Original Research Article

Exploring the Relationship between Perfectionism, Rumination and Imposter Phenomenon among Young Adults

Manisha Saha[1], Deepthi Vijayan[2]

[1]2nd Year Post Graduate Student, MSc. Psychology (Clinical), Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous. Bangalore.
[2]Assistant Professor, Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous, Bangalore
Corresponding author: Manisha Saha
Email – 22mpsy28@kristujayanti.com

ABSTRACT

Background: This study explores the relationships among perfectionism, rumination, and the impostor phenomenon in young Indian adults. It studies how perfectionism and rumination influence individuals and why understanding the impostor phenomenon is crucial for addressing psychological distress. The impostor phenomenon can have a profound impact on an individual's mental well-being, leading to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression. Perfectionism aspects such as the desire for approval, organization, and rumination are a substantial predictor of imposter sentiments, providing insight into the psychological roots of these phenomena.
Methodology: The current research follows a non-experimental quantitative correlational research design for the variable's perfectionism, rumination and imposter phenomenon.
Result: Results revealed a significant positive correlation between overall perfectionism and impostor phenomenon, particularly driven by self-evaluative perfectionism. Dimensions like need for approval, organization, and reluctance best predicted the phenomenon. Regression analysis ($F = 8.407$, $p < 0.01$) confirmed at least one independent variable significantly predicts impostor phenomenon, emphasizing the mediating role of ruminative response styles in amplifying distress linked with perfectionism.
Conclusion: Further studies in larger populations are needed to validate the findings of this study.
Keywords: perfectionism, rumination, imposter phenomenon, young adults

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INTRODUCTION

Perfectionism, rumination, and the impostor phenomenon are psychological constructs that have garnered considerable attention in recent years due to their perceived impacts on individuals across various areas of life. Perfectionism [1] involves striving to adhere to high standards and engaging in overly critical self-evaluations. It is often characterized by a persistent pursuit of flawlessness and a tendency to set excessively high standards for oneself. Conversely, the impostor phenomenon describes a psychological state wherein individuals perceive themselves as intellectual frauds despite evidence of competence. These individuals harbour a persistent fear of being exposed as impostors and often attribute their successes to external factors rather than acknowledging their own abilities. Rumination, on the other hand, involves repeatedly dwelling on negative thoughts and emotions, often leading to heightened levels of psychological distress.

Theoretical perspectives on perfectionism emphasize its multidimensional nature, encompassing both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects. Hewitt and Flett [2] proposed a conceptual model that distinguishes between self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionists set excessively high standards for themselves and harshly judge their own performance, while socially prescribed perfectionists impose unrealistic standards on others and judge them severely. These different dimensions of perfectionism have been found to contribute to various psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and impostor phenomenon symptoms.

Similarly, rumination has been recognized as a maladaptive cognitive style associated with a range of psychological disorders, including depression and anxiety. Nolen-Hoeksema's [3] response style theory defines rumination as the tendency to passively focus on one's depressive symptoms and the causes and consequences surrounding these symptoms. Individuals who engage in frequent rumination are more likely to experience prolonged and severe episodes of depression, highlighting the detrimental effects of rumination on psychological well-being.

The impostor phenomenon, first described by Clance and Imes [4] refers to individuals' persistent belief that they are intellectual frauds despite evidence of competence. These individuals often attribute their successes to luck or external factors and fear being exposed as frauds. While the impostor phenomenon was initially thought to primarily affect high-achieving individuals, research has shown that it can occur across various domains and demographic groups.

Despite the growing body of research on perfectionism, rumination, and the impostor phenomenon, there remains a need for further exploration of their interrelationships. While individual studies have examined these constructs independently, few have investigated their mutual influence and how they interact to contribute to psychological distress. Understanding the complex dynamics between perfectionism, rumination, and the impostor phenomenon is crucial for developing effective interventions and support strategies for individuals struggling with impostor feelings and related distress.

