

What makes you feel like an imposter: An investigation of caste discrimination and social support

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Abstract: Imposter literature has predominantly been Western, and looked into gender and racial discrimination. The present study aimed to understand impostorism in the Indian context with a more culturally informed framework of the Caste System, and also assess the role played by perceived social support (PSS) in mediating this relationship between caste discrimination and imposter phenomenon (IP). The sample was recruited through non-probability techniques, and comprised 168 university students in North India (aged 18-25), with 67 belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) and 101 to the General Caste (GEN) groups. The Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, and the Everyday Discrimination Scale were administered, following which the data was analyzed using t-test for independent samples, linear regression, and mediation analysis. Results revealed (1) no significant association between IP and caste discrimination, (2) a significant difference among GEN and SC students in perceived social support, but not for IP or caste-discrimination, and (3) significant mediating role of PSS between caste-discrimination and impostorism. These findings suggest the need for more contextual frameworks, which consider socio-cultural factors, in understanding imposter phenomenon, especially among marginalized groups.

Keywords: imposter phenomenon, caste-discrimination, perceived social support, India, scheduled castes

‘Imposter phenomenon’ is described as the feeling of perceived fraudulence where people find it difficult to attribute their success to their own abilities despite many achievements and accolades, and believe themselves to have landed their roles through luck (Parkman, 2016). It can be detrimental to an individual’s well-being, causing clinically significant mental health consequences characterized by psychological distress (Cokley et al., 2017). Researchers have found that it may also have undesirable professional implications as it influences career attitudes and organizational behavior (Vergauwe et al., 2015).

While researchers have majorly adopted an individualistic approach in conceptualizing imposter phenomenon (IP) by examining it as a trait, there is a growing realization about larger social contexts characterized by the kind of structures and interactions that induce self-doubt about one’s abilities and worth (Feenstra et al., 2020). A person’s social position may play a role as people belonging to marginalized groups internalize the negative stereotypes associated with their group identities causing feelings of inadequacy

(Nadal et al., 2021). This has been defined as part of Tajfel’s (1979) social identity theory, which posits that an individual’s sense of identity is based on the groups they ‘identify’ with. For instance, Clance and Imes (1978) argued that negative societal messages about women and success cause them to seek alternative explanations for their accomplishments (such as fooling others). Similarly, students from ethnic minorities that are perceived as unintelligent may grapple with feelings of impostorism when they secure admissions to prestigious universities.

Discrimination and Imposter Phenomenon

Negative stereotypes may result in overt discrimination towards minority-status groups. How these behaviors are actually appraised by the individuals of that group is also of importance. Perceived discrimination occurs when individuals ‘perceive’ or ‘experience’ discrimination, which may fall outside the politico-legal definitions of discrimination (Straiton et al., 2019). Perceived discrimination has been linked to low self-esteem in marginalized minority groups, a factor which is implicated in the development of IP (Harris-

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Britt et al., 2007; Verkuyten, 1998).

Although limited, research has found higher prevalence of IP in women and in people of color, two groups which have faced considerable discrimination throughout history (McGregor et al., 2008; Villwock et al., 2016). Greater vulnerability to IP in women is related to their disadvantageous social position due to internalization of gender hierarchy within the society (Cokley et al., 2015).

While the existing literature establishes a link between IP and discrimination, it focuses mostly on experiences of minorities in American societies, being limited to gender and racial discrimination. This highlights a need for further research in the Indian context which also allows for the investigation of the caste system and its implications as a unique dimension related to discrimination.

Caste Discrimination in India

The caste system in India is a social hierarchy entered into by birth that places people into ranked castes called 'varnas' on the basis of their occupation, and further determines a person's access to wealth, power, and privilege. At the bottom of this hierarchy are Dalits, or the 'untouchables' as they were known historically – considered 'outcastes' and thus, not included in the four ranked castes of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Historically, the Dalits were subject to ostracization and discrimination. They could be charged for 'polluting' certain things such as temples with their presence, and were also subject to not only social but considerable economic deprivation. Along with strict rules against inter-caste interactions, especially in the case of marriages (Hampton, 2010), there also existed stringent barriers around the kind of occupations an individual from a specific caste could take up – thus, the untouchables were permanently resigned to degrading work, disallowing them to rise from their economic circumstances (Sana, 1993).

