Unpacking Impostor Syndrome and Positionality: A Panacea for the Realities Faced by Graduate Students in Kenya?

Dr. Jane Kinuthia[1*], Dr. Perminus Githui[2]

[1]Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya

[2]Taita Tavetta University, Kenya

[*]Corresponding Author

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0002

Received: 22 December 2025; Accepted: 29 December 2025; Published: 05 January 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intertwined dynamics of impostor syndrome and identity among graduate students in Kenya, with a view to determining whether an understanding of these fundamental realities would serve as a remedy to the multifaceted challenges faced by students pursuing higher education. Drawing on responses to an exploratory survey among purposively selected Master's and PhD students who are pursuing Social Science fields of study, data that was collected revealed how feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and alienation are exacerbated by socio-economic, gendered, and institutional positionalities. Anchored in intersectionality, social identity, and critical pedagogy perspectives, the analysis underscores how students' identities mediate their academic self-concept. While impostor syndrome is often conceptualized and analyzed in individualistic terms, this paper examines it as a social and structural construct. Findings suggest that positionality awareness and critical reflexivity has ability to empower students for reframing of academic journeys with a view to advocating for more inclusive and supportive learning environments. The paper concludes with recommendations for institutional reforms, the need for mentorship, and mental health interventions that are culturally and contextually grounded.

Keywords: positionality, impostor syndrome, postgraduate students, reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

This section provides a brief overview of the graduate education landscape and the challenges thereof, since the sector has witnessed significant growth over the past two decades, driven by increasing demand for specialized skills and research capacity. The concepts of positionality and impostor syndrome, which are central in this paper, have also been introduced.

The graduate education landscape

According to the Commission for University Education (CUE, 2023) statistics, Kenya has a total of 64 fully-fledged universities, comprised of 37 public and 27 private institutions, with an additional 15 institutions at various stages of accreditation offering a diverse range of postgraduate programs. Matheka et al. (2020) observe that Kenyan students pursuing doctoral programs face many challenges, including a lack of research funding, a scarcity of PhD holders to mentor them, and delays in PhD student graduation.

Further, there is a huge disparity between the expected number of PhD holders to serve the university education needs and the number that universities across the country graduate each year. Previous studies have reported that Kenya needed to be graduating 2,500 PhDs annually for ten years since 2012, in order to achieve that target, yet there has not been much improvement towards this end. Moreover, graduate students often encounter unique challenges, including limited funding, heavy workload, pressure to publish, personal responsibilities, and a competitive, demanding, and rigorous academic environment. While this expansion is crucial for national development, fostering innovation and contributing to various sectors of the economy, in Kenyan universities, doctoral applicants often take as much as ten years to complete their studies. Part-time study, supervisory

disagreements, and resource shortages are some of the factors that cause delays. Moreover, the mode of study, working loads for graduate students, and the inexperience of some supervisors are highlighted as factors contributing to delays in PhD completion in Kenya (Matheka et al. 2020;Githui & Kinuthia,2023).

Introduction to the concept of impostor syndrome

Impostor syndrome, also referred to as impostor phenomenon, is a common psychological pattern among high-achieving individuals, particularly prevalent in academic settings, such as postgraduate studies. It involves persistent feelings of intellectual inadequacy and self-doubt despite objective evidence of competence and success, coupled with a fear of being exposed as a "fraud" (Clance & Imes, 1978; Bravata et al., 2020; Soules, 2024).

The syndrome is evident in individuals who experience psychological patterns where persistent internalized fear of being seen as "frauds" plagues them, yet there is external evidence of their competence in other aspects. Those experiencing impostor syndrome remain convinced that they are not intelligent, capable, or deserving of their success (Soules, 2024). Historically, early research focused primarily on high-achieving women, but subsequent studies have demonstrated its prevalence across genders, professions, and demographic groups. Globally, impostor syndrome is increasingly recognized as a significant barrier to academic and professional development, affecting individuals from undergraduate students to seasoned professionals, with an effect on confidence, performance, and overall well-being (Parkera et.al., 2024).

