

Exploring Imposter Syndrome and Loneliness Among IT Professionals: The Role of Workplace Stress as a Moderator

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Abstract

Information technology (IT) is a key sector in modern India, attracting many young professionals. Software industry is a human capital industry and people working in the IT sector constantly have pressure to give services that are effective and inexpensive. Thus, IT professionals suffer from the double burden of giving effective services and managing the economic demands which further lead to mental health issues among IT professionals. This study examined how workplace stress influences the relationship between Imposter Syndrome (IS) and loneliness among IT professionals. The study was conducted on 160 IT professionals (84 males & 76 females) aged between 21-50 years and purposive sampling technique was employed to select the sample from Delhi and Bangalore states of India. Results showed a strong link between IS and loneliness, with workplace stress moderating this relationship. Gender differences were found across all variables, while age differences appeared only in loneliness and workplace stress.

In the fiercely competitive IT industry, recognizing and addressing these psychological factors will help in increasing worker happiness, productivity, and general performance. It highlights how crucial it is to adopt a comprehensive strategy and comprehend how many psychological elements interact to affect worker well-being.

Keywords: *Imposter Syndrome, Workplace Stress, Loneliness, Information Technology*

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INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) has become the most important sector of modern India and due to globalization and continuous development; the IT sector in India is gaining significant growth. IT professionals' main job is to customize and make new software according to the needs and demands of the industry with the help of the latest skills and technology (Nayak, 2014; Ramesh et al., 2016). This can again lead to techno stress, the stress that arises due to the continuous use of technology. IT professionals suffer from the double burden of giving effective services and managing the economic demands which further lead to mental health issues among IT professionals. According to research by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in Bangalore, around 46% of IT professionals in India report a level of high stress, which again questions their mental health (NIMHANS, 2020).

Workplace stress arises when individuals face challenges, strain, anxiety, or worry in

managing their day-to-day work tasks and other pressures of their jobs (Stranks, 2015). Different types of stress can arise at work for the employees, depending on the specific qualities of the workplace, and these stressors might be organization and industry specific (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Research found out that 17.7% of IT professionals experience work stress, with higher rates among those who are above 31 years old (18.8%), female employees (21.4%), and those with 4 to 7 years of work experience (19.4%) (Trivedi et al., 2024). It has been argued that requiring workers to regularly exceed 100 hours a week in the office is predatory and places organizational gains above people and their health (Dice, 2019). Workplace stress can lead to numerous short- and long-term consequences including increased medical errors, longer recovery times, decreased patient satisfaction, physician turnover, inefficiency, depression, suicide, and many more (West et al., 2018).

Workplace Stress and Perceived Loneliness

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Several studies have shown that work-related stress and perceived loneliness are strongly correlated in remote work situations (Miyake et al., 2022; O. Gilmer et al., 2023). The amount of companionship and coaching from peers and managers has a strong effect on office employees' feelings of isolation whether they are telecommuting or working in office (Miyake et al., 2021). The literature suggests that feeling lonely is stressful and can negatively impact mental health and overall well-being of human beings (Murphy & Kupshik, 1992). Loneliness tends to happen when individuals feel like they're not getting the support, understanding, and emotional connection they need from social interactions (Taha & Caldwell, 1993). It stems from shortcomings in a person's social interactions, whether in the depth or frequency of those connections (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).

Work Place Stress and Imposter Syndrome (IS)

Workplace stressors can increase loneliness and IS (Bravata et al., 2020). Clance & Imes (1978) first coined the term "Impostor Phenomenon" they defined it as experiencing intellectual dishonesty and there is always a fear of being exposed, where individuals believe they've deceived others into thinking they're more competent than they truly believe themselves to be. It's been suggested that around 70% of individuals will go through Impostor Phenomenon (IP) at least once during their lifetime (Gravois, 2007; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

Studies show that women in the IT sector often experience higher work stress than men, with different stressors affecting each gender (Gupta, 2022; Prasad et al., 2016). Factors like work-life imbalance, job exhaustion, and role conflict contribute to mid-career turnover among women (Adya, 2008). However, some research suggests that in software development roles, gender may not significantly impact stress levels (Anantharaman et al., 2018). Sufficient amount of literature found gender difference

in IS and discovered that females tend to report higher levels of impostor fears compared to males (Henning et al., 1998; King & Cooley, 1995; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). IS is more common among Gen Z (66%) and millennials (58%) than Gen X (41%) and older adults (25%) (Moss, 2023). While women describe loneliness as a subjective feeling, men tend to score higher on loneliness scales (Borys & Perlman, 1985).

