

Phenomenological Analysis of Imposter Syndrome in Women Transitioning from Employment to Entrepreneurship

Mustafa Nabi Shah

Student, Cambridge International City Montessori School, Lucknow

Maseerah Arif

Coordinator, Cambridge International City Montessori School, Lucknow

Soumya Pandit

Assistant Teacher, Cambridge International City Montessori School, Lucknow

Abstract

Women transitioning from stable professional careers to entrepreneurship frequently encounter imposter syndrome (IS), a psychological phenomenon characterized by persistent self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy despite evident success. This phenomenological study investigates how this transition influences IS experiences, the psychological and social factors involved, and strategies to mitigate its effects. Data from in-depth semi-structured interviews with three women entrepreneurs revealed themes including career transitions, gendered societal pressures, and self-doubt. The findings underscore the role of mentorship, self-reflection, and supportive networks in overcoming IS. This paper also highlights the need for gender-sensitive entrepreneurial support systems, offering theoretical insights and actionable strategies to foster resilience and confidence among women entrepreneurs.

Key words

Entrepreneur, imposter syndrome, phenomenological analysis, in-depth interview.

Introduction

Women embarking on their initial business ventures often encounter imposter syndrome, a psychological phenomenon that can result in self-doubt and significantly hamper their success. As described by (MacNeil & Hedges, 2012), entrepreneurship for women represents the dawn of a new movement. Despite a growing number of women seeking independence through their own ventures, these businesses tend to grow more slowly and are less profitable than those owned by men (Ladge et al., 2019). One critical factor inhibiting the growth of women entrepreneurs, as extensively discussed in the literature, is imposter syndrome. This phenomenon involves a perceived self-doubt regarding one's capabilities to achieve success. Women experiencing imposter syndrome often view themselves as less intelligent and attribute their successes to luck rather than their skills or efforts (Clance & Imes, 1978). Consequently, they may feel that true success is beyond their reach and may curtail their aspirations to align with work-life commitments (Eddleston et al., 2020). Phillip (2024) emphasizes the necessity of studying the specific contextual factors influencing imposter syndrome in female entrepreneurs. One particularly significant, yet underexplored context is the identity shift experienced by professional women who weigh the opportunity cost of leaving stable jobs to pursue their passions. This transition involves substantial financial risks and complex relationship dynamics. Although (Kelly & McAdam, 2023) discuss how women transition into their entrepreneurial ventures through newfound identities, they do not address how the loss of a previous identity and the ambiguity of a new one contribute to self-doubt

among these women. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a deeper exploration of the psychological and social impacts of such profound career changes.

Two predominant theories of intelligence underpin the phenomenon of imposter syndrome among individuals: the Entity Theory and the Incremental Theory. The Incremental Theory posits that intelligence is malleable and can be cultivated through persistent effort and the continuous honing of skills. Proponents of this theory adopt learning-oriented goals, emphasizing the enhancement of their capabilities over time. In contrast, the Entity Theory advocates the notion that intelligence is a fixed trait, an inherent quality that dictates success. Adherents of this perspective are primarily driven by performance metrics as the sole indicators of their competence. In challenging situations, individuals aligned with the Entity Theory often experience profound feelings of helplessness, pervasive negative thoughts, and a tendency towards avoidance. Their belief in the static nature of intelligence exacerbates their susceptibility to imposter syndrome, as any perceived failure is internalized as a reflection of their unchangeable limitations. Conversely, those who subscribe to the Incremental Theory are more resilient in the face of difficulties, viewing setbacks as opportunities for growth rather than as insurmountable obstacles (Vian, 2021).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the relationship between the identity shift experienced by women transitioning from stable jobs to entrepreneurial ventures and imposter syndrome, examined through the lens of two intelligence theories: Entity Theory and Incremental Theory. This section provides a detailed overview of the research design, procedures, and analysis methods employed in the study. The chapter outlines the research design and articulates the research questions that guide and focus the inquiry. Additionally, it describes the site and participant selection, including the criteria used for sampling. The chapter also discusses the researcher's role and offers a comprehensive summary of the methodologies utilized for data collection and analysis. Finally, this section addresses the trustworthiness of the research findings and considers ethical considerations that may impose limitations or influence the research process. The aim of this chapter is to provide thorough information and clarity on the methodologies used, ensuring the study can be replicated without obstacles.

Research Design

Qualitative research allows researchers to use a literary and semi-flexible writing style that will enable them to effectively convey stories or descriptions of experiences without having restrictions on formal academic standards. This flexibility is important because it allows for the description of individual experiences.

Moreover, qualitative research provides readers with a deeper understanding of the contextual factors and settings in which impostor syndrome occurs. In our study, utilizing a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, we aim to explore and describe how the shift in identity—from stable careers to entrepreneurial ventures—affects the experience of impostor syndrome among female entrepreneurs. This approach allows us to uncover the nuanced ways in which changes in professional identity influence feelings of impostorism in this specific context.