The concept of positionality

Positionality, in academic and sociocultural contexts, refers to the researcher's or individual's identity and social location in relation to the people and topics being studied or discussed. It acknowledges that one's perspectives, experiences, and biases are shaped by various aspects of one's identity, including but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, nationality, disability, and sexual orientation. In academic research, understanding one's positionality is crucial for promoting reflexivity, minimizing bias, and acknowledging the subjective nature of knowledge production. Socio-culturally, positionality highlights how individuals are situated within power structures and how these locations influence their interactions, opportunities, and understanding of the world. For graduate students, their positionality can significantly impact their academic journey, influencing their access to resources, their interactions with supervisors, and their sense of belonging within the academic community (Kennedy et. al,2024)

Challenges Kenyan graduate students face

Kenyan graduate students, while sharing some universal challenges with their global counterparts, face unique hurdles often exacerbated by local socioeconomic and cultural realities. These include, but are not limited to, financial constraints due to high tuition fees and living costs, limited access to research grants and resources, the pressure to balance academic pursuits with family and work responsibilities, and sometimes, a rigid hierarchical academic culture (Githui & Kinuthia,2023). Furthermore, issues of biases, while officially condemned, can subtly influence academic opportunities and support networks. These challenges can intensify feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, making them particularly vulnerable to imposter syndrome. The interplay between these external pressures and internal psychological states form the core of the research problem addressed in this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a detailed account of the literature that was reviewed in relation to the key constructs being explored.

Impostor syndrome in higher education

The concept emerged from a study on high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978) where it was reported that they indicated feelings of inauthenticity, which was relative to their academic and professional accomplishments within the environments in which they worked. Clance (1985), further identified six components of the impostor phenomenon that an individual can experience simultaneously. These include the treadmill experience

(experiences anxiety,self-doubt, and dread) When undertaking a new task, feeling like a failure when perfection cannot be achieved, individuals believing that they can succeed in whatever they attempt (superhuman complex), over preparing to increase chances of succeeding, denial of competence (trouble internalizing talent), and feelings of fear or guilt as a result of their success or capabilities. The term impostor syndrome emerged due to its association with negative psychological well-being and experiences at work as illustrated in Gottlieb et al. (2020) among physicians. The study further demonstrated that feelings of impostor syndrome are associated with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout on the job, as well as increased levels of emotional exhaustion.

In the African context, research on impostor syndrome in higher education is emerging, though still limited. Some preliminary qualitative studies in Africa have highlighted how academic pressures, coupled with societal expectations and economic disparities, can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy among students. For example, Okoro et.al. (2021), focusing on Nigerian postgraduate students, identified financial strain and a lack of adequate academic support as key factors contributing to self-doubt. The unique historical and socio-economic realities of many African nations, including post-colonial legacies and ongoing development challenges, also introduce additional layers of complexity to how impostor syndrome is experienced and perceived.

Research has revealed that the syndrome affects postgraduate students. For instance, studies by Martin et al. (2023) and Bravata et al. (2020), reveal that the syndrome is strongly linked to heightened levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among postgraduate students**.** Their mental health status is thus affected, with some experiencing fear of not meeting expected demands or sometimes high self-imposed standards. This, at times, causes significant distress. Stress and burnout due to internal pressure, coupled with the demanding nature of postgraduate research (intellectual complexity, lofty expectations, blurred work-life boundaries), can lead to mental fatigue (Legassie et al., 2008; Villwock et al., 2016). Moreover, students experiencing impostor syndrome often report lower levels of self-esteem and a diminished academic self-concept, as they struggle to internalize their accomplishments and attribute success to external factors like luck rather than their own abilities (Cokley et al., 2015; Schubert & Reiner, 2021).

There is also the internal struggle and fear of judgment which could lead students to withdraw from social circles, avoid tasks, and hesitate to seek support, intensifying feelings of isolation. This is compounded by students setting extremely high standards for themselves, often as a strategy to prevent being considered as academic frauds. This can lead to excessive over-preparation for tasks or, conversely, procrastination followed by frenzied, last-minute work (Clance & Imes, 1978).

