

THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON AND INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR: A CRITICAL SYNTHESIS OF A CONTESTED RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

The impostor phenomenon (IP), a persistent internal experience of intellectual or professional fraudulence despite objective evidence of competence, has traditionally been treated in organizational research as a straightforward liability for innovative work behavior (IWB), the intentional generation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas at work. This paper critically synthesizes recent literature on the IP-IWB relationship and argues that this deficit-only framing is incomplete. Drawing on a narrative synthesis of peer-reviewed studies, doctoral dissertations, and integrative reviews published largely from 2020 onward, the paper shows that IP is a multidimensional construct whose self-doubt and external-attribution components suppress innovation through diminished self-efficacy, eroded psychological safety, and emotional exhaustion, while its achievement-pressure component can, under specific conditions, positively predict idea generation through a compensatory, problem-solving-oriented pathway. The paper further maps the leadership, organizational climate, and cultural boundary conditions, including power distance and supportive leadership styles, that determine which of these two pathways dominates in a given context, and highlights gender and cross-cultural gaps in the current evidence base. The synthesis culminates in an integrated framework that reframes IP not as a uniform obstacle to be eliminated but as an ambivalent psychological state whose innovation-related consequences depend on individual construal and organizational design. The paper concludes with a targeted research agenda emphasizing longitudinal designs, cross-cultural samples, and gender-sensitive moderation models, alongside practical recommendations for leadership development, feedback design, and innovation climate-building that organizations can use to channel impostor-driven anxiety toward productive rather than self-defeating outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations operating in the twenty-first century face relentless pressure to innovate, and this pressure is ultimately discharged onto the

individual employee. Innovative work behavior (IWB), the intentional generation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas within a work role, has therefore become one of the most heavily

studied individual-level predictors of organizational competitiveness (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Scholars typically decompose IWB into four interrelated stages: opportunity exploration, idea generation, idea championing, and idea implementation (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010). Because each stage requires an employee to expose a not-yet-validated idea to the judgment of others, IWB is inherently a psychologically risky behavior. It is precisely this exposure to judgment, evaluation, and possible failure that brings a seemingly unrelated psychological construct into direct theoretical contact with innovation research: the impostor phenomenon (IP).

The impostor phenomenon was first identified by Clance and Imes (1978) among a clinical sample of high-achieving women who, despite consistent external evidence of competence, privately believed that their success was attributable to luck, charm, or error rather than to genuine ability, and who lived in persistent fear of being found out. Although IP began as a clinical construct describing a narrow population, nearly five decades of subsequent research have shown that it is widespread across genders, occupations, and cultures, and that it exerts a measurable influence on workplace attitudes, well-being, and performance (Bravata et al., 2020). Within the last few years, organizational scholars have pushed to reconceptualize IP for the workplace specifically. Tewfik (2022), for instance, reframed the construct as workplace impostor thoughts, defined as the belief that others overestimate one's competence at work, in order to strip away decades of definitional drift and give the construct renewed conceptual precision. This reconceptualization matters because it signals that IP is no longer treated purely as a clinical or personality-level deficit; it is increasingly studied as a cognitive-affective state that interacts dynamically with the demands of specific work contexts, including the demand to innovate.

At first glance, the relationship between IP and IWB appears theoretically unambiguous: self-doubt should suppress innovation. An employee who privately believes their competence is illusory should be less willing to expose a novel idea to

colleagues, less confident in defending that idea against criticism, and more prone to withdrawing when an idea is challenged. This intuitive logic is well supported empirically. Alrashidi et al. (2025), in a cross-sectional study of 255 nursing leaders, found that the self-doubt dimension of IP was significantly and negatively correlated with opportunity exploration, one of the four core behaviors of IWB. Similarly, Hudson and González-Gómez (2021) demonstrated across four studies that IP predicts feelings of shame, and that this shame, rather than IP itself, mediates a negative effect on workplace creativity, an effect that is intensified in mechanistic, rule-bound organizational structures. A related stream of research on leadership shows that when IP is examined among practicing managers, it is associated with reduced decision-making self-efficacy and reduced innovative work behavior more broadly (Bowen, 2023). Taken together, this body of work has produced what might be called the dominant narrative in the literature: IP is a psychological liability that organizations must identify, contain, and ideally eliminate if they wish to sustain a culture of innovation.