Despite the significant impact of the IT sector on the country's economy still there isn't enough research that explores the mental health of IT professionals and the Indian IT industry haven't received adequate focus (Sharma & Kapoor, 2019). People working in this industry face so many challenges, yet there hasn't been sufficient attention given to fully understanding their psychological wellness (Dutta, 2021). Some important aspects, like how the company's culture affects loneliness, or how worries about work play into it, haven't been studied much. Therefore, the present study aims to assess workplace stress, impostor syndrome, and loneliness among IT professionals living in Bangalore and Delhi states of India. Further, it attempted to analyse the moderating role of workplace stress on the relationship between impostor syndrome and loneliness.

OBJECTIVE

1. To assess the levels of impostor syndrome, loneliness, and workplace stress among IT professionals, and to explore how these variables differ across gender and age groups.
2. To examine the relationship between impostor syndrome and loneliness
3. To analyze the moderating role of workplace stress in this relationship between impostor syndrome and loneliness.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant difference between male and female IT professionals in

levels of impostor syndrome, loneliness, and workplace stress.

H2: There are significant differences across age groups of IT professionals in levels of impostor syndrome, loneliness, and workplace stress.

H3: There is a significant relationship between impostor syndrome and loneliness.

H4: Workplace stress significantly moderates the relationship between impostor syndrome and loneliness among IT professionals

METHOD

Sample:

The present investigation is based on descriptive and correlation research design. The research was conducted on IT

professionals with varying job roles, experience levels, and income, this diversity reflects the real-world heterogeneity of the IT sector. The age range was 21-50 with the mean age of 32.7 years, living in Delhi and Bangalore in India. A total of $n=160$ out of which 52% of male and 48% of female subjects were selected for the study and they constitute both males and females belonging to different age groups. The sampling technique employed for the selection of sample was purposive sampling method. The study aimed to capture a broad understanding of psychosocial factors across typical workplace settings, not a narrowly defined subgroup. While these variables may influence the outcomes, they were not the primary focus and are acknowledged as potential confounders for future research.

Table 1: Socio- demographic profile of IT professionals

Socio- Demographic Variables	Sample	
	n	%
Gender		
Male	84	52
Female	76	48
Age Category		
21- 30	82	51
31-40	41	26
41-50	37	23
State (Currently Living)		
Delhi	93	69
Bangalore	67	31

Measures:

- The Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1980):** the scale includes 20 self-report items, with each being rated on a five-point Likert scale. A higher score on the scale signifies a greater impostor syndrome. The original version of the scale comprises of three dimensions: fake, luck, and discount. The scale's internal reliability coefficient was found to be .72.

- Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980):** The scale,

- consisting of 20-item is intended to measure subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. It demonstrate excellent internal consistency (coefficient alpha = .96) and a test-retest correlation of .73 over a two-month period.
- The Workplace Stress Scale (The Marlin Company and the American Institute of Stress, 1978):** This scale includes 8 items that assess work environment stress with each stressor rated for both frequency and severity on a five point rating scale. Internal consistency with Cronbach

alpha typically exceeding 0.80, indicating good consistency among scales items.

Procedure:

Prior to conducting the research, a proper rapport was established with the selected number of participants, who were then requested to complete the consent form. Participants who declined to participate were excluded for this study. Data were collected by using sociodemographic information of the participants followed by Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1980) followed by Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al., 1980) and Workplace Stress Scale ((Marlin Company and the American Institute of Stress, 2001). Data has been

RESULTS

Table 2:

Independent sample t-test comparing Imposter Syndrome, Loneliness and Workplace Stress in males and females