According to (Moustakas, 1994), the term "transcendental" relates to perceiving all things as if encountering them anew, emphasizing a fresh perspective. This process involves gathering necessary information to articulate and elucidate a specific experience. (Hegel, 2018) defined phenomenology as the scientific study of elucidating an individual's immediate awareness and experience, encompassing perceptions, sensations, and knowledge. In our study, the objective is to gain a precise understanding of how the identity shift from stable careers to entrepreneurship influences the experience of impostor syndrome among female entrepreneurs. This research aims to explore and illuminate the unique aspects of this phenomenon in the context of entrepreneurial ventures.

Kant introduced the term phenomenology in 1765 (Kockelmans, 1967), but the transcendental phenomenological design is rooted in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, often considered the founder of phenomenology (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Husserl emphasized the importance of exploring experiences without preconceived notions, focusing directly on the essence of lived experiences (Creely, 2018). According to (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015), phenomenology encompasses two main methodologies: descriptive and interpretive.

Transcendental phenomenology, a descriptive approach, examines the fundamental structure and significance of individuals' lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). This method aims to grasp phenomena from the unbiased perspective of those who have experienced them. In contrast, hermeneutic phenomenology, influenced by Martin Heidegger's work, interprets experiences by delving into their cultural contexts and underlying meanings (Neubauer et al., 2019). Given the aim of our study to understand and articulate the complexities of how identity shifts impact impostor syndrome among female entrepreneurs, the transcendental phenomenological approach is most appropriate.

Research Question 1

How does the transition from stable professional careers to entrepreneurship affect the development and experience of imposter syndrome among female entrepreneurs?

Research Objectives:

- To explore the personal narratives of female entrepreneurs regarding their transition from stable careers to entrepreneurship.
- To identify specific moments or experiences during the transition that heightened feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome.
- To understand how changes in professional identity impact their confidence and perception of success.

Interview Questions:

- Can you describe your journey from a stable career to becoming an entrepreneur?
- What were the most challenging aspects of this transition for you?
- How did this career change impact your sense of self and professional identity?
- Can you share any specific experiences where you felt self-doubt or imposter syndrome during this transition?

Research Question 2

What are the key psychological and social factors that contribute to imposter syndrome in women entrepreneurs, particularly in the context of their identity shift and the associated financial and relational challenges?

Research Objectives:

- To uncover the psychological triggers of imposter syndrome as experienced by female entrepreneurs.
- To investigate how social expectations, gender norms, and relationship dynamics contribute to these feelings.
- To examine the impact of financial risks and work-life balance on their psychological well-being.

Interview Questions:

- What psychological challenges have you faced as an entrepreneur?
- How do societal expectations and gender norms affect your confidence as an entrepreneur?
- How have financial risks and managing work-life balance influenced your feelings of self-doubt?
- In what ways have your personal relationships (e.g., family, friends, mentors) impacted your entrepreneurial journey and feelings of imposter syndrome?

Research Question 3

What strategies and support mechanisms can effectively mitigate imposter syndrome and promote successful identity integration for women entrepreneurs?

Research Objectives:

- To identify coping strategies employed by female entrepreneurs to manage imposter syndrome.
- To evaluate the perceived effectiveness of support mechanisms such as mentorship, networking, and professional development.
- To develop recommendations for targeted support programs to help women overcome imposter syndrome.

Interview Questions:

- What strategies have you found helpful in dealing with self-doubt and imposter syndrome?
- Can you describe any support systems or resources that have been particularly beneficial to you?
- How has mentorship or networking influenced your confidence and business success?
- What kind of support or resources do you think would help female entrepreneurs overcome imposter syndrome?

Settings

The study adopts a framework that aligns with the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, providing an in-depth understanding of their perceptions and insights. This qualitative approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of human experience, encompassing interactions, psychological constructs, cultural contexts, and other dimensions. Such an approach offers a profound understanding of the complexities inherent in their entrepreneurial journeys (Phillip, 2024). This contrasts with quantitative techniques, such as scale surveys, which are often limited to gathering specific types of information and may not capture the nuanced and holistic aspects of individual experiences.

Setting in our study encompasses the physical environments where we engage in one-on-one conversations with female entrepreneurs. These settings are chosen by participants and typically include their offices, co-working spaces, or other locations central to their entrepreneurial activities. This approach allows us to immerse ourselves in their work environments, observe their surroundings, and capture the nuanced aspects of their professional lives. By conducting face-to-face interviews in these settings, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of how their workspaces influence their experiences with impostor syndrome and the shifts in their entrepreneurial identities. This method ensures a comprehensive exploration that includes both verbal and non-verbal cues, providing a contextual backdrop to their entrepreneurial journeys.