However, a closer and more recent reading of the literature complicates this narrative considerably. A growing number of studies suggest that the relationship between IP and IWB is not uniformly negative, and that under specific conditions, impostor thoughts can coexist with, or even catalyze, innovative behavior. Tewfik and Kim (2023) proposed and tested an intraindividual attribute framing theory in which workplace impostor thoughts operate as a double-edged sword: the same underlying cognition can trigger affective rumination, which suppresses creativity, or problem-solving pondering, which enhances it, depending on the individual's perceived progress toward their goals. In the same vein, Alrashidi et al. (2025), the very study that found a negative relationship between self-doubt and opportunity exploration, simultaneously reported that the achievement-pressure dimension of IP was positively associated with idea generation. This is a striking and easily overlooked finding: within a single sample, two dimensions of the same

construct pulled the same outcome variable in opposite directions. Haroon et al. (2025), studying department heads in the Pakistani hospitality sector, extended this paradox to leadership, finding that leaders' impostor thoughts positively predicted their own innovative behavior, apparently because those leaders attempted to compensate for internal self-doubt through visible problem-solving and idea generation. These findings collectively suggest that IP is not a unitary predictor of reduced innovation but a multidimensional construct whose components, and whose interaction with contextual moderators, determine whether the ultimate effect on IWB is inhibitory or facilitative.

This contradiction is the central motivation for the present paper. The IP-IWB literature is scattered across nursing, hospitality, general management, and organizational psychology outlets, uses inconsistent operationalizations of IP, and has not, to date, been synthesized into a single coherent account of when impostor thoughts help and when they hurt innovation. Broader syntheses of IP exist. Gullifor et al. (2024), for example, systematically examined 188 works on IP in the workplace generally, and Tewfik et al. (2025) recently produced an integrative, multidisciplinary account of the construct itself. Neither of these efforts, however, is centered specifically on innovation as the outcome of interest, and neither resolves the emerging contradiction between the view that IP suppresses innovation and the view that IP can catalyze it. A dedicated, critical synthesis is therefore both timely and necessary. Accordingly, this paper pursues four objectives: first, to synthesize and critically evaluate the evidence for a negative relationship between IP and IWB, including the mediating roles of self-efficacy, psychological safety, and emotional exhaustion; second, to synthesize the emerging, contradictory evidence for a conditional or positive relationship between specific dimensions of IP and specific components of IWB; third, to map the leadership, organizational, and cultural moderators that determine which pathway is expressed in a given context; and fourth, to identify gaps in the current evidence base and

propose a research agenda capable of resolving the contested relationship identified in this paper.

Conceptual Foundations

Defining the Impostor Phenomenon

The impostor phenomenon denotes a persistent internal experience of intellectual or professional fraudulence that coexists with, and is contradicted by, objective evidence of competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Individuals experiencing IP tend to attribute their achievements to external or transient causes such as luck, timing, or the goodwill of others rather than to stable internal ability, and they typically anticipate that continued success will eventually expose them as frauds (Bravata et al., 2020). Contemporary factor-analytic work on workplace samples has clarified that IP is not a single undifferentiated trait but a multidimensional construct. Using principal component analysis on a sample of nursing leaders, Alrashidi et al. (2025) identified three latent dimensions: self-doubt, achievement pressure, and external attribution of success. This dimensional structure is important for the present paper because, as later sections will show, these three components do not relate to innovation in the same way or even in the same direction.

