phenomenon scores between male and female HR professionals.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference in the impostor phenomenon scores across racial groups among HR professionals.

Research design

Research approach

This study adopted a positivist paradigm and a quantitative research design. The positivist approach was appropriate given the study's objective to measure and compare observable patterns of the impostor phenomenon across demographic groups, consistent with established quantitative research on psychological constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data, enabling the statistical analysis required to test the study's hypotheses.

A voluntary sampling approach was implemented because of the absence of a comprehensive, accessible national database of HR professionals in South Africa. This method facilitated access to a geographically dispersed professional population through the South African Board of People Practitioners (SABPP) network. While practical and consistent with sampling methods used in prior impostor phenomenon research (e.g. Bravata et al., 2020), this approach introduces potential self-selection bias.

Professionals who are members of SABPP and choose to respond may differ systematically from non-members or non-respondents in terms of professional engagement, self-awareness, or psychological vulnerability, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. This limitation is acknowledged.

The target sample size was approximately 300 participants, a threshold commonly deemed adequate for detecting medium effect sizes in group comparison studies using *t*-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA), while allowing for demographic subgroup analysis (Cohen, 1988). The final sample of 317 respondents met this target.

Sampling strategy and rationale

A voluntary sampling approach was adopted for this study as a result of the absence of a comprehensive, accessible national database of registered HR professionals in South Africa. This method facilitated access to a geographically dispersed and demographically varied population within pragmatic constraints. While voluntary sampling may introduce self-selection bias wherein individuals with stronger opinions or experiences related to the impostor phenomenon may be more likely to participate, this approach is consistent with prior cross-sectional studies in workplace psychology and allowed for efficient data collection within the study's timeframe. The final sample size of 317 was deemed adequate for the planned inferential analyses, based on comparable studies in the field and meeting the minimum requirement for parametric tests. The demographic composition of the sample (Table 1) reflects diversity across gender, race, and age, although generalisability may be limited by the non-probabilistic sampling method. These limitations are acknowledged and considered in the interpretation of the findings.

Research participants

All HR professionals within South Africa were identified as part of the target research population. This broad scope includes HR professionals at various phases of their careers, such as new entrants, as well as professionals with extensive experience. In addition, it includes those

within the broader HR community, such as academics. The research study collected primary data and employed voluntary sampling.

Research instrument

The Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) was selected as the measurement instrument because of its extensive validation and widespread use in professional and cross-cultural contexts (Chrisman et al., 1995; Mak et al., 2019). The scale's 20-item structure, measuring three subscales (Discount, Luck, Fake), aligns well with the theoretical components of the impostor phenomenon. However, the cultural validity of the CIPS in the unique South African context, with its distinct socio-historical and linguistic landscape, has not been formally established. While the scale was deemed suitable for this exploratory study, the potential for cultural nuance in the interpretation of items related to 'success', 'intelligence', and 'praise' is recognised as a consideration for interpreting results and a recommendation for future validation studies. Table 2 shows the score criteria put forward by Clance (1985):

Instrument validity and cultural applicability

The CIPS was selected for its robust validation across professional and cross-cultural contexts, including use in diverse cultural settings. While the scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties globally, its application within the South African context required consideration of potential cultural nuances in the expression and interpretation of impostor feelings. The scale was administered in English, the primary professional language of the South African HR sector, to address this concern. Although no formal cross-cultural validation was conducted within this study, the reliability analyses performed (Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5) provide evidence of internal consistency for the Luck and Fake subscales within this

TABLE 1: Description of the sample of respondents in the study ($N = 317$).

Demographic group	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	86	27
Female	231	73
Race		
Black people	102	32
Coloured people	140	44
White people	44	14
Indian people	31	10
Age (years)		
18–25	54	17
26–35	123	39
36–45	73	23
46–55	48	15
56–65	16	5
≥ 66	3	1

TABLE 2: Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale score criteria.

Score	Impostor feelings
≤ 40	Few impostor phenomenon feelings
41–60	Moderate impostor phenomenon feelings
61–80	Frequent impostor phenomenon feelings
> 80	Intense impostor phenomenon feelings

TABLE 3: Internal consistency results for the Discount subscale – Reliability statistics.

Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on standardised items	Number of items
0.544	0.512	4

TABLE 4: Internal consistency results for the Luck subscale – Reliability statistics.

Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on standardised items	Number of items
0.792	0.801	4

TABLE 5: Internal consistency results for the Fake subscale – Reliability statistics.

Cronbach's alpha	Cronbach's alpha based on standardised items	Number of items
0.871	0.872	11

sample. The lower reliability of the Discount subscale prompted item-level analysis and removal, as detailed in the results section.

Statistical analysis rationale

The selection of statistical tests was guided by the study's comparative objectives. The data were analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 29). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarise sample characteristics and the prevalence of impostor feelings. Inferential statistics were selected to align directly with the study's hypotheses and comparative objectives.

Independent-samples *t*-test: This test was appropriate for H1, comparing the mean impostor scores between two independent groups (male and female HR professionals) to examine gender differences.

One-way ANOVA: This test was appropriate for H2, comparing mean impostor scores across multiple independent racial groups (black people, coloured people, Indian people, white people, and Chinese people) to examine racial differences. Post-hoc tests were not conducted as the research question focused on overall group differences rather than specific pairwise comparisons.

The reliability of the CIPS subscales was evaluated by using Cronbach's alpha, with a cut-off of 0.70 considered acceptable for research purposes. While the Discount subscale initially showed low reliability ($\alpha = 0.544$), the removal of two poorly correlating items brought it to an acceptable level ($\alpha = 0.740$), and these items were excluded from subsequent analyses, following standard psychometric practice.

Ethical considerations

The professional registration body for the HR profession in South Africa, the SABPP, disseminated the invitation to participate in the study via email in their weekly mailers to all registered HR professionals. The requests for participation were published along with an intent statement, consisting of the study's purpose and objectives. After approximately 6 weeks, the study received feedback from 320 respondents from different industry sectors in South Africa. Of the 320 questionnaires received, only 317 were regarded as usable. Ethical considerations to conduct this study were obtained through the University of the Western Cape Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee with reference no. HS23/6/85. The study was guided by confidentiality, and all data remained solely with the researcher and were safely secured with a password-protected encryption known only by the researcher to avoid any data breaches. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained by explaining the nature of the research to participants before displaying their willingness to participate. Respondents were provided with the researcher's contact information in the informed consent form and encouraged to contact them with any questions, concerns, and clarifications during the completion of the questionnaire.

In addition, respondents were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without facing consequences. This aim was achieved by including a mandatory statement on the front page of the questionnaire, which respondents had to initial and agree to. The statement read as follows:

'I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I wish to withdraw, I may contact the lead researcher at any time to do so.'

All collected data were solely used for the purposes of this study.

Results

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a structured approach, beginning with reliability assessment, followed by descriptive and inferential statistics aligned with the study's hypotheses. An exploratory multiple regression analysis was also conducted to address the study's broader aim of understanding potential predictors of the impostor phenomenon.

Reliability analysis

The reliability of the three subscales of the CIPS was evaluated by using Cronbach's alpha. As reflected in Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5, the Luck ($\alpha = 0.792$) and Fake ($\alpha = 0.871$) subscales demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency. In contrast, the Discount subscale initially produced a weak reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.544$). Further examination of item-total correlations revealed that items S1 and S19 showed poor alignment with the overall subscale. Once these items were removed, the reliability of the Discount subscale improved to an acceptable level ($\alpha = 0.740$), leading to their exclusion from subsequent analyses. This refinement highlights the influence of contextual considerations on the interpretation of 'discounting' behaviours among South African HR professionals.

An exploratory factor analysis was performed on the revised Discount subscale, following the removal of the problematic items. The data met the requirements for factor analysis, as evidenced by a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.500 and a statistically significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 134.659$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). In line with Kaiser's criterion (as cited in Field, 2005), these results indicate that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor extraction. The analysis identified a single factor with an eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 79.43% of the total variance. All retained items loaded strongly on this factor (loadings > 0.50), thereby supporting the unidimensional structure of the refined Discount subscale.

The reliability analysis output for the discount subscale results is displayed in Table 3.

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Discount subscale ($\alpha = 0.544$) fell below the conventional threshold of 0.70, indicating inadequate internal consistency. Item-total correlation analysis revealed that items S1 and S19 had correlations below the acceptable 0.30 threshold, suggesting that they did not align well with the overall subscale construct. Their removal increased reliability to $\alpha = 0.740$, and thus, they were excluded from subsequent analyses to enhance measurement integrity. This refinement highlights the role of both contextual and language-related influences in shaping how discounting behaviours are understood within the South African HR professional environment.

