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In search for authentic leaders: Imposter syndrome or just an imposter?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the concept of strategic imposterism, a phenomenon in which individuals deliberately adopt imposter-like tendencies to gain power, deflect accountability, or manage expectations. This distinction is crucial within the understanding of leadership, workplace culture, and organisational dynamics.

Design/methodology/approach – To better understand authenticity the design contrasted a conceptual review of the imposter phenomenon with a narrative review of strategic imposterism, dysfunctional/toxic leadership and the Dark Triad. By mapping these contrasting key factors and concepts, the paper provides a novel theoretical contribution to leadership studies and offers practical insights for fostering authenticity within professional environments.

Findings – The conceptual review establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors, identifying key factors (or descriptors), contributing to the imposter phenomenon and strategic imposter among organisational team members and leaders. Further, it broadens the discourse on the imposter phenomenon by emphasising that organisations not only harbour individuals who perceive themselves as imposters but also accommodate strategic imposters. This distinction sheds light on a novel conceptual understanding of organisational dynamics.

Practical implications – Delineating distinct factors and behaviours associated with both imposter phenomenon and strategic imposters, provides valuable insights for managing and supporting distinct employee profiles.

Originality/value – The comprehensive conceptual review of the concepts enriches the understanding of the factors influencing the imposter phenomenon within modern organisational contexts; it adds insights into strategic imposterism, impression management and self-presentation techniques and how they relate to professional development, professionalism and the feedback processes, and our authentic conceptual map can aid the management of employee profiles within the workplace and teams.

Keywords Imposter phenomenon, Strategic imposters, Impression management, Leadership

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

In contemporary leadership discourse, discussions surrounding the imposter phenomenon have become increasingly prevalent, particularly in professional settings and platforms such as LinkedIn. The term is often used to describe individuals who experience persistent self-doubt despite evidence of their competence. However, a critical distinction remains overlooked within this discourse: the difference between individuals who genuinely suffer from the imposter phenomenon and those who strategically leverage imposter-like behaviours to manipulate professional perceptions. This paper explores the concept of strategic imposterism, a phenomenon in which individuals deliberately adopt imposter-like tendencies to deceive, gain power, deflect accountability, or manage expectations. This distinction is crucial for understanding leadership, workplace culture, and organisational dynamics.

Leadership research has long explored the characteristics that differentiate effective and ineffective leaders (Rose *et al.*, 2015). Authentic leadership is often framed as the antidote to toxic workplace behaviours, including manipulation, impression management, and organisational deceit (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner *et al.*, 2021; Northouse, 2022). However, the presence of strategic imposterism complicates this narrative by introducing a form of leadership deception that mimics the language and self-presentation of the imposter phenomenon while serving different underlying motivations. “Deception is conceptualized as a complex social behaviour that takes many forms . . . to conceal, fabricate and/or manipulate



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... factual and/or emotional information” (Turi *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, understanding strategic imposterism, allows, in contrast, a clearer understanding of leadership.

This paper aims to contribute to leadership studies and organisational behaviour by developing a conceptual framework that contrasts the true imposter phenomenon (a psychological burden characterised by anxiety, self-doubt, and the inability to internalise success) (Clance and Imes, 1978) with strategic imposterism (a manipulative strategy designed to create an illusion of humility, lower expectations, or gain professional advantages (Michalec *et al.*, 2023, p. 908). While both concepts share surface-level similarities, their psychological underpinnings, behavioural markers, and organisational impacts diverge significantly. This distinction has profound implications for leadership development, workplace culture, and equality, diversity and inclusion. Therefore, to address the lack of clear differentiation between these two concepts, hindering the development of leadership studies and practice, this study employs a conceptual and narrative review methodology to synthesise existing literature on: the Dark Triad, impression management, and leadership deception in contrast to the imposter phenomenon. The conceptual framework is developed through a structured review of scholarly sources, drawing on leadership studies, organisational psychology, and workplace bullying research. By mapping these contrasting concepts, the paper provides a novel theoretical contribution to leadership studies and offers practical insights for fostering authenticity within professional environments.

Our contributions are thus three-fold. First, it advances leadership studies on authentic leadership by offering a new conceptual framework that distinguishes between the imposter phenomenon and strategic imposterism, addressing the gap in how these concepts are perceived in professional settings. Second, it broadens discussions on workplace authenticity and leadership integrity, illustrating how strategic imposterism can undermine trust, transparency, and effective leadership development. Third, it provides practical applications for leadership training, HR policies, and EDI initiatives by offering insights into identifying and addressing strategic imposterism while fostering supportive environments for those experiencing the imposter phenomenon.

Theoretical background

Authentic leaders “are originals, not copies,” acting in alignment with personal values and convictions (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p. 321). They lead by example, reflect on their behavior, take responsibility for actions and adapt to better serve others. Although still an emerging and debated field (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Northouse, 2022), authentic leadership, unlike transactional (Weber, 1947), servant (Greenleaf, 1970) and transformational (Burns, 1978) is relatively new and emphasises a work-related self, echoed by this paper. Its core components; self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced processing and relational transparency, stand in clear contrast to descriptors of strategic imposterism.

Intrapersonally, it involves self-knowledge, self-regulation and self-concept (Datta and Gupta, 2015), especially when navigating conflicting values between leaders and followers (Gardner *et al.*, 2021). Interpersonally, authenticity arises in the leader-follower relationship, stressing transparency and balanced processing. Developmentally, authenticity may be shaped by critical life events (Northouse, 2022) and can help shape self-awareness and one’s moral perspective.

Authentic leadership, therefore, is better understood as a continuum rather than a binary trait (Gardner *et al.*, 2021). It correlates with enhanced performance, satisfaction and quality of life (Datta and Gupta, 2015, p. 70) and further research suggests it fosters justice, engagement and reduced deviance (Liu *et al.*, 2018, p. 230). While not a cure-all, authentic leadership offers a vital contrast to dysfunctional/toxic leadership. Yet, if authenticity is judged by observation, questions remain: how do we distinguish between dysfunctional/toxic leadership and strategic imposterism masked as humility?