Participants

In our study, participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach through a snowball method. We identified and contacted female entrepreneurs who have made the transition from traditional employment to entrepreneurship. This sampling strategy enabled us to gather insights from a diverse group of women with varying backgrounds and experiences related to impostor syndrome and the challenges associated with entrepreneurial identity shifts. Specifically, we focused on entrepreneurs who have been actively running their businesses for at least 3 years, aiming to explore how this transition impacts their experiences with impostor syndrome over time. By intentionally selecting participants with different entrepreneurial journeys, we aimed to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives that enriches the depth and validity of our study findings.

Procedure

Using qualitative methods, we focused on individuals who self-identified as experiencing impostor syndrome, aiming to explore their unique experiences in depth. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations chosen by the participants, allowing us to immerse ourselves in their entrepreneurial environments and gain insights into how impostor syndrome manifests in their professional lives. Audio recordings of these interviews were made to capture both verbal responses and non-verbal cues, facilitating thorough transcription and detailed analysis during the subsequent research phases.

Researchers' role

In our study, as the primary researcher, my role centered on serving as the human instrument throughout the research process. This encompassed selecting an appropriate research design tailored to our objectives, developing the research proposal, and overseeing data collection using qualitative methods. Specifically, I conducted in-depth interviews with female entrepreneurs who had transitioned from traditional jobs to entrepreneurship, focusing on their experiences with impostor syndrome. Utilizing transcendental phenomenology techniques, I analyzed the gathered data to uncover underlying themes and narratives. The aim was to contribute to the understanding of how impostor syndrome impacts entrepreneurial identity shifts among women.

Additionally, as the researcher, I recognized the importance of transparency regarding any personal experiences that might influence the study. While acknowledging the potential for my own experiences and biases to affect interpretations, I strived to maintain objectivity by minimizing their influence. Drawing on Husserl's concept of *epoché*, I endeavored to set aside preconceived notions and remain impartial throughout the research process. This approach ensured that the findings presented a comprehensive and unbiased exploration of the participants' experiences with impostor syndrome in their entrepreneurial journeys.

Data collection

In our study, data collection was conducted using rigorous qualitative methodologies tailored to explore the experiences of female entrepreneurs who transitioned from traditional careers to entrepreneurship and encountered impostor syndrome. Utilizing a one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interview approach, each participant engaged in a 30 to 45-minute interview session. The interview protocol, adapted from existing literature and further developed, aimed to delve deeply into the perceptions and experiences of these entrepreneurs with impostor syndrome.

The interviews were designed to create a safe and open environment where participants could freely express their emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. This approach facilitated the collection of detailed descriptions and narratives that captured the nuanced experiences of impostor syndrome within the entrepreneurial context. Throughout the interviews, careful attention was paid to both verbal responses and nonverbal cues, as nonverbal communication can provide rich insights into participants' experiences beyond verbal data alone.

Following each interview, efforts were made to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the data collected, ensuring that the narratives presented were faithful representations of the participants' accounts. This rigorous approach aimed to uphold the integrity and validity of the qualitative data, aligning with the goal of generating a comprehensive understanding of how impostor syndrome manifests and influences entrepreneurial identity shifts among women.

Interviews

In our qualitative study focused on understanding the impact of impostor syndrome on female entrepreneurs transitioning from stable careers to entrepreneurship, we employed a methodological approach centered on individual experiences to uncover commonalities among participants. The primary data collection method utilized was one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted in person. Each interview session was designed to last between 30 to 45 minutes, ensuring ample time for participants to reflect on and articulate their experiences with impostor syndrome. The interview questions were crafted to be open-ended, allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on their perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of impostor syndrome within the entrepreneurial context. This approach aimed to capture rich, detailed narratives that provide insights into the complexities of the phenomenon as experienced by female entrepreneurs. Throughout the interviews, the researcher actively observed both verbal and nonverbal cues to deepen understanding and ensure the authenticity of the data collected. Audio and video recordings were utilized during interviews to accurately capture participants' responses and nonverbal communication, facilitating subsequent transcription and detailed analysis. The interview process was guided by a framework of questions developed from existing literature and tailored to explore various dimensions of impostor syndrome relevant to our study. Probing questions were selectively used to delve deeper into specific aspects of participants' experiences, aligning with the phenomenological approach that aims to uncover the essence and lived experiences of individuals. After transcription, the collected data underwent rigorous analysis to elucidate the fundamental nature of impostor syndrome among female entrepreneurs. This comprehensive methodological approach aimed to generate nuanced insights into how impostor syndrome impacts entrepreneurial identity shifts, contributing to the broader understanding of psychological challenges faced by women in business.