After the exclusion of the identified items, an exploratory factor analysis was performed on the remaining indicators of the Discount subscale. The suitability of the data for factor analysis was supported by a KMO measure of 0.500, together with a statistically significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 134.659$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). In accordance with Kaiser's guideline for factor extraction (Kaiser, 1974; as referenced in Field, 2005), these statistics confirm that the correlation matrix was appropriate for further analysis. The factor solution produced a single dominant component with an eigenvalue exceeding one, explaining 79.43% of the total variance. All retained items demonstrated strong associations with this factor, with loadings above 0.50, thereby supporting the single-factor structure of the revised subscale. The corresponding results are summarised in Table 6.

The intended meaning is clear: the Luck subscale achieved a reliability score of 0.792, which exceeds the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Therefore, the subscale demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency.

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine the underlying structure of the Luck subscale. The adequacy of the data for factor analysis was confirmed by a KMO value of 0.782 and a statistically significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 399.793$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.001$). In line with Kaiser's guideline for acceptable sampling adequacy (as referenced in Field, 2005), these findings indicate that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor extraction. The analysis

TABLE 6: The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Bartlett's test and total variance explained for the Discount subscale.

Test	Variable	Value
KMO measure of sampling adequacy	-	0.500
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	134.659
	<i>df</i>	1
	Sig.	< 0.001

Approx., approximate; *df*, degrees of freedom; Sig., significance; KMO, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin.

TABLE 7: The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Bartlett's test and total variance explained for the Luck subscale.

Test	Variable	Value
KMO measure of sampling adequacy	-	0.782
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	399.793
	<i>df</i>	6
	Sig.	< 0.001

Approx., approximate; *df*, degrees of freedom; Sig., significance; KMO, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin.

identified a single underlying factor with an eigenvalue exceeding one, explaining 62.91% of the total variance. All items loaded strongly onto this factor, with loadings greater than 0.50, supporting the unidimensional nature of the Luck subscale. The detailed factor analysis results are presented in Table 7.

The Fake subscale yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.871, reflecting strong reliability. Therefore, the Fake subscale met the critical cutoff value of 0.70 for an acceptable internal consistency coefficient. Table 5 presents Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Fake subscale.

An exploratory factor analysis was undertaken to assess the construct structure of the Fake subscale. The suitability of the dataset for factor extraction was confirmed by a KMO measure of 0.898, alongside a statistically significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 927.226$, $df = 28$, $p = 0.001$). In accordance with Kaiser's recommended criteria for sampling adequacy (as cited in Field, 2005), these statistics demonstrate that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor analysis. The results indicated a single-factor solution, with one component yielding an eigenvalue greater than one and explaining 51.41% of the total variance. All retained items showed strong associations with the extracted factor, with loadings exceeding 0.50, thereby confirming the unidimensional structure of the Fake subscale. The detailed outcomes of this analysis are presented in Table 8 (Omar, 2025).

Descriptive results and prevalence

Analysis of the 317 completed CIPS questionnaires reflected a notably high level of impostor feelings among South African HR professionals. Specifically, 83% of participants reported moderate or higher levels of the impostor phenomenon, encompassing 55% with moderate feelings, 25% with frequent feelings, and 3% with intense impostor experiences. The remaining 17% reported few impostor feelings. This widespread experience aligns with the study's conceptual framework, suggesting that the high-stakes, advisory nature of HR work may create a context ripe for self-efficacy doubts and attributional biases, irrespective of objective competence.

In Table 9, similar response categories were combined for clarity: 'not at all' and 'rarely' form 'NOT TRUE', while 'often' and 'very true' form 'TRUE'. Table 9 shows how participants responded to statements across the three CIPS subscales (Discount, Luck, and Fake).

TABLE 8: The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Bartlett's test and total variance explained for the Fake subscale.

Test	Variable	Value
KMO measure of sampling adequacy	-	0.898
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	927.226
	<i>df</i>	28
	Sig.	< 0.001

Approx., approximate; *df*, degrees of freedom; Sig., significance; KMO, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin.