Equally important is the recent move within organizational scholarship to reframe IP specifically for the workplace context. Tewfik (2022) argued that the construct's core cognitive feature, the belief that others overestimate one's competence at work, had become obscured by decades of definitional drift in both academic and popular usage, and proposed the term workplace impostor thoughts to restore precision. Building on this, Tewfik, Yip, and Martin (2025) conducted an integrative review that traced the construct's evolution across disciplines and argued that many assumptions inherited from the clinical literature, including the assumption that impostor thoughts are uniformly maladaptive, do not hold up when tested directly against workplace evidence. This reframing provides the conceptual scaffolding for the present paper's central argument: that IP's relationship with innovation is contingent rather than fixed.

Defining Innovative Work Behavior

Innovative work behavior is most commonly operationalized using the four-stage model developed by De Jong and Den Hartog (2010): opportunity exploration, the identification of contexts or problems ripe for improvement; idea generation, the production of novel and potentially useful solutions; idea championing, the act of persuading others, particularly those with resources or authority, to support an idea; and idea implementation, the conversion of an idea into a working product, process, or practice within the organization. Each of these four behaviors carries a distinct social-psychological demand. Opportunity exploration and idea generation are primarily cognitive and can, in principle, be performed privately; idea championing and idea implementation, in contrast, are inherently interpersonal and expose the individual to visible evaluation, disagreement, and the risk of public failure. This distinction matters directly for the present synthesis, because several of the studies reviewed below find that IP's dimensions interact differently with the early, more private stages of IWB than with the later, more exposed stages.

Methodology

This paper adopts a critical narrative synthesis design rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis, because its central objective is to interrogate an apparent contradiction within the literature, namely the coexistence of negative and positive findings regarding the IP-IWB relationship, a task better served by thematic and interpretive integration than by narrow quantitative aggregation of incompatible effect sizes (Gullifor et al., 2024). A structured search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Business Source Ultimate, and Google Scholar, supplemented by manual searches of the reference lists of relevant systematic and scoping reviews (Gullifor et al., 2024; Para et al., 2024; Tewfik et al., 2025). Search terms combined the impostor construct with the innovation construct using Boolean operators, for example: impostor phenomenon OR impostor syndrome OR

impostorism OR workplace impostor thoughts, AND innovative work behavior OR innovation OR creativity OR idea generation OR opportunity exploration. Searches were supplemented with terms capturing key moderators identified in the preliminary literature, including psychological safety, power distance, self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, gender, and leadership style.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic and scoping reviews, and doctoral dissertations published from 2020 onward, in order to capture the recent reconceptualization of IP as a workplace-specific construct (Tewfik, 2022) and the surge of empirical studies directly linking IP to innovation-related outcomes that has followed it. A small number of foundational, pre-2020 sources were retained where they define constructs central to this paper, namely the original conceptualization of the impostor phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978) and the standard operational model of innovative work behavior (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010), since no adequate 2020-or-later substitute exists for these foundational definitions. Studies were included if they empirically or theoretically examined a relationship between any dimension of IP and any component of IWB, creativity, voice, or a closely related innovation-adjacent outcome in a workplace or professional-training context. Studies focused exclusively on academic or student populations without workplace relevance were generally excluded unless they offered essential theoretical, measurement, or mechanism-level grounding not otherwise available in the workplace literature.

For each included study, the following information was extracted: authorship and year, sample and context, operationalization of IP, the specific IWB or innovation-related outcome, the direction and mechanism of the reported relationship, and any moderators tested. Extracted studies were organized thematically around three lines of inquiry that structure the remainder of this paper, an inhibitory-mechanism line, a conditional-positivity line, and a boundary-condition line, rather than in chronological order, so that points of agreement and contradiction

across studies could be surfaced directly. Where studies reported conflicting findings within a single sample, such as Alrashidi et al.'s (2025) simultaneous finding of a negative self-doubt effect and a positive achievement-pressure effect, these were flagged explicitly and treated as key evidence for the paper's argument regarding dimensionality. As a narrative synthesis rather than a systematic review, this paper does not apply a formal risk-of-bias scoring instrument to each included study, nor does it compute pooled effect sizes; this is an intentional trade-off, consistent with recent narrative and scoping work in the adjacent IP literature (Gullifor et al., 2024; Para et al., 2024), that prioritizes conceptual integration of a young and heterogeneous evidence base over precise quantification across incompatible measures and samples.

