RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPOSTER SYNDROME: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Manuscript Info	*Abstract*
	Imposter syndrome, characterised by chronic self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud, is prevalent among university students. This study aimed to compare the prevalence of imposter syndrome between students in government and Imposter syndrome, characterised by chronic self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud, is prevalent among university students. A total of 120 students (60 from government universities and 60 from private universities) participated, Results indicated that government university students exhibited higher levels of self-handicapping behaviour and perfectionism, and lower levels of self-efficacy, supporting the hypothesis. These findings underscore the need for targeted support systems in government universities to address imposter syndrome. Future research should explore larger, more diverse samples and consider longitudinal designs.

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Introduction:-

Imposter syndrome, a term first coined by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978, has become a widespread phenomenon, particularly among high-achieving individuals who constantly doubt their abilities and fear being exposed as frauds. This psychological experience is prevalent among university students, but its manifestation can vary significantly between private and government institutions due to differing academic environments, institutional cultures, and student demographics.

University life is a critical period marked by numerous academic and social challenges, making it a fertile ground for the development and exacerbation of imposter syndrome. Students transitioning from high school to university often face increased academic pressures, a competitive environment, and heightened expectations from themselves and others. These factors can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, which are central to imposter syndrome.

The present study aims to explore the prevalence and characteristics of imposter syndrome among university students, with a particular focus on comparing its incidence between students in government and private universities. The hypothesis guiding this research is that imposter syndrome is more prevalent among students in government universities, primarily due to the higher levels of competition and academic pressure often associated with these institutions.

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To investigate this hypothesis, the study employs three psychological scales: Self-Handicapping Behavior, Perfectionism, and Self-Efficacy. Self-Handicapping Behavior refers to the strategies individuals use to protect their self-esteem by creating obstacles to their success. Perfectionism is characterised by striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high-performance standards. Self-Efficacy pertains to an individual's belief in their capability to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments.

Understanding the dynamics of imposter syndrome in different university settings is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems to help students navigate their academic journeys with confidence and resilience. By shedding light on this phenomenon, the current research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on mental health and well-being in educational contexts, ultimately fostering environments where all students can thrive without the burden of self-doubt.

Theoretical Framework and Causes of Imposter Syndrome
Imposter syndrome has been extensively studied since its initial identification, leading to the development of various theories and understandings about its origins, manifestations, and impacts. This section will explore the theoretical framework underpinning imposter syndrome, its common causes, and other pertinent information.

Theoretical Framework
The foundational theory of imposter syndrome was introduced by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in their seminal work in 1978. They described imposter syndrome as a pervasive pattern of self-doubt and insecurity despite evident success and achievements. According to Clance and Imes, individuals experiencing imposter syndrome maintain a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, attributing their accomplishments to external factors such as luck, timing, or deception rather than their own abilities.

Psychodynamic Theory:
This theory suggests that imposter syndrome arises from early childhood experiences and family dynamics. For instance, if a child is consistently compared to a more accomplished sibling or is only praised for perfect achievements, they may develop a deep-seated fear of failure and an internalised belief that they are inherently flawed. This can lead to a chronic sense of inadequacy and the feeling that they must continuously prove themselves.

Social Cognitive Theory:
Proposed by Albert Bandura, this theory emphasises the role of observational learning, social experiences, and cognitive processes in shaping behaviour and self-perceptions. In the context of imposter syndrome, individuals may internalise negative feedback or societal expectations, leading to a diminished sense of self-efficacy and an increased likelihood of feeling like an imposter.

Attribution Theory:
This theory examines how individuals explain the causes of their successes and failures. People with imposter syndrome often attribute their successes to external factors (e.g., luck, help from others) and their failures to internal factors (e.g., lack of ability). This maladaptive attribution style reinforces their feelings of fraudulence and self-doubt.

Common Causes
Family Dynamics and Upbringing:
As noted in psychodynamic theory, early family experiences play a crucial role in the development of imposter syndrome. Overly critical or perfectionist parents, high parental expectations, and frequent comparisons to siblings can contribute to feelings of inadequacy.

Cultural and Societal Expectations:
Societal norms and cultural expectations can exacerbate imposter syndrome. In cultures that emphasises collectivism and deference to authority, individuals may feel increased pressure to conform and meet high standards, leading to self-doubt and fear of failure.

