

Understanding the Impostor Phenomenon among Active Student Organization Members in Indonesian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The impostor phenomenon describes a psychological condition in which competent individuals feel unworthy of their achievements, doubt their abilities, and fear being perceived as incompetent. This study examines the impostor phenomenon level among active members of student association organizations in the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication. This research employed a quantitative approach with purposive sampling, involving 98 students. Data were collected using the online Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) questionnaire and analyzed descriptively. The findings revealed that organizationally active students experienced a moderate impostor phenomenon, with a mean score of 60.96. The most dominant aspect was perfectionism, with a mean score of 3.36 (67%), which may trigger impostor feelings in students managing dual responsibilities, academic and organizational. The pressure to appear perfect, demonstrate leadership, and consistently fulfill responsibilities can contribute to persistent feelings of inadequacy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Impostor or impostor phenomenon is a psychological condition characterized by feelings of doubt about one's abilities, accompanied by the belief that achievements are merely the result of luck or external factors, not real competencies possessed. Individuals with impostor tendencies often experience fear of being 'exposed' for their incompetence, even in the presence of objective evidence showing their success [1]. Clance first proposed that this phenomenon has been proven to affect various aspects of life, including self-esteem, mental health, and performance motivation [2]. In the academic and organizational context, the impostor phenomenon can hinder potential development and reduce the effectiveness of an individual's role in their social environment.

Student organizations are forums created by and for students to develop self-potential, broaden horizons, and enhance leadership, managerial, and social skills outside of

formal classroom activities [3]. The existence of this organization serves as a means of non-formal learning that allows students to practice managing programs, communicating effectively, and building a broad social network [4]. From the perspective of higher education, student organizations are an integral part of student development aimed at shaping a character-driven, critical, innovative, and community-oriented generation. In addition, student organizations also function as agents of change and guardians of moral and cultural values, which are expected to make a real contribution both in the campus environment and the wider community [5].

Students involved in student organizations are strategic agents of change, guardians of values, and social movers. At the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication UIN Sumatera Utara, student organizations focus on developing leadership skills, rhetoric, and event management and disseminating relevant da'wah values in line with contemporary developments. However, behind this spirit of service and idealism exists psychological dynamics that are not always apparent, including the impostor phenomenon. Individuals experiencing this phenomenon often doubt their competence, fear failure, and worry about their inadequacies being 'exposed.' This situation can arise from intense social comparison among members, pressure to maintain a competent image, and high expectations from their environment.

The impostor phenomenon has become a focus of study in various countries and educational contexts, with findings indicating its impact on self-confidence, mental health, and individual performance [6]. In Indonesia, research by Yasin et al has revealed that the impostor phenomenon is commonly experienced by students, especially those in highly competitive fields such as medicine, engineering, and education [7]. However, the literature review shows that the study tends to be general and does not consider the socio-cultural context and religious values that influence the intensity and form of impostor experiences.

In addition, research by Ali, Kurniawati, & Nurwanti on impostor among students active in campus organizations is still limited. However, members of student organizations often face complex dual demands: maintaining academic achievement while meeting social expectations and organizational responsibilities [8]. The environment of a faculty based on dakwah and communication adds a unique dimension in the form of moral burdens, public expectations, and the role of dakwah that can strengthen psychological pressure. Until now, no research has specifically studied the impostor phenomenon in the context of active student organizations in faculties based on dakwah and communication, particularly at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. The absence of this study presents an important research gap that needs to be addressed.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus, which places the impostor phenomenon within the unique context of active organization students at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication of the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. This study integrates the dimensions of da'wah values, moral expectations, and religious social norms as factors that shape the impostor experience, which has rarely been discussed in the literature before.

In addition, this study aims to map the levels and symptoms of impostor syndrome and examine the contextual factors that trigger it and its impact on organizational performance and students' psychological well-being. With this approach, it is hoped that the

research results will provide theoretical contributions in the form of enriching perspectives on the imposter phenomenon in higher religious education, as well as practical contributions in formulating strategies for mentoring, psychological intervention, and relevant self-development programs for active students in the Islamic campus environment.

2. METHOD

This research uses a quantitative method with descriptive analysis to provide an overview of the level of the impostor phenomenon among active members of student organizations at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UIN SU) Medan. A quantitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to measure data numerically through standardized instruments, while descriptive analysis is used to describe the characteristics of the data and present information systematically and meaningfully [1].

The research subjects are students active in student organizations, specifically the Student Association of the Major (HMJ) in the four majors within the faculty, with a total population of 133 students. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, with the criteria that respondents must (1) be active members of the organization, and (2) have a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) ≥ 3.00 . Based on these criteria, 98 respondents who met the requirements were obtained and included in the analysis [9].