While individuals with impostor syndrome are often high achievers, the associated anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of failure can indirectly affect academic performance. Studies have shown an inverse association between impostor phenomenon and academic performance. Despite achieving milestones like publishing papers or completing projects, individuals with impostor syndrome struggle to internalize these successes. The cumulative effect of such challenges, especially the mental health burden, can contribute to significant dropout rates among postgraduate students (Stubb et al., 2012)

Positionality and self-conception in academic research

The concept of positionality is deeply embedded in qualitative research methodologies and critical social theory, emphasizing that knowledge is always situated and influenced by the researcher's identity. Positionality enables a researcher to locate themselves in the study in terms of ontological (what constitutes reality/existence), epistemological (what constitutes knowledge), axiological (what are your values), and methodological (scientific and systematic procedures in the study) assumptions. This underscores the worth of researchers admitting their social identities, personal histories, and philosophical assumptions during the research process. Furthermore, positionality influences research choices, relationships with participants, and how readers interpret the work (Kennedy et al., 2024). Irrefutably, the integration of positionality in research ensures transparency, methodological rigor, and the fostering of diverse perspectives in scholarly inquiry.

In academic settings, a student's identity, which might be shaped by their class, ethnicity, gender, and even institutional affiliation, can profoundly impact their experiences. Previous studies on mental health and performance among Kenyan university students depict that positionality has some effects on higher education such as influencing research and knowledge production. This further includes how researchers' identities affect

the topics they study, their methodologies, and their interpretations, together with maintaining objectivity while acknowledging personal experiences (Achieng et al., 2025). Thus, recognizing positionality can lead to more inclusive policies and practices. On the other hand, the role of situationality in Higher Education include contextual learning and adaptation whose focus in academic practices varies across different cultural, political, and institutional settings. This has an impact on student engagement and performance.

In recent years, there has been an increase in research on the mental health of university students in Kenya, which frequently highlights important issues. About 30% of university students in Kenya are reported to have symptoms of anxiety and depression (Achieng et al 2025). While there is a general understanding that mental health impacts academic performance, the specific interplay between impostor syndrome, positionality, and academic realities for Kenyan graduate students remains largely unexplored.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in a multi-pronged theoretical framework that allows for a comprehensive analysis of the intertwined issues of impostor syndrome and positionality among graduate students in Kenya. The selected theories, Intersectionality, Social Identity, and Critical Pedagogy provide robust lenses through which to understand the complex interplay of individual experiences and broader social structures.

Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality theory, a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989), posits that various social and political identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability) combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. In the context of this study, intersectionality is crucial for understanding how the multifaceted identities of Kenyan graduate students mediate their experiences of impostor syndrome. It allows us to explore how, for example, a female student from a rural, lower socioeconomic background might experience impostor syndrome differently and perhaps more acutely than a male student from an urban, privileged background. This framework moves beyond a simplistic view of impostor syndrome as an isolated psychological phenomenon (Jaremka et al., 2020) and helps us analyze how systemic inequalities, shaped by socio-economic stratification in Kenya, can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt among those whose identities are marginalized within the academic system. Incorporating intersectionality strategies helps in addressing the unique challenges of individuals who are often at the intersection of multiple identities, such as the marginalized, leading to a more just society for all (Ruiz et al.,2021).

Social Identity Theory

Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory (SIT) proposes that individuals categorize themselves into social groups, leading to the formation of in-groups and out-groups. People compare their in-group favorably to relevant out-groups in an effort to establish and preserve a positive social identity. In this context, work capacity is considered as the result of a dynamic process. This theory aids in the explanation of phenomena such as the desire for social status within groups, inter-group discrimination, and conformity (Scheepers & Ellemers,2019*;* Haslam, 2012). When applied to graduate students, SIT enables us to comprehend how the students' identification with different groups—such as their department, university, discipline, research team, or even cohort—influences their academic self-concept. Feelings of impostor syndrome can arise when students believe they do not fully fit into the "in-group" of successful academics (because they believe they are not smart enough, not prepared, or culturally incompatible). This approach also clarifies how a student's sense of belonging and, in turn, their susceptibility to impostor syndrome can be impacted by institutional culture problems and a lack of diversity in academia (Haslam, 2012).