A culture of falsity

Our society is increasingly inundated with a pervasive culture of falsity (Abu Arqoub *et al.*, 2020). This encompasses various forms of deceptive information, commonly referred to as fake news, including misinformation (Abu Arqoub *et al.*, 2020; Domenico *et al.*, 2021, p. 330), distorted news (Figueira and Oliveira, 2017, p. 818), and the emergence of deepfakes (Albahar and Almalki, 2019, p. 3242). These phenomena not only pose security risks for governments and present challenges for large organisations but also foster divisions within communities, teams and workplaces. Women are often at the forefront of this onslaught. Nast (2024) reports that 98% of all deepfake videos were for pornographic purposes and 99% of these targeted women. The parallels with falsity in leadership are stark, and as will be seen later, the parallels with the imposter phenomenon demographics are intriguing.

In the UK, gender disparities persist across sectors. Women hold 41% of part-time roles compared to just 10% of men (Close the Gap, 2022), face a 16.2% average gender pay gap that widens with age to 23.7% (UNISON, 2021), and are underrepresented in leadership with only 12.5% on FTSE 100 boards, 7.8% on FTSE 250 boards, 6.9% as newspaper editors, 6.7% as media CEOs, 21.9% in the House of Lords, and just 2.3% as local authority CEOs (Government Equalities Office, 2012). These inequalities worsen when age and ethnicity intersect, with 75% of women of colour reporting experiencing racism at work (Fawcett Society, 2022). Gender is, therefore, a significant demographic in the impostor phenomenon.

In male-dominated sectors like healthcare and engineering, women frequently report gender-based discrimination in training and career progression (Bernica *et al.*, 2021; Fraszczyk and Piip, 2019). While the healthcare workforce is delivered largely by women, leadership remains male-dominated (Haines and McKeown, 2023, p.360). Whilst research suggests that female leadership is more likely to prioritise teamwork and patient-oriented care (Shi *et al.*, 2021), women face higher rates of imposterism, unconscious bias and stereotype threat (Bernica *et al.*, 2021), often linked to a lack of mentorship (Rajan, 2021). Access to supportive networks and female mentors is shown to improve outcomes, including in entrepreneurial contexts (Panda, 2018).

A lack of gender parity in early leadership pipelines limits women's advancement (Haines and McKeown, 2023). This is tied to role congruity bias, whereby perceived incongruity between gender and leadership roles fuels discrimination. Women in senior roles are often undermined by male colleagues or managers, reflecting dynamics of strategic imposterism. Singh (2022) describes this as part of an unbalanced organisational ecosystem. In higher education, Johnson *et al.* (2024) highlight the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and class, calling for structural reform. This paper argues that strategic imposterism is not merely an individual political persuasion but impacts institutional culture and systemic design.

The construction of alternative narratives through the manipulation of facts serves social, persuasive, and evasive agendas (Hannigan *et al.*, 2024, p. 10), reminiscent of what scholars have termed "bullshitting," a disregard for truth's constraints, i.e. falsity and drivel (used from here on instead of bullshit). While scholarly inquiry has scrutinised organisational "Business Bullshit" (Spicer, 2017) (i.e. business drivel), this paper delves into the individual realm, exploring strategic imposters and the concept of the impostor phenomenon, with the aim of fostering authenticity within work environments, teams and leadership, especially in relation to women, cultivating transparency.

Methodology

This paper aimed to better understand authenticity by contrasting a conceptual review of the imposter phenomenon with a narrative review of strategic imposterism, dysfunctional/toxic leadership and the Dark Triad. "Guided by an understanding of basic issues rather than a research methodology, the writer of a conceptual literature review is looking for key factors, concepts or variables and the presumed relationship between them" (Frederiksen *et al.*, 2018, no page). As indicated by the conceptual review of 68 papers, sufficient systematic reviews

(we found 4) on the imposter phenomenon had already been conducted. What was missing was identifying factors and relationships between the key factors already evident in various reviews and papers. In contrast, and in comparison, “a narrative or traditional review provides an overview of research on a particular topic that critiques and summarizes a body of literature” (Frederiksen *et al.*, 2018, no page). This ensured the key concept (imposter phenomenon) was understood within a broader body of literature related to strategic imposterism and allowed an overview of conceptual links in key factors. These methods enabled a better and deeper theoretical understanding of authenticity related to the imposter phenomenon and strategic imposterism. The same would not be achieved through other reviews. For example, empirical reviews are necessarily narrow, and this can make them less “informative, for such reviews are likely to eliminate studies that introduce new ideas, use new methodologies, or use unique methodologies” (Kennedy, 2007, p. 146).

A Round 1 systematic search was conducted using Google Scholar Advanced Search for the term ‘imposter syndrome’ with a date limitation between 2014–2024. This reached data saturation resulting in 814 returns (search conducted on 26/03/2024) and then limited to 192 articles in specific journals as seen in Table 1 below.

These journals were selected due to their being part of the 12 largest academic publishers (Musa, 2024) and as the most frequently cited research journals among the Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2024). From the 192 articles reviewed, 124 were excluded, as seen in Table 2 below.

The term “Imposter Phenomenon” is also used (Long *et al.*, 2024; Manongsong and Ghosh, 2021). Imposter Phenomenon was initially coined by Clance and Imes (1978) (Cutri *et al.*, 2021), rather than Imposter Syndrome, as “syndrome” is not a recognised clinical disorder (Bravata *et al.*, 2020). As such, a Round 2 systematic search was conducted to explore the concept and thus the search term “Imposter Phenomenon” in Google Scholar’s Advanced Search with a date limitation between 2014–2024, also including results for “impostor”. Reaching data saturation resulted in 1,020 returns (search conducted on 05/12/2025). Accessible articles from the same selected journals as Round 1 were then reviewed, as seen in Table 3.

From these 322 articles reviewed, 292 were excluded as seen in Table 4 below.

Key concepts related to each across research were identified. The conceptual review summary is found in Table 5 provided within the following section.

Conceptual mapping process

A conceptual and narrative review was chosen due to the need for a conceptual synthesis in the fragmented discussion on imposterism. The aim was to understand concepts related to the strategic imposterism, dysfunctional/toxic leadership and the Dark Triad, in order, in contrast, to understand authentic leadership and the imposter phenomenon within it.

