

## Big 5 Personality Traits, Imposter Phenomenon and Hypercompetitive Attitude Among High Performing Emerging Adults

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### Abstract

Emerging adults refers to a developmental phase in the human life cycle following adolescence and preceding adulthood. "Personality is generally defined as an individual's unique and relatively stable patterns of behavior, thoughts, and emotions". Hypercompetitive attitude reflects the need to compete and win at all costs as a means of maintaining or enhancing one's self-worth. Impostor syndrome refers to the state that affects high achievers who are unable to internalize and accept their achievements. This study seeks to analyse the significant relationship between Big 5 Personality Traits, Hypercompetitive Attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon among high-achieving emerging adults. Samples were collected using a purposive sampling technique. Research instruments used in the study were the Big Five Inventory - 10, Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale and Imposter Phenomenon Scale. The data was analyzed using SPSS. The statistical technique used was Spearman's Rank Correlation. The finding showed that there was a significant negative relationship between extraversion and imposter phenomenon, a negative relationship between agreeableness and hypercompetitive attitude, a positive relationship between neuroticism and imposter phenomenon and a positive relationship between hypercompetitive attitude and imposter phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Big 5 Personality; High Achieving Emerging Adults; Hypercompetitive Attitude; Imposter Phenomenon

### 1. Introduction

Life's demands for success can often create tension between external achievements and internal struggles. For emerging adults, this tension is not just about academic performance but also the psychological pressures they face. Emerging adulthood is a stage in life between adolescence and full adulthood (usually ages 18-25), it is a time of exploration, self-discovery, and major life transitions (Arnett, 2000). This study concentrates on high achievers. A high achiever is someone who is successful in their studies or their work, usually as a result of their efforts. (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). In this study, students who obtained either an A, A+ or S in their most recent semester were considered high achievers. The research seeks to understand if there exists a relationship between the Big 5 Personality Traits, Hypercompetitive Attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon among high achievers. Personality

shapes how individuals think, feel, and behave in different situations (Thomas, n.d.). Every adult personality is a combination of temperaments and personal history of family, culture, and the time during which they grew up (Kagan, 2010). It is what makes each person different from every other person in the world. Personality develops as a result of both genetic predispositions and the environments in which individuals grow up, including family dynamics, cultural values, and social interactions. While core traits, such as those outlined in the Big Five Model, provide a baseline for how people typically think and behave, experiences can influence specific aspects of personality over time. For instance, a challenging life event might increase resilience in one person or lead to heightened anxiety in another, depending on their personality traits and coping mechanisms. Although certain traits tend to



remain stable, personality is not entirely fixed. Research shows that with conscious effort and new experiences, individuals can develop or modify aspects of their personality. Furthermore, personality plays a crucial role in how individuals form relationships, make decisions, and adapt to change, influencing not only their personal growth but also their interactions with the broader world. While personality defines how individuals perceive themselves and navigate the world, it can also contribute to struggles like the imposter phenomenon. This is a persistent sense of self-doubt and the belief that their achievements are unearned, even when supported by clear evidence of their abilities (Clance & Imes, 1978; APA Dictionary, n.d.). When faced with a project and the obligation to perform, imposters often experience the “Imposter Cycle” (Clance & Imes, 1978). This begins with worry, self-doubt, and intense fears of being discovered, leading to either procrastination or over-preparation. Despite achieving success, imposters attribute their accomplishments to external factors, which reinforces the belief that their success is not authentic. Research has shown that these feelings of inadequacy are shared similarly by both males and females (Harvey, 1981; Lawler, 1984; Cromwell, 1990). However, their interpersonal styles differ; female imposters tend to be self-protective, cautious, and socially withdrawn, while male imposters are more socially interactive and less inclined to withdraw (Beard, 1990). Low self-acceptance, as originally identified by Clance and Imes (1978), has been consistently linked to imposter feelings, with studies showing negative correlations between self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and self-concept with the phenomenon (Harvey, 1981; Topping & Kimmel, 1985; Kertay, 1991; Eschbach, 1990). Eschbach highlighted self-concept as a stronger predictor of imposter feelings than factors like achievement tendency, effort, or ability. Imposters also have a strong emotional need for validation and social support but often distance themselves from others due to fear of forming connections, a behavior echoed in studies with high-achieving students (Prince, 1989; Cromwell, 1990). Alongside this, hypercompetitive attitude is also seen. Hypercompetitive attitude is