The Inhibitory Pathway: How Impostor Cognition Suppresses Innovation

The dominant explanation for a negative IP-IWB relationship rests on three overlapping mechanisms: diminished self-efficacy, eroded psychological safety, and resource depletion through emotional exhaustion.

Self-efficacy, the belief in one's own capacity to execute a given course of action, is a well-established proximal driver of innovative behavior, because opportunity exploration and idea generation both require the confident application of one's own judgment to ambiguous situations. IP directly undermines this belief by design: individuals experiencing IP privately doubt the very competence that IWB requires them to exercise publicly. Bowen's (2023) doctoral research on South African managers found that the impostor phenomenon negatively predicted both decision-making self-efficacy and innovative work behavior, with self-esteem operating as a partial explanatory mechanism between the two. In a similar vein, Xu and Suntrayuth (2022), studying research and development staff in Chinese high-technology firms, found that psychological safety and knowledge sharing operated as a chained mediating pathway between organizational innovation climate and IWB, underscoring that

innovative behavior does not emerge from ability alone but depends on employees feeling secure enough to exercise that ability visibly. Where IP erodes this sense of security, the pathway to innovation is correspondingly narrowed.

Psychological safety, defined as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, functions as a second and closely related mechanism. Elsayed, Zhao, Goda, and Elsetouhi (2023) demonstrated that perceived psychological safety predicts IWB through employees' willingness to take error-related risks, and that this relationship is strengthened under a supportive organizational innovation climate. Because IP-affected employees, by definition, fear that any visible error will be interpreted as confirmation of their fraudulence rather than as an ordinary part of the innovation process, they are likely to experience diminished psychological safety even in objectively safe environments, and to correspondingly restrict their willingness to take the exploratory risks that opportunity exploration and idea championing require. Chen, Zhu, Sun, Liao, and Guo (2021) extend this logic by showing that psychological capital, a related but distinct construct encompassing self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience, promotes IWB through a chain of knowledge donating and knowledge collecting behaviors; IP can be understood as functioning in the opposite direction, depleting exactly the psychological resources that this chain depends upon.

Emotional exhaustion offers a third, resource-based explanation. Li et al. (2025), in a large sample of Chinese nurses, found that IP was positively associated with emotional exhaustion, and that this relationship was partially explained by bidirectional work-family conflict. Emotional exhaustion is a well-established resource-depletion state that leaves diminished cognitive and affective surplus for discretionary, effortful behaviors, and IWB is by definition discretionary and effortful; it typically falls outside the strict boundaries of a formal job description and must be actively initiated by the employee. An employee who is already depleted by the chronic vigilance that IP produces, constantly monitoring their own

performance for signs of impending exposure, has correspondingly less capacity left to explore new opportunities or champion untested ideas. Hill and Gotwals's (2025) meta-analysis of multidimensional perfectionism and IP provides converging evidence for this resource-based account: across 25 studies and more than 12,000 participants, perfectionistic concerns, the maladaptive, self-critical facet of perfectionism, showed a large positive association with IP, while perfectionistic strivings showed only a small positive association. Because perfectionistic concerns are themselves associated with chronic self-monitoring and fear of failure, this finding helps explain why IP so often co-occurs with the kind of anxious, effort-diverting cognition that undermines sustained innovative engagement. Together, these three mechanisms depict IP as a construct that attacks innovative behavior at its psychological source: it removes the confidence, the sense of safety, and the emotional reserves that opportunity exploration, idea generation, championing, and implementation each require. This inhibitory account is well supported and should not be dismissed. However, as the next section demonstrates, it is not the whole story.