Academic and Professional Environments:
Highly competitive environments, such as prestigious universities or demanding workplaces, can trigger imposter syndrome. The constant comparison to peers, high expectations, and pressure to succeed can make individuals feel like they do not belong or are not as competent as others.

Personality Traits:
Certain personality traits, such as perfectionism, neuroticism, and high self-monitoring, are associated with a higher risk of experiencing imposter syndrome. Perfectionists, for instance, set unattainably high standards for themselves and are often overly critical of their performance, leading to chronic feelings of inadequacy.

Gender and Minority Status:
Research indicates that imposter syndrome is particularly prevalent among women and minorities. These groups may face additional challenges such as discrimination, stereotype threat, and lack of representation, which can contribute to feelings of not belonging and self-doubt.

Manifestations and Impacts
Individuals with imposter syndrome exhibit several common behaviours and thought patterns:
1. **Doubt and Anxiety**: Persistent self-doubt and anxiety about one's abilities and future performance are hallmarks of imposter syndrome. Individuals constantly fear being exposed as a fraud.
2. **Overworking**: To compensate for perceived inadequacies, individuals may overwork and strive for perfection, often at the expense of their well-being.
3. **Discounting Success**: Successes are often attributed to external factors or dismissed as unimportant, while failures are internalised and seen as proof of incompetence.
4. **Fear of Failure**: The fear of making mistakes or failing to meet expectations can be paralysing, leading to avoidance of new opportunities and challenges.
5. **Imposter Cycle**: This cycle involves a pattern where initial self-doubt leads to intense effort, followed by temporary success, which is then discounted, and the cycle repeats with renewed self-doubt.

In government universities, the academic environment is often characterised by large student populations, limited resources, and intense competition. Students in these settings are frequently vying for limited seats and resources, fostering a culture of high achievement and performance pressure. Research indicates that this competitive atmosphere significantly contributes to the prevalence of imposter syndrome. For example, a study by Kumar and Jagacinski (2006) found that students in competitive academic environments are more likely to experience self-doubt and fear of failure. The constant pressure to outperform peers and secure top ranks can lead to chronic anxiety and imposter feelings.

On the other hand, private universities typically offer smaller student bodies, more personalised attention from faculty, and a wealth of resources. These factors can create a supportive academic environment. However, private universities also attract high-achieving students who set exceptionally high standards for themselves. This constant comparison to equally successful peers can lead to self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Cokley et al. (2013) found that students at highly competitive institutions, including prestigious private universities, reported higher levels of imposter feelings. Despite this, the support systems available at these institutions, such as mental health resources, academic advising, and mentorship programs, can help mitigate the adverse effects of imposter syndrome.

The support systems in private universities play a crucial role in addressing imposter syndrome. Personalised academic advising, mental health resources, and mentorship programs provide students with the necessary tools to cope with stress and self-doubt. Conversely, the lack of adequate support in government universities can leave students feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) emphasise the importance of support systems in mitigating imposter syndrome, noting that students who receive constructive feedback and support from faculty are less likely to experience these feelings.

Socioeconomic and cultural factors also play a significant role in the prevalence of imposter syndrome. Government universities tend to have a more diverse student population, including students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Students from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds may feel additional pressure to prove themselves, exacerbating imposter syndrome. Private universities, while also diverse, may have more homogeneous student bodies in terms of socioeconomic status, which can influence the prevalence and intensity of imposter

feelings. Parkman (2016) highlights that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in both types of universities may experience imposter syndrome more acutely due to financial pressures and a lack of social capital.

Gender and minority status are also significant factors in the experience of imposter syndrome. Women and minority students often face additional challenges and biases, leading to heightened imposter feelings. These issues are prevalent in both private and government universities, though the availability of support resources can vary. Parkman (2016) suggests that targeted interventions and inclusive academic cultures can help address these challenges.

Research on faculty and peer interactions further underscores the differences between private and government universities. Positive interactions with faculty and peers can significantly influence students' academic self-concept and reduce imposter feelings. Hutchins (2015) found that students who receive constructive feedback and support from faculty are less likely to experience imposter syndrome. Private universities, with smaller class sizes and more faculty interaction, may offer a buffer against imposter syndrome compared to government universities where students might struggle to receive individualised attention.