Perfectionism, characterized by high personal standards and concerns about mistakes, has been linked to rumination in various studies. Treynor and Nolen-Hoeksema [5] identified chronic stress and low self-perceived competence as catalysts for rumination, often intertwined with perfectionism. Flett and others [6] proposed that rumination may fuel heightened perfectionism and psychological distress, suggesting a bidirectional relationship between these constructs.

Similarly, the impostor phenomenon has been associated with both perfectionism and rumination in the literature. Ferrari and Thompson [7] found that impostors often engage in self-criticism and use perfectionistic self-presentation strategies to conceal their perceived inadequacies. Kolligian Jr. and Sternberg [8] found that impostor feelings were associated with lower self-esteem and higher levels of rumination, suggesting a potential contribution to increased psychological distress.

Several studies have examined the relationship between perfectionism, rumination, and psychological distress in various contexts. Miles and others [9] suggested that clinical perfectionism and rumination may mediate the relationship between cognitive flexibility and anorexia nervosa pathology. Liu and others [10] found that perfectionism was associated with suicidal ideation among Chinese college students, highlighting the roles of rumination and depression. Juczyński and others [11] studied ruminations as predictors of post-traumatic stress disorder in patients hospitalized for COVID-19, emphasizing the mental health challenges associated with the pandemic.

Furthermore, research on the impostor phenomenon has highlighted its association with psychological distress and maladaptive coping strategies. Harvey [12] proposed that impostor feelings contribute to increased psychological distress, partly due to heightened rumination about one's perceived inadequacies and fear of exposure as a fraud. Leary and others [13] emphasized the central role of rumination in maintaining impostor feelings, suggesting that interventions targeting rumination may help alleviate impostor-related distress.

Research Gap

The research conducted thus far has provided valuable insights into the complex interplay between perfectionism, rumination, and the impostor phenomenon. However, several gaps in the existing literature warrant further investigation. One notable research gap lies in the need to explore longitudinal and experimental designs to elucidate the causal relationships among these constructs. While correlational studies have offered valuable insights, they fall short of establishing causality and directionality of effects. Additionally, there is a need for more diverse and representative samples to ensure the generalizability of findings across different populations and contexts. Furthermore, the literature predominantly focuses on individual-level factors, such as personality traits and cognitive processes, neglecting potential contextual and socio-cultural influences on perfectionism, rumination, and impostor experiences. Addressing these research gaps will not only enhance our theoretical understanding of these phenomena but also inform the

development of more effective interventions and support strategies for individuals grappling with impostor feelings and related distress.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The objectives are as follows –

- To examine the relationship between perfectionism, rumination, and imposter phenomenon.
- To investigate the impact of imposter phenomenon on perfectionism and rumination.

Research Design

The current research follows a non-experimental quantitative correlational research design for the variables perfectionism, rumination and imposter phenomenon.

Sample and technique

A sample size of (N=162) young Indian adults in the age group of 18-16 years were chosen using convenience sampling. Males(n=71) and females(n=91) with an average of 22.24 years, participated in the study.

Sampling Technique

Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where units are chosen for the sample based on their accessibility to the researcher.

Tool and scale

Perfectionism- Big Three Perfectionism Scale-Short Form (BTPS-SF):

The short form of the perfectionism scale [14] is a 16-item scale graded on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from completely disagree 1 to completely agree 5. It has good test–retest reliability as the correlation level from 0.71 to 0.79 is significant at the .001 level (rigid perfectionism, $r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$, self-critical perfectionism, $r = 0.75$, $p < 0.001$ and narcissistic perfectionism, $r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$) Cronbach's alpha also varies from 0.78 to 0.90. Moreover, the perfectionism factors showed the expected divergent validity and convergent validity with the scales measuring personality traits, trait emotional intelligence, resiliency, life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, depression, stress, and anxiety. Items 1–4 measure rigid perfectionism, 5–10 measure self-critical perfectionism, and 11–16 measure narcissistic perfectionism.