The Paradox of Conditional Positivity

A second and more recent body of evidence complicates the inhibitory account by showing that specific dimensions and specific framings of impostor cognition can coexist with, or actively fuel, innovative behavior.

The clearest theoretical statement of this paradox comes from Tewfik and Kim's (2023) intraindividual attribute framing theory, presented at the Academy of Management, which proposes that workplace impostor thoughts operate as what the authors term a double-edged sword. On one edge, impostor thoughts can trigger affective rumination, an anxious, self-focused preoccupation with the fear of exposure that depletes cognitive resources and suppresses creative output, consistent with the inhibitory account above. On the other edge, the same underlying cognition can trigger problem-solving pondering, a compensatory, effortful cognitive

style in which the individual, motivated by the desire to close the gap between perceived and actual competence, invests unusual effort in finding a genuinely superior solution. According to this theory, which edge dominates in a given instance depends on the individual's perceived progress toward their goals: when progress feels attainable, the impostor thought is more likely to be construed as a challenge to rise to, activating problem-solving pondering; when progress feels blocked, the same thought is more likely to be construed as a threat, activating affective rumination instead.

Empirical support for this conditional positivity appears independently in at least two other lines of research. First, and most strikingly, Alrashidi et al. (2025) found within a single sample of 255 nursing leaders that the achievement-pressure dimension of IP was positively correlated with idea generation, even as the self-doubt and external-attribution dimensions were negatively correlated with opportunity exploration. Achievement pressure, operationalized as the internalized sense that one must continually prove one's worth through visible accomplishment, appears to function less like classic self-doubt and more like a performance-driving anxiety that pushes the individual toward generating new ideas as a form of self-vindication. This single finding is arguably the most important piece of evidence in the entire IP-IWB literature, because it demonstrates within one sample, rather than across incommensurable studies, that IP's relationship with innovation cannot be summarized with a single sign.

Second, Haroon et al. (2025) extended this logic to leadership. Studying 318 department heads in the Pakistani luxury hospitality sector, the authors found that leaders' impostor thoughts positively predicted their own innovative work behavior, a finding the authors interpret through a compensatory, social-cognitive lens: leaders who privately doubt their competence appear to overcompensate by visibly engaging in problem-solving and idea generation, in effect using demonstrated innovation as a strategy for managing the threat of exposure. This compensatory account echoes Hudson and

González-Gómez's (2021) broader finding that impostor-related affect does not act uniformly across outcomes; in their four-study design, IP-induced shame reduced creativity but simultaneously increased organizational citizenship behavior, suggesting that impostor-driven employees redirect their compensatory energy toward whichever behavior seems most available to restore a sense of deservingness, which in some organizational contexts may be innovation itself.

A useful analogy for this pattern exists in adjacent literatures on other seemingly negative workplace states. Jiang, Ning, Zhang, and Batrancea (2024), studying perceived overqualification, another state characterized by a mismatch between self-perception and external reality, found that overqualification simultaneously predicted job crafting, which positively mediated its effect on creativity, and work withdrawal behavior, which negatively mediated the same effect, with organizational identification moderating both pathways. Wang, Chen, Wang, and Xie (2022) documented a structurally similar double-edged pattern in the reverse causal direction, showing that employees' innovative behavior itself carries both a positive pathway toward workplace wellbeing, through leader support for innovation, and a theoretically anticipated but empirically unsupported negative pathway, through coworker ostracism. These parallel findings across different constructs lend indirect but meaningful support to the plausibility of Tewfik and Kim's (2023) double-edged sword framework: psychologically ambivalent workplace states, of which IP appears to be one clear example, routinely produce bifurcated rather than uniform effects on innovation-related outcomes, with the direction of the net effect determined by which of two competing behavioral pathways is activated.