Questionnaire

1. Can you describe your journey from a stable career to becoming an entrepreneur?
2. What were the most challenging aspects of this transition for you?
3. How did this career change impact your sense of self and professional identity?
4. Can you share any specific experiences where you felt self-doubt or imposter syndrome during this transition?
5. What psychological challenges have you faced as an entrepreneur?
6. How do societal expectations and gender norms affect your confidence as an entrepreneur?
7. How have financial risks and managing work-life balance influenced your feelings of self-doubt?
8. In what ways have your personal relationships (e.g., family, friends, mentors) impacted your entrepreneurial journey and feelings of imposter syndrome?
9. What strategies have you found helpful in dealing with self-doubt and imposter syndrome?
10. Can you describe any support systems or resources that have been particularly beneficial to you?
11. How has mentorship or networking influenced your confidence and business success?
12. What kind of support or resources do you think would help female entrepreneurs overcome imposter syndrome?

In this qualitative study focusing on female entrepreneurs navigating the transition from stable careers to entrepreneurship, **Question 1** serves as a foundational icebreaker aimed at understanding each participant's unique journey. By inviting participants to describe their path to entrepreneurship, the interview opens with a personal narrative that sets a positive tone and establishes rapport. **Question 2** delves into the challenges encountered during this transition, encouraging participants to reflect on hurdles they faced in leaving stable careers behind. This question aims to foster empathy and understanding while paving the way for deeper discussion. **Question 3** explores the impact of career change on participants' self-concept and professional identity, encouraging introspection into how entrepreneurship has shaped their sense of self. **Question 4** seeks specific instances where participants have grappled with self-doubt or impostor syndrome, aiming to normalize and explore these common feelings in the entrepreneurial context. Moving forward, **Question 5** probes into the psychological challenges participants have faced as entrepreneurs, inviting them to articulate the internal struggles that may arise in their professional journey. **Question 6** examines the influence of societal expectations and gender norms on participants' confidence as entrepreneurs, shedding light on external factors impacting their entrepreneurial experience. **Question 7** delves into the intersection of financial risks and work-life balance management, exploring how these factors contribute to feelings of self-doubt and impostor syndrome. **Question 8** explores the role of personal relationships—such as family, friends, and mentors—in participants' entrepreneurial journey and their experiences with impostor syndrome. **Question 9** focuses on strategies participants have found effective in coping with self-doubt and impostor syndrome, aiming to identify resilience-building practices. **Question 10** invites participants to describe support systems or resources that have been particularly beneficial in navigating their entrepreneurial challenges. **Question 11** explores the impact of mentorship and networking on participants' confidence and business success, highlighting external support mechanisms. **Question 12** concludes by soliciting participants' perspectives on the types of support or resources that would help female entrepreneurs overcome impostor syndrome, aiming to identify potential areas for intervention and support within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Each question is carefully crafted to elicit rich, qualitative data that illuminates the psychological, societal, and personal dimensions of the participants' experiences as female entrepreneurs.

Data Collection

The data collection process for this study focused on exploring identity shifts from stable careers to entrepreneurship, particularly examining impostor syndrome and self-doubt among participants. Through purposeful sampling, individuals who recently transitioned from traditional careers to entrepreneurship were identified and recruited. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve into

their experiences and perceptions during this career transition phase. Each interview was designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts and emotions about the challenges and psychological impacts of becoming an entrepreneur after a stable career. The researcher employed probing questions developed specifically for this study, aimed at uncovering nuanced insights into how societal expectations, gender norms, financial risks, and personal relationships influenced participants' confidence and feelings of impostor syndrome. Data collection prioritized creating a supportive and comfortable environment, enabling participants to share their authentic experiences openly.

Data Analysis

Following a phenomenological approach inspired by (Moustakas, 1994), the data analysis focused on identifying recurring themes and essential meanings embedded within participants' narratives. The researcher practiced epoché throughout the analysis process, setting aside personal biases and assumptions to ensure an objective interpretation of the data. Detailed notes and memos were taken during and after each interview to capture both verbal and non-verbal cues, aiding in the thorough review and analysis of the transcripts. Thematic analysis involved categorizing and organizing the data to develop a comprehensive understanding of how identity shifts to entrepreneurship intersect with impostor syndrome and self-doubt. This approach facilitated the construction of rich, descriptive accounts that authentically reflected the lived experiences of participants in their career transition journeys.

Epoché and Bracketing

Epoché, rooted in phenomenology, guided the researcher in suspending preconceived notions and approaching the interviews with an open and impartial mindset. This methodological stance allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences without undue influence from the researcher's personal perspectives. Additionally, bracketing was employed to acknowledge and manage potential biases that could arise from the researcher's background as a life and trauma coach, ensuring the integrity and trustworthiness of the study findings.

