

## Beyond the Courtroom Confidence: Investigating the Relationship Between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit in Legal Professionals

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit among legal professionals, focusing on gender differences in these psychological constructs. A sample of 50 legal professionals aged 25-40 years, practicing in Punjab and Haryana High Court, participated in the study. Using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale and Short Grit Scale, data was analysed through t-tests and correlational analysis. Results revealed a significant negative correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit. Gender differences were observed, with male legal professionals showing higher levels of Imposter Phenomenon (self-doubt), while female legal professionals demonstrated higher levels of both Grit and work-related stress. The findings contribute to understanding psychological resilience in the legal profession and highlight the complex interplay between self-doubt and perseverance in high-stakes professional environments.

**Keywords-** Imposter Phenomenon, Grit, Resilience, Perseverance, Self-Doubt.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The journey toward legal expertise begins long before practitioners enter their first courtroom. Law students navigate an intellectually demanding curriculum that includes rigorous moot court sessions, complex case analyses, and high-pressure oral arguments that simulate real world legal practice. These moot court competitions are characterized by intense preparation requirements and public scrutiny, they serve as crucibles where budding legal professionals first encounter the demanding standards of their chosen profession. Within these academic arenas, a paradoxical phenomenon emerges. While the rigorous training environment cultivates resilience and perseverance (qualities essential for legal success) it simultaneously creates conditions where self-doubt can develop. Students who arrive unprepared for moot sessions or struggle with the demanding pace of legal reasoning may begin to question their fundamental aptitude for the profession. This academic "pressure cooker environment", where peers appear supremely confident while delivering polished arguments, can foster feelings of intellectual inadequacy even among capable students. (Grenardo, 2022).

The psychological toll of legal education extends far beyond graduation. Behind the confident façade that characterizes professional legal practice, many practitioners wrestle with persistent self-doubt and fear of exposure as intellectual frauds. This internal struggle, known as Imposter Phenomenon, appears particularly pronounced in a profession where expertise is publicly tested and where the stakes of failure can be extraordinarily high.

Paradoxically, the same demanding environment that may foster imposter feelings also cultivates extraordinary resilience and determination, a quality psychologists term "grit." The legal profession presents unique challenges characterized by high-pressure environments, competitive atmospheres, and demanding work schedules, all of which significantly impact practitioners' psychological well-being while simultaneously developing their capacity for sustained effort in pursuit of long-term goals.

Two psychological constructs have gained considerable attention in understanding professional resilience: Imposter Phenomenon and Grit. While these concepts appear to exist at opposite ends of the psychological spectrum, one representing self-doubt and the other embodying confidence and persistence, their relationship within the context of legal practice remains underexplored. This study investigates how these seemingly contradictory psychological forces interact within the demanding world of legal practice, with particular attention to how they manifest differently across gender lines in the profession.

## II. IMPOSTER PHENOMENON

The concept of Imposter Phenomenon was first articulated by Clance and Imes (1978), who described it as the persistent feeling of intellectual fraudulence and unworthiness despite objective evidence of professional success and academic achievement. Individuals experiencing this phenomenon struggle with authentic self-assurance and exhibit profound unease when receiving compliments or favourable feedback from colleagues and supervisors.

Those affected by Imposter Phenomenon characteristically diminish their professional achievements, systematically reject others' acknowledgment of their capabilities, and maintain the conviction that their thoughts, insights, and skills lack merit or consideration. They attribute their success not to their own intellectual abilities or professional competence, but to external factors such as luck, timing, personal charisma, or superficial characteristics. (Agrima Nanda, 2021).

Despite receiving consistent external validation of their accomplishments, individuals with Imposter Phenomenon live in constant fear of being exposed as frauds. They believe themselves to be less intelligent, capable, or deserving than others perceive them to be, systematically discounting feedback that contradicts their negative self-perceptions. This creates a "psychological prison" where they maintain impossibly high standards for success, feeling compelled to be exceptional and perform flawlessly in all professional endeavours. (Crawford, 2021).

The universality of this experience is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that even extraordinarily accomplished individuals such as Albert Einstein, Michelle Obama and Justice Sonia Sotomayor have publicly acknowledged experiencing Imposter Phenomenon. (Grenardo, 2022). In the legal world this recognition underscores that this psychological construct transcends achievement levels and can profoundly affect individuals across virtually all domains of professional excellence.

Grit represents a multifaceted psychological trait that encompasses the combination of passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term objectives (Duckworth, 2007). This construct extends far beyond mere talent or intelligence, emphasizing instead the critical importance of sustained effort and unwavering dedication over extended periods, even when faced with significant obstacles, professional setbacks, or apparent failures. (Coats, 2019).