This led to widespread criticism and resistance, and concerted efforts were made in contemporary Indian history to address the social inequities produced by this system. While rapid modernization led to changes in social and cultural values, and various constitutional reforms were put in effect for abolishing untouchability

and for reserving seats in legislatures and government institutions, it cannot be said that this framework is entirely obsolete in the current Indian set-up. SCs continue to remain the largest deprived section of society (Sundaram & Tendulkar, 2003), and are subjected to discrimination, with crime rate against Dalits having a 66% increase in recent years (NCRB, 2017).

Caste Discrimination and IP: Perceived Social Support as a possible mediator

Social support is the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us" (Sarason et al., 1983). While received social support refers to supportive behaviors provided by social networks of an individual, perceived social support refers to the individual's perception of this support pertaining to its availability and level of satisfaction (Sarason, Sarason & Pierce, 1990). A line of research suggests that perceived social support could be altered due to individual experiences. Perceived discrimination may change the way people appraise the availability of social support causing an erosion in their perception of the social support. In this way, discrimination can be a predictor of low perceived social support (Hashemi et al., 2019).

The lack of social support has been found to be detrimental to the psychological well-being of the individual, with linkages to loneliness, alcohol use, major depression, posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, and nonspecific psychological distress (Brewin et al., 2000, Finch et al., 1999; Lakey & Cronin, 2008). On the other hand, literature also suggests that high levels of perceived social support are linked to several desirable health outcomes such as increased quality of life and overall happiness (Kang et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Perceived social support also plays an important role in stress-buffering. Stress theory posits that social support is a crucial resource for dealing with stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and a lack of the same enhances an individual's susceptibility to emotional distress.

Certain marginalized social groups, such that of caste, may face what is known as minority status stress in the form of perceived discrimination, which can

have damaging effects on the person's psychological well-being. Williams and Mohammad (2009) suggest that everyday discrimination makes persistent demands which can exhaust the person's mental resources. The role of social support in mitigating the impact of these negative social interactions has been investigated, suggesting that social support can be utilized as a coping strategy to effectively deal with perceived discrimination as it serves a protective function by acting as a buffer against the associated negative outcomes (Itzick et al., 2017; Jackson et al., 2003)

Perceived social support has also been found to be linked to higher self-esteem (Budd et al., 2009), as well as higher levels of self-efficacy (Mengfei & Jiyeon, 2016). Since both these dimensions are related to IP, PSS may also influence the experience of imposter feelings. Although research on this subject matter is sparse, social support can be used as a coping strategy to manage imposter feelings by using social networks for feedback and recognition. Coryell et al. (2013) found that support from peers can enable an individual to combat feelings of imposterism by enhancing self-confidence.

The current problem: IP and PSS in SC students

A review of previous literature has found a high prevalence of imposter phenomenon in student populations across a variety of majors including psychology, engineering, medical, dental, nursing, and pharmacy students. IP was also related to adverse academic outcomes such as evaluation anxiety, low academic self-esteem and self-efficacy, and academic dishonesty (Parkman, 2016). Further, students from marginalized communities, such as ethnic minorities who reported as being racially discriminated against, have been found to experience higher levels of imposter feelings. Among African America college students, Cokley et al. (2013) found a positive association between IP and minority status stress – an amalgamation of race-related stressors such as racial discrimination and marginalizing comments.

One such group in the Indian context is that of the Scheduled Castes. Students belonging to this community face a number of challenges and are severely underrepresented in institutes of higher

education as even with lower cut-offs, they are unable to fill the quotas (Ministry of HRD, Government of India, 2015). Moreover, due to reservations, the individuals who do manage to get into prestigious universities are often subject to patronizing comments, and questioned about their admission being based on 'quota' rather than merit, inducing feelings of guilt, inferiority, and self-doubt.