Review of Data

After completing the interviews, the researcher meticulously reviewed the audio recordings and transcripts to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. This process involved careful listening and re-listening to capture nuances in participants' responses, followed by systematic coding to identify significant statements and emerging themes. The researcher maintained a detailed audit trail, documenting decisions and interpretations made during the data analysis phase to enhance transparency and reliability.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was established using criteria proposed by (Lincoln et al., 1985), which include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation of data, and member checking to validate findings. Dependability and confirmability were ensured by maintaining rigorous documentation and employing systematic data analysis techniques that allowed for traceable and reproducible results. Transferability was addressed by providing rich, contextual descriptions of participants' experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts or populations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were strictly upheld, with all data anonymized and securely stored. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, outlining their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation. The researcher-maintained transparency regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, offering participants the opportunity to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Data retention and disposal protocols were followed to safeguard participants' information and ensure compliance with ethical guidelines.

RESPONDENT PROFILES

	Afreen Mohsini	Pareesa Rabbani	Ruzaina Khan	Rehana Kidwai
Age	35	32	34	44
Previous Career	Electronics Engineer	Doctor	Teacher	Teacher
Current Business	Online boutique	Clothing Trader	Bakery	Café
Years in Business	2	1	5	2
Relationship status	Married	Married	Married	Married
Location	Dubai, UAE	Patna, India	Lucknow, India	Dubai, UAE
Education	M.Tech	PG, MBBS	M.Tech	M.Sc.

Imposter Syndrome: A Theoretical Perspective

Imposter syndrome (IS) refers to the persistent internal experience of doubting one's abilities, despite evident success. Originally conceptualized by [Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978](#), this psychological phenomenon primarily affects high-achieving individuals, especially women. People suffering from imposter syndrome often feel that their achievements are not a product of their skills or qualifications but rather luck or external factors, and they live in fear of being "found out" as a fraud. Over time, IS has been studied across a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and business, especially in the context of female entrepreneurship.

Imposter Syndrome in Women: A Gendered Dimension

Imposter syndrome is often gendered, with women disproportionately affected compared to men. While men also experience IS, research suggests that women internalize their self-doubt more profoundly, partly due to the societal pressures and stereotypes that place undue expectations on them. Women entrepreneurs, particularly, face dual pressures—one from their roles as leaders or business owners and another from social norms that may undermine their legitimacy in traditionally male-dominated fields. The experiences of Afreen, Pareesa, and Ruzaina—three women entrepreneurs—illustrate how imposter syndrome is intricately connected to societal expectations of women. Their stories reveal the internal conflict between their professional aspirations and societal norms that still tend to view women in the domestic sphere or in support roles. This conflict exacerbates self-doubt, leading to imposter syndrome.

Theories Underpinning Imposter Syndrome

The theoretical framework behind imposter syndrome (IS) is deeply rooted in cognitive and social psychology. According to [Clance & Imes \(1978\)](#), imposter syndrome often originates from early childhood experiences. Specifically, messages received from family, educational environments, and society can foster a sense of perfectionism. This creates an internal belief that the individual must meet exceedingly high standards, and failure to meet these standards—sometimes even perceived failure—leads to feelings of inadequacy and fraudulence.

One of the most widely referenced theories in IS research is **Attribution Theory**. [Heider, \(1958\)](#) posited that individuals have a natural tendency to attribute the causes of events to either internal factors (such as skill or competence) or external factors (such as luck or timing). In the context of imposter syndrome, success is often attributed to external factors, thus reinforcing feelings of fraudulence. The individual attributes their accomplishments to something other than their own abilities, leading them to believe that they do not deserve their success.

Social Comparison Theory, developed by [Leon Festinger in 1954](#), is another crucial theory in understanding IS. It suggests that individuals have a natural tendency to compare themselves to others in order to assess their abilities and self-worth. For women entrepreneurs like Afreen, Pareesa, Ruzaina, and Rehana, these comparisons—whether to male counterparts or other successful women—often reinforce the belief that they are less capable, thereby intensifying feelings of imposter syndrome.

Career Transitions and Imposter Syndrome: A Theoretical Exploration

Career transitions are a key factor that can trigger or amplify imposter syndrome. Moving from a familiar professional role into a new, often unstructured, entrepreneurial environment creates uncertainty and amplifies the fear of failure. This uncertainty can make imposter syndrome more prominent, as individuals are forced to redefine their identity, abilities, and success metrics.

Afreen's transition from an electronics engineer to an entrepreneur illustrates this shift in professional identity. Career transitions require a change in how individuals see themselves and how they are validated in the workplace. In traditional environments like corporations or academia, individuals

receive external validation through promotions, evaluations, and feedback. In entrepreneurship, however, success metrics are often more ambiguous, and external validation may be infrequent, leading to heightened self-doubt. Afreen's statement, "I struggled with a sense of losing my professional identity because my old and new careers are completely unrelated," aligns with existing theories that suggest that lack of structured feedback in new roles exacerbates imposter syndrome.