Critical Pedagogy

In Freirean theory (1970), critical pedagogy is a process where individuals develop a critical awareness of their social reality, moving from naive acceptance to a deeper, more contextual understanding of oppression, injustice, and power structures. Through reflection and action, they understand their conditions and become empowered to transform their circumstances, becoming subjects of their own history rather than passive objects. It inspires students to take revolutionary action, analyze their social reality critically, and comprehend power dynamics.

In this study, Critical Pedagogy offers a framework for exploring whether fostering critical reflexivity and positionality awareness can serve as a "panacea" for impostor syndrome. By encouraging graduate students to critically analyze the systemic factors contributing to their self-doubt, they can move from a state of internalized oppression to one of critical consciousness. Positionality awareness influences a supportive learning environment by creating less hierarchical relationships and allowing each participant to contribute based on their identity, role, and power. Integrating student positionalities in the learning process requires critical thinking practices and self-reflection to encourage a deeper understanding of one's own positionality (McLaren 2019). This framework suggests that understanding the social and structural roots of imposter syndrome empowers students to reframe their experiences, challenge oppressive academic norms, and advocate for more equitable and supportive learning environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method research design to explore the subtle experiences and implications of impostor syndrome and positionality among graduate students in Kenya. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth analysis of complex human experiences, perceptions, and the subjective meanings individuals attach to their realities (Cresswell & Cresswell,2023). Using interpretivism research design from a phenomenological approach, the lived experiences of graduate students were explored, explained and discussed. This approach acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that meaning is derived from human interaction and interpretation. This allowed the study to capture the essence of impostor syndrome and establish navigation of positionality.

A purposive sample of students who are already enrolled in Master's and PhD programs in the Social Science fields of study was targeted for this study with the understanding that these could provide relevant information. This comprised a sample of 49 respondents of which 38 duly filled and returned the questionnaires. Thus, the response rate was 77.5%. Data was collected using detailed questionnaires, which had both open and closed-ended questions. The questions targeted students' understanding of the factors that contribute to successful completion of postgraduate studies (socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, institutional experiences and individuals' characteristics). Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, while quantitative data was analyzed using the SPSS software. The ultimate analytical insights were derived through the researcher's interpretive processes, such as grouping related ideas into themes.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of qualitative responses of Master's and PhD students involved in the study. These findings are richly illustrated with direct quotes from participants to provide authentic insights into their experiences.

Experiences and expressions of impostor syndrome

The responses revealed that graduate students experience impostor syndrome, though they do not conceptualize it as such. This is manifested through expressions such as:

Self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy despite evidence of success: Many participants, despite having performed well in their previous studies and being admitted into competitive graduate programs, expressed profound doubts about their intellectual capabilities, especially at the research level of their studies. Below are a few responses;

" I always feel like I'm likely to make a fool of myself, especially when defending my work, I sometimes feel like I've just been lucky or people might eventually think that I'm not as smart ..."(Female, PhD, candidate)

"*I fear that people know me as an achiever in my workplace yet I don't feel so confident when making academic presentations…I fear embarrassment (Male PhD candidate)*

"I feel like I might make a fool of myself at defense/" This feeling gives me the chills…(Masters Female student)

Fear of being exposed as a "fraud": This was a recurring theme, with students constantly fearing that their perceived intellectual shortcomings would be uncovered by peers or supervisors.

"I'm terrified of presentations. I feel like everyone else in the room is brighter, and they'll see that I don't really know what I'm talking about, despite preparing extensively." (Male, Master's, student)

Attributing success to external factors: Some participants often downplayed their achievements, attributing them to external circumstances, sheer luck rather than their own abilities.

"My thesis proposal was approved, but honestly, I just think my supervisor was being lenient,." (Female, Master's, student)

"I just got lucky with the topic and passed. I wasn't sure until the last minute when the verdict was declared " (Male PhD Student)

Perfectionism and overworking: A coping mechanism for many was an obsessive drive for perfection, leading to excessive workloads fueled by the fear of making mistakes lest they be seen as "fraudulent."