Gender adds a further layer of nuance to this paradox. Fleischhauer, Wossidlo, Michael, and Enge (2021) found that women report higher IP on average than men, and that this gap is partially explained by lower self-esteem and higher neuroticism among women in their sample, alongside a strong association between IP and

socially prescribed perfectionism, the belief that others expect perfection of oneself. Because socially prescribed perfectionism is externally referenced, it may plausibly interact with the achievement-pressure dimension of IP in ways that differ by gender, although direct tests of this interaction within an innovation outcome remain scarce. Domínguez-Soto, Labajo, and Labrador-Fernández (2024), in qualitative interviews with Spanish female executives, captured this ambivalence directly in their finding that female leaders described IP simultaneously as torture and blessing, reporting that impostor feelings, while personally distressing, also motivated meticulous preparation and a heightened responsiveness to feedback that some participants credited with strengthening their leadership and problem-solving effectiveness. Scymcyk's (2025) doctoral research adds a further dimension by showing that the frequency and framing of performance feedback interacts with gender to shape both self-confidence and IP, which in turn predict voice and helping behaviors, outcomes conceptually adjacent to idea championing, suggesting that organizational feedback practices may be one lever through which the achievement-pressure pathway can be encouraged over the self-doubt pathway. Taken as a whole, this section demonstrates that the IP-IWB relationship cannot be adequately modeled as a single negative coefficient. It is better understood as two competing internal pathways, an anxious, resource-depleting pathway and a compensatory, effort-mobilizing pathway, whose relative activation depends on which dimension of IP is engaged, how the individual construes their situation, and, as the next section shows, the surrounding organizational and cultural context.

Boundary Conditions: Leadership, Organizational Climate, and Culture

If IP's effect on innovation is conditional rather than fixed, then the conditions themselves warrant close examination. Three categories of boundary condition recur across the literature: supportive leadership, organizational climate, and national or cultural context.

Supportive leadership repeatedly emerges as a buffer against the inhibitory pathway and, in some studies, as an activator of the compensatory pathway. Khan et al. (2022), studying 689 knowledge workers in Pakistan's service sector, found that servant leadership predicts IWB through a sequential mediating chain of psychological empowerment and job crafting, both of which are plausible antidotes to the self-doubt dimension of IP: an employee who feels genuinely empowered and who has latitude to reshape their own job is less dependent on unwavering self-confidence to attempt something new. Yadav, Prakash, and Dalal (2023) reported a parallel finding for empowering leadership more broadly, showing that psychological empowerment mediates its relationship with IWB among employees in India. Neither study measured IP directly, but both identify precisely the psychological resource, empowerment, that the inhibitory-pathway literature shows IP to erode, which suggests that leadership styles capable of restoring a sense of empowerment may be well positioned to counteract IP's negative pathway even without directly addressing impostor cognition itself.

Organizational climate operates similarly. Elsayed et al. (2023) found that a strong perceived organizational innovation climate strengthens the positive relationship between psychological safety and IWB, implying that the same climate should, in principle, dampen the negative relationship between IP and IWB by making error-related risk-taking feel less consequential. Xu and Suntrayuth (2022) reinforce this point by showing that organizational innovation climate operates on IWB through psychological safety and knowledge sharing in sequence, a chain that offers IP-affected employees multiple points of potential intervention: even if IP directly undermines an individual's private sense of safety, an organization that actively encourages and rewards knowledge sharing may still be able to draw out the achievement-pressure pathway rather than the self-doubt pathway.

The clearest and most theoretically important moderator, however, is national and

organizational power distance. Haroon et al. (2025) found that although leaders' impostor thoughts positively predicted their own innovative behavior overall, this compensatory relationship was significantly weakened under conditions of high power distance. The authors' explanation is instructive: in high-power-distance cultures, hierarchical norms discourage leaders from openly displaying uncertainty, admitting error, or soliciting critical feedback, precisely the behaviors that the problem-solving-pondering pathway in Tewfik and Kim's (2023) framework requires in order to convert impostor-driven anxiety into visible innovative output. Where such norms are strong, IP-affected leaders may be structurally prevented from expressing their compensatory drive through legitimate channels, leaving affective rumination as the more available, and more damaging, outlet.