Additionally, they face a host of unique challenges at these educational institutions. Tierney et al. (2018) spoke to and recorded the narratives of students from SC background. Many SC students brought up their economic shortcomings, highlighting the interplay of caste and class, and how their lack of material goods and access to certain technology due to their deprived backgrounds puts them at a disadvantage against their privileged upper-caste peers. Further, in interacting with professors and participating in classroom discussions, they seem to struggle with a language barrier due to poor proficiency in English and limited technical vocabulary. Moreover, being first-generation students, many cannot avail academic support from their kin, while conservative upper-class professors may also not provide empathy and support. While overt discrimination may be absent, there are several instances of social exclusion also because students preferred to stick to other SC peers and feel hesitant in approaching upper-caste seniors for guidance. This perceived lack of support further exacerbates problems.

Thus, in addressing the existing gaps in the current literature linking IP and discrimination, as being limited to racial and gender discrimination in the western socio-cultural set-up, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between discrimination and IP in the Indian context, specifically in consideration of caste-based discrimination by studying the experiences of students from the Scheduled Castes community. Further, in light of research suggesting a possible influence of discrimination on perceived social support and the latter's potential as a coping strategy against feelings of imposterism, it also focuses on investigating the mediating role played by it in the relationship between IP and caste-based discrimination.

With reference to the existing literature, the study adopted the following five hypotheses to test:

1. There will be a significant association between imposter phenomenon and caste-based discrimination as experienced by students across the two caste groups.
2. There will be a significant difference in imposter phenomenon between the Scheduled Castes and General Castes groups.
3. There will be a significant difference in caste-based discrimination between the Scheduled Castes and General Castes groups.
4. There will be a significant difference in perceived social support between the Scheduled Castes and General Castes groups.
5. There will be a significant mediating role played by perceived social support between caste discrimination and imposter phenomenon.

Method

Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 168 students (82.1% women, 15.5% men, and 2.4% non-binary) studying at universities only within India, aged between 18-25 ($M = 20$) and belonging to either the Scheduled Castes (SC) or General Castes (GEN) groups. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students were included in the present study. Students belonging to Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other backward classes (OBCs) were excluded from the sample. The study included a total of 101 GEN students and 67 SC students. 36.9% (SC = 14, GEN = 48) of the participants were from an upper-class economic background, 53% (SC = 42, GEN = 47) from the middle and 10.1% (SC = 11, GEN = 6) from the lower background. The participants were recruited using non-probability sampling techniques of purposive, convenience, and snowballing. Demographic details are also presented in Table 1 –

Table 1

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Demographics	SC (n=67)	GEN (n=101)	Total
	n	n	n(%)
Economic Background			
Upper-class	14	48	62 (36.9)
Middle-class	42	47	89 (53)
Lower-class	11	6	17 (10.1)
Educational Level			
Undergraduation	58	96	154 (91.67)
Postgraduation	9	5	14 (8.3)
Gender			
Men	12	14	26 (15.48)
Women	53	82	135 (80.36)
Non-binary	1	3	4 (2.38)

Measures

Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance & Imes, 1978). The CIPS is a 20-item scale that measures the extent to which a person experiences imposter feelings or worries about being a fraud. The items are rated on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very true), with higher scores reflecting more intense imposter feelings. The CIPS has evidence for good reliability ($\alpha = .96$) and convergent validity in a gender and ethnically heterogeneous sample (Cokley et al., 2017; Mascarenhas et al., 2019).

Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS; William et al, 1997). A 9-item scale used to assess the frequency of routine, relatively subtle discriminatory experiences in everyday social situations. Responses are coded on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from “almost every day” (6) to “never” (1), with higher scores indicating greater perceived discrimination. For the purpose of the present study, an additional clause regarding caste was added to the questionnaire: “Please keep in mind your caste while answering the following questions”. The EDS has demonstrated good internal consistency and validity over time, even in an Indian sample (Gonzalez et al., 2016; Khubchandani et al., 2018).

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988). This 12-item scale measures the subjective assessment of an individual’s perceived social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others. The responses are rated and scored on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 = “very strongly disagree” and 7 = “very strongly agree”. A higher score reflects higher perception of social support. The scale has a high internal reliability of $\alpha = .88$ and has indicated good internal consistency in the previous studies (Koydemir et al., 2013; Tonsing et al., 2012).

Additionally, the online questionnaire also gathered details about the participants’ basic demographic details (age, gender and sexuality, disability status, annual family income, education qualification, and religion) after taking their informed consent.

Procedure and Design

The present study adopted a quantitative comparative design using the survey method of data collection. An online questionnaire (Google form) with all the measures for the study was circulated amongst students across universities/colleges in India. The form contained a cover page informing them about the details of the study, their rights as a participant, as well as the instructions on answering the questions. Their informed consent was taken before proceeding with the questions. Participants were recruited on the basis of purpose and convenience, along with the non-probability sampling technique of snowballing. The data obtained was coded by calculating scores on each individual scale for both the caste groups, and the average scores then statistically analyzed for comparison between groups, association, and mediation on SPSS version 28.0. Simple linear regression was done to assess the association between caste discrimination and IP, t-tests were carried out for independent means on all three constructs for both the groups (GEN and SC), and the mediating role of perceived social support was analyzed using PROCESS macro mediational analysis.

Results

Tables 2-4 along with Figure 1, present the results for each of the inferential analyses carried out in the present study.

Table 2

Simple linear regression analysis of caste discrimination and IP

Model	R Square	F	p-value
Caste Discrimination	.009	1.550	0.215

Simple linear regression analysis was carried out to check for association between caste-discrimination and imposter phenomenon among the entire sample of participants. The results of the same, as presented in Table 2, revealed that caste-discrimination does not

have a significant impact on the imposter feelings experienced by students, with a regression coefficient (R Square) of .009 and $p = .215$. Thus, the 0.9% of variance in imposter feelings attributable to caste-discrimination is not statistically significant at $p < 0.1$ level.

Table 3

Comparison of IP, PSS, and Caste Discrimination between SC and GEN participants

	Mean (SD)		t-value	p-value
	SC	GEN		
IP	62.19 (14.75)	66.12 (12.94)	-1.820	.071
PSS	57.46 (12.07)	63.64 (11.89)	-3.280	.001*
Caste Discrimination	19.73 (8.13)	18.60 (8.15)	.879	.381

Note: * $p < .001$

Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test carried out to compare the mean scores of students in both SC and GEN groups on caste-discrimination, imposter phenomenon, and perceived social support. The results revealed no significant

difference between both the groups on imposter phenomenon and caste discrimination ($t = -1.820$, $p = .071$; $t = .879$, $p = .381$). However, for perceived social support, a statistically significant difference was observed between both the groups, with a t-value of -3.280 and $p < 0.001$.

Table 4

Mediation Analysis for Caste Discrimination and IP through PSS

	Coefficient	SE	t-value	p-value
Path A (Direct)	-.3927	.1134	-3.464	0.0007*
Path B (Direct)	-.2300	.0881	-2.611	0.0099**
Path C (Direct)	.0726	.1332	.5451	.5864

Note: * $p < .001$

** $p < 0.01$

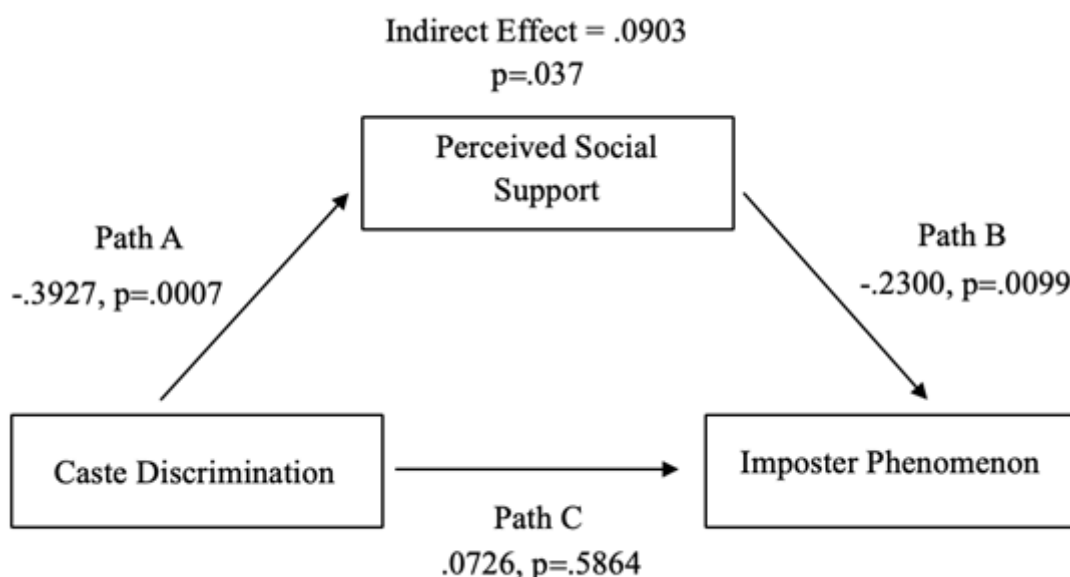
A mediational analysis using PROCESS macro was conducted to check for indirect effect of caste-discrimination on imposter phenomenon through perceived social support. Results of the same, as shown in Table 4, suggest a significant effect of perceived social support in mediating the indirect impact of caste-discrimination on impostorism among students,

with an indirect effect of .0903 significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

According to the criteria given by Hair et al. (2010), perfect mediation could be established between caste discrimination and IP through PSS in the present study since A and B effects are significant while path C is not. Figure 1 demonstrates this mediation model.

Figure 1

Mediation Analysis Model for Caste Discrimination and IP through PSS



Thus, even though a direct effect of caste-discrimination was not observed on students' imposter feelings, a perfect indirect effect with perceived social support as a mediator was present. The amount of social support was also differently perceived by both the SC and GEN groups, with SC students having significantly lower scores

Discussion

The study sought to investigate the contextual roots of imposter phenomenon and frame a culturally-informed model by studying imposter feelings in relation with discrimination and social support as experienced and perceived by students from the Scheduled and General Castes. A comparison of the descriptive statistics reports higher average scores on

IP ($M_{\text{GEN}}=66.12$, $M_{\text{SC}}=62.19$) and PSS ($M_{\text{GEN}}=63.64$, $M_{\text{SC}}=54.76$) among the GEN students than SC, but lower on caste discrimination ($M_{\text{GEN}}=18.6$, $M_{\text{SC}}=19.73$). The results revealed no significant association between caste-discrimination and imposter phenomenon, and no significant difference among SC and GEN groups on caste-discrimination and imposter feelings. Thus, these hypotheses were not accepted. However, perceived social support played a perfect mediating role between caste discrimination and imposter phenomenon, and was significantly different for SC and GEN students. While some of these findings contradict existing literature, it must be noted that the link between discrimination, imposter phenomenon, and perceived social support has not been studied so far in the Indian context.

Though there were no significant caste minority differences in imposterism and discrimination, perceived social support was significantly lower in SC students. Students from marginalized backgrounds face a myriad of challenges (Tierney et al., 2018), therefore, social support may play an important role in shaping their experiences at educational institutions. Since material support is a crucial aspect of perceived social support, taking into consideration that the number of students from an upper and middle-class background were higher for the GEN group as compared to the SC group, this may also explain higher PSS among GEN.

Expressions of discrimination may not always be overt and are much less prevalent at institutes of higher education in urban areas (Leo & Panigrahi, 2021), from where the sample was primarily derived, which might have reduced the difference in perception of the same among SC and GEN students. Moreover, since EDS does not specifically measure caste-discrimination, the participants' appraisal of the discrimination they experience could have been influenced by their gender since majority of the sample (80.36%) comprised of women. Comparable IP scores in GEN as opposed to SC may also be attributed to a higher percentage of women as they are more likely to experience IP (McGregor et al., 2008).

The dynamics of impostor phenomenon suggest that individuals' perceptions can vary and are shaped by external factors (Clance & Imes, 1978). Social support can act as an active coping strategy in managing one's imposter feelings as it allows one alternative perspective to review their perceived limitations, receive feedback on their performance, and also focus on the successes (Pervez et al., 2021). Alternatively, social support may also become a source of stress in cases of negative or ambivalent experiences while seeking social support from peers (Gardner et al., 2019). Thus, individual experiences of perceived discrimination may alter the appraisal of availability of social support (Hashemi et al., 2019). In the present study as well, perceived social support was observed to have a significant mediating role in explaining the impact discrimination has on imposter phenomenon. Thus, it can be suggested that perceived social support helps in establishing a casual pathway between caste-

discrimination and imposter phenomenon among students.

Though no statistically significant association could be established between caste-discrimination and imposter feelings directly, this can be attributed to limitations in measurement approach since the EDS does not have provisions for assessing culture-bound experiences of caste discrimination in everyday life.

Further, it is possible that students from minority castes minimize their perceived discrimination in order to feel more in control of their social worth. Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) established that minority group students hold a greater tendency towards the same due to the perceived consequences of high performance, and social control and self-esteem.

Moreover, according to the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), perceived discrimination may enhance in-group identification which has been shown to act as a buffer against negative outcomes related to discrimination by serving a protective function for the individual's well-being, especially self-esteem. This may have played a role in the relationship as being related to both perceived discrimination and imposter phenomenon.

Examination of perceived discrimination as of a personal or group nature is also of relevance. Personal versus group discrimination can influence the self-esteem of an individual in different ways (Bourguignon et al., 2006) where the former is related to low self-esteem and the latter to higher levels of self-esteem. These discrepancies may influence the relationship between perceived discrimination and IP of which self-esteem is an important component.

Limitations and Future Directions

In the present study the questionnaire was built using standardized scales used in English, therefore limiting the sample to only the English speakers. The scale used for assessing caste-based discrimination was not designed specially to measure caste discrimination in an Indian context, thus may have altered the obtained results. Further, it is needed that research methods other than survey be utilized for investigating the discriminatory experiences of marginalised students

where Focus Group Discussions or interviews could elicit elaborate subjective descriptions of the participants' experiences

Additionally, the in-group identification of SC students may also be assessed to understand the extent of internalization of negative stereotypes associated with their social group which could help explain the levels of imposter phenomenon as well as its relationship with perceived discrimination. Discrimination may also be measured for both the personal and group dimension in order to better examine how group identity plays into perceived discrimination.

The study also identified perceived social support as a predictor of better college/university experiences for minority caste students by allowing them to cope with their impostorism. Therefore, university/college intervention programs can target the creation of peer support programs or groups for the student body overall. Recommendations can also be made to college counselors working with caste-minority students to address the common stressors experienced by individuals who are not a part of the dominant group on campus.

Conclusion

The present study observed a significant role played by perceived social support in mediating the impact discriminatory attitudes and behaviors have on university students' imposter feelings, also indicating how the experiences of marginalized students at educational institutions are shaped by a dynamic interplay of complex socio-cultural factors. Our findings highlight the need for more culturally-sound contextual frameworks for conceptualizing Imposter Phenomenon, which has largely been individualized in Western literature. Such frameworks could offer more contextual interventions, and structural and effective solutions for combating imposter feelings.

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