Rumination-Ruminative Response Scale (RRS):

The RRS of the RSQ includes 22 items that assess the extent to which individuals repeatedly focus on the causes, meanings, and consequences of their negative mood. A factor analysis of the RRS has identified two separate subscales that are differentially related to symptoms of depression. The first, reflection, consists of five questions that assess the degree to which individuals engage in cognitive problem solving to improve their mood (e.g., Analyse recent events to try to understand why you are depressed), and the second, brooding, consists of five items that assess the degree to which individuals passively focus on the reasons for their distress (e.g., think 'What am I doing to deserve this?') [15]. These two scales showed adequate internal consistency in this study (brooding- 0.77; reflection - 0.71)

Imposter Phenomenon scale

The Leary Impostor Scale is a 7-item instrument aligned to a unidimensional conceptualization of the impostor phenomenon as solely focused on a sense of being an impostor or fraud [13]. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 for the leary imposter scale.

Procedure

The data of the research study was collected using google forms. The google forms were created and circulated among college students. The form contained the basic demographic details along with three questionnaires- Big Three Perfectionism Scale-Short Form (BTPS-SF) by Feher, Ruminative Response Scale and Leary Imposter scale. This form took around 10 to 15 minutes to be filled. IBM SPSS software was used to analyze the data gathered.

Data Analysis

The statistical analyses that will be used here is correlation and multiple regression.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation and correlation of perfectionism, rumination, and imposter phenomenon

Variable	M	SD	1	2
Perfectionism	43.57	12.09	-	-
Rumination	56.15	11.51	.525**	-
Imposter Phenomenon	19.12	5.75	.248**	.304**

** *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Table 1 shows the Mean, standard deviation and correlation of perfectionism, rumination, and imposter phenomenon. Perfectionism has a mean of 43.57 and standard deviation of 12.09, while rumination has a mean of 56.15 and standard deviation of 11.59 and imposter phenomenon has a mean of 19.12 and standard deviation of 5.75). For perfectionism and rumination, the correlation coefficient is found out to be 0.525 which is significant at 0.01 level. Thus, the hypothesis that states that there is no relationship correlation between perfectionism and rumination is rejected. Similarly, for perfectionism and imposter phenomenon, the correlation coefficient is found out to be .248 which is significant at 0.01 level. Thus, the hypothesis that states that there is no relationship correlation between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon is rejected. Additionally for rumination and imposter phenomenon, the correlation coefficient is found out to be .304 which is significant at 0.01 level. Thus, the hypothesis that states that there is no relationship correlation between rumination and imposter phenomenon is rejected. These findings suggest that individuals who exhibit higher levels of perfectionism tend to engage in more rumination and experience a stronger imposter phenomenon. Similarly, those who report higher levels of rumination also tend to experience a more pronounced imposter phenomenon.

Table 2: Showing multiple regression of perfectionism, rumination, and imposter phenomenon

Variable	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	Model Summary
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
Perfectionism	.074	.042	.155	F= 8.407
Rumination	1.00	0.44	.199	t= .081
				p= .000**
				R= .309
				R square= .096

Table 2 shows the multiple regression of perfectionism, rumination, and imposter phenomenon. For the independent variable "Perfectionism," the unstandardized coefficient (B) was 0.074, with a standard error of