Data was collected through an online questionnaire using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) developed by Clance, consisting of 20 statements with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The collected data were tested for validity and reliability to ensure the instrument's suitability. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using quantitative descriptive statistics to calculate the mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage. The level of impostor phenomenon was categorized based on Clance's classification, namely low, moderate, high, and very high. All analyses were conducted with the help of SPSS software.

Purposive sampling techniques are appropriate because this research requires respondents with specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives, namely students who are active in student organizations at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication and have exemplary academic achievements ($GPA \geq 3.00$). The selection of these criteria allows the researcher to obtain more accurate data regarding the phenomenon of impostor in a group that fits the context of the research [10].

Data collection was conducted using a cross-sectional design, where all data were obtained in the same period. The data collection process was carried out during May 2025. The instrument's validity was tested through expert judgment by guidance and counseling lecturers to ensure the appropriateness of the statement items with the measured constructs. Subsequently, a try-out was conducted with 30 respondents outside the research sample. The instrument's reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, with a value ≥ 0.70 as an indicator of good reliability. The CIPS instrument measures three main domains of the impostor phenomenon [2], that is:

Table 1. Main Domains and Description of Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) Instruments

Domain	Brief Description
Fear of Failure	Excessive worry about failure and doubt in one's ability to meet expected standards.
Discounting Praise	The tendency to ignore or downplay praise for one's achievements.
Attributing Success to Luck	The belief that success is due to external factors such as luck, rather than one's competence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Based on the results of the validity test on the research instrument for the impostor phenomenon variable, all statement items are declared valid with correlation coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 0.404$ to 0.762 . All these values are above the *r*-table value of 0.361 at a significance level < 0.05 , indicating that each item can accurately measure the intended construct. Furthermore, the reliability test results obtained a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.891 , indicating a very high level of internal consistency. Thus, the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) instrument is declared reliable and suitable for measuring the impostor phenomenon in the context of this research. The frequency distribution and percentage of the level of impostor phenomenon among 98 active students in the organization are presented in the following table, which serves as the basis for interpreting the distribution of the impostor phenomenon level among the research respondents.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution and Percentage of Impostor Phenomenon Rate

Score Interval	Category (Clance)	Frequency	Percentage
< 40	Very High	2	2%
41–60	High	43	44%
61–80	Moderate	51	52%
> 80	Low	2	2%
Total	—	98	100%

Based on Table 2, it can be seen that the majority of respondents are in the moderate category at 52%, followed by the high category at 44%. Meanwhile, only 2% of respondents fall into the low or very high categories. These findings indicate that most students involved in organizations experience the impostor phenomenon at a quite noticeable level, although they do not fall into very low or very high levels. In other words, perceptions of unworthiness, self-doubt about personal abilities, and anxiety about others' judgments are quite dominant among respondents, but have not yet reached a point that could severely disrupt their performance or involvement in the organization. This condition implies the need for appropriate accompanying strategies or interventions to prevent the increase of the impostor phenomenon to a higher level, while supporting the development of students' self-confidence and professional identity.

Table 3. Results of Descriptive Analysis of Impostor Phenomenon Scores

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Phenomena Impostor	98	60,96	10,05
Valid N (listwise)	98	—	—

Based on the data analysis, the average score of the impostor phenomenon is 60.96, indicating that, in general, the respondents fall into the moderate category and are close to the threshold of the high category according to Clance's classification. This finding suggests that most students actively involved in organizations experience self-doubt despite having adequate competencies objectively. The standard deviation value of 10.05 indicates a moderate variation in the levels of the impostor phenomenon among the respondents. With a 95% confidence interval ranging from 50.92 to 70.99, it can be concluded that most respondents fall within the moderate to high range. This condition implies a potential decrease in self-confidence, increased performance anxiety, and disruptions in decision-making, ultimately affecting individual performance and student organizations' overall effectiveness. This finding reinforces the need for psychological support strategies and capacity building for members of student organizations.

Table 4. Average Scores and Percentage of Impostor Phenomenon Based on CIPS Indicators

No	CIPS Indicator	Mean	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Category
1	Perfectionism	3.37	0.73	67%	High
2	Self-Doubt	3.20	0.56	63%	High
3	Social Comparison	3.04	0.74	60%	High
4	Fear of Failure	2.97	0.65	59%	Moderate
5	Inability to Internalize Achievements	2.80	0.69	56%	Moderate

Based on Table 4, the research findings indicate that the perfectionism indicator is the most dominant aspect of the impostor phenomenon among the respondents, with the highest average score of 3.37. This suggests that the drive to achieve extremely high standards is a key characteristic that colors the impostor experience. The following indicators are self-doubt (mean = 3.20) and social comparison (mean = 3.04), which emphasize that, in addition to being trapped by the demands for perfection, individuals also tend to question their abilities and compare their achievements with those of others.

Meanwhile, two other indicators, namely the fear of failure (mean = 2.97) and the inability to internalize achievements (mean = 2.80), fall into the moderate category. This position indicates that although these two aspects are not as strong as other indicators, they remain an integral part of the dynamics of the impostor phenomenon. The relatively small range of score variation across all indicators (SD 0.56–0.74) indicates consistency in respondents' perceptions of the experienced phenomenon. This means that the tendency in each aspect of impostor syndrome is relatively evenly distributed among the research participants, thus strengthening the validity of the interpretation that this phenomenon is multidimensional yet interconnected.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Perfectionism

This research finding reveals that perfectionism is the most prominent indicator of the impostor syndrome phenomenon among active organizational students, with an average score of 3.37 falling into the high category. Most respondents are second and third-year students, a phase of academia characterized by an increased coursework load and intensified involvement in organizational activities. This condition drives internal demands to maintain a competent image in front of peers and seniors. This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Cohen & McConnell, which state that individuals occupying public roles in organizations tend to set very high performance standards as a preventive mechanism against criticism or negative evaluation [11].

In line with that, Arini emphasized that perfectionism is a strong predictor of high levels of academic stress [5]. Bravata et al also added that maladaptive perfectionism is closely related to the emergence of impostor syndrome among students [12]. Moreover, the study by Ribica & Bhambri among medical students found a significant correlation between high levels of perfectionism and symptoms of mental fatigue (burnout) [13]. In Indonesia, Alzufari et al. show that students actively involved in organizations are vulnerable to overcommitment due to internal pressure to produce perfect performance, thereby sacrificing the balance between academics, organizations, and mental health [14].

This finding implies the importance of higher education institutions developing intervention programs focusing on self-management training standards and strengthening self-compassion. A positive psychology-based approach can be an effective strategy to help students balance academic and non-academic achievements with their psychological well-being. In addition, the gender dimension also deserves attention. Some classical studies, such as those conducted by Craddock et al., show that women tend to have higher levels of perfectionism in the context of impostor syndrome compared to men [15]. Although this research does not explicitly test the differences, the existing literature indicates that gender factors can be an important variable that moderates the relationship between perfectionism and the impostor syndrome phenomenon among the student population.

3.2.2. Self-Doubt

The research results show that the indicator of self-doubt has an average score of 3.20, which falls into the high category, reflecting the tendency of active organizational students to doubt their abilities despite having measurable achievements. This phenomenon is more commonly experienced by students in the early years of college, when they are still adapting to academic demands and the social dynamics of the organization. These findings align with Fakhri's research, which identifies that impostor syndrome often triggers self-doubt even in individuals with good academic and non-academic achievements [16].

Furthermore, Langford & Clance explain that self-doubt can trigger a negative psychological cycle, starting with low self-confidence, which drives individuals to engage in excessive preparation, leading to burnout, and ultimately reinforcing feelings of being a 'fraud' or imposter [17]. A study by Tasya et al. in Indonesia reinforces this finding, where active students in organizations tend to compare their achievements with unrealistic ideal

standards, leading to increased self-doubt [4]. From an intervention perspective, universities can play an important role by providing peer mentoring programs focused on providing social support and validating competencies from peers. This approach is expected to help students build sustainable self-confidence and reduce the tendency to compare themselves to disproportionate standards.

Gender factors also become a relevant aspect. Nabila, Dewi, and Nur reported that women often have higher self-doubt levels than men, especially in competitive academic environments [3]. This shows that self-doubt in impostor syndrome is influenced not only by internal factors but also by the social and cultural context that shapes individual perceptions of competence.

3.2.3. Social Comparison

The research results indicate that the social comparison score among active students in organizations is at 3.04, which indicates a relatively high tendency to compare personal achievements with those of others. This situation will likely arise in student organizations with a clear hierarchical structure, where members' achievements are often publicly exposed through various internal forums and organizational social media. This finding can be explained by the Social Comparison Theory proposed by Festinger, which states that upward comparison, comparing oneself to individuals considered superior, often triggers feelings of inferiority and decreases self-esteem [18].

Previous research by Yantu, Cahyadi, and Fitriana showed that a high level of social comparison is positively correlated with increased performance anxiety, which in turn can disrupt an individual's motivation and productivity [19]. In the local context, Tasya found that among students of the Student Executive Body (BEM) in Indonesia, the organization's exposure on social media plays a role in reinforcing the tendency for social comparison [20]. This is caused by the public publication of members' achievements, which encourages individuals to evaluate themselves based on the achievements of their peers.

The implications of these findings highlight the importance of interventions that emphasize the concept of healthy comparison, which is a motivational comparison that does not decrease self-esteem. Universities can educate students to focus more on individual self-development and personal achievements rather than merely measuring success against external standards. Additionally, gender factors also influence this tendency. Princen et al. reported that women are more likely to be affected by upward comparison, especially when competing or participating in fields historically dominated by men [21]. This indicates that interventions in social comparison management also need to consider gender dimensions to achieve optimal effectiveness.

3.2.4. Fear of Failure

The research results show that the average score of fear of failure among active organization students is 2.97, which falls into the moderate category. This finding indicates that the fear of failure does not completely hinder students, but it is still a relevant factor in academic and organizational activities. This condition aligns with the achievement motivation model proposed by Nurfadhilah & Archianti, which explains that fear of failure

can trigger defensive motivation [22]. At a moderate level, this motivation tends to push individuals to take preventive measures to avoid negative outcomes, including avoiding new challenges deemed risky.

The study by Ali, Kurniawati, & Nurwanti reinforces this finding by showing that students who have a moderate fear of failure often engage in overpreparation, which means preparing excessively to ensure success [8]. Conversely, a high fear of failure tends to lead to task avoidance. In the context of student organizations, research by Nurhikma & Nuqul found that the fear of failure can encourage excessive delegation behavior to team members as a strategy to reduce the likelihood of mistakes that could impact reputation [23].

This finding implies the need for universities to integrate growth mindset training into student development programs. This training can help shift the perception of failure from a threat to a natural part of the learning process and competency development. Thus, students are expected to be able to use failure experiences as a source of learning, rather than as a trigger for avoidance. Gender factors also become an important aspect to consider. The study by Tambak & Rohmadani reported that women in competitive academic environments tend to have a higher fear of failure than men [24]. However, despite being in the moderate category, the psychological effects and behaviors resulting from fear of failure can be similar in both genders, so interventions must be inclusive and adaptive to the needs of all student groups.

3.2.5. Inability to Internalize Achievement

Research results indicate that the average score for the indicator of inability to internalize achievements among active students in organizations is 2.80, which falls into the moderate category. This finding suggests that some students still have difficulty accepting success due to personal competence and effort, and tend to attribute their achievements to external factors such as luck or help from others. This phenomenon is consistent with the initial description of impostor syndrome by Agatha et al, which emphasizes that one of its hallmark characteristics is the individual's failure to internalize achievements despite objective evidence of their abilities [25].

Pákozdy et al's research shows that the inability to acknowledge success due to personal competence can lead to a decline in long-term motivation, as individuals feel that their achievements do not reflect their true abilities [26]. In the context of Indonesian students, the study by Villwock et al. found that social support, particularly in the form of appreciation and recognition from professors and peers, plays an important role in assisting the process of internalizing achievements [27]. This support can strengthen students' belief that their achievements result from fundamental skills, effort, and personal capacity.

From a practical perspective, universities need to build a positive feedback system that focuses on final achievements and recognizes individual competencies, processes, and progress. This approach is expected to reduce students' tendency to attribute success to external factors and encourage the development of stronger self-efficacy. Gender factors should also be taken into account in understanding this phenomenon. Some studies, such as those reported by Sakulku, indicate that women are more vulnerable to having difficulty internalizing achievements, especially in male-dominated fields [28]. This may relate to

social norms, gender stereotypes, and environmental perceptions that influence how individuals interpret their success.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the impostor phenomenon is quite high among active organization students, with the majority falling into the moderate (52%) and high (44%) categories. The CIPS instrument is valid and reliable, revealing that perfectionism is dominant, followed by self-doubt and social comparison, while fear of failure and difficulty internalizing achievements are moderate. This condition reflects the presence of internal pressure, habits of self-comparison, and doubts about abilities that could potentially disrupt psychological well-being and students' roles in organizations. Theoretically, these findings enrich the study of impostor syndrome among Indonesian students, emphasizing the relevance of a multidimensional model that includes perfectionism, self-doubt, and social comparison. The research results provide a foundation for higher education institutions to design interventions such as psychological counseling, self-compassion training, healthy social comparison education, and peer mentoring programs. From a policy perspective, it is recommended to have routine mental health check-ins and growth mindset training so that students can view failures as part of the learning and personal development process, thus creating an organizational environment that supports mental health and personal development.

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