	Male	Female	t (158)	P
	Mean $\pm$ SD	Mean $\pm$ SD		
Imposter Syndrome	54.45 $\pm$ 14.53	60.27 $\pm$ 13.97	-2.57	.011*
Loneliness	45.72 $\pm$ 8.19	48.40 $\pm$ 7.03	-2.20	.029*
Workplace Stress	24.13 $\pm$ 7.62	26.77 $\pm$ 6.40	-2.36	.019*

Note - *significant at 0.05 level

Table 1 presents the findings of the independent samples t-test comparing levels of imposter syndrome, loneliness, and workplace stress between male and female IT professionals. The mean values, along with their standard deviations, indicate that females scored higher across all three psychological constructs compared to males. The results revealed that females experience significantly higher levels of imposter syndrome ($M = 60.27$, $SD = 13.97$) than

collected from the subject individually by survey method using questionnaire (self-administration method) and the data was analyzed quantitatively. For quantitative analysis of the data and to interpret the findings appropriate statistical tools has been applied.

Statistical Analysis:

The data collected has been tabulated and analyzed with the help of statistical tools viz. Microsoft EXCEL, SPSS and SPSS AMOS. Descriptive statistics like mean, SD and standard error of mean were calculated for the quantitative analysis. Inferential statistics like t-test and moderation analysis and moderation analysis were computed for testing the hypotheses.

males ($M = 54.45$, $SD = 14.53$). This difference is statistically significant ($t = -2.57$, $p = .011$), suggesting that females are more likely to experience imposter syndrome than males. Similarly, females reported significantly higher levels of loneliness ($t = -2.20$, $p = .029$). Moreover, a significant difference in workplace stress was observed ($t = -2.36$, $p = .019$), again indicating that females experience higher levels of workplace stress compared to male.

Table 3:

Mean, SD, F statistics comparing the Imposter Syndrome, Loneliness and Workplace Stress with respect to age variations

	Mean $\pm$ SD	F(2,157)	P
Imposter Syndrome			
21- 30 Years	57.68 $\pm$ 15.19	1.466	0.234
31- 40 Years	59.31 $\pm$ 13.99		
41- 50 Years	53.86 $\pm$ 13.30		
Total	57.21 $\pm$ 14.51		
Loneliness			

21- 30 Years	46.10 ± 8.32	3.599	0.030*
31- 40 Years	49.75 ± 5.57		
41- 50 Years	45.91 ± 7.98		
Total	47.00 ± 7.75		
Workplace Stress			
21- 30 Years	23.84 ± 7.74	4.070	0.019*
31- 40 Years	27.12 ± 4.33		
41- 50 Years	26.89 ± 7.74		
Total	25.38 ± 7.17		

Note - *significant at 0.05 level

Table 2 presents a one-way ANOVA examining imposter syndrome, loneliness, and workplace stress across three age groups. The results showed significant differences in loneliness $F(2, 157) = 3.599, p = .030$ and

workplace stress $F(2, 157) = 4.070, p = .019$, indicating age-related variation in these areas. However, no significant difference was found for imposter syndrome $F(2, 157) = 1.466, p = .230$.

Table 4:

Pearson Correlation between Imposter Syndrome and Loneliness

	1	2
1. Imposter Syndrome		
2. Loneliness	.265**	

Note - *significant at 0.01 level

In the table 3, Pearson correlation coefficient shows the strength and direction of the linear relationship between imposter syndrome and loneliness. The correlation coefficient between imposter syndrome and loneliness

was found to be significant ($r = .265, p < .001$). Therefore, the findings revealed that with the increase in imposter syndrome there is an increase in loneliness.

Table 5: Moderator Role of Workplace Stress on the relationship between Imposter Syndrome and Loneliness