Grit comprises three interconnected and essential components that work synergistically to drive long-term success. First, sustained interest involves maintaining genuine enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity for chosen professional objectives, reflecting a deep-seated passion that continuously fuels one's commitment to challenging tasks. Second, sustained effort underscores the absolute necessity of maintaining demanding work and demonstrating resilience despite professional challenges, setbacks, or temporary failures. This component acknowledges that achieving significant professional goals often requires prolonged and intellectually demanding effort that extends well beyond initial motivation or enthusiasm. Third, the emphasis on long-term goals highlights the commitment to objectives that extend far beyond immediate professional gratification or short-term rewards. Individuals with high levels of grit demonstrate unwavering commitment to objectives that may require years or even decades to accomplish, maintaining steadfast determination to overcome substantial obstacles and persist through adversity. It ultimately represents an unwavering commitment to outworking others through sheer determination and persistence, recognizing that sustained effort often trumps natural talent in determining long-term professional success (Duckworth et al., 2007).

## III. METHODOLOGY

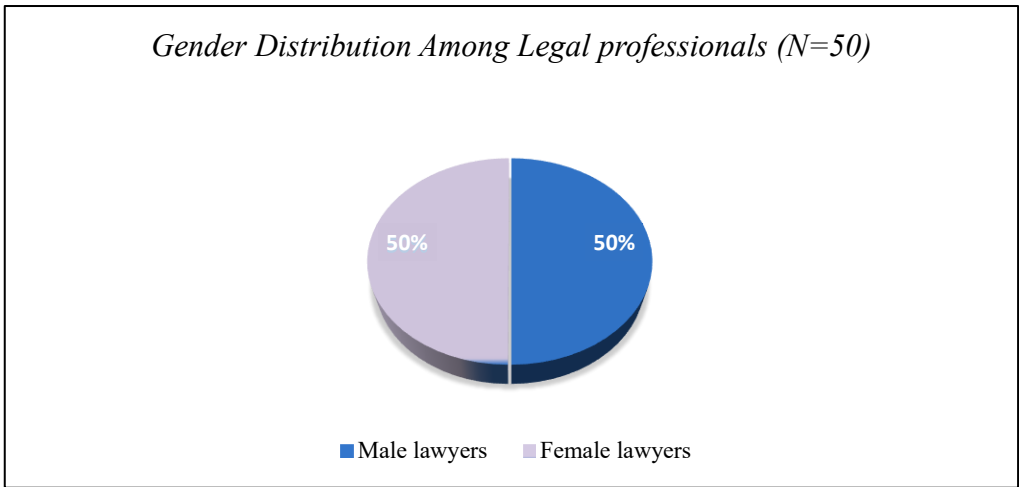
### *Aim and Objectives*

This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive examination of the relationship between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit within the professional environment of practicing legal professionals, with particular emphasis on identifying and understanding gender differences in these critical psychological constructs.

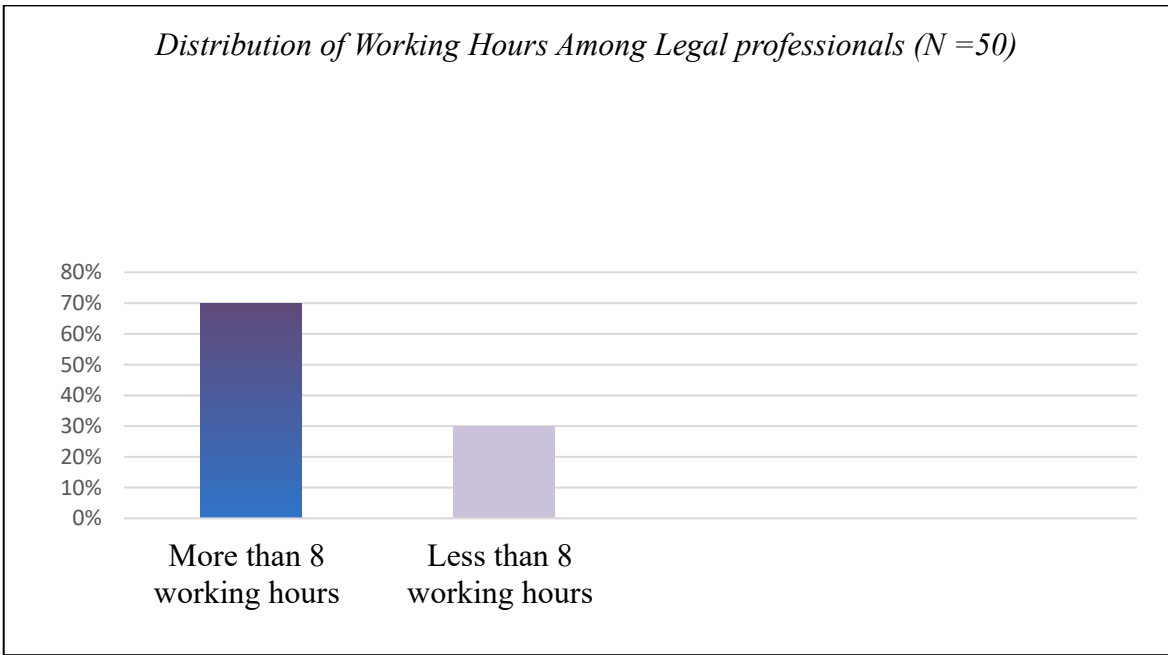
### *Sample Description*

The study focused on a carefully selected sample comprising practicing legal professionals aged 25-40 years. The sample consisted of 50 legal professionals, practicing in the Punjab and Haryana High Court. These individuals represented well-educated professionals who had received their legal education from prestigious law schools throughout India. The sample was deliberately divided into distinct groups of male and female legal professionals to facilitate comprehensive gender-based analysis. Additional demographic variables systematically considered included family background related to

legal practice, typical number of working hours per week, subjective assessment of work-life balance, and self-reported levels of professional stress and burnout.



**Figure 1**  
*Note.* The figure displays an equal distribution of male and female legal professionals. With each gender representing 50% of the total sample (n=25 each)



**Figure 2**  
*Note.* The chart shows that 70% of legal professionals work more than 8 hours per day (n = 35), while 30% work less than 8 hours per day (n = 15). Total sample size N = 50.

**Data Collection**

Data were systematically collected using Google Forms, ensuring efficient and standardized data gathering across all participants. The questionnaire included detailed inquiries about family background in legal practice, typical number of weekly working hours, subjective assessment of work-life balance, and comprehensive stress levels experienced in professional practice.

**Instruments**

Two rigorously validated psychological instruments were employed in this research study:

1. **The Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985)** represents a comprehensive 20-item self-assessment instrument specifically designed to evaluate the extent and intensity of self-doubt-related thoughts and emotions. Using a carefully calibrated five-point Likert scale, participants indicate the frequency with which they experience

characteristic patterns including fear of professional failure, anxiety about performance evaluation, and significant difficulty accepting their achievements as genuine despite overwhelming contrary evidence.

2. **Short Grit Scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009)** constitutes an efficient 8-item Likert-type self-report scale that systematically assesses both perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Respondents rate individual items from 1 (Not at all like me) to 5 (Very much like me), with higher total scores indicating substantially greater levels of grit and persistence.

Data Analysis

Collected data were systematically analysed using independent samples t-tests for examining gender differences and correlational analysis to explore the relationship between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit. Statistical significance was evaluated at both .05 and .10 levels to ensure comprehensive analysis of both strong and moderate effects.

IV. RESULTS

Correlation Analysis

The primary finding revealed a negative correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit among practicing legal professionals.

Table 1: Correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit

Variable	Imposter Phenomenon	Grit
Imposter Phenomenon	1	-0.23
Grit	-0.23	1

Note. N=50. Results indicate a negative correlation of Imposter Phenomenon and Grit in legal professionals.

The correlation analysis revealed a negative relationship ( $r = -.23$ ) between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit among 50 legal professionals. This indicates that legal professionals experiencing higher imposter feelings such as doubting their competence or attributing success to luck tend to demonstrate lower levels of perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Grit). Conversely, legal professionals with greater grit would show fewer imposter phenomenon experiences.

Gender Differences

Statistical analysis revealed significant gender differences across multiple psychological variables of interest.

Table 2: Gender Differences in Imposter Phenomenon, Grit, and Stress Among Legal professionals

Variable	t-value	p-value	Gender
Imposter Phenomenon	-2.76**	0.01	Higher in males
Grit	0.76	0.45	Higher in females

Note. N = 50. Results indicate males reported significantly higher Imposter Phenomenon scores, while females showed slightly higher Grit scores (non-significant). \*\*p < .01.

The statistical analysis revealed significant gender differences in imposter phenomenon scores, with a t-value of -2.76 and a p-value of .01, indicating that males reported significantly higher levels of imposter phenomenon compared to females. In contrast, grit scores showed no statistically significant gender differences, with a t-value of .76 and a p-value of .45, although females demonstrated slightly higher grit levels than males. The lack of significance in grit scores indicates that both genders exhibited similar levels of perseverance and passion for long-term goals, suggesting that this psychological construct may not be substantially influenced by gender factors in this sample

V. DISCUSSION

This study reveals a profession characterized by resilience yet burdened by elevated stress and persistent imposter feelings. The analysis confirmed a negative correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Grit, with higher grit levels consistently associated with lower imposter feelings. Legal professionals exhibited significantly elevated grit levels compared to general population norms, reflecting the high-pressure environment and chronic stress characterizing legal practice. Notable gender differences emerged requiring careful consideration. Male legal professionals demonstrated significantly higher Imposter Phenomenon levels, possibly reflecting societal expectations to project unwavering confidence. Female legal professionals showed substantially higher Grit and work-related stress levels, with their exceptional grit serving as an adaptive mechanism for navigating systemic challenges in a male-dominated profession. However, this combination creates concerning vulnerability to burnout.