defined as the intense and often unhealthy drive to win at any cost, which can add further pressure. This attitude is linked to aggressive behaviors and can negatively impact relationships and emotional well-being (Horney, 1937; Ryckman et al., 1990; Hibbard & Buhrmester, 2010). All living organisms compete with others of their species to achieve their goals. Competition, defined as the effort to secure something that others also strive for (Mead, 2002), is a fundamental aspect of life. A competitive personality, known as trait competitiveness, can be crucial for success in certain areas. Studies indicate that competitiveness is positively linked to career interests (Houston, Harris, et al., 2015), job performance (Lam, 2012), and motivation for achievement (Smither & Houston, 1992). However, it also has drawbacks. Highly competitive individuals may struggle with failure (Lam, 2012), experience higher levels of depression, and face difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships (Hibbard & Buhrmester, 2010). Wang et al. (2018) emphasize that competition is vital for survival, not only for individuals but also for institutions and societies. It is considered a natural human trait and plays a role in evolution through interactions with the environment and within species. Due to its importance, competition has become a topic of interest across disciplines like psychology, management, economics, and politics. Despite its universality, human competitiveness is complex, varying greatly among individuals. Some may strongly exhibit competitive behavior due to high trait competitiveness, while others with lower levels of this trait may not feel the same drive. Hypercompetitive attitude, defined as an unhealthy obsession with winning at any cost, is linked to aggressive behaviors and negative impacts on relationships and emotional health (Horney, 1937; Ryckman et al., 1990; Hibbard & Buhrmester, 2010). This form of competitiveness arises from a neurotic need for self-worth and power, where success bolsters self-esteem and a sense of superiority over others (Horney, 1937). From an evolutionary perspective, resource scarcity may have contributed to the development of competitive behaviors. However, hypercompetitive individuals often face

difficulties in personal relationships, exhibiting traits like jealousy, possessiveness, mistrust, and low emotional support. Research suggests that hypercompetitive attitude correlates with loneliness, depressive symptoms, and interpersonal challenges (Thornton, Ryckman, & Gold, 2011). These individuals may overestimate their abilities, set unrealistic goals, and become distressed when they fail to achieve them. Childhood experiences, such as excessive parental control or a lack of recognition and acceptance, may also play a role. Overprotective or neglectful parenting could lead to aggression, hostility, and a tendency to seek external validation, resulting in psychological distress and anxiety. While competition is an inherent part of human nature that drives individuals toward their goals, excessive competitiveness can harm both the individual and those around them. This research aims to examine the relationship between personality traits, hyper competitive attitude and imposter phenomenon among high-performing emerging adults. Understanding these interrelationships provides critical insights into how high-performing emerging adults navigate psychological challenges, paving the way for fostering healthier mindsets, environments, and societal structures. This research is particularly relevant for educational institutions, workplaces, and policymakers aiming to support emerging adult populations [1-3].