"I can't submit anything unless I'm confident it's perfect. I spend countless hours rechecking, re-writing, because the thought of embarrassing errors is just unbearable." (Male, PhD, student)

" I know that I am too thorough and so waste so much time checking and revising…" (Female Masters student)

Social isolation and reluctance to seek help: Some students withdrew socially or hesitated to ask for help from peers or supervisors, fearing that doing so would confirm their inadequacy.

"I struggle sometimes, but I don't want to keep asking my supervisor for help. She might consider me weak." (Female, Master's, student)

"*I find this journey very lonely…*" ((Female PhD student)

Role of social, economic, and cultural positionality in shaping students' experiences

The study clearly demonstrated that impostor syndrome is not a monolithic experience, but is profoundly shaped and intensified by various aspects of students' positionality, which include;

Socioeconomic Background: Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often reported a heightened sense of impostor syndrome. They frequently highlighted financial strain as a major stressor.

" I sometimes feel out of place here. Most of my classmates seem well-off; they clear fees early and I feel like I'm constantly catching up financially." (Male, Master's, student)

"I'm self-sponsored and have a child in college too. All these are overwhelming yet I have to compete with those who effortlessly pay fees and keep focused on their studies…I sometimes want to give up…"(Male masters student

"I wonder if I'm just not cut out for this. The studies, wifely and motherly duties are just too much. I feel like I'm not 'intellectual' enough to manage everything." (Female, PhD, student)

Institutional Culture: The perceived culture of the university also played a role. Private universities, offer more personalized attention and the university administration is concerned about how students are treated by supervisors probably because of their numbers.

"The supervisors are quite approachable and supportive." (Female, PhD, student)

"*We have heard that supervisors can make your life miserable yet, it appears not. They are however, too demanding when it comes to excellence"* (Male PhD student)

Academic rigor

Higher prevalence among first-generation graduate students: Students who were the first in their families to pursue postgraduate education often expressed a stronger sense of impostor syndrome, grappling with unfamiliar academic norms and a lack of familial understanding or support for their academic journey.

"I have nobody to ask when I get stuck with research matters…"(Female Masters Student)

Impact of Supervision Style: Participants with supportive, communicative supervisors reported feeling less isolated and more validated, potentially buffering the effects of impostor syndrome. Conversely, those with absentee or critical supervisors experienced heightened self-doubt.

" I do not get any support from my supervisor, he is always too busy…" (Female PhD student)

"The only comment that I get from my supervisor is that 'we are not yet there'. That is after staying with the document for months…" (Male PhD student)

Financial Stress as an Amplifier: Many respondents reported financial stress as a significant amplifier of imposter syndrome. The burden of tuition, living expenses, and often supporting families made students question their decision to pursue graduate studies, leading to intense self-doubt about their capabilities to succeed given these external pressures.

" My pace of work is restructuring. I'm not sure I'll be able to complete this program" (Female Masters student)

" I'm straining to pay my fees since my son joined high school" (Male PhD student)

General overarching themes that emerged from the survey responses include;

The societal pressure to succeed academically which translates into immense pressure on graduate students, amplifying their fear of failure and contributing to impostor syndrome.

Many students felt that universities lacked sufficient mental health support services, career guidance tailored for graduate students, and robust mentorship programs, leaving them to navigate impostor feelings largely on their own.

Some participants noted a tension between cultural norms that value humility and the academic requirement for self-assertion and confidence in presenting one's work. This tension could exacerbate.

Surprisingly, some students who openly admitted to experiencing fear and self-doubt also expressed a deep passion for their research and a strong desire to complete their degrees, indicating a resilience that coexisted with their self-doubt.

While many students acknowledged the value of understanding their positionality, they did not view it as a magical cure for impostor syndrome, but rather as a crucial step in a continuous process of self-awareness and empowerment. It was seen as a tool for reframing, not eliminating, the feelings.