As shown in Table 9, a notable proportion of respondents endorsed impostor-related beliefs, particularly within the Discount subscale, in which items related to downplaying success and avoiding recognition were frequently acknowledged. This pattern suggests that even among experienced HR professionals, internalisation of achievement remains a challenge. The Luck and Fake subscales also revealed meaningful levels of self-doubt and external attribution of success, reinforcing the multifaceted nature of the impostor phenomenon in professional settings.

Self-identified gender and the impostor phenomenon

Table 10 displays the results of an independent-samples *t*-test conducted to examine potential differences in the impostor phenomenon scores between self-identified male and female participants. The analysis indicated that scores did not differ significantly between males ($M = 43.17$, $s.d. = 12.79$) and females ($M = 46.33$, standard deviation [$s.d.$] = 13.82), $t(317) = -1.85$, $p = 0.07$ (two-tailed). The observed mean difference of 3.16 (95% confidence interval [CI]: -6.51 to 0.195) was minimal, with a corresponding effect size of $\eta^2 = 0.001$. The magnitude

of this effect was evaluated by using Cohen's (1988) guidelines for interpreting eta-squared values, where 0.01 represents a small effect, 0.06 a moderate effect, and 0.14 a large effect.

Inferential statistics: Testing hypotheses

Gender differences: H1

An independent-samples *t*-test demonstrated no significant variation in the impostor phenomenon scores among males ($M = 43.17$, $s.d. = 12.79$) and females ($M = 46.33$, $s.d. = 13.82$) HR professionals, $t(317) = -1.85$, $p = 0.065$ (two-tailed). The effect size was negligible (eta-squared = 0.001). This finding challenges early gendered conceptualisations of impostor phenomenon (IP) and supports a contemporary view, informed by self-efficacy theory, that professional socialisation and role demands in HR may homogenise experiences of self-doubt across genders.

Racial differences: H2

Analysis using a one-way ANOVA showed that IP scores differed significantly among the racial groups, $F(7, 310) = 3.56$, $p = 0.001$, corresponding to a moderate effect (eta-

TABLE 9: Responses to the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale.

CIPS item		Statement	%		
			Not true	Neutral	True
Discount					
1	I sometimes succeed at tasks even though I was worried I might fail.	5.4	24.4	70.0	
10	I find it difficult to accept praise for my intelligence or accomplishments.	35.0	32.5	32.2	
16	When praised for something I achieve, I tend to downplay its importance.	40.3	30.0	29.4	
19	I hesitate to share promotions or recognition with others until it is confirmed.	14.1	12.2	73.5	
Luck					
11	I occasionally give others the impression that I am more competent than I feel I am.	73.7	15.9	10.1	
5	I tend to avoid evaluations and worry about being assessed.	68.1	15.3	16.2	
9	I feel that some of my successes have resulted from mistakes or errors rather than skill.	83.4	9.7	6.0	
15	Even when recognised for achievements, I doubt I can consistently replicate that success.	59.1	24.7	15.9	
Fake					
2	I can give the impression that I am more competent than I really am.	33.1	32.2	34.1	
3	I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.	60.3	21.3	17.8	
4	I fear that I will not meet expectations when praised for accomplishments.	37.5	25.6	26.3	
6	I worry that important people may discover I am less capable than they think.	66.9	21.6	11.3	
7	I tend to remember my mistakes more than my successes.	34.4	29.1	36.3	
8	I rarely complete tasks to the standard I desire.	59.1	28.4	11.9	
12	I sometimes feel disappointed with my current accomplishments, thinking I should have done more.	29.1	30.9	39.4	
13	I am concerned that others might realise my knowledge or skills are limited.	70.0	17.8	11.6	
14	I often feel anxious about failing at new tasks, even if I usually succeed.	41.3	31.6	26.9	
17	I compare my abilities with those of others, fearing they may be more capable.	43.4	27.5	28.8	
18	I worry about not succeeding even when others are confident in my abilities.	26.9	37.8	35.0	
20	I feel discouraged if I am not the best or particularly outstanding in achievement-related situations.	44.4	31.9	23.1	

CIPS, clance impostor phenomenon scale.

TABLE 10: The *T*-test output between gender and the impostor phenomenon.