Similarly, Rehana, who transitioned from a corporate job in finance to starting a consultancy business, shared how the shift affected her sense of competence. "In my previous job, I knew exactly what was expected of me. But now, as an entrepreneur, there's no clear path, and I often question if I am doing enough." This lack of clear feedback and structure is a common experience for women entrepreneurs, reinforcing their feelings of imposter syndrome.

From the perspective of **Role Transition Theory**, changes in professional roles demand individuals to navigate new expectations both from others and from themselves. When transitioning from an employee to a business owner, there is often a vacuum of external accountability—no boss or team to answer to—forcing individuals to self-manage and self-evaluate. This shift can lead to an overestimation of challenges and an underestimation of capabilities, both of which are hallmarks of imposter syndrome. Afreen's reflection, "I felt like I might be perceived as someone who isn't serious about having a full-time career," further exemplifies the emotional toll of this transition.

Psychological Constructs Related to Career Transitions and IS

Imposter syndrome during career transitions is closely tied to **self-efficacy**, a concept introduced by [Albert Bandura in 1977](#). Self-efficacy refers to the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations. During transitions into entrepreneurship, women often experience a dip in self-efficacy due to the inherent uncertainty of new challenges. For example, Ruzaina, who transitioned from teaching to running her own bakery, experienced diminished self-efficacy not just from the new demands of entrepreneurship but also from the perception of more established industry players. As she mentioned, "Whenever I looked at people who had established names in the baking industry, I felt like their experience and knowledge were on another level."

Similarly, Rehana found that her self-efficacy was challenged as she had to develop new skills outside of her finance background. She shared, "I had no prior experience in consultancy. I felt like I was always learning on the go, and that made me question my abilities."

Bandura's theory suggests that self-efficacy is shaped by four key sources: mastery experiences, social modeling, social persuasion, and physiological responses. Mastery experiences—overcoming challenges through perseverance—are crucial for building self-efficacy. However, women suffering from imposter syndrome may downplay their mastery experiences, attributing their success to luck rather than their own competence. This leads to a cycle of self-doubt, which is evident in the experiences of Afreen, Pareesa, Ruzaina, and Rehana, who often underestimated their abilities and achievements.

Gender Expectations and the Intersection of Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome in women is closely intertwined with gendered societal expectations. Historically, leadership and entrepreneurship have been seen as masculine pursuits, while women have been relegated to roles in domesticity or support. Even today, women breaking into male-dominated fields or entrepreneurship often face heightened scrutiny and self-doubt.

This gendered expectation is especially pronounced in entrepreneurship, where women face the dual burden of excelling in business while adhering to societal norms related to family and personal life. Pareesa, who transitioned from a doctor to an entrepreneur, felt this pressure acutely. She said, "The idea of being a boss fascinated me, but turning that dream into a reality, especially with no formal business background, led to moments of severe self-doubt." This illustrates the internal conflict that arises when women entrepreneurs feel the need to prove their worth in both professional and personal spheres.

For Rehana, coming from a finance background, her gender and new role as a business owner also compounded her sense of inadequacy. She remarked, "People often don't expect women to excel in male-dominated fields like finance and consultancy, so I felt I had to constantly prove myself."

External Validation and the Reinforcement of Imposter Syndrome

A core feature of imposter syndrome is the belief that external validation is either temporary or unearned. Even when women entrepreneurs achieve success, they often attribute their accomplishments to factors such as luck or timing rather than their own competence, reinforcing the imposter syndrome.

Ruzaina's experience exemplifies this. Despite building a successful bakery, she often questioned her ability to meet industry standards. "I often questioned my ability to reach that standard," she remarked, despite a growing clientele and business success. This disconnect between external success and internal validation is central to imposter syndrome and reinforces the sense of fraudulence.

Rehana shared a similar sentiment: "Even when clients praised my work, I wondered if they were just being polite or if they truly believed in my abilities." This reflects a common trait in imposter syndrome, where external success is undermined by internal self-doubt.

From a theoretical perspective, **self-verification theory**, as proposed by [Talaifar & Swann \(2017\)](#), helps explain this phenomenon. This theory suggests that individuals tend to seek out environments that validate their pre-existing beliefs about themselves. For those suffering from imposter syndrome, this can mean discounting positive feedback and seeking out situations that confirm their internal doubts about their abilities, further perpetuating feelings of inadequacy.

The Psychological Costs of Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome can have significant psychological costs, especially for women entrepreneurs who face multiple external challenges while establishing and growing their businesses. The internal struggle to prove legitimacy, combined with the external pressures of business operations, can lead to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Afreen's emotional journey highlights the psychological toll of imposter syndrome. She reflected, "I've questioned if my decision to make this change was hasty or foolish." This constant questioning and self-doubt create an emotional burden, as individuals like Afreen try to reconcile their evolving professional identities with the pressure to succeed.

Similarly, Rehana shared the emotional toll of her entrepreneurial journey: "I felt overwhelmed with self-doubt. I was constantly questioning if I had made the right decision to leave my stable job and start something on my own."