Supervisor's Positionality, such as their gender, their own career journey, and personal initiative, was perceived by students to impact the supervisory relationship.

While impostor syndrome is often framed individually, many respondents intuitively leaned towards more collectivistic coping strategies such as peer support groups, even while internalizing individual feelings of inadequacy.

These findings underscore the complex and multi-layered nature of impostor syndrome among Kenyan graduate students, highlighting the critical role of positionality and the need for culturally sensitive and structurally informed interventions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how aspects of impostor syndrome can be extrapolated from among the Kenyan graduate students who participated in this survey. This moves beyond an individualistic pathology to acknowledge its profound connections with social, economic, cultural, and institutional positionalities. The paper argues that while understanding positionality and engaging in reflexivity empowers individual students, a true "panacea" requires a systemic commitment from universities to create environments where impostor syndrome is not just managed but actively prevented through inclusive and equitable practices (Zebastian,2024).

The widespread experience of impostor syndrome among Kenyan graduate students aligns with global literature on its prevalence in higher education, particularly in competitive postgraduate environments. The self-doubt, fear of exposure, and attribution of success to external factors observed in this study resonate strongly with the classic definitions by Clance and Imes (1978), which are illustrated through the responses below;

"I attended a defense where I felt that the panel was so harsh on the students. I had to defer mine as I felt not ready to go through such an experience" (Male PhD student)

"I fear presenting my proposal because I don't want to be embarrassed in the presence of my peers" (MA Candidate)

"I am a senior executive at work and can't imagine being made to feel like a fool" (Male MA student)

"Sometimes I felt like I could give an expert to do the work for me, but then I wonder what it would look like if I failed to explain the work in a defense" (Female PhD student)

However, the study extends this understanding by demonstrating how these manifestations are not uniform but are intensely mediated by students' unique positionalities. The intersectionality theory proved to be an indispensable framework for interpreting these findings. It enables a truly relational approach to the analysis of power that is often neglected in research on this framework (Levine, 2011). The data unequivocally showed that students with intersecting marginalized identities reported a more intense and multifaceted experience of impostor syndrome. Their feelings of inadequacy were not merely about academic capability but were intricately linked to their navigation of societal inequalities and structural biases within the academic system (Helfer & Drew, 2019). For instance, the added burden of financial struggle for low-income students (a socio-economic positionality) often translated into deeper feelings of not being "smart enough" to manage both studies and survival, highlighting the synergistic effects of multiple disadvantages. This echoes Crenshaw's (1989) argument that understanding the unique experiences of those at the intersections of various oppressions is crucial.

On the other hand, the Social Identity Theory provided a lens to understand the dynamics of belonging and comparison. Students often compared themselves to perceived "in-group" members (e.g., financially secure peers, students from dominant ethnic groups, or those with seemingly effortless academic success). Impostor feelings are fueled among those who perceive a discrepancy in their social identity as capable graduate students (Newar et.al.,2025). The institutional culture, particularly in large universities, where students often feel like "numbers" rather than valued members, further erodes their sense of belonging, contributing to self-doubt. This reinforces Tajfel and Turner's (1986) premise that group membership and social comparisons significantly shape individual self-concept.

Critical Pedagogy offered a compelling framework for considering interventions. The findings that students intuitively sought collectivist coping mechanisms or struggled to assert themselves academically due to cultural norms of humility suggests a need for a pedagogical approach that encourages critical consciousness. When students begin to understand that their impostor feelings are not solely individual failings but are often symptoms of systemic issues (e.g., lack of equitable resources, biased academic structures, or societal pressures), they move towards "conscientization" as envisioned by Freire (1970). This shift from self-blame to critical analysis is pivotal for empowerment.