This cultural boundary condition connects to a broader and more troubling gap in the literature: the near-total dominance of Western, individualist samples in IP research generally. Abbas, Farzand, Riaz, and Ahmad (2024), in a phenomenological study of first-generation Pakistani university students, found that impostor experiences were substantially shaped by the interplay between collectivist family obligations and individualist academic environments, with participants describing impostor feelings that were inseparable from concerns about bringing honor or shame to their families rather than purely individual competence concerns. Although this study examines an academic rather than a strictly workplace population, its findings raise a question of direct relevance to the present paper: if the phenomenological texture of IP itself differs by cultural orientation, then the achievement-pressure dimension identified by Alrashidi et al. (2025), which appears to drive positive innovation outcomes in at least two non-Western samples, namely Saudi nursing leaders and Pakistani hospitality managers, may operate through collectivist mechanisms, such as pressure not to let one's group down, that are absent or differently expressed in the individualist, Euro-American samples from which most IP theory, including the

double-edged sword framework itself, was originally derived. This is a significant limitation of the current evidence base and a central item on the research agenda proposed in the following section.

Toward an Integrated Understanding

Synthesizing the three preceding sections yields an integrated account of the IP-IWB relationship that can be summarized in three propositions. First, IP is not a unitary predictor of reduced innovation; it is a multidimensional construct whose self-doubt and external-attribution components reliably suppress the earlier, more privately executed stages of IWB, namely opportunity exploration, primarily through the erosion of self-efficacy, psychological safety, and emotional resources, while its achievement-pressure component can, under the right conditions, positively predict the later, more effortful stage of idea generation, through a compensatory, problem-solving-oriented mechanism. Second, which of these two pathways dominates in a given case depends on the individual's construal of their situation, specifically whether goal progress feels attainable or blocked, and on organizational conditions that either legitimize or suppress the visible expression of uncertainty, including leadership style, innovation climate, and power distance. Third, this entire pattern has so far been documented almost exclusively in individualist, Anglo-European, and a small number of Middle Eastern and South Asian organizational samples, leaving open the question of how collectivist cultural frames might reshape both the phenomenology of IP and its downstream relationship with innovation.

This integrated view carries an important implication for how the field should proceed. Much of the earlier literature implicitly treated IP as something to be eliminated, an unambiguous liability to be screened for and therapeutically managed. The evidence reviewed here suggests a more precise, and arguably more actionable, target: rather than eliminating impostor cognition altogether, which may be neither feasible nor entirely desirable given its apparent link to conscientious over-preparation and heightened

interpersonal effectiveness (Hudson & González-Gómez, 2021; Tewfik, 2022), organizations may do better to focus on reshaping the conditions under which impostor thoughts are experienced, so that employees are more likely to be pushed toward the problem-solving-pondering pathway and away from the affective-rumination pathway.

Future Research Directions

Several concrete research priorities follow directly from the gaps identified above. First, longitudinal and experience-sampling designs are needed to test Tewfik and Kim's (2023) claim that goal progress determines which pathway is activated; nearly all of the evidence reviewed here is cross-sectional, which cannot establish whether achievement pressure causes idea generation or whether employees who are already succeeding at generating ideas subsequently come to experience achievement pressure as a byproduct of visibility. Second, direct, within-sample tests of the power-distance moderation identified by Haroon et al. (2025) are needed across a wider range of national contexts and organizational levels, extending beyond leaders to frontline and mid-level employees, since power distance is likely to shape the expression of IP differently depending on where an individual sits in the organizational hierarchy. Third, cross-cultural and specifically collectivist-context research on IP and IWB remains strikingly thin; studies such as Abbas et al. (2024) suggest that the phenomenology of IP itself may be culturally variable in ways that a purely Western-derived dimensional model, including the self-doubt, achievement-pressure, and external-attribution structure used throughout this paper, may not fully capture. Fourth, future work should more explicitly integrate gender as a moderator rather than a control variable; Fleischhauer et al. (2021), Domínguez-Soto et al. (2024), and Scymcyk (2025) each suggest that gender interacts with feedback environments, perfectionism, and self-presentation concerns in ways that could plausibly alter which IP pathway is activated, yet no study reviewed here tests a full moderated-mediation model linking gender, IP dimensionality, and IWB simultaneously. Finally,