### **1.1. Review of Literature**

Ross, S. R., Stewart, J., Mugge, M., and Fultz, B. (2000) investigated the Imposter Phenomenon (IP) in relation to achievement traits and the Five-Factor Model (FFM). The study sampled 129 college students, mostly female (71.3%), with an average age of 19.3 years ( $SD = 2.07$ ). Measures included the Harvey (1998) Imposter Phenomenon Scale, Debilitating Anxiety Scale (Alpert & Haber, 1968), Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale (Ryckman et al., 1990), Personality Development Competition Scale (Ryckman et al., 1996), Cooperative Strategy Subscale (Simmons et al., 1998), Self-Handicapping Scale (Rhodewalt, 1990), and the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992). The findings showed that the HIP scale was positively linked to fear of failure, self-handicapping,

and hypercompetitive attitude, but negatively linked to cooperation and personal development competition. Regarding personality, it was positively correlated with Neuroticism and negatively with Extraversion and Conscientiousness, connecting IP with both achievement traits and the FFM. Another study conducted by Kaur, T and Jain, N. (2022) investigated the correlation between the Imposter phenomenon and personality traits among undergraduate students. The research involved a sample of 40 students from the University of Punjab, all aged between 18 and 21 years. The researchers employed the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale and the Big Five Inventory for data collection. Utilizing a convenience sampling method, the results were analysed using the Pearson correlation coefficient. The findings indicated that there was no significant relationship between the Imposter phenomenon and the traits of Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness; however, a significant positive correlation was found between Neuroticism and the Imposter phenomenon. Kuruvilla, S. M., Gowri, A.S., Shibu, F., Rajan, E.M., Mathews, K.D. (2022) investigated the difference in the Imposter Phenomenon (IP) and Hypercompetitive Attitude among emerging adults using self-report measures. The tools used included the Harvey Imposter Phenomenon Scale, and the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale. Results showed a significant difference in IP at the 0.05 level and in hypercompetitive attitude at the 0.01 level. It was found that reduced self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, limited resources, and a lack of timely support contributed to higher levels of IP, creating barriers to personal success. A study conducted by Ryckman, R. M., Thornton, B., & Butler, J. C. (1994). investigated the relationship between personality traits and hypercompetitive attitude. The study included 160 participants (58 men and 102 women) with a mean age of 17.40 years ( $SD = 8.55$ ). The researchers utilized the Hypercompetitive Attitude (HcA) Scale, CPI-Narcissism (CPI-NAR) Scale, Self-Esteem Scale (SS Scale), E Scale, MACH Scale, Texas Social Behavior Inventory, Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability (SD) Scale, and EM

Scale. Results indicated that hypercompetitive individuals exhibited high levels of narcissism but were found to have low self-esteem [4-7].

### 1.2. Objective

To find the relationship between Personality, Hypercompetitive attitude and Imposter Phenomenon.

### 1.3. Hypotheses

- There will be a significant relationship between openness and hypercompetitive attitude.
- There will be a significant relationship between conscientiousness and hypercompetitive attitude.
- There will be a significant relationship between extraversion and hypercompetitive attitude.
- There will be a significant relationship between agreeableness and hypercompetitive attitude.
- There will be a significant relationship between neuroticism and hypercompetitive attitude.
- There will be a significant relationship between Imposter phenomenon and hypercompetitive attitude.
- There will be a significant relationship between openness and imposter phenomenon.
- There will be a significant relationship between conscientiousness and imposter phenomenon.
- There will be a significant relationship between extraversion and imposter phenomenon.
- There will be a significant relationship between agreeableness and imposter phenomenon.
- There will be a significant relationship between neuroticism and imposter phenomenon.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

A sample of 82 participants from the emerging adulthood ranging from 18 to 25 years participated in the survey. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method from different science

colleges in India [8-9].

## 2.2. Research Instruments

### 2.2.1. Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10)

The Big Five Inventory-10 (BFI-10) was developed by Rammstedt and John in 2007. It is a concise 10-item scale designed to measure the Big Five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The scale follows a 5-point Likert format, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and is widely used for quick assessments of personality in research and applied settings. A high score on each trait reflects a strong presence of that particular personality dimension, while a low score indicates a weaker presence. The BFI-10 is valued for its efficiency and reliability in capturing core aspects of personality with minimal burden on respondents.