From a psychological standpoint, imposter syndrome also triggers **emotional labor**, as described by [Russell Hochschild \(1983\)](#). Emotional labor refers to the process of managing emotions to meet external demands. For women entrepreneurs, emotional labor is twofold: they must manage the emotions associated with running a business, while also bearing the emotional weight of continuously proving their worth. This often leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Societal Implications: How Cultural Norms Reinforce Imposter Syndrome

Cultural and societal norms significantly contribute to the reinforcement of imposter syndrome, particularly for women. In many cultures, entrepreneurial success is seen through a masculine lens, where traits like risk-taking, assertiveness, and competitiveness are valued. In contrast, women are often expected to be nurturing, cooperative, and humble qualities that may seem at odds with entrepreneurship.

This cultural tension amplifies imposter syndrome, as women navigate both their professional goals and societal expectations. Afreen's experience reflects this cultural conflict. Although she did not face direct pressure to be the primary breadwinner, she internalized societal messages that questioned the legitimacy of her entrepreneurial efforts. She shared, "I felt like I might be perceived as someone who isn't serious about having a full-time career, instead working as a pastime."

For Rehana, the clash between societal expectations and her entrepreneurial aspirations was similarly profound. "I often felt like I had to prove I was as competent and ambitious as men in the same field," she noted, further illustrating the deep-rooted cultural scripts that devalue women's entrepreneurial contributions.

Strategies for Overcoming Imposter Syndrome: A Psychological and Social Approach

Several strategies can help women entrepreneurs overcome imposter syndrome, including psychological interventions and social support systems.

Psychological Interventions: Cognitive restructuring, a process in which individuals challenge negative thought patterns, is one of the most effective methods for combating imposter syndrome. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), developed by [Aron Beck \(1963\)](#), offers a framework for reframing internal narratives, moving from self-doubt to self-efficacy.

For women entrepreneurs, cognitive restructuring involves recognizing and celebrating their accomplishments. Afreen, Pareesa, Ruzaina, and Rehana all noted moments where they recognized the value of their successes. As Ruzaina stated, “Giving your hundred percent and eventually getting one hundred and one percent back in your favor is the best reassurance.”

Social Support: Mentorship, networking, and peer validation are essential in helping women entrepreneurs navigate imposter syndrome. As Pareesa mentioned, “Talking to people who have made similar decisions helped me during moments of self-doubt.” Mentors offer both emotional and practical support, helping women feel more confident in their abilities and decisions.

Rehana also emphasized the value of networking. She said, “Connecting with other entrepreneurs who understand the challenges I face has been crucial in helping me feel validated and supported.”

Conclusion

Imposter syndrome remains a significant psychological and social barrier for women entrepreneurs, shaped by a complex interplay of gendered expectations, societal norms, and internal cognitive processes. The experiences of Afreen, Pareesa, Ruzaina, and Rehana demonstrate how deeply imposter syndrome affects personal identity, business decisions, and emotional well-being. However, through strategies like cognitive restructuring and strong social support systems, women entrepreneurs can overcome these challenges, leading to greater self-efficacy, resilience, and entrepreneurial success. Theoretical perspectives such as **Attribution Theory**, **Social Comparison Theory**, and **Role Transition Theory** offer valuable insights into the root causes of imposter syndrome, while also providing pathways for overcoming it. Understanding and addressing imposter syndrome is critical not only for individual women entrepreneurs but also for fostering a more inclusive, supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Theoretical Implications

1. **Entrepreneurial Identity and Self-Efficacy:** All three respondents' transitions from stable employment to entrepreneurship highlight the role of entrepreneurial identity development and self-efficacy. Their belief in their capacity to learn and grow, despite challenges, supports incremental intelligence and the growth mindset theory.
2. **Gendered Experiences and Social Capital:** The respondents' experiences reflect feminist entrepreneurship theory, emphasizing gendered barriers in male-dominated industries. Despite these barriers, they leveraged social capital through mentorship and networks, aligning with social network theory.
3. **Imposter Syndrome and Psychological Barriers:** Common across respondents were issues of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, supporting psychological theories on entrepreneurial stress. Their persistence aligns with psychological resilience theories, showing the importance of emotional support and mentorship in overcoming these barriers.

Policy Implications

1. **Targeted Support for Female Entrepreneurs:** Policymakers should establish gender-specific funding, mentorship programs, and incubators to address the unique challenges faced by female entrepreneurs.
2. **Entrepreneurial Training and Work-Life Balance:** Provide modular entrepreneurship education and support systems, such as subsidized childcare and flexible work arrangements, to help women balance business and family.
3. **Access to Mentorship and Networks:** Government-backed mentorship and networking platforms should be developed to improve women's access to business opportunities and industry connections.