The findings suggest that understanding positionality does not *eliminate* impostor syndrome, but it serves as a powerful tool for mitigation and reframing. Participants who demonstrated greater awareness of how their socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnic background influenced their academic journey, while still experiencing impostor feelings, were often better able to:

1. Externalize the problem: Instead of internalizing self-doubt as a personal deficit, they could attribute some of their struggles to systemic factors or external pressures (Helfer & Drew,2019). For example, understanding that financial stress impacts academic focus, rather than interpreting it as a sign of their own intellectual weakness.
2. Foster self-compassion: Recognizing that their challenges were not unique to them, but were often shared by others with similar positionalities, allowed for greater self-compassion and reduced feelings of isolation.
3. Develop agency: By critically analyzing the structural roots of their feelings, some participants expressed a desire to advocate for themselves and for changes within the university system, moving from passive struggle to active engagement.
4. Reframe success: Success was not just seen as an individual achievement but also as a testament to overcoming systemic barriers.

However, it is crucial to emphasize that this understanding is not a "panacea" in the sense of a magical cure because, impostor syndrome is deeply ingrained, and awareness alone may not instantaneously dissolve years of self-doubt. It is rather, a continuous process of reflexivity and critical engagement (Scotland,2025). Based on the study's findings, reflexivity and identity awareness can be considered a ‘powerful intervention and coping strategy’ rather than a complete cure. A true "panacea" would imply a total eradication of the issue, which is unlikely given the complex interplay of individual psychology and structural inequalities a view that concurs with Bano and O'Shea (2023).

In view of the findings in this study, this paper argues that reflexivity (the ability to critically examine one's own assumptions, biases, and role in the research process or broader social context) empowers students to understand how their own experiences are shaped by their positionality. When applied to impostor syndrome, this means questioning why they feel inadequate, and critically analyzing the messages they receive from their environment that might contribute to these feelings (Bravata, et.al., 2020). Moreover, identity awareness (recognizing and appreciating the multifaceted aspects of one's identity) helps students acknowledge the unique strengths and perspectives that their positionality brings, rather than viewing it solely as a source of vulnerability.

These two processes together facilitate a shift from individual blame to systemic understanding. They equip students with the cognitive tools to resist internalizing negative messages and to build a more resilient academic self-concept. However, their effectiveness is greatly enhanced when coupled with external support systems and institutional changes that address the structural issues contributing to impostor syndrome (Mugotitsa, 2025).

This paper acknowledges that the findings have significant implications for various aspects of the graduate education ecosystem in Kenya such as pedagogical approaches that promote critical reflexivity, promoting positionality-aware mentorship for **s**upervisors, and facilitate peer-to-peer mentorship where students with similar positionalities can share experiences and coping strategies. Further, institutional policies could also invest in mental health services that address impostor syndrome (Mugotitsa, 2025) and financial support to alleviate financial stress that exacerbates impostor syndrome.This is a significant factor because the study established that majority (86.20%) of the respondents were self-sponsored, 10.30% were supported by their families and 3.40% were sponsored by their employers. None of the students were on scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the complex interplay of impostor syndrome and positionality among graduate students in Kenya, questioning whether a deeper understanding of these concepts could offer a remedy to their multifaceted challenges. The findings affirm that impostor syndrome is a prevalent and deeply felt reality by Kenyan graduate students, manifesting as pervasive self-doubt, fear of exposure, and attributing success to external factors. Crucially, the study demonstrates that these experiences are not isolated psychological

phenomena but are profoundly shaped, intensified, and nuanced by students' social, economic, cultural, and institutional positionalities.

The research revealed that students navigating distinct institutional cultures often experienced impostor syndrome more acutely. Financial strain, gender biases, subtle ethnic dynamics, and a lack of personalized institutional support emerged as significant amplifiers of self-doubt. While participants did not view understanding positionality as a magical cure, they recognized its immense value in re-framing their struggles from individual deficits to issues influenced by systemic factors. The concept of critical reflexivity, rooted in critical pedagogy, thus emerged as a powerful tool for mitigation and empowerment, allowing students to critically analyze the sources of their impostor feelings rather than internalizing them.

Ultimately, while no single "panacea" exists, fostering a deeper understanding of impostor syndrome alongside critical awareness of one's positionality offers a powerful pathway for Kenyan graduate students to navigate their academic journeys with greater resilience, self-compassion, and agency. This requires a concerted effort from individuals, supervisors, and institutions to cultivate environments that are not only academically rigorous but also genuinely inclusive and supportive.