intervention research remains underdeveloped from an innovation-specific standpoint; Para, Dubreuil, Miquelon, and Martin-Krumm's (2024) scoping review of IP interventions found that most existing programs target general well-being and self-acceptance outcomes rather than channeling impostor cognition toward productive ends, leaving open the design and testing of interventions explicitly aimed at converting achievement pressure into sustained idea generation without incurring the well-being costs documented in the inhibitory-pathway literature.

Practical Implications

The synthesis offered in this paper carries several implications for organizational practice. Leaders and human resource practitioners should resist the temptation to treat impostor feelings among employees as a uniformly negative signal requiring elimination; doing so risks overlooking the achievement-pressure pathway that, under supportive conditions, can fuel idea generation (Alrashidi et al., 2025; Haroon et al., 2025; Tewfik & Kim, 2023). Instead, organizations should focus on strengthening the specific psychological resources that the inhibitory pathway depends upon, namely self-efficacy, psychological safety, and emotional recovery capacity, through mechanisms such as constructive, competence-affirming feedback, manageable workloads that reduce chronic exhaustion, and visible normalization of error as a routine part of the innovation process (Elsayed et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Xu & Suntrayuth, 2022). Leadership development programs, particularly in high-power-distance organizational cultures, should explicitly address the finding that hierarchical norms can suppress the compensatory expression of impostor-driven problem solving among leaders (Haroon et al., 2025); training that legitimizes visible uncertainty and error disclosure among senior leaders may unlock innovative behavior that would otherwise remain privately generated but never championed or implemented. Servant and empowering leadership styles, which have been shown to build the psychological empowerment and job-crafting latitude that buffer

against self-doubt, represent a particularly promising lever (Khan et al., 2022; Yadav et al., 2023). Finally, given the documented gender patterning of IP and its interaction with feedback practices (Fleischhauer et al., 2021; Scymcyk, 2025), organizations should audit their feedback and appraisal systems for gendered patterns that may inadvertently reinforce the self-doubt pathway among women and other groups more susceptible to intense impostor feelings, while still preserving the accountability structures that appear to activate achievement pressure productively.

Conclusion

This paper set out to resolve an apparent contradiction in the literature on the impostor phenomenon and innovative work behavior: the coexistence of robust evidence that IP suppresses innovation and emerging evidence that it can, under specific conditions, catalyze it. The resolution offered here is that both findings are correct, but incomplete on their own. IP is a multidimensional construct whose self-doubt and external-attribution components erode the self-efficacy, psychological safety, and emotional resources that innovative work behavior requires, while its achievement-pressure component can, when construed as a challenge rather than a threat and when expressed within organizational and cultural contexts that tolerate visible uncertainty, redirect impostor-driven anxiety into genuine problem-solving effort. This more precise, dimension-sensitive, and context-sensitive account moves the field beyond a simple deficit framing of the impostor phenomenon and toward a more actionable understanding of how organizations might shape the conditions under which impostor thoughts are experienced, so that the same psychological experience that quietly disables one employee's innovative potential might, under better-designed conditions, be productively channeled in another's. The evidence base for this account, however, remains geographically and culturally narrow, methodologically dominated by cross-sectional designs, and only beginning to integrate gender as an active moderator rather

than a demographic control; closing these gaps is the central task facing future research in this area.

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