### 2.2.2. Imposter Phenomenon Scale (IPS)

The Imposter Phenomenon Scale (IPS), created by Pauline Rose Clance, evaluates an individual's self-perception of feeling like an imposter. This 20-item tool measures the inner experience of phoniness, which is believed to stem from difficulty in internalizing personal achievements. For those experiencing the imposter phenomenon, these feelings of inauthenticity are persistent, even when competence is evident. The IPS applies to both men and women, with total scores interpreted to determine intensity; a score of 62 or higher indicates significant issues with self-perceived phoniness and a lack of internalized confidence in one's success or competence.

### 2.2.3. Hypercompetitive Attitude (HAS)

The Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale (HAS) was created by Richard M. Ryckman, Max Hammer, Linda M. Kaczor, and Joel A. Gold in 1990. This 26-item scale is intended to measure hypercompetitive attitude—the drive to win and outperform others at any cost as a means of maintaining self-esteem. The construct includes traits like manipulation, aggressiveness, exploitation, and the disparagement of others in various situations. The HAS scale is based on psychoanalyst Karen Horney's construct of hypercompetitive attitude. Originally developed from a 65-item pool, the final version was refined to 26 items through research. The HAS is considered



valuable in business and industry as a screening tool or for identifying individuals who may require special attention, and it may also serve as an assessment and evaluation tool in clinical settings.

### 2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Confidentiality of all data collected was ensured and the consent from participating individuals were taken before administering the survey. The data were collected using Google forms and offline forms. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method from different science colleges in India.

### 2.4. Statistical Technique

The statistical analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The version used here is 25. Statistical technique used was Spearman's rank correlation to find the relationship between variables as the data was not normally distributed. It was nonparametric.

**Table 1 Spearman's Rank Correlation Between Big 5 Personality Traits and Hypercompetitive Attitude**

Variables		Hypercompetitive Attitude
Extraversion	r value	0.133
	p value	0.234
Agreeableness	r value	-0.314**
	p value	0.004
Conscientiousness	r value	-0.039
	p value	0.725
Neuroticism	r value	0.141
	p value	0.208
Openness	r value	-0.009
	p value	0.934

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Table 1 shows significant correlations between the Big 5 Personality Traits and Hypercompetitive attitude. The r-value between Agreeableness and Hypercompetitive attitude is -0.314\*\* with a corresponding p-value of 0.004. No significant correlations were found for the other traits. Extraversion has an r-value of 0.133 and a p-value of 0.234. Conscientiousness has an r-value of -0.039 and a p-value of 0.725. Neuroticism shows an r-value of

0.141 and a p-value of 0.208, while Openness has an r-value of -0.009 and a p-value of 0.934.

**Table 2 Spearman's Rank Correlation between Big 5 Personality traits and Imposter Phenomenon**

Variables		Imposter Phenomenon
Extraversion	r value	-0.292**
	p value	0.008
Agreeableness	r value	-0.161
	p value	0.148
Conscientiousness	r value	-0.204
	p value	0.066
Neuroticism	r value	0.374**
	p value	0.001
Openness	r value	-0.010
	p value	0.932

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

**Table 3 Spearman's Rank Correlation between Hypercompetitive Attitude and Imposter Phenomenon**

Variables		Imposter Phenomenon
Hypercompetitive attitude	r value	0.322**
	p value	0.003

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

### 2.5. Tables

Table 2 highlights significant correlations between the Big 5 Personality Traits and the Imposter Phenomenon. Neuroticism has an r-value of 0.374\*\* and a corresponding p-value of 0.001. Extraversion shows a significant negative correlation with the Imposter Phenomenon, with an r-value of -0.292\*\* and a p-value of 0.008. Other traits did not show significant correlations. Agreeableness has an r-value of -0.161 and a p-value of 0.148, Conscientiousness has an r-value of -0.204 and a p-value of 0.066, and Openness has an r-value of -0.010 and a p-value of 0.932. Table 3 shows a significant positive correlation between Hypercompetitive attitude and

the Imposter Phenomenon. The  $r$ -value is 0.322\*\* with a corresponding  $p$ -value of 0.003. Tables Among Emerging Adults.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Results