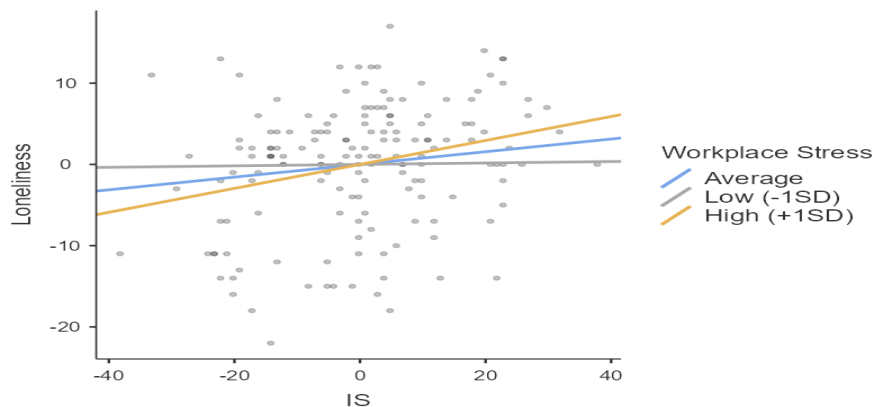
Relationship	Beta	C.R (t Value)	p- value
Loneliness<--- Imposter Syndrome	.146	1.799	.072
Loneliness<--- Workplace Stress	.298	3.703	<.001***
Loneliness<--- Workplace Stress_ Imposter Syndrome	.130	2.017	.044*

Note - *significant at 0.05 level, ***significant at 0.001 level

The study examined how work place stress moderates the relationship between imposter syndrome and loneliness. The results revealed that a positive and significant moderating impact of workplace stress on imposter syndrome and loneliness ($b = .130$,

$t = 2.017, p = .044$) as shown in Table 5. Workplace stress influences the relationship between imposter syndrome and loneliness.

Figure 1: Showing the Graphical representation of moderation analysis

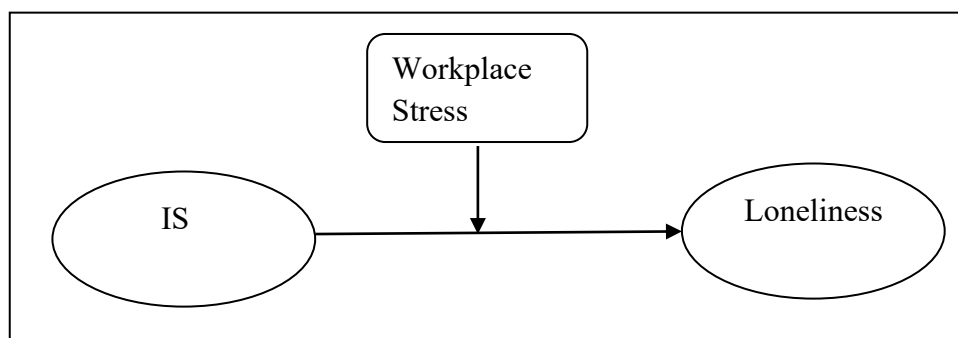


Results of simple slope analysis (figure 1) were done to better understand the nature of the moderating effect. As it can be seen in the figure 1, the line is much steeper for the

high workplace stress then the line of low workplace stress, this shows that higher the workplace stress, more imposter syndrome and thus, loneliness will increase.

Figure 2:

Model of Moderation Analysis



DISCUSSION

The present study revealed gender difference in imposter syndrome where women persistently believe that they are not qualified or competent despite evidence of the contrary. Social role theory suggests that women are socialized to display communal traits (i.e., warm, nurturing, and domestic) and men are socialized to display agentic traits (i.e., self-interested, assertive, and independent) (Eagly, 1983). This gender role disparity even permeates individual competence, which some have argued accounts for why women experience imposter feelings more than men.

The current investigation found gender differences in loneliness. Women IT professional reported more loneliness than male. The study also found gender

differences in loneliness, with women IT professionals reporting more loneliness than men. Research shows women generally experience higher levels of loneliness across all ages (Nikolaisen & Thorsen, 2014). Factors like burnout, lower job satisfaction, and constant skill demands contribute to this. With the rise of online platforms and remote work, interpersonal interactions have declined (Brummelhuis et al., 2010). Additionally, stereotypes about women's technical competence and challenges in socializing or adapting to workplace culture may heighten feelings of isolation, leading to increased turnover intentions (Moore, 2000).

Further, the findings of the present study showed gender difference in workplace stress, with women reporting higher level of stress than man. In a recent study, it has been

observed that working women in the IT sector generally face high levels of work stress compared to their male counterparts (Karamchandani & Dubule, 2020; Gupta, 2022). The gender role theory proposes that men and women are exposed to different workplace stressors, but the empirical findings do not consistently support it. Moreover, men were found more likely to be assigned to low stress profiles, and women were more likely to be assigned to medium stress profiles indicating curvilinear or nonlinear relationship between gender and exposure to stressors (Costa, 2022).

The present research found no significant age-related variation in the experience of impostor syndrome among IT professionals. Similarly, the past literature also shown the ambiguity in the result, some studies suggesting that there is an age variation (Bravata et al., 2020), whereas other research found no age difference (Rohrmann et al., 2016). This could be due to the fact that the IS among workers may be explained by the widespread presence of this syndrome across various age groups, ranging from adolescents to experienced workers (Beckman, 2022). Moreover, the obligation to constantly self-justify, the sensation of not being enough and the need to overwork in order to mask the feeling of lack of competence are common narratives associated to the impostor syndrome and could overcome age limits to affect people in several steps of their career paths (Tomar et al., 2023).

In the current study, age differences were observed in case of loneliness and workplace stress (as per table -3 in result section). IT professional between the age group of 30 to 40 years reported more workplace stress and loneliness. In Indian context, factors such as age, marital status, and the quantity of colleagues (Firoz et al., 2021) within the work environment played a crucial role in determining feelings of loneliness at work (Shankar & Ravi, 2023). The factors posing a risk and linked to heightened loneliness levels might be more visible in the particular age range of 30 to 40 than in another. For

example, the increased levels of loneliness observed among adult are frequently ascribed to their smaller social circles, higher proportion of living alone, and the more common and/or severe functional constraints present in this age category compared to younger individuals (de Jong Gierveld & van Tilburg, 2006). Research on workplace stress revealed that participants aged 30 years till retirement working in the field of software development, reported stress due to work-family interface problems. On the other hand, participants below the age of 30 were found to experience stress due to fear of obsolescence and technical risky behaviours (Vaghasiya, 2023).

In the present study significant correlation was found between the IS and loneliness. Moreover, the moderating role of personality was observed on the relationship between IS and loneliness. Studies indicate that impostor syndrome could be linked to feelings of isolation among individuals in professions such as computer science, physics, and mathematics, potentially dissuading women from pursuing high-level research roles and subsequently alienating themselves from such opportunities (Gemma, 2013). Studies have shown that the presence of IS can have negative impacts on mental health including higher rates of anxiety, depression and loneliness particularly in high achieving medical doctors like physicians (Beckman, 2022) Furthermore, individuals experiencing impostor syndrome may encounter challenges in sharing their feelings with others, often resulting in their isolation (Zorn, 2005). The association between impostor syndrome and feelings of loneliness has been identified, along with its correlation to heightened social anxiety and reduced social assistance (Ferrari, 2005).

Research shows that people experiencing IP may not have acquired the necessary resource initially to meet work requirements, thus leading to emotional exhaustion and work-family conflict (Crwaford et al., 2016) Also, the rate of IP in the workplace is significantly high and may relate to

depressive and anxious symptoms related to the job, highlighting the need for organizational support as a buffer (Crawford et al., 2014). It has been observed that deficient work skills may intensify deviant behaviours while diminishing organizational citizenship behaviours (Parul & Anand, 2020). Furthermore, a study exploring the relationship between Imposter Syndrome and burnout among people with employment found a positive relationship between the two constructs (Beckman, 2022).

Several studies have shown that work-related stress and perceived loneliness are strongly correlated in remote work situations (Miyake et al., 2022; O. Gilmer et al., 2023). Evidence suggests work-related stress in remote workers is linked to increased loneliness, especially with limited support from colleagues or superiors (Ameer & Nauman, 2023). During COVID-19, more remote work and job insecurity worsened this, reducing belonging and causing mental health issues and lower work engagement (Miyake et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION:

In conclusion, the study found a clear link between Impostor Syndrome and loneliness, with workplace stress acting as a moderator. Gender differences were significant across all variables, while age differences appeared only in loneliness and stress. Future research with larger, more diverse samples across India is recommended, along with exploring the role of socioeconomic factors. Psychosocial interventions may also benefit IT professionals facing high levels of IS, loneliness, or stress.

Declaration of Conflicting interest

The authors declare no competing or conflict of Interest

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