Independent-samples test: TIMPOST	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for equality of means							
	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	Significance		Mean difference	s.e. difference	95% CI of the difference	
					One-Sided <i>p</i> -value	Two-Sided <i>p</i> -value			Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.074	0.786	-1.853	317.000	0.032	0.065	-3.155	1.703	-6.506	0.195
Equal variances not assumed			-1.919	165.938	0.028	0.057	-3.155	1.644	-6.401	0.091

Sig., significance; *df*, degrees of freedom; s.e., standard error; CI, confidence interval.

squared = 0.08). This result provides empirical support for the relevance of social identity theory and stereotype threat within the South African context. The result suggests that historically marginalised groups may face additional identity-related stressors that amplify feelings of intellectual fraudulence, as hypothesised in the conceptual framework.

This finding challenges early gendered conceptualisations of IP and supports a contemporary view, informed by self-efficacy theory, that professional socialisation and role demands in HR may homogenise experiences of self-doubt across genders.

Self-identified race and the impostor phenomenon

A one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of race on the impostor phenomenon. The results of the ANOVA are presented in Table 11. The race variable was divided into five categories, namely, black people, coloured people, Indian people, white people, and Chinese people. There was a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.05$ level in the impostor phenomenon scores for the five race categories: $F(7, 310) = 3.56, p = 0.001$. While the analysis indicated statistical significance, the practical difference in mean scores across groups was moderate. The effect size, calculated by using eta-squared, was 0.08 (Cohen, 1988).

This result provides empirical support for the relevance of social identity theory and stereotype threat within the South African context. It suggests that historically hypothesised groups may face additional identity-related stressors that amplify feelings of intellectual fraudulence, as hypothesised in the conceptual framework.

Exploratory regression analysis: Identifying predictors

An exploratory standard multiple regression was conducted to move beyond bivariate comparisons and explore potential predictors of the impostor phenomenon. The total CIPS score was entered as the dependent variable. Predictor variables included: gender (dummy-coded), race (dummy-coded with 'white [person]' as reference), age, and years of HR experience.

TABLE 11: Self-identified and the impostor phenomenon *t*-test.

ANOVA	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
TIMPOST					
Between-groups	4357.975	7	622.568	3.563	0.001
Within groups	54165.412	310	174.727	-	-
Total	58523.387	317	-	-	-
Score					
Between-groups	4828.258	7	689.751	3.662	< 0.001
Within groups	58012.173	308	188.351	-	-
Total	62840.430	315	-	-	-
Race					
Between-groups	44.021	7	6.289	7.351	< 0.001
Within groups	266.073	311	0.856	-	-
Total	310.094	318	-	-	-

ANOVA, analysis of variance; *df*, degrees of freedom; Sig., significance.

The regression model as a whole was significant, $F(9, 307) = 3.92, p < 0.001$, accounting for approximately 10.3% of the variance in the impostor phenomenon scores (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.103$). The detailed results are presented in Table 12, in which age emerged as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.22, p < 0.001$), indicating that older HR professionals reported lower levels of IP. Furthermore, identifying as 'black [person]' ($\beta = 0.18, p = 0.012$) and 'coloured [person]' ($\beta = 0.16, p = 0.022$) were significant positive predictors compared to the 'white [person]' reference group, even after controlling for age and experience. Gender and years of experience were not significant predictors in this multivariate model.

Table 12 shows the results of multiple regression analysis predicting the impostor phenomenon scores.

The regression analysis substantiates and extends the ANOVA findings. The persistent significance of race, even when accounting for age and experience, strongly reinforces the social identity perspective, suggesting that racial identity itself, potentially through mechanisms of stereotype threat or belongingness uncertainty, is a key factor in IP experiences. The negative relationship with age may reflect the development of stronger self-efficacy beliefs or more stable attributional styles over time, as postulated by Bandura (1997). The non-significance of gender in the multivariate model further consolidates the finding that within this professional cohort, demographic identity factors related to race and age are more salient predictors of impostor feelings than gender is.

Discussion

This study examined the prevalence and demographic correlates of the impostor phenomenon among HR professionals in South Africa. The findings reveal a high prevalence of impostor feelings, no significant gender differences but significant racial differences. These results are interpreted through the lens of the study's theoretical framework, highlighting the roles of self-efficacy, attribution patterns, and social identity in shaping experiences of the impostor phenomenon. By providing quantitative evidence of prevalence and demographic variation, this study establishes an empirical foundation for targeted organisational interventions and future qualitative inquiry.

TABLE 12: Results of multiple regression analysis predicting the impostor phenomenon scores.