Imposter Phenomenon demonstrates particular prevalence within the legal profession, especially among high-achieving individuals such as law students and practicing attorneys. Research indicates that these feelings often manifest during the early stages of legal education, where many first-year law students silently harbour the belief that their classmates are inherently smarter, better connected professionally, or more naturally capable of legal reasoning. The pervasive belief that other students already possess established legal networks and professional connections can significantly deepen these feelings of professional inadequacy. However, research suggests that recognizing the possibility of building meaningful professional connections during law school can help alleviate these fears and support the development of a stronger, more authentic professional identity (Grenardo, 2022).

Professional legal professionals often mask their internal "grit" as a powerful combination of passion and unyielding determination beneath their composed professional demeanour. This psychological resource fuels their persistent fight for justice, providing the emotional and intellectual energy needed to work through complex cases, overcome significant setbacks, and weather the inevitable storms of legal practice. Through this process, they continuously learn, adapt, and rise from temporary defeats, ultimately forging distinctive career paths and shaping lasting professional legacies. Research consistently shows that grit burns brightest and proves most valuable during the most challenging professional circumstances (Bennett, 2014). This relationship between passion and perseverance proves particularly relevant in legal education, where students must conquer demanding academic challenges, recover from inevitable setbacks, and master the intricate complexities of legal reasoning and analysis. Grit serves as the psychological fuel that powers their journey from the rigorous demands of law school through eventual professional triumphs in practice.

Making grit development a core educational goal in legal training can significantly enhance student learning outcomes and long-term professional success. One of the most effective approaches for nurturing grit involves deliberate practice, including a structured, goal-driven methodology that has proven effective for improving performance across diverse professional disciplines. This may begin by focusing on the legal education that embeds principles of deliberate practice into first-year curriculum can effectively support the systematic growth of grit among students. As students develop greater resilience and persistence, they become better equipped to navigate the complex challenges of law school and subsequently thrive in their professional legal careers (Heinrich, 2019).

Recent research in positive psychology has explored how utilizing personal character strengths can significantly enhance both well-being and professional performance within the legal field, which is unfortunately marked by high rates of depression and job dissatisfaction. A study involving seventeen women legal professionals recognized by Super Legal professionals revealed that successful practitioners consistently applied their personal strengths to overcome professional challenges. Interestingly, these highly successful legal professionals favoured what researchers term "heart strengths" including kindness, gratitude, and emotional intelligence over traditionally valued analytical traits. These emotional competencies were deliberately and strategically employed alongside more conventional legal traits such as prudence and self-control. These findings fundamentally challenge the persistent stereotype that legal excellence derives solely from logical reasoning and analytical thinking, suggesting instead that cultivating heart strengths may foster both exceptional professional success and meaningful personal fulfilment (Snyder, 2012).

These findings suggest several critical implications. Law schools and legal organizations should develop targeted interventions addressing both Imposter Phenomenon and stress management with gender-specific considerations. Structured mentorship programs could effectively address imposter feelings among male legal professionals while providing stress management support for female legal professionals. Legal organizations must foster environments recognizing professional competence as developmental, reducing unrealistic expectations that fuel imposter feelings. Professional dissatisfaction and turnover cannot be resolved through compensation alone but require cultural transformation across individual, organizational, and institutional levels. Practitioners must recognize that pessimistic legal mindsets can be counterproductive personally and professionally (Seligman, 2001). Organizations should empower junior associates with meaningful decision-making authority, while institutions should promote civility and collaborative approaches over purely adversarial methods.

Law school's hold transformative potential by integrating evidence-based positive psychology principles to cultivate psychologically sustainable legal culture. This research advocates enhancing associate training programs by incorporating Psychological Capital (PsyCap) development comprising hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism through brief, targeted interventions that benefit both individual legal professionals and broader professional outcomes (Knudson, 2015).

## VI. DELIMITATION

This study was designed with specific parameters that define its scope and focus. The sample size was set at 50 participants to explore the relationship between imposter phenomenon and grit for detailed examination of these constructs in the specific context of legal professionals. These delimitations were established to ensure focused data collection and analysis while maintaining research feasibility and depth of investigation. Future research may be conducted on a larger sample size in order to ensure more generalizability of results.

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