0.042 and a standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.199. Similarly, for the independent variable "Rumination," the unstandardized coefficient (B) was 1.00, with a standard error of 0.44 and a standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.155. The R-value (multiple correlation coefficient) was 0.309, suggesting a moderate positive relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The R-squared value (coefficient of determination) was 0.096, indicating that approximately 9.6% of the variance in the imposter phenomenon can be explained by the included independent variables. The regression analysis gave a statistically significant result ($F = 8.407$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that at least one of the independent variables significantly predicts the imposter phenomenon. Hence the hypothesis that states that there is no significant association between perfectionism, rumination, and imposter phenomenon.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that perfectionism, rumination, and the imposter phenomenon are related. Perfectionism and rumination are linked, and both are connected to feeling like an imposter. Essentially, if someone strives for perfection a lot, they're more likely to overthink things and feel like they don't belong. This feeling of not belonging is what we call the imposter phenomenon. The linkage between perfectionism and rumination suggests a multifaceted interaction between these two constructs [16]. It is evident that individuals who exhibit perfectionistic tendencies are more prone to engaging in rumination. This may be due to the relentless pursuit of unattainable standards and heightened sensitivity to external evaluation, which can trigger self-doubt and overanalyzing behavior. The constant pursuit of perfection, along with a fear of failure, can lead to a cycle of self-doubt and over analysis. Furthermore, the negative influence of perfectionism on self-esteem [17-18], emphasizes the tendency for rumination.

Perfectionism and the impostor phenomenon frequently overlap, resulting in a complicated psychological environment. People who constantly strive for perfection may inadvertently intensify feelings of inadequacy and fraudulence, especially when they become overly anxious about making mistakes. Moreover, academic environments, characterized by intense pressure to excel, can exacerbate impostor experiences, particularly among individuals already burdened by perfectionism [18]. The coping mechanisms deployed by impostors offer insights into the intricate dynamics between perfectionism, impostor experiences, and individual responses, ranging from meticulous planning to self-sabotage [19]. Individuals prone to rumination may find themselves trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and over analysis, perpetually dwelling on perceived inadequacies and shortcomings. This relentless pursuit of perfection often accompanies heightened feelings of not belonging, as individuals struggle to reconcile their high standards with their perceived performance [7]. The impostor phenomenon can have a profound impact on an individual's mental well-being, leading to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression. Perfectionism aspects such as the desire for approval, organization, and rumination were substantial predictors of imposter sentiments, providing insight into the psychological roots of these phenomena [20].

The connection between perfectionism, rumination, and feeling like an impostor reveals how our thoughts, emotions, and motivations interact. When someone constantly seeks perfection, they tend to overthink and doubt themselves, which can make them feel like they do not belong. This feeling of not fitting in is what we call the impostor phenomenon. Perfectionists often get stuck in a loop of self-doubt, thinking too much about their mistakes and shortcomings. This cycle can make them feel even more like impostors. Academic pressure can make these feelings worse, especially for perfectionists. The way people cope with feeling like impostors varies, from planning everything meticulously to sabotaging themselves. The impostor phenomenon can harm mental health, so it is crucial to find ways to help people deal with it. Understanding how perfectionism, rumination, and feeling like an impostor are connected can lead to better support and interventions for those who struggle with these issues.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate a strong link between perfectionism, rumination, and the impostor phenomenon. Perfectionism, especially when people set too high standards for themselves, often leads to overthinking and feelings of inadequacy, often referred to as the imposter phenomenon. Research shows that perfectionism is

associated with rumination, can increase feelings of imposter, and lead to psychological distress. Likewise, rumination, characterized by prolonged and repeated rumination on negative experiences, can reinforce imposter behavior and lead to increased anxiety and depression. These findings highlight the complex relationships between perfectionism, rumination, and imposter emotions and highlight the need for further research to understand their impact on mental health and well-being.

Future research

Further research could explore longitudinal studies to better understand how perfectionism, rumination, and impostor feelings develop over time and how they influence each other. Additionally, qualitative research methods such as interviews or focus groups could provide deeper insights into individuals' experiences with these phenomena, offering a more nuanced understanding of their impact on mental health and well-being. Investigating potential cultural differences in the manifestation and consequences of perfectionism, rumination, and impostor feelings could also be valuable, as cultural factors may influence these constructs differently. Furthermore, exploring the efficacy of interventions targeting these factors, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy or mindfulness-based approaches, could provide valuable insights into effective strategies for addressing them in clinical and educational settings. Finally, research could examine the role of social support networks and coping mechanisms in mitigating the negative effects of perfectionism, rumination, and impostor feelings, offering practical implications for intervention and prevention strategies.

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