4. **Addressing Gender Norms:** Launch awareness campaigns to promote female role models and challenge societal expectations, alongside gender sensitivity training in industries to create more inclusive environments.
5. **Promoting Psychological Resilience:** Offer mental health resources, business coaching, and peer support to help entrepreneurs manage stress and overcome imposter syndrome.

Limitations of the Study

1. **Small Sample Size:** The study is based on the experiences of only three respondents, which limits the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample would provide more comprehensive insights into the diversity of entrepreneurial journeys.
2. **Subjectivity and Self-Reporting:** The data relies on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to bias, selective memory, or personal interpretation. This can affect the accuracy of the information gathered about their challenges and successes.
3. **Lack of Industry Diversity:** The respondents may come from a narrow range of industries, such as fashion or textiles, which limits the applicability of the findings to entrepreneurs in other sectors like technology or manufacturing.
4. **Cultural and Geographic Context:** The study may be limited to a specific cultural or geographic context, making it difficult to apply the findings universally. Different regions may present unique challenges and opportunities for female entrepreneurs that are not captured in this study.
5. **Temporal Factors:** The study focuses on a particular time in the respondents' journeys. Longitudinal research, tracking their experiences over time, would provide deeper insights into how challenges and successes evolve.

Future research directions

Future research should focus on expanding sample size and diversity, including entrepreneurs from various industries, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of findings. Comparative gender analysis is crucial to better understand the differences in entrepreneurial challenges and support systems between male and female entrepreneurs. Longitudinal studies tracking entrepreneurs over time would provide deeper insights into how challenges and resilience evolve. Cross-cultural studies are also recommended to explore how societal norms and policies influence entrepreneurship globally. Further research on specific challenges like imposter syndrome, access to capital, and work-life balance, as well as the role of mentorship and social networks, would offer more targeted insights. Finally, investigating the development of psychological resilience and a growth mindset in entrepreneurship could help identify effective interventions for overcoming self-doubt and fostering long-term success.

References

1. Alhazmi, A. A., & Kaufmann, A. (2022). Phenomenological Qualitative Methods Applied to the Analysis of Cross-Cultural Experience in Novel Educational Social Contexts. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 785134. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.785134>
2. Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191>
3. Beck, A. T. (1963). Thinking and Depression: I. Idiosyncratic Content and Cognitive Distortions. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 9(4), 324. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.1963.01720160014002>
4. Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). *THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON IN HIGH ACHIEVING WOMEN: DYNAMICS AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION*.
5. Creely, E. (2018). 'Understanding things from within'. A Husserlian phenomenological approach to doing educational research and inquiring about learning. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 41(1), 104–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2016.1182482>
6. Eddleston, K., Ladge, J., & Sugiyama, K. (2020). "Imposter Syndrome" Holds Back Entrepreneurial Women. *Entrepreneur and Innovation Exchange*. <https://doi.org/10.32617/438-5e4bda061a20d>
7. Festinger, L. (1954). A Theory of Social Comparison Processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
8. Hegel, G. W. F. (2018). *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: <I>The Phenomenology of Spirit</I>* (T. Pinkard & M. Baur, Eds.; 1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139050494>
9. Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. John Wiley & Sons Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10628-000>
10. Kelly, G., & McAdam, M. (2023). Women Entrepreneurs Negotiating Identities in Liminal Digital Spaces.

- Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 47(5), 1942–1970. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10422587221115363>
11. Kockelmans, J. J. (1967). *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation*.
 12. Ladge, J., Eddleston, K. A., & Sugiyama, K. (2019). Am I an entrepreneur? How imposter fears hinder women entrepreneurs' business growth. *Business Horizons*, 62(5), 615–624. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2019.05.001>
 13. Lincoln, Y. S., Guba, E. G., & Pilotta, J. J. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 9(4), 438–439. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8)
 14. MacNeil, N., & Hedges, K. (2012, June 8). *Entrepreneurship Is The New Women's Movement*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2012/06/08/entrepreneurship-is-the-new-womens-movement/>
 15. Matua, G. A., & Van Der Wal, D. M. (2015). Differentiating between descriptive and interpretive phenomenological research approaches. *Nurse Researcher*, 22(6), 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.22.6.22.e1344>
 16. Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
 17. Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 8(2), 90–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S40037-019-0509-2>
 18. Phillip, M. (2024). *THE ROLE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES AND SOCIETAL PRESSURES IN CREATING IMPOSTOR SYNDROME IN BLACK FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS*.
 19. Russell Hochschild, A. (1983). The Managed Heart. In A. Wharton, *Working in America* (5th ed., pp. 40–48). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003199588-7>
 20. Talaifar, S., & Swann, W. B. (2017). Self-Verification Theory. In V. Zeigler-Hill & T. K. Shackelford (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences* (pp. 1–9). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-28099-8_1180-1
 21. Vian, S. (2021). *The Impostor Phenomenon and Implicit Theories of Intelligence*.