Based on a conceptual review of the articles from the search strategy in Round 1 and Round 2, a conceptual review summary of the Imposter Syndrome can be found in Table 5 below.

Table 1. Round 1 search results

Journal	Articles
Springer	43
Sage	32
Taylor and Francis	34
Wiley	33
Elsevier Science Direct	38
Emerald Insight	12
<i>TOTAL</i>	192

Table 2. Round 1 exclusion criteria results

Exclusion Criteria	Articles
Irrelevant, e.g. referring to mental disorders	25
No explicit link: may have just used the term ‘imposter syndrome’ with no explanation or was only in the reference list	49
TOTAL	124

Table 3. Round 2 search results

Journal	Articles
Springer	94
Sage	41
Taylor and Francis	37
Wiley	51
Elsevier Science Direct	86
Emerald Insight	13
TOTAL	322

Table 4. Round 2 exclusion criteria results

Exclusion Criteria	Articles
Irrelevant, e.g. cyber imposter, Capgras, imposter content	93
No explicit link: may have just used the term ‘imposter phenomenon’ with no explanation or was only in the reference list	155
Duplications of Round 1	44
TOTAL	292
<i>Review TOTAL (322–292)</i>	30

For a narrative review, a broader Google Scholar Advanced Search was executed for the terms “strategic AND imposterism” (NOT syndrome OR phenomenon), “impression AND management”, “self-presentation”, “bullshit”, “dark AND triad” and “Machiavellianism”, selecting articles relevant to business management published between 2014–2024. To maintain consistency in search strategies, the same journals were selected as in the conceptual review. “A narrative or traditional review provides an overview of research on a particular topic that critiques and summarizes a body of literature” (Frederiksen *et al.*, 2018) and as such, data was not saturated. The narrative review summary is found in Table 6 visual positioning of strategic imposterism with established leadership models in Figure 1.

Figure 1 indicates some overlap between strategic imposterism and toxic/dysfunctional leadership but indicates a clear distinction with the Dark Triad. In some ways, it will be argued, strategic imposterism is less obvious than toxic leadership and the Dark Triad, hence the necessity to analyse it more carefully. This analysis not only refines our understanding of what constitutes an authentic leader but also highlights the manipulative tactics that can masquerade as humility or self-doubt in professional settings. The contrast of key descriptors seen in Table 5 (the imposter phenomenon) and Table 6 (strategic imposterism, toxic leadership and the Dark Triad) helps leaders and followers to identify and distinguish between genuine imposter phenomenon and strategic imposters. The following section begins by examining the literature on strategic imposterism, followed by an exploration of the imposter phenomenon, before presenting a comparative analysis that underscores their fundamental distinctions and

Table 5. Conceptual review summary

Key descriptions of imposter syndrome	Key concepts	Citations
	Anxiety, depression, burnout	Couser <i>et al.</i> (2023), Dutta <i>et al.</i> (2022), Fawzy <i>et al.</i> (2023), Jolly and Asokan (2024), Kim <i>et al.</i> (2023), Lingard and Colquhoun (2022), Ménard and Chittle (2023), Parikh and Leschied (2022), Setchell <i>et al.</i> (2023), Singh (2022), Smith and McLellan (2023), Winderbaum and Coventry (2024)
	Lack of belonging, contested identity, marginality	Campbell <i>et al.</i> (2020), Deutsch <i>et al.</i> (2022), Evans and Kevern (2015), Fu <i>et al.</i> (2023), Hartman (2023), Itchuaqiyag and Walton (2021), Jach and Rinaldi (2024), Lightner-Laws <i>et al.</i> (2023), Pennock and Wade (2015), Piano <i>et al.</i> (2023), Wells (2020)
	Lack of confidence, self-sabotage, self-handicapping	Cherrstrom and Bixby (2018), Curlewis <i>et al.</i> (2021), Diggs-Andrews <i>et al.</i> (2021), Fasge (2021), Gottlieb <i>et al.</i> (2022), Grohnert <i>et al.</i> (2024), Meyerhoff (2019), Oldham (2020), Sharma <i>et al.</i> (2021)
	Feeling like a fraud, inadequate, phony	Ashford <i>et al.</i> (2018), Chess and Shaw (2015), Grass and Latal (2022), Morris and Shelton (2020), Plaskett <i>et al.</i> (2018), Song and McCreary (2020), Witcher and Mullen (2021)
	Low self-esteem, self-doubt, low levels of belief in competency	Bronson and Long (2023), Carrington <i>et al.</i> (2024), Deiorio <i>et al.</i> (2022), Haines and McKeown (2023), Hughes and Bowers-Brown (2021), Margolis <i>et al.</i> (2021)
	Perfectionism, high achievers, procrastination Luck not merit	Andersson <i>et al.</i> (2021), Collins (2018), Cordova <i>et al.</i> (2020), Pinxten <i>et al.</i> (2023), Wong (2020) Balakrishnan <i>et al.</i> (2023), Dickerson (2022), Gottlieb <i>et al.</i> (2020), Kamalumpundi <i>et al.</i> (2024)
Key study cohorts	Short-term, temporary Education (students and academics)	Barrow (2019), Dancy II and Jean-Marie (2014) Ashmore (2021), Callander <i>et al.</i> (2024), Chakraborty <i>et al.</i> (2021), Cutri <i>et al.</i> (2021), Gajparia (2017), McGivern (2023), Morrow-Howell <i>et al.</i> (2022), Pownall <i>et al.</i> (2022), Prestridge <i>et al.</i> (2023), Withorn <i>et al.</i> (2020)
	Women	Ahmadi <i>et al.</i> (2025), Al-Gergawi <i>et al.</i> (2024), Apostolou <i>et al.</i> (2021), Bernica <i>et al.</i> (2021), Blackburn (2023), Chilmeran and Hedström (2021), Fraszczyk and Piip (2019), Gullifor <i>et al.</i> (2024), Hemans <i>et al.</i> (2020), Inguaggiato <i>et al.</i> (2024), Irving (2014), Juarez-Campos <i>et al.</i> (2024), Lomáscolo <i>et al.</i> (2024), Manongsong and Ghosh (2021), Masiran <i>et al.</i> (2023), Monteiro <i>et al.</i> (2023), Rinn and Bishop (2015), Shi <i>et al.</i> (2021), Smith and Sinkford (2022), Weyant <i>et al.</i> (2021)
	Healthcare	Childers and Arnold (2019), Couser <i>et al.</i> (2023), Freeman and Peisah (2022), Gonzales <i>et al.</i> (2024), Grant <i>et al.</i> (2022), Hamilton-Shield <i>et al.</i> (2018), Hariharan and Griffin (2019), Heaton-Shrestha <i>et al.</i> (2023), Järvinen <i>et al.</i> (2018), Kuhn and Flanagan (2017), Martin (2019), McClunnie-Trust <i>et al.</i> (2024), Nguyen <i>et al.</i> (2024), Oshodi and Sookhoo (2024), Passarelli <i>et al.</i> (2024), Tyndall <i>et al.</i> (2021)

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

Key descriptions of imposter syndrome	Key concepts	Citations
	Minorities, race	Abel and Gonzales (2020), Blount-Hill <i>et al.</i> (2022), Collins-Anderson <i>et al.</i> (2022), Corsini <i>et al.</i> (2020), Fletcher <i>et al.</i> (2023), Johnson <i>et al.</i> (2024), Knox and Seide (2023), Mansfield <i>et al.</i> (2022), Nkansah and Amankwah (2021), Peng (2024), Stewart (2016), Torres Acosta <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Key solutions	Self-awareness Networks Mentors, sponsors Humility Role models Growth mindset	Langawi <i>et al.</i> (2020), Sharma <i>et al.</i> (2021) Sharma <i>et al.</i> (2021) Bellini <i>et al.</i> (2019), Kamalumpundi <i>et al.</i> (2024), Manongsong and Ghosh (2021) Michalec <i>et al.</i> (2023) Noronha <i>et al.</i> (2022), Panda (2018) Wolcott <i>et al.</i> (2020)

implications for leadership and organisational culture. Thus, through this multi-faceted methodology, we delineate the stark contrast between strategic impostorism and the true imposter phenomenon, providing both a theoretical extension of authentic leadership studies and practical insights for organisations navigating the complexities of leadership authenticity.

Findings

A conceptual review: imposter phenomenon/syndrome

Catanzano *et al.* (2023, p. 131) defined the imposter phenomenon as “a strong belief of personal inadequacy in spite of success” (Butler, 2014; Chassangre and Callahan, 2017), a discrepancy between confidence and achievement (Stankov *et al.*, 2015). The Imposter Syndrome, or Imposter Phenomenon (Bravata *et al.*, 2020), due to societal norms, predominantly affects women and those from minority ethnic groups, potentially due to feelings of marginality, a lack of belonging and contested identity (Heslop *et al.*, 2023; Hsiao *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Morfitt, 2020). The Clance Impostor Scale is used to identify the imposter phenomenon and has been validated for its reliability (Chrisman *et al.*, 1995).

The imposter phenomenon, then, is multifaceted, with distinct psychological and behavioural dimensions as seen in Table 5. Koch (2023) argued that the Impostor Phenomenon has intrapersonal costs such as burnout (Hanna and Koo, 2024; Hsu *et al.*, 2024) but interpersonal benefits. The review summary identified through several studies that affected groups are those who are perfectionists and high-achievers (Andersson *et al.*, 2021; Flett *et al.*, 2022), those in healthcare and academia due to feelings of intellectual phoniness (McClunie-Trust *et al.*, 2024; Nguyen *et al.*, 2024), women (Al-Gergawi *et al.*, 2024; Gullifor *et al.*, 2024) and those from minority ethnic groups (Knox and Seide, 2023; Peng, 2024) some citing younger people within these categories as well (Price *et al.*, 2024). A combination of these affected groups leads to higher Imposter Phenomenon among minor ethnic high achieving women.

Key characteristics of Imposter Phenomenon include feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and self-doubt (Manongsong and Ghosh, 2021), and the inability to internalise successes (Bernard and Neblett, 2018). These feelings lead to fear, anxiety and depression, and are attributed to burnout and poor mental health (Catanzano *et al.*, 2023; Manongsong and Ghosh, 2021). If unchecked, this feeling of being a fraud can lead to self-sabotage and self-handicapping behaviour (Dancy II and Jean-Marie, 2014; Manongsong and Ghosh, 2021), not to mention being manipulated by imposters. Typical responses include procrastination and overpreparation (Catanzano *et al.*, 2023). Any achievement is seen as luck

Table 6. Narrative review summary

Key descriptions of strategic imposter	Key concepts	Citations
Bullshit	Social, persuasive and evasive agenda	Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017), Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017), Vartanian (2015)
	No concern for truth	Ferreira <i>et al.</i> (2022), McCarthy <i>et al.</i> (2020)
	Pseudo-profound type	Ferreira <i>et al.</i> (2022), McCarthy <i>et al.</i> (2020)
	Evasive type	Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Social type	Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Truth scale	Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Bosses scale	Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Language scale	Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Tactics	Bolino and Klotz (2015), Gottschalk (2024), Kimura (2014), Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017), Roulin <i>et al.</i> (2014)
	Impression management/self-presentation	Not anxious, no stress
Positive emotions		Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Not high standards		Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
No procrastination		Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022), Leonhardt <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Perspective taking		Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Hubris		Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Humblebragging		Michalec <i>et al.</i> (2023), Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Hypocrisy		Bolino and Klotz (2015), Leary <i>et al.</i> (2000), Lee <i>et al.</i> (2022), Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Backhanded compliments		Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Dark Triad: Narcissism		Self-centred
	Self-aggrandizing	Brownell <i>et al.</i> (2021), Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Arrogant	Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
Dark Triad: Machiavellianism	Antagonising	Muris <i>et al.</i> (2017), Steinmetz <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Sneaky, cunning, lacking in morales	Liyanagamage and Fernando (2023), Turi <i>et al.</i> (2022), Zheng and MacCann (2023)
	Power and control	Brownell <i>et al.</i> (2021), Liyanagamage and Fernando (2023)
Dark Triad: Psychopathy	Manipulation and exploitative	Dinić and Jevremov (2019), Liyanagamage and Fernando (2023), Muris <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Psychopath and narcissism	Jones and Mueller (2022)
	Deceptive	Jones and Mueller (2022), Turi <i>et al.</i> (2022)
	Reckless	Dinić and Jevremov (2019), Jones and Mueller (2022)
	Callous	Jones and Mueller (2022), Muris <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	Antisocial	Jones and Mueller (2022), Zheng and MacCann (2023)

rather than merit (Catanzano *et al.*, 2023; Manongsong and Ghosh, 2021). Catanzano *et al.* (2023, p. 131), therefore, define Imposter Phenomenon as “a strong belief of personal inadequacy in spite of success”, a “chronic” (Michalec *et al.*, 2023, p. 905), “psychological pattern rooted in intense, concealed feelings of fraudulence . . .” (Walker and Saklofske, 2023, p. 2162). Stewart (2016) contends that fear, low confidence and the imposter phenomenon hinder women and especially women of ethnicity to proactively pursue senior roles. As has already been discussed, more women in senior roles is needed to address the tide of women suffering from the imposter phenomenon and gender-based discrimination.

Although many solutions and strategies abound, solutions include increasing self-awareness, engaging in professional networks, having role models, mentors and sponsors, and cultivating a growth mindset and humility, facilitated by shared leadership and humble

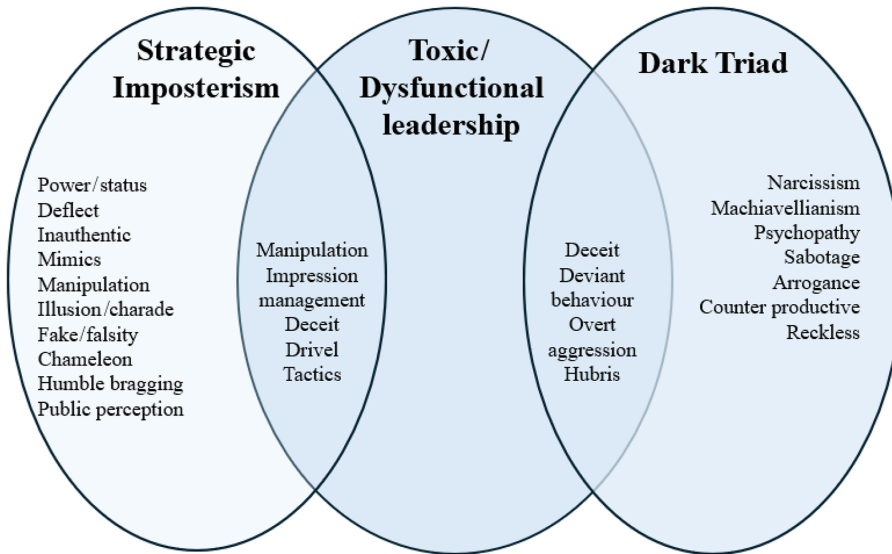


Figure 1. Strategic imposterism and other leadership models. Authors' generated, 2025

leadership (Son and Yang, 2023) i.e. authentic leadership. Within such leadership and teams, Dancy II and Jean-Marie (2014) suggest that imposter phenomenon could decrease (Barrow, 2019), suggesting that it can therefore be temporary.

A final conceptual map has been created for the concept “Imposter Syndrome/Phenomenon” as seen in Figure 2 below.

It is unclear whether all of the descriptors are required to be identified as someone with the imposter phenomenon. For example, could someone suffer from the imposter phenomenon if they are successful yet feel fraudulent, but are not high achievers? Furthermore, it is also not clear whether the high frequency of the imposter phenomenon among minority ethnic women is due to systemic culture and therefore, if the latter is changed or addressed, whether these demographics would shift and change.

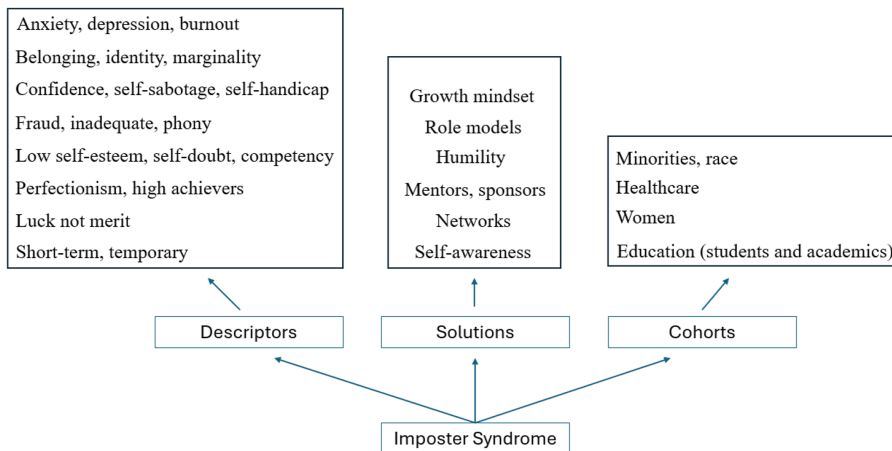


Figure 2. Imposter syndrome/phenomenon conceptual map. Authors' generated, 2025

A narrative review: strategic imposters

Strategic imposterism is defined as a charade of success, to hide actual failure, “not necessarily burdened by authentic self-doubt . . . to appear more modest and to keep others’ expectations concerning one’s abilities as low as possible . . . and to turn out successful despite their assumed incompetence” (Michalec *et al.*, 2023, p. 908). Additionally, Anderson-Zorn (2022, p. 61) define the Strategic Imposter, in contrast to the imposter phenomenon, as not having “high anxiety, negative emotions, or . . . prone to perfectionism . . . not being under stress”. Silverman (2024, p. 3) suggests strategic imposters include chameleon imposters, con artist imposters, lucky duck imposters, procrastinating imposters and workaholics.

Strategic imposterism is best understood as a deliberate leadership strategy designed to manipulate perceptions and control narratives within professional settings. In contrast to the imposter phenomenon, which is marked by self-doubt and psychological distress, strategic imposterism functions as a purposeful tactic of deception. The Strategic Imposter Conceptual Summary displayed in Table 6, deconstructs its core components, details the key descriptors, highlighting how strategic imposterism differs from genuine self-doubt, and explores its connections to workplace dysfunction, impression management, and leadership deception.

Strategic imposterism is the anthesis of authenticity and truth. One is “true” and the other is “strategic” (Lee *et al.*, 2022) or “drivel” (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). As noted in Table 1, **drivel** is a key concept when considering Strategic imposterism, with **drivel** being both a verb (the act of communicating with no regard for the truth) and a noun (the information contained in that which is communicated with no regard for the truth) (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). Drivel has several similarities with strategic imposterism: not knowing what you are actually talking about, a lack of accountability, deceit and the abuse of power, status or position, misrepresenting “by being appealing or convincing, or by distracting, exhausting, or disengaging colleagues, so that agendas can be pursued with little or no resistance” (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020, p. 257).

Strategic imposterism behaviors, which demonstrate the drivel agenda are “interpersonal strategies designed to convey a particular social identity to other people rather than truly held self-perceptions. . . claiming to feel like an “impostor” transfers some of the responsibility for potential failure away from oneself and onto others’ expectations” (Leary *et al.*, 2000, p. 733). This is done for deference, power, compliance and support (Lee *et al.*, 2022), unaffected by psychological impairments (Leonhardt *et al.*, 2017). “Conversely, humble bragging often conveys achievement and accomplishments (thinly) shrouded in a veil of humility – the focus is on ability” (Michalec *et al.*, 2023, p. 909) and backhanded compliments aim to “communicate superior status and garner liking” (Steinmetz *et al.*, 2017, p. 14). These are clear examples of drivel as a verb and noun and link to self-presentation and impression management, and the language used is often excessive acronyms, trendy jargon, flaky logic and shallow arguments (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022).

When these behaviours are apparent among leaders, not only do they create challenges for others under their leadership, but they also creates dysfunctional cultures. A review of the concepts suggests the following are counter measures: Confront “drivel” “facts”, create and encourage a culture of critical thinking, clarify evidence vs opinion (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020), prohibit jargon (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022), eliminate pointless meetings (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020) and instead increase collaboration (Callanan, 2004). These solutions, however, can create awkward and uncomfortable work environments.

In addition to its connection with *drivel*, our review identified a relationship between strategic imposterism, self-presentation, and impression management (Michalec *et al.*, 2023), aspects found in toxic/dysfunctional leadership (cf. Figure 1). As Michalec *et al.* (2023, p. 909) explain, “both represent tactical efforts to dupe peers and colleagues into embracing (and supporting) an inauthentic and inaccurate version of ourselves.” Impression management, according to Steinmetz *et al.* (2017, p. 6), “occurs when people attempt to conceal their self-presentation intent.” This does not always have a malicious intent such as trying to blend-in or to strategically stand-out (Sun *et al.*, 2021) or develop political skill through behaviour

modification and monitoring to achieve a certain public image (Kimura, 2014) or reveal or conceal stigma in identity management (Jones and King, 2013) or what is common among job applicants (Potočnik et al., 2021).

In contrast, malicious self-presentation can involve specific tactics, such as *ingratiation*, “soft persuasion in which one overcompliments others to elicit favours by appearing agreeable” or *intimidation* which is “strong persuasion in which one frightens others in an effort to elicit compliance by appearing powerful” (Steinmetz et al., 2017, p. 2). Appearing to be modest can lead to higher hierarchical positions (Kimura, 2014). In addition, “self-aggrandizing displays” can be exhibited by leaders can be displayed to maintain the charade and lack of authenticity (Steinmetz et al., 2017, p. 5; Rose et al., 2015).

Leary et al. (2000) differentiate true imposterism from self-presentation by highlighting that the former occurs both privately and publicly, while strategic imposterism focuses on public perception, aiming to “to profit from an advantage of attribution” (Leonhardt et al., 2017, p. 8). Impression management, in this context, is therefore defined as the attempt “to create particular impressions in others’ minds”, often lacking authenticity (Roulin et al., 2014, p. 142; Vartanian, 2015), but not always with a malicious intent. If used strategically, for malicious intent, it represents intentionally deceptive behaviour, and when done to cause harm, can be associated with counterproductive work behaviour similar to characteristics within the Dark Triad (Bolino and Klotz, 2015).

The Dark Triad; Narcissism, Machivellianism and Psychopathy, describes socially aversive personality traits involving manipulation and exploitation for personal gain (Paulhus and Williams, 2002; Turi et al., 2022; Zheng and MacCann, 2023). These traits manifest in deceptive behaviors’ such as self-promotion, credit-stealing, manipulation and bullying, with damaging effects on individuals and organisational culture. When present in both leaders and followers, these traits create especially toxic environments.

“Narcissism is characterized by a self-centred, self-aggrandizing, dominant, and scheming interpersonal orientation. . . arrogance and antagonism come to the fore” (Steinmetz et al., 2017, p. 4), egocentricity and excessive self-love (Turi et al., 2022). *Machiavellianism*, coined in 1970 by Christie and Geis (before the 1978 term Imposter Syndrome), describes “an individual difference variable associated with duplicity, cynicism, and amorality” (Jones and Mueller, 2022, p. 535). *Machiavellianism* behaviour includes exploitation and counterproductive tactics, i.e. sabotage, creating stress and mistrust (Jones and Mueller, 2022), and high levels of organisational cynicism and emotional exhaustion (Liyagamage and Fernando, 2023). Liyagamage and Fernando (2023) suggest it is more prominent in younger managers. “Machiavellian approaches are counterproductive, and are a greater threat to one’s irrelevance” (Callanan, 2004), leading to dishonesty, bullying, burnout and low trust (Liyagamage and Fernando, 2023). “Psychopathic individuals are deceptive, reckless, and callous . . . lack . . . impulse control” with “. . . antisocial behaviour” (Jones and Mueller, 2022, p. 538). Interestingly, Zheng and MacCann (2023) found that of the Dark Triad, only higher levels of narcissism were significantly associated with higher happiness. In their research, Muris et al. (2017) found no evidence to support the idea that the Dark Triad traits are linked to more positive outcomes. Therefore, more commonly, when these behaviours are apparent among leaders, not only does this create challenges for others under their leadership, but it also creates dysfunctional cultures. It can manifest as a potential implicit workplace discrimination towards women. They are the worst of toxic behaviours and create systemic issues.

Case vignette: Norwegian police (Gottschalk, 2024)

The Norwegian central police unit for fighting economic and environmental crime faced a scandal due to a tax fraud acquittal in a Norwegian court appeal in 2014. Impression management was applied through press releases to return to a state of regained social license. However, this was construed as manipulative and deceptive by the public. Press releases by the police received reactions by the media and public and this motivated the police to monitor and

to respond to reduce discrepancies in their image. However, the case identified that impression management in this case was fraudulent, covering up incompetence and using deterrence strategies. Failures were not due to the imposter phenomenon, and press responses did not reveal toxic leadership or Dark Triad traits. In this case, there was a clear lack of authentic leadership and strategic imposterism – strategic deceit.

Using “studies by Leary *et al.* (2000), Leonhardt *et al.* (2017), and Lee *et al.* (2022)” (cited in Michalec *et al.*, 2023, p. 905), and others, Table 1 represents the conceptual framework summary which created the conceptual map displayed in Figure 3 below, which has been developed for the “form of imposterism that is strategically used by individuals to minimise the implications of poor performance” (Michalec *et al.*, 2023, p. 905).

Strategic imposterism and related concepts add no value to the organisation or the person concerned, i.e. short-term gain for long-term dysfunctionality. Silverman (2024) distinguishes strategic imposters from the imposter phenomenon by stating that the former does not experience anxiety or negative emotional states compared to the latter. The former as we have discussed is motivated by other intentions. However, a deeper understanding of the latter, in comparison, is required to which we now turn.

Comparative analysis

By placing the two conceptual maps together (Figures 2 and 3) as contrasts, a clear distinction between “true” and “strategic” “drivel” verb and noun imposterism can be seen, allowing an easier identification of authenticity. This can be seen in Figure 4 below with a summary of the differences seen after.

Callanan (2004) argues that management literature focuses on tactics to increase power and hoard it for leadership status (Bolino and Klotz, 2015). However, this paper argues that it is detrimental to workplace motivation and retention, and hampers the recovery of the imposter phenomenon especially among women. It does not appear that the Imposter Phenomenon impacts the organisation as negatively, i.e. it is more an unrecognised potential (personal), in contrast to Strategic imposterism, which is counterproductive (public). The former is personally deceptive and destructive and void of public “drivel”. The latter is publicly deceptive, arrogant and destructive, awash with “drivel” and among leaders has a detrimental impact on the workplace, and those who suffer from the imposter phenomenon, especially women.

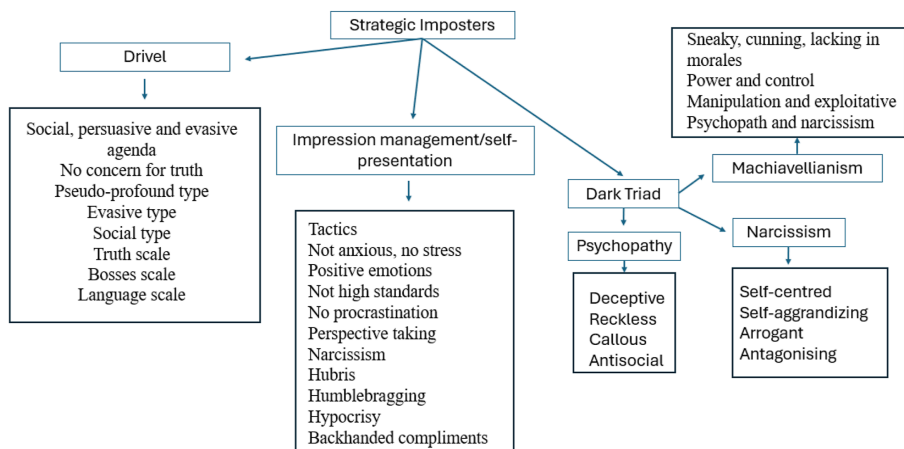


Figure 3. Strategic imposter conceptual map. Authors' generated, 2025

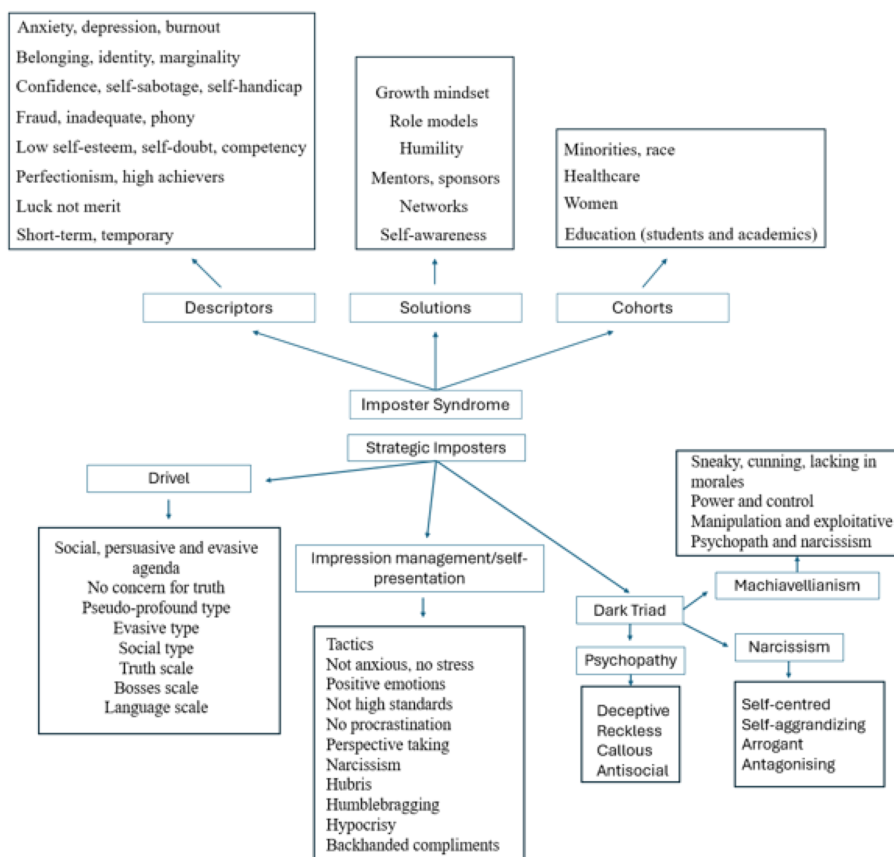


Figure 4. Authentic conceptual map. Authors' generated, 2025

Discussion

From two different reviews, this paper endeavoured to introduce conceptual framework's addressing both the imposter phenomenon and strategic imposters, arguing the latter could be detrimental to individuals (especially women suffering from the imposter phenomenon) and create dysfunctional workplaces. It is clear that citing the imposter phenomenon as strategic impostorism is not viable, as it does not deliver the same intentions or have the same descriptors.

The contribution is therefore three-fold. First, the conceptual review establishes a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors, identifying key antecedents (or descriptors), contributing to the imposter phenomenon and strategic imposter among organisational team members and leaders. Second, it broadens the discourse on the imposter phenomenon by emphasising that organisations not only harbour individuals who perceive themselves as imposters but also accommodate strategic imposters. This distinction sheds light on a novel conceptual understanding of organisational dynamics. Third, this paper holds practical relevance for organisations by delineating distinct descriptors and behaviours associated with both the imposter phenomenon and strategic imposters. By elucidating these, it provides valuable insights for managing and supporting these distinct employee profiles within the workplace and teams.

Our first contribution lies in conducting a comprehensive conceptual review of the concepts, thereby enriching the understanding of the factors influencing the imposter phenomenon within modern organisational contexts. By pinpointing key descriptors and identifying demographic cohorts predisposed to experiencing the imposter phenomenon, our research empowers individuals to recognise and acknowledge their own encounters with this phenomenon, reassuring them that they are not alone in grappling with it. Given the detrimental effects associated with the imposter phenomenon, such as feelings of fraudulence, diminished confidence, and heightened anxiety and burnout, it becomes imperative for individuals, managers, and organisations alike to proactively delve into understanding and implementing HR practices and policies, and team dynamics, aimed at mitigating these challenges. It is unclear whether those who suffer from the imposter phenomenon are the common victims of strategic imposters, although cases seem to lean in this direction.

Secondly, based on calls for insights into strategic imposterism (Leonhardt *et al.* (2017) we broaden the discourse on the imposter phenomenon. Our exploration underscores the symbiotic relationship between individual experiences of the imposter phenomenon and organisational and team dynamics. We argue that where individuals grapple with feelings of imposterism, organisations are likely to harbour individuals who actively engage in deceptive practices to advance their positions. Thus, our conceptual framework on strategic imposterism illuminates critical aspects of individuals who manipulate their professional circumstances, often resorting to Machiavellian strategies and impression management techniques. While this phenomenon may present challenges for organisations and teams, our framework proposes actionable strategies to address and mitigate its effects. These include fostering a culture of transparency (humbleness and authenticity), promoting collaborative environments, and discouraging the excessive use of technical jargon. By prioritising these interventions, organisations and teams can cultivate an environment conducive to authenticity and ethical conduct. By illustrating the tangible effects of these two phenomena, this research advances theoretical understanding of authentic leadership by clarifying what it is not. Leadership is inherently fraught with contradictions and ambiguities, yet our findings emphasise that true authenticity stems from a genuine alignment between personal values and professional responsibilities. This means upholding moral integrity in decision-making, actively seeking diverse perspectives rather than shaping environments to suit personal agendas, and engaging in open, transparent communication rather than crafting misleading narratives. Authentic leadership is about demonstrating self-awareness, sharing personal experiences honestly, and welcoming constructive feedback, not fabricating an image or cultivating an ecosystem of deception. In contrast, strategic imposterism, much like the impression management operates through manipulation, calculated self-presentation, and the deliberate construction of a misleading leadership persona. By exposing these contrasts, we sharpen our understanding of authentic leadership as a practice rooted in ethical consistency, accountability, and relational transparency. Practically, the presence of falsity and especially toxic leadership, noticed by HR professionals and team managers, indicate issues in work culture and systemic design. Regarding the perpetrator, drivel must be confronted and jargon prohibited. Appropriate training could develop deeper critical thinking and collaboration by all. For victims of deceit and falsity, including the imposter phenomenon, appropriate training could develop deeper self-awareness, growth-mindset dispositions, support by mentors and sponsors, networks and role models.

Thirdly, it is evident that we are in a society filled with fakery and the influence on and within organisations is still poorly understood, with Ferreira *et al.* (2022) suggesting that research into “drivel” is in its infancy. Our contribution, therefore, is the practical relevancy for organisations and teams, through our authentic conceptual map, which can aid the management of employee profiles within the workplace and teams. Using the collated solutions, an authentic culture can be cultivated in leaders, teams and workplaces by increasing self-awareness, engaging in professional networks, having positive role models, mentors and sponsors, cultivating a growth-mindset and humility, confronting “drivel facts”, creating and encouraging a culture of critical thinking, clarifying evidence vs opinion, prohibiting jargon,

eliminating pointless meetings and instead increasing collaboration and focusing on authenticity in the workplace and in leadership is possible and adds better value than strategic imposterism.

The limitations of this research include the authors selection of journals from which the conceptual and narrative review were drawn. This may limit further key factors and thus relationships evidenced in other publications. Furthermore, using only published literature means that we have undoubtedly missed many diverse and interesting examples of practice that have not been formally documented. As such, again, there may be further key factors and relationships among these factors excluded from our conceptual maps. Future research could saturate all databases for a systematic review and include practice-based research. Future work could further develop the contribution that authentic leadership as a style and concept can make to supporting the imposter phenomenon but also how it can confront and neutralise strategic imposterism.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online

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Further reading

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