Predictor	β	s.e. β	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value
(Constant)	58.21	3.45	-	16.86	< 0.001
Gender (female)	1.98	1.52	0.07	1.30	0.194
Race					
Black people	5.67	2.23	0.18	2.54	0.012
Coloured people	5.01	2.17	0.16	2.31	0.022
Indian people	3.45	2.56	0.08	1.35	0.179
Age	-0.38	0.09	-0.22	-4.12	< 0.001
Experience (years)	0.05	0.10	0.03	0.52	0.601

s.e., standard error.

Note: $R^2 = 0.103$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.099$. Reference categories; gender = male; race = white [person].

Prevalence and nature of the impostor phenomenon

The finding that 83% of HR professionals experience at least moderate impostor feelings suggests that the impostor phenomenon is widespread within this occupational group. This prevalence aligns with the conceptual framework, which integrates self-efficacy and attribution theories to explain how professional contexts may trigger self-doubt. According to self-efficacy theory, individuals' beliefs about their competence influence motivation, emotional regulation, and performance (Bandura, 1997). In HR roles characterised by advisory authority, ethical responsibility, and transformation mandates, professionals may perceive their responsibilities as challenging and evaluative, reducing self-efficacy despite objective achievements.

Attribution theory further explains the persistence of these feelings: HR professionals may discount success as luck or external circumstances while internalising failures, reinforcing impostor experiences over time. Responses on the Discount and Luck subscale exemplify this maladaptive attribution pattern, illustrating how perceived incompetence persists even in high-achieving individuals. These findings underscore the relevance of theoretically grounded constructs in explaining not only the prevalence but also the psychological mechanisms underpinning the impostor phenomenon in South African HR contexts.

Gender differences: Challenging early conceptualisations

Contrary to early feminist formulations of the impostor phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978), this study found no significant gender differences in impostor scores. This finding aligns with more recent research suggesting that impostor experiences are comparable across genders (Bravata et al., 2020; Naser et al., 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, self-efficacy theory provides an explanatory lens: professional socialisation and role expectations in HR may homogenise experiences of self-doubt across genders, particularly in high-stakes advisory positions where performance demands are equally salient. Attribution patterns may operate similarly across males and female, with both genders tending to internalise failure and discount success in line with impostor tendencies. Methodologically, it is also possible that social desirability or gendered expression of self-doubt influenced self-report responses, as suggested by Mann (2019). Overall, these findings support the conceptualisation of the impostor phenomenon as context-driven rather than inherently gendered.

Racial differences: The role of social identity and context

Significant racial differences in impostor scores, with moderate effect sizes, highlight the relevance of social identity theory in the South African context. Human resource professionals from historically marginalised groups reported

higher impostor feelings, reflecting the enduring impact of structural inequality and identity-based stressors on self-perception. Social identity theory posits that individuals' sense of belonging and legitimacy is shaped by group membership (Turner et al., 1979). In post-apartheid South African workplaces undergoing transformation, professionals from marginalised racial groups may experience heightened self-doubt because of stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) and the ongoing negotiation of professional legitimacy.

Furthermore, self-efficacy may be undermined by structural inequities, with external barriers and subtle biases amplifying internalised feelings of inadequacy. These findings align with prior research linking racial discrimination to elevated impostor experiences (Bernard & Neblett, 2018; Cokley et al., 2013) and emphasise that demographic identity interacts with psychological mechanisms to shape the impostor phenomenon.

Theoretical interpretation of findings

In interpreting findings through the combined lenses of self-efficacy, attribution, and social identity theories, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals. The high prevalence supports self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) and attribution theories, showing that perceived competence and attributional tendencies are central to experiencing impostor feelings. The absence of gender differences suggests that context and role expectations, rather than demographic category alone, determine self-doubt, while racial disparities underscore how social identity and historical inequalities amplify impostor experiences (Steele, 1997). Together, these insights reinforce the study's conceptualisation of the impostor phenomenon as a context-sensitive, psychologically mediated experience.

Organisational and human resource implications

The high incidence of the impostor phenomenon among HR professionals has practical implications for organisational practice and employee well-being. Guided by theoretical insights, HR departments can implement interventions that target underlying psychological mechanisms.

Self-efficacy enhancement: Awareness workshops and coaching sessions to reinforce competence feedback and validate achievements.

Attributional reframing: Training to challenge maladaptive beliefs about luck and internalised failure, fostering realistic self-assessment.

Identity-sensitive support: Mentorship, sponsorship, and inclusive organisational policies to reduce identity-based stressors and stereotype threat.

Leadership development: Equipping managers to recognise impostor feelings and provide supportive feedback.

Through embedding these strategies within professional development frameworks, organisations can enhance resilience, psychological safety, and role efficacy, ultimately contributing to more inclusive workplaces.

Practical implications

This study demonstrates that the impostor phenomenon is highly prevalent among South African HR professionals, with 83% of participants reporting at least moderate feelings of self-doubt regarding their abilities and competencies (54 [17%] low, 174 [55%] moderate, 78 [25%] frequent, 11 [3%] intense). These findings highlight the need for HR departments to implement interventions that address both the psychological and the organisational aspects of impostor experiences.

Practical strategies include:

- Awareness workshops to normalise impostor feelings and educate employees about their psychological and performance impacts
- Mentorship and coaching programmes to reinforce competence, provide constructive feedback, and reduce isolation
- Recognition and reward policies to ensure that achievements are celebrated and success criteria are clear, counteracting maladaptive attribution patterns
- Inclusive workplace practices to address identity-based stressors, particularly for employees from historically marginalised racial groups, who reported higher impostor scores.

The study found no significant gender differences, suggesting that interventions can be applied broadly across men and women employees. However, racial disparities indicate that targeted support may be particularly beneficial for individuals from underrepresented groups, consistent with social identity theory and research linking structural inequality to heightened impostor experiences. Through integrating these strategies into professional development frameworks, organisations can foster resilience, self-efficacy, and psychological safety across HR teams (Omar, 2025).

Conclusion

This study provides one of the first empirical examinations of the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals. Findings indicate a high prevalence of impostor feelings, challenge the gendered narrative of the construct, and highlight the significant role of racial identity in shaping self-doubt experiences. Theoretically, the study supports conceptualising the impostor phenomenon as a context-driven, rather than demographically fixed, experience. Practically, the findings provide evidence to inform HR interventions aimed at reducing self-doubt, fostering psychological safety, and enhancing professional self-efficacy within South African organisations.

Limitations

The interpretation of the findings should be considered in light of several limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design constrains causal inferences regarding the causes and consequences of impostor feelings. Secondly, the quantitative approach identifies prevalence patterns and demographic associations but does not capture the nuanced lived experiences or organisational processes through which impostor feelings manifest, highlighting the need for complementary qualitative research.

Thirdly, the use of voluntary sampling introduces potential self-selection bias, as individuals with stronger impostor experiences or greater interest in the topic may have been more likely to participate. Fourthly, reliance on self-reported measures may result in common method bias, potentially inflating observed relationships between variables. Fifthly, although the CIPS has been used in prior South African studies (e.g. Bowen & Botha, 2023), its cultural and linguistic validity requires further verification through qualitative or mixed-methods investigations.

Finally, the unequal gender distribution in the sample may have limited the statistical sensitivity to detect subtle gender-based differences, so gender-related findings should be interpreted cautiously. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable empirical insights into the impostor phenomenon among South African HR professionals and lays the foundation for future research using complementary methods and more diverse samples.

Future research and recommendations

Future research should address the methodological limitations of this study. Longitudinal designs are recommended to examine the trajectories of the impostor phenomenon over time and its causal relationships with outcomes such as burnout, job satisfaction, and career progression (Folabit & Jita 2024). Incorporating multi-rater assessments, including supervisor or peer ratings, could reduce self-report bias and provide a more objective assessment of professional competence and performance.

Research should also investigate organisational moderators, such as leadership style, team climate, and diversity and inclusion policies, to understand their influence on impostor feelings (Fisher, 2019). Beyond methodology, future studies should adopt a context-specific approach, exploring the impostor phenomenon across diverse South African professional sectors, using mixed-methods designs to capture nuanced narratives of identity, belonging, and self-efficacy in workplaces undergoing transformation. Intervention studies evaluating the effectiveness of impostor-focused training, coaching programmes, or mentorship schemes are also needed to translate research into practical support mechanisms (Ojetimi, 2025).

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CRedit authorship contribution

Faraaz Omar: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Tendency Beretu: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, Faraaz Omar, upon reasonable request.

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