The results of the study revealed significant correlations between Big 5 personality traits, hypercompetitive attitude, and the Imposter Phenomenon. A significant negative correlation was found between Agreeableness and Hypercompetitive attitude ( $r = -0.314$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), indicating that individuals with lower Agreeableness levels tend to exhibit higher hypercompetitive attitude. No significant correlations were observed for Extraversion ( $r = 0.133$ ,  $p = 0.234$ ), Conscientiousness ( $r = -0.039$ ,  $p = 0.725$ ), Neuroticism ( $r = 0.141$ ,  $p = 0.208$ ), or Openness ( $r = -0.009$ ,  $p = 0.934$ ). Regarding the Imposter Phenomenon, Neuroticism showed a significant positive correlation ( $r = 0.374$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), suggesting that individuals with higher Neuroticism levels are more prone to experiencing imposter feelings, while Extraversion showed a significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.292$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ), indicating that individuals with higher Extraversion levels are less likely to experience such feelings. Other traits, including Agreeableness ( $r = -0.161$ ,  $p = 0.148$ ), Conscientiousness ( $r = -0.204$ ,  $p = 0.066$ ), and Openness ( $r = -0.010$ ,  $p = 0.932$ ), did not show significant correlations with the Imposter Phenomenon. Finally, a significant positive correlation was found between Hypercompetitive attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon ( $r = 0.322$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), indicating that individuals with higher hypercompetitive attitude are more likely to experience imposter feelings [10-12].

#### 3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the relationships between personality traits, hypercompetitive attitude, and the Imposter Phenomenon. The significant negative correlation between Agreeableness and Hypercompetitive attitude suggests that individuals with lower levels of Agreeableness are more prone to hypercompetitive attitude. This might be due to the inherent focus of less agreeable individuals on personal goals over

interpersonal harmony, which aligns with the drive for competition and achievement seen in hypercompetitive individuals. Agreeableness, characterized by traits such as empathy and cooperation, appears to be at odds with the self-focused and competitive nature of hypercompetitive attitude. The significant positive correlation between Neuroticism and the Imposter Phenomenon aligns with previous research showing that emotionally unstable individuals are more likely to experience self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. Neuroticism, associated with heightened sensitivity to stress and negative emotions, likely exacerbates the feelings of being an "imposter" or not deserving of success. In contrast, the significant negative correlation between Extraversion and the Imposter Phenomenon suggests that extraverted individuals, who are typically more confident and socially engaged, may be less susceptible to such feelings. The lack of significant correlations between traits like Conscientiousness, Openness, and both Hypercompetitive attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon suggests that these traits may not play a central role in shaping these specific attitude and experiences. The positive correlation between Hypercompetitive Attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon sheds light on a potential mechanism linking these constructs. Hypercompetitive individuals often rely heavily on external validation and comparisons to define their self-worth. This reliance could make them more vulnerable to experiencing imposter feelings when they perceive themselves as falling short of expectations. The competitive drive, while potentially leading to success, may come at the cost of internal stability and self-assurance, resulting in feelings of fraudulence and inadequacy. Overall, these findings highlight the complex interactions between personality traits and attitude like hypercompetitive attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon. The results suggest that traits such as Neuroticism and Extraversion play critical roles in shaping imposter feelings, while Agreeableness appears to influence hypercompetitive tendencies. These insights can inform interventions aimed at reducing imposter feelings by addressing underlying personality factors and hypercompetitive attitude.

## Conclusion

The objective of the study was to find the relationship between Personality, Hypercompetitive attitude and Imposter Phenomenon. The study confirms that personality traits affect hypercompetitive attitude and the Imposter Phenomenon. People with lower Agreeableness are more competitive, while those high in Neuroticism feel more like imposters. Extraverted people feel less like imposters. Hypercompetitive attitude is linked to stronger imposter feelings, showing how competition and self-doubt are connected, confirming the problem.

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