REFERENCES

1. Achieng, M. A., Odwar, A. Q., & Migunde, J. (2025). Relationship between mental health literacy and mental wellbeing among students in secondary schools in Homa Bay County, Kenya. https://www.jriiejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/JRIIE-9-2-101-.pdf
2. Bano, S., & O'Shea, C. (2023). Factors contributing to imposter phenomenon in doctoral students: A US-based qualitative study. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 18, 251–269. https://doi.org/10.28945/5195
3. Bravata, D. M., Watts, H., Keefer, A. L., Taylor, K. T., Esfahani, K., Moore, H., & Shultz, S. E. (2020). Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of imposter syndrome: A systematic review. Journal of General Internal Medicine, 35(4), 1252–1275.
4. Clance, P. R. (1985). The impostor phenomenon: When success makes you feel like a fake. Bantam Books.
5. Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high-achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice, 15(3), 241–247. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006
6. Cokley, K. O., Awad, G. H., Smith, L., Jackson, S., Awosogba, O., Hurst, A., & Roberts, D. (2015). The multidimensional imposter phenomenon scale: Factor structure and initial validation. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 62(2), 184–197.
7. Commission for University Education. (2023). University statistics 2022/2023.
8. Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.
9. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, D. J. (2023). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (7th ed.). SAGE Publications.
10. Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Penguin Random House.
11. Githui, P., & Kinuthia, J. (2023). Students' perceptions of the quality of supervision in proposal and dissertation development. Journal of Research in Education and Technology, 1(1).
12. Gottlieb, M., Chung, A., Battaglioli, N., Sebok-Syer, S. S., & Kalantari, A. (2020). Impostor syndrome among physicians. Medical Education, 54(2), 116–124. https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.13956
13. Haslam, S. A. (2012). Social identity theory. In Handbook of theories of social psychology.
14. Helfer, F., & Drew, S. (2019). Students' perceptions of doctoral supervision. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 14, 499–524. https://doi.org/10.28945/4368
15. Jaremka, L. M., et al. (2020). Common academic experiences no one talks about. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 15(3), 519–543. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619898848
16. Kennedy, E., Castanelli, D. J., Molloy, E., & Bearman, M. (2024). Addressing positionality in qualitative research. The Clinical Teacher, 21(6). https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.13820
17. Legassie, J., Zibrowski, E. M., & Goldszmidt, M. (2008). Measuring medical students' perceived stress. Medical Education, 42(10), 1018–1027.

18. Levine-Rasky, C. (2011). Intersectionality theory applied to whiteness. Social Identities, 17(2), 239–253.
19. Loy, L. S. (2017). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory.
20. Maji, S. (2021). Exploring imposter phenomenon among Indian female software engineers. Metamorphosis.
21. Matheka, H. M., Jansen, E. P. W. A., & Hofman, A. (2020). PhD students' background and program characteristics. International Journal of Doctoral Studies, 15.
22. Huecker, M. R., Shreffler, J., McKeny, P. T., & Davis, D. (2023). Imposter phenomenon. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK585058/
23. McLaren, P. (2019). The future of critical pedagogy. Educational Philosophy and Theory. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1686963
24. Mugotitsa, B., et al. (2025). Understanding mental health among university students in Kenya. Frontiers in Public Health, 13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2025.1557058
25. Newar, R., et al. (2025). Self-esteem as a mediator of imposter phenomenon. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 30(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2025.2496449
26. Okoro, N. D., Okere, I. C., & Nwankwo, U. P. (2021). Prevalence of impostor phenomenon. Health Professions Education, 7(4), 519–528.
27. Oyoo, M. A. (2024). Mental well-being among students in higher learning institutions. IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-4417-0.ch001
28. Parkera, J. S., et al. (2024). Dismantling the imposter syndrome. Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 49(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2023.2281670
29. Ruiz, A. M., et al. (2021). Intersectionality theory. Nursing Inquiry, 28(4).
30. Sanders, M. S., et al. