

Leaders' Imposter Thoughts and Leaders' Innovative Behavior: A Gender Perspective

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Article History:

Submitted: January 21, 2025

Revised: February 04, 2025

Accepted: February 24, 2025

Published online: March 30, 2025

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: In this paper, we explore the connection between leaders' imposter thoughts and their innovative behavior, especially considering the moderating role of gender. With regards to the hospitality sector of Pakistan, this study employs social cognitive theory to analyze how self-perceived inadequacies influence innovation.

Methods: The surveys were conducted on 232 members of hotel staff who were purposively sampled. This study was anchored in moderation analysis with regression techniques being used to evaluate the assumed relationships.

Findings: Results show that leader's imposter thoughts correlate positively with their innovative behavior. In addition, it also emerged as a gendered phenomenon where female leaders were found to have a stronger relationship than male leaders.

Implications: Secondary findings suggest that while leading females strive for innovation and exceptional performance, misgivings about their competencies could stem from deeply ingrained stereotypes about women in positions of leadership. Therefore, organizations need to confront the notion of "imposter syndrome" by considering its potential upside, serving as a stimulus towards enhancing productivity with respect to stereotype-threatened demographics.

Keywords: imposter thoughts, innovative behavior, gender, leadership, social cognitive theory

JEL Classification: D91, O31, J16, M12, I31

1 | INTRODUCTION

Leaders who suffer with imposter thoughts are locked in a loop of persistent self-doubt and a nagging fear that others will unmask them as phonies, even when their record shows nothing but success (Clance & Imes, 1978; Vergauwe et al., 2015). Such inner chatter chips away at how they see themselves and spills over into the choices they make every day. Studies tie these feelings to lower self-belief, higher anxiety, and a tendency to duck high-stakes tasks (Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015), all of which can stall a leader's impact. One pressing arena likely dimmed by imposter thoughts is a leader's power to drive innovation. Innovation-the act of dreaming up and putting into play fresh ideas or methods (Scott & Bruce, 1994)-matters more than ever in fast-moving workplaces. Yet when self-doubt grips them, leaders often pull back from risk, trial, and exposure, exactly the moves that fuel new thinking (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016).

Imposter feelings don't just stay inside a person's head; they also shape how others see a leader and how the leader works with the team. To cover the sense that they do not measure up, some leaders fall into perfectionism or micromanagement, building tense environments where new ideas feel unsafe (Cokley et al., 2013). Others, weighed down by self-doubt, sidestep difficult projects, leaving the organization stuck in a cautious rut. Although the imposter phenomenon has drawn increasing attention, empirical studies linking it directly with a leader's willingness to innovate remain scarce, creating a notable hole in the field.

People respond to these self-doubts in ways that differ from one individual to the next. Research shows that gender can shape both the experience of imposterism and its outward expression. Female leaders generally report stronger imposter thoughts than their male peers (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011), a trend linked to the tight web of stereotypes and expectations that surround women in authority (Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015). Such gender patterns may steer imposter feelings toward distinct behaviors. Male leaders often mask their uncertainty with bold talk or calculated risk, whereas female leaders may retreat or soften their ideas to dodge scrutiny, habits that can quietly limit the fresh thinking they bring to the table (Ely et al., 2011; Sandberg, 2013).

Because both personal mindsets and shared social identities shape how people lead, it matters to ask not just if impostor feelings dull a leader's inventiveness, but also when and why the link appears. We argue that gender edits this story by moderating the tie between a leader's impostor worries and his or her actual innovative acts. In practical terms, we expect the drag of impostor thinking on innovation to be heftier for female leaders than for their male counterparts. Drawing on theory and empirical data, our study therefore seeks to clarify the psychological roadblocks that slow innovation at the top. We also outline evidence-based ways organizations can better steady leaders-especially those from marginalized or stigmatized groups-when impostor doubts set in.

2 | LEADER'S INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR AND IMPOSTER THOUGHTS

Social cognitive theory, argues that people do not simply react; they actively steer their actions based on what they believe, how they think about their thinking, and the feedback they draw from those around them (Bandura, 1986). A key part of this process is self-regulation, the ongoing habit of watching, judging, and adjusting ones conduct in light of internal benchmarks and a sense of ability (Bandura, 1991). Within organizations, these self-checks can produce widely different results, especially when leaders are haunted by quiet doubts often labeled imposter feelings.