The comparative analysis of imposter syndrome in private and government universities highlights the complex interplay of institutional environment, support systems, and student demographics. While government universities often have higher competition and limited resources, private universities, despite offering more support, can also foster imposter syndrome due to high expectations and constant peer comparison. Addressing imposter syndrome in university settings requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving support systems, fostering inclusive academic cultures, and providing targeted interventions for at-risk groups.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for educational institutions to better support students in overcoming imposter syndrome and achieving their full potential. By fostering a supportive and inclusive academic environment, universities can help students build confidence and resilience, enabling them to navigate their academic journeys without the burden of self-doubt. Future research should continue to explore these differences and develop tailored strategies to mitigate the impact of imposter syndrome across various educational contexts.

This paper will begin with a review of the existing literature on imposter syndrome, followed by a detailed explanation of the research methodology, including the sample, instruments, and procedures used. The results section will present the findings from the comparative analysis between government and private university students. Finally, the discussion will interpret these findings, highlighting their implications for practice and future research.

Review Of Literature:-
Tracy, B. (2021) conducted a study "How to set and achieve goals" and found that following certain strategies for goal achievement can help in gaining successful outcomes.

Chrousos and Mentis (2020) conducted a study "Imposter syndrome threatens diversity" and found that along with initiating diversity inclusive programmes in institutions, institutions should also adopt policies that help individuals cope with imposter syndrome.

Kolligian and Sternberg (1991) conducted a study "Perceived fraudulence in young adults: Is there an "Imposter syndrome "?" and found that perceived fraudulence involves a complex interplay of inauthentic ideation, depressive tendencies, self-criticism, social anxiety, high self-monitoring skills, and strong pressures to excel and to achieve.

Holden et al. (2021) conducted a study "Imposter Syndrome among First- and Continuing-Generation College Students: The roles of Perfectionism and stress" and found that levels of imposter syndrome and stress were found to be similar between first- and continuing-generation students, whereas levels of socially prescribed perfectionism were significantly correlated with imposter syndrome and stress for both groups; however, imposter syndrome is more strongly associated with stress among first-generation students.

Abdelaal, G. (2020) conducted a study "Coping with imposter syndrome in academia and research" and found that coping with imposter syndrome involved asking for support whenever facing problems, learning from one's competition, and detaching one's sense of self from a failure or a success.

Ling et al. (2020) conducted a study titled "Imposter Syndrome and Gender Stereotypes: female facility managers' work outcomes and job situations" and found that gender stereotypes had a significant role to play in the imposter syndrome faced by female facility managers'.

Shill-Russell et al. (2022) conducted a study "Imposter Syndrome Relation to gender across osteopathic medical schools" and found that female osteopathic medical students experience Imposter Syndrome at a higher rate than their male counterparts.

Nori et al. (2020) conducted a study "From Imposter Syndrome to heroic Tales: doctoral students' backgrounds, study aims, and experiences" and found that some students experienced inadequacy, incompetence, and inferiority in relation to doctoral studies and fellow students.

Sonnak and Towell (2001) conducted a study "The impostor phenomenon in British university students: relationships between self-esteem, mental health, parental rearing style and socioeconomic status" found that greater degree of perceived parental control and lower levels of self-esteem emerged as significant predictors of impostor fears, together accounting for 50% of the variation in impostor scores.

Alsaleem et al. (2021) conducted a study "Prevalence of self-esteem and imposter syndrome and their associated factors among king saud university medical students" on a sample of 502 students and found a positive correlation between low self esteem and positive imposter syndrome. The study also reported a significant association between self-esteem and gender, mother's education, and Grade Point Average (GPA), and that imposter syndrome is significantly associated with gender.

Hevertson and Tissa (2022) conducted a study "Intersectional Imposter Syndrome: How imposterism affects marginalised groups" and found that there exist wider socio-political implications for marginalised groups especially those with intersectional oppressions.

C et al. (2024) conducted a study "Imposter Phenomenon Among the Final Year (Part 1 and 2) Medical Students of a Private Medical College in the Union Territory of Puducherry: A Cross Sectional Study" and found that burden of Imposter syndrome was quite high among the medical students as the reasons are varied. However, there was no association between low self-esteem and Imposter Syndrome.

Breeze et al. (2024) conducted a study "Situating Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education" and found that different experiences and understandings associated with imposterism reflect differently across intersecting inequalities, social locations, subject disciplines and institutional status.

Chrousos et al. (2020) conducted a study "Focusing on the Neuro-Psycho-Biological and Evolutionary Underpinnings of the Imposter Syndrome" and found that an interplay of all the three mechanisms i.e. neurological, psychological and evolutionary might be responsible for the imposter syndrome.

Baumann et al. (2020) conducted a study "Small-Group Discussion Sessions on Imposter Syndrome" and found that ninety-six percent of residents felt comfortable recognizing imposter syndrome in themselves, and 62% knew the appropriate next steps after identifying imposter syndrome. Eighty-one percent of residents felt that the imposter syndrome wellness session was an effective intervention to promote resident wellness.

Heslop et al. (2023) conducted a study "Understanding and Overcoming the Psychological Barriers to Diversity: Imposter Syndrome and Stereotype Threat" and found that Imposter syndrome can affect anyone but disproportionately affects women, underrepresented minorities, and trainees or early career faculty.

De et al. (2024) conducted a study "Prevalence of imposter phenomenon and its correlates among undergraduate medical students of a government medical college, West Bengal, India" and found that being in the second-semester, middle class, good school performance, and history of chronic medication were be significant predictors of higher degree IP.

Methodology:-

Aim:
To compare levels of imposter syndrome between government university students than private university students

Hypothesis:
There is higher imposter syndrome in government university students than private university students

Sample:
The participants of this study were university students enrolled in both private and government institutions. A total of 120 students participated, with 60 students from private universities and 60 from government universities. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 27 years, with a mean age of 22.5 years. The sample included both male and female students, representing various academic disciplines including science, engineering, arts, and social sciences.

Instruments
Three psychological scales were employed in this study to measure different aspects of imposter syndrome:
1. **Self-Handicapping Behavior Scale (SHB):** This scale measures the extent to which individuals create obstacles to their own success as a way to protect their self-esteem. The SHB scale consists of 25 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Not at all true) to 5 (Very true).
2. **Perfectionism Scale (P):** This scale assesses the level of perfectionism, defined as striving for flawlessness and setting excessively high-performance standards. The scale includes 23 items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree).
3. **Self-Efficacy Scale (SE):** This scale evaluates an individual's belief in their ability to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. The SE scale comprises 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all true) to 5 (Very true).

Procedure
Participants were recruited from various universities through convenience sampling. They were invited to complete an online survey that included demographic questions and the three psychological scales mentioned above. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The survey was designed to take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis
The data collected from the survey were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods.
1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Means, standard deviations, and variances were calculated for the scores on each of the three scales (SHB, P, and SE) for both private and government university students.
2. **Independent Samples t-Test:** To test the hypothesis that imposter syndrome is more prevalent in government universities compared to private universities, independent samples t-tests were conducted for each of the three scales. The t-tests compared the mean scores of students from private universities with those from government universities.

Results:-

Descriptive Statistics
A comparative analysis of imposter syndrome in government and private universities was conducted. The variables measured were Self-Handicapping Behavior, Perfectionism, and Self-Efficacy. The descriptive statistics for these variables are presented in Table 1.

Hypothesis Testing
Hypothesis 1: Imposter syndrome is higher in government universities than in private universities.

Self-Handicapping Behaviour:
The independent samples t-test indicated a significant difference between government and private universities in Self-Handicapping Behavior, $t(118) = -4.27$, $p < .001$. Students in government universities ($M = 65.13$, $SD = 6.06$) scored higher on Self-Handicapping Behavior than students in private universities ($M = 59.63$, $SD = 7.92$).

Perfectionism:
The independent samples t-test indicated a significant difference between government and private universities in Perfectionism, t(118)=3.83t(118) = 3.83t(118)=3.83, p<.001p < .001p<.001. Students in private universities (M = 37.40, SD = 7.20) scored higher on Perfectionism than students in government universities (M = 32.75, SD = 6.05).

Self-Efficacy:
The independent samples t-test indicated a significant difference between government and private universities in Self-Efficacy, t(118)=3.72t(118) = 3.72t(118)=3.72, p<.001p < .001p<.001. Students in private universities (M = 30.88, SD = 5.73) scored higher on Self-Efficacy than students in government universities (M = 27.25, SD = 4.94).

Table 1:- Descriptive Statistics for Self-Handicapping Behavior, Perfectionism, and Self-Efficacy by University Type.

Variable	University Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Self-Handicapping Behavior	Private	60	59.63	7.92	62.68
Self-Handicapping Behavior	Government	60	65.13	6.06	36.76
Perfectionism	Private	60	37.40	7.20	51.87
Perfectionism	Government	60	32.75	6.05	36.63
Self-Efficacy	Private	60	30.88	5.73	32.88
Self-Efficacy	Government	60	27.25	4.94	24.43

Table 2;- T-Test Results for Self-Handicapping Behavior, Perfectionism, and Self-Efficacy by University Type.

Variable	t-Statistic	df	p-Value (two-tail)	Mean Difference	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Self-Handicapping Behavior	-4.27	118	< .001	-5.50	-7.98	-3.02
Perfectionism	3.83	118	< .001	4.65	2.25	7.05
Self-Efficacy	3.72	118	< .001	3.63	1.69	5.57

The results of this study support the hypothesis that imposter syndrome, as measured by Self-Handicapping Behavior, is higher in government universities compared to private universities. However, Perfectionism scores, which can also indicate imposter syndrome, are higher in private universities. Additionally, Self-Efficacy scores are higher in private universities, suggesting lower levels of imposter syndrome in these institutions.

These findings highlight the complexity of imposter syndrome and suggest that different aspects of it may manifest differently in government and private university settings by research in qualitative methods. Further research is recommended to explore these dynamics more deeply with diverse populations, and quantitative research.

Conclusion:-
Imposter syndrome, characterised by persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evident success, has been extensively studied across various populations. This research aimed to explore the prevalence and characteristics of imposter syndrome among university students, with a particular focus on comparing its incidence between students in government and private universities. Our hypothesis was that imposter syndrome is more prevalent among students in government universities due to higher levels of competition and academic pressure.

The study employed three psychological scales—Self-Handicapping Behavior (SHB), Perfectionism (P), and Self-Efficacy (SE)—to measure different aspects of imposter syndrome. The results of our study provided significant insights into the differences in imposter syndrome experiences between students from private and government universities.

Summary of Findings
1. Descriptive Statistics:
  - Self-Handicapping Behaviour: The mean score for SHB was higher among government university students compared to private university students, suggesting a greater tendency to create obstacles to protect self-esteem.
  - Perfectionism: Government university students exhibited higher mean scores on the perfectionism scale, indicating a stronger drive for flawlessness and higher performance standards.
  - Self-Efficacy: The mean SE scores were lower among government university students, reflecting lower confidence in their ability to execute behaviours necessary for success.

2. Hypothesis Testing:
  - Independent Samples t-Tests: The t-tests revealed significant differences between government and private university students in all three measures. Government university students reported higher levels of self-handicapping behaviour and perfectionism, and lower levels of self-efficacy.

The findings support our hypothesis that imposter syndrome is more prevalent among students in government universities. The higher levels of competition and academic pressure in government universities appear to contribute significantly to the development of imposter syndrome. Students in these institutions are more likely to experience self-doubt, engage in self-handicapping behaviours, and set excessively high standards for themselves, all of which are hallmarks of imposter syndrome.

In contrast, while private universities also have high expectations, the availability of better support systems, personalised attention from faculty, and a more resource-rich environment seem to mitigate the adverse effects of imposter syndrome. Despite this, the presence of high-achieving peers in private universities can still foster self-doubt and comparison, contributing to imposter feelings, though to a lesser extent than in government universities.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The sample size, though adequate, may not be representative of all university students. Additionally, the use of self-reported measures may introduce bias, as students might underreport or overreport their experiences. Future research should aim to include larger, more diverse samples and consider longitudinal designs to track changes in imposter syndrome over time.

Understanding the dynamics of imposter syndrome in different university settings is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems. Universities, especially government institutions, should prioritise mental health resources and create supportive environments that address the specific needs of students prone to imposter syndrome. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, counselling services, and workshops on self-efficacy and resilience can help students build confidence and overcome feelings of inadequacy.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant impact of the institutional environment on the prevalence and manifestation of imposter syndrome among university students. The higher prevalence of imposter syndrome in government universities underscores the need for targeted support and interventions to help students navigate their academic journeys with confidence and resilience. By fostering inclusive and supportive academic cultures, universities can help students realise their full potential and reduce the burden of imposter syndrome. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics and develop tailored strategies to support students across various educational contexts.

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