Imposter thoughts point to a stubborn worry that, despite clear achievements, one will be unmasked as a phony thinker or a paper-qualified professional (Clance & Imes, 1978). Though such beliefs usually stir anxiety or a fear of falling short, they can paradoxically ignite extra effort in high-performing people who refuse to be sidelined. Bandura himself noted that when perceived skill falls short of outward demands, individuals frequently chase after the mismatch through intense, almost compensatory work (1991). For leaders, this resolve commonly shows up as the impulse to prove worth through visible accomplishments, such as pioneering fresh initiatives or adopting bold, innovative practices.

Innovative behavior refers to the full cycle of generating, championing, and putting into practice fresh ideas that move an organization forward (Janssen, 2000). When leaders privately question their value, they may still lean on visible innovation to showcase skill and legitimize their role (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Under such strain, impostor feelings can push them to overreach, using new projects as a form of self-proof (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006).

Social cognitive theory also stresses how outside judgments and inner review shape action. Leaders under tight external standards often hunt for ways to stand out. In cultures that prize results, constant novelty serves as a tactical answer to self-doubt—a way to confirm one belongs (Mak, Kleitman, & Abbott, 2019). So, far from blocking performance, impostor thoughts may drive leaders to initiate, innovate, and deliver, aligning how they see themselves with what their role demands. Drawing on this framework and earlier evidence, we present the following hypothesis:

H1: Leader's imposter thoughts are positively related to leader's innovative behavior.

3 | THE MODERATING EFFECT OF GENDER

Social cognitive theory posits that what people do stems from the ongoing give-and-take of personal thoughts, actual conduct, and the settings they inhabit (Bandura, 1986). A key insight is that background factors—like age, race, or gender—shape how someone reads inner thoughts and finally turns them into action. Thus, in leadership, a person's gender can color how imposter feelings surface and, in turn, guide the degree and type of innovative work that follows.

Across studies, men and women commonly handle imposter thoughts in distinct ways, a pattern rooted in workplace norms that applaud or penalize different behaviors (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Research shows women tend to take self-doubt inward, chalking success up to luck rather than skill, which deepens the imposter cycle (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Yet because female leaders often sense harsher scrutiny of their performance, they may counteract those doubts by ramping up innovative actions as a way to prove they belong (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004).

Men who wrestle with imposter fears often escape the intense public audit women face over their leadership skills, so they feel less urgency to offset that doubt with bold, creative action (Badawy, Gazdag, Bentley, & Brouer, 2018). Because stereotypes, identity pressures, and differential workplace norms shape self-appraisal, the same internal doubts may express themselves very differently in day-to-day behavior.

Social cognitive theory highlights both private self-reflection and outside feedback as key moderating forces that guide how feelings of inadequacy actually translate into action (Bandura, 1991). Gender, a prominently noticed social divider, can color that appraisal by amplifying the urge to prove worth and by

shaping the specific tactics leaders chose for silencing self-doubt. As a result, the link between a leader's imposter beliefs and their willingness to innovate tends to be stronger-and more predictable-for women than for men.

Building on these insights, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Gender moderates the relationship between leader's imposter thoughts and leader's innovative behavior.

4 | DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Our examination of the proposed link among leaders imposter thoughts, gender, and leaders innovative behavior draws on survey data gathered in upscale hotels across Pakistan. The final sample included 232 staff members from both the administration and service wings of the hotels. Within each division, respondents were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure targeted insights. Demographic analysis reveals a youthful, well-educated group of operational leaders: 62% male, 73% aged 25-34, 58% holding a bachelor's degree, and 39% possessing a masters qualification. The cohort comprised 57.3% ($n = 133$) front-line service personnel and 42.7% ($n = 99$) administrators, mirroring the operational hierarchy typical of Pakistan's hospitality industry (Huang, 2013). On average, participants had 4.5 years of service ($SD = 2.3$), spanning 1 to 12 years, a tenure pattern that reflects moderate organizational stability while capturing early to mid-career viewpoints (Janssen, 2000). Such distribution ensures balanced representation of customer-facing and support roles, yet it also controls for varying levels of familiarity with institutional processes.

The researcher delivered each questionnaire in person. With every copy came a brief cover letter outlining the study's aims and promising that answers would remain anonymous and treated in strict confidence. Since all staff members work in English every day, the survey itself was written in that language.

Drawing on previous studies, we created the path model shown in Figure 1 to test how the key variables are linked. In short, the diagram postulates that impostor thoughts among leaders spur innovative actions, yet leader gender moderates the strength of that effect. We examined the model in SPSS by means of Hayes PROCESS Version 3.0.

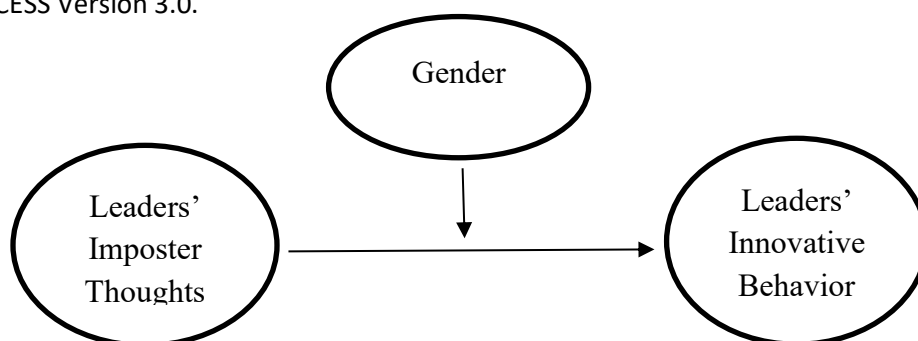


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

Throughout, we used previously developed tests as measures for each of the constructs.

- Leaders' Imposter Thoughts was based on examples of behavior observed by operational leaders. It was measured using 20 items on a 7-point Likert scale adapted from Clance & Imes (1978). Examples include "I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me" and "When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectation, in the future".
- Leaders' Innovative Behavior was supervisor-reported and measured using 06 items on a 7-point Likert scale adapted from Scott & Bruce (1994). Examples include "Generates creative ideas," and "Promotes and champions ideas to others."

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	α
Age	2.36	0.636	1					
Education	1.25	0.476	-0.016	1				
Leader's Imposter thoughts	5.0388	1.44600	0.016	-0.061	1			.981
Gender	1.38	0.487	-0.115	-0.118	0.005	1		
Leader's Innovative Behavior	5.4109	1.6744	-0.013	-0.100	0.886**	0.043	1	.971

Note. Correlations marked with ** indicate significance at $*p* < .01$ (2-tailed).

The descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels of both *leader's imposter* thoughts ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.45$) and *innovative behavior* ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.67$). The correlation matrix showed a **strong positive relationship** between imposter thoughts and innovative behavior ($*r* = 0.886$, $*p* < 0.01$), supporting *H1*. Demographic variables (age, education, gender) exhibited weak or non-significant correlations with other constructs ($|r| < 0.12$), suggesting their limited standalone influence.

Table 2: Direct effect and moderation

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable			
	Leader's Innovative Behavior			
	Effect	SE	T statistics	P-value
Constant	-0.6531	0.6790	-0.9619	0.3372
Leader's Imposter Thoughts	1.2297	0.1106	11.1175	0.0000
Gender	0.889	0.4096	2.1712	0.0309

Regression analysis confirmed that leader's imposter thoughts significantly predicted innovative behavior ($\beta = 1.23$, $*p* < 0.001$). Gender moderated this relationship (Interaction term: $\beta = 0.89$, $*p* = 0.031$), supporting H2. The positive coefficient suggests that the imposter-innovation link is stronger for women (coded higher) than men. Simple slope analysis (Table 3) clarified this moderation:

- For **women** (Level 1), the effect was stronger (Effect = 1.07, 95% CI [0.99, 1.16]).
- For **men** (Level 2), the effect remained significant but attenuated (Effect = 0.92, 95% CI [0.79, 1.04]).

Table 3: Effect of Leaders' Imposter Thoughts on Leaders' Innovative Behavior

Independent Variable	Level of Moderation	Conditional Indirect Effect	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Leaders' Imposter Thoughts	Women	1.0739***	0.9852	1.1626
	Men	0.9181***	0.7942	1.0421

Note: The cell values are unstandardized regression weights; * $< .05$, ** $< .01$, *** $< .001$.

Follow-up bootstrap analysis (5,000 resamples, $N = 232$) probed this moderation:

- **For women** (coded as 1): Effect = 1.07, 95% CI [0.99, 1.16], $*p* < .001$
- **For men** (coded as 0): Effect = 0.92, 95% CI [0.79, 1.04], $*p* < .001$

The imposter-innovation effect was **16.3% stronger for women** (1.07 vs. 0.92), suggesting gendered behavioral responses to self-doubt.

The hypotheses were tested using correlation and hierarchical regression analyses with a sample of 232 leaders. Hypothesis 1 (H1), which proposed a positive relationship between leader's imposter thoughts and innovative behavior, was strongly supported by a significant correlation ($*r* = .886$, $*p* < .01$) and a robust regression coefficient ($\beta = 1.23$, $*p* < .001$). Hypothesis 2 (H2), predicting gender moderation, was tested by introducing an interaction term (Imposter $\times$ Gender) in the regression model. The significant interaction effect ($\beta = 0.89$, $*p* = .031$) confirmed that the relationship between imposter thoughts and innovative behavior was stronger for women (Effect = 1.07) than for men (Effect = 0.92), as further validated by bootstrap analysis (95% CIs excluding zero). These results collectively support both hypotheses, highlighting the gendered nature of how imposter feelings translate into leadership behaviors.

5 | DISCUSSION

It has been found in this study that there are important links between leaders' imposter thoughts, their innovative behavior, and the modifying influence of gender. As noted in Table 1, there is a remarkable positive relationship between leaders' imposter thoughts and their innovative behavior ($r = 0.886$, $p < .01$), which supports our hypothesis of self-doubt serving as a stimulant for creativity. This corroborates Clance and Imes's (1978) conjecture that sustaining feelings of being an imposter can lead to exceptional performance through overcompensation, regardless his/her underlying distress. Also observed by (Bravata et al.'s study, 2020) there was the rather insignificant correlation between demographic factors such as age or education driven by exacerbated imposter thoughts which denote that these sentiments exist amongst all people.

As illustrated in Table 2, from both a theoretical along with practical standpoint we can validate that the direct impact emanating from "Imposter" thoughts on innovative behaviors is significant ($\beta = 1.2297$, $p < .001$). As seen on Table 3 Gender emerges as a notable moderator as well, having impact through $\beta = 0.889$ ($< .05$). Zhen & Heywood report showing indirect effects from Imposter thus motivating innovation with Effect = 1.0739, $p < .001$ for women beating their male counterparts who showed minimal effects at Effect = 0.9181, $p < .001$ marks stronger results overall than men did on average, thus justifying stereotype threats set forth by Steele & Aronson's (1995) work supporting that indeed women partake in self-defeating acts to promote ignited innovation propelled countering perceived sociocultural discriminations targeted against them.

6 | THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS:

This research goes further in studying the imposter phenomenon by relating it to beneficial outcomes in an organization, thus, expanding on its more common perception as negative. The results are consistent with Bravata et al. (2020) and their cognitive reappraisal theories which assert that self-doubt can serve as a creative motivator when properly reframed. Moreover, the moderation effect of gender contributes to the literature on stereotype threat by illustrating how societal expectations influence reactions inspired by self-doubt (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012).

7 | PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:

This research offers practical implications for both practitioners and organizational leaders. To begin with, leadership development courses should integrate cognitive reappraisal strategies that allow leaders to view imposter thoughts as a possible innovation catalyst instead of an obstacle. This is consistent with the notion that self-doubt can motivate peak performance, provided it is well-managed. Furthermore, because

their correlational relationship seems stronger among women, organizations need to adopt diversity policies combining mentorship with recognition systems designed to alleviate stereotype threat in order to provide fair access to career advancement opportunities at all levels. Additionally, creating workplaces that are psychologically safe—where employees can discuss self-doubt as part of the human condition without judgment—allows these normal but rarely spoken about experiences to be embraced while fostering creativity within the organization. Finally, organizations need to pay attention to managing workload carefully; otherwise, there is a risk of overwork arising from feelings associated with being an imposter. Maintaining a healthy level of innovation while safeguarding employee wellbeing can be achieved by setting supportive wellbeing-centered balanced performance indicators including properly maintaining work-life boundaries and mental health off the job.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Although this study augments the current body of knowledge, there are notable gaps which need addressing. A longitudinal approach is needed to ascertain whether ‘imposter’ innovation persistently drives growth or ultimately results in burnout because the cross-sectional design used here lacks causal reasoning. Furthermore, the homogeneity of the sample’s culture in this study impacts generalizability; different cultures, industries, and their intersections should be studied for these dynamics. The use of self-report measures could weaken accuracy pertaining to bias; therefore utilizing multisource data from peers and supervisors would enhance validity. How organizational culture or leadership style as a whole moderates the imposter-innovation relationship also remains unexamined and constitutes another important factor for future research to address. Intersectional analysis—how race, career stage, or other identity factors alongside gender shape responses to imposter thoughts—also presents exciting possibilities. Lastly, strategies aimed at constructively minimizing the negative impact of these thoughts could be tested using experimental or intervention-based approaches focusing on cognitive-behavioral methods.

9 | CONCLUSION

This research reinterprets imposter thoughts as innovation drivers that also necessitate control to avert personal and organizational burdens. Organizations can strategically leverage self-doubt alongside protective measures for employee well-being by integrating these insights into leadership training and diversity initiatives. Further research is needed in this context to verify these conclusions across a wider range of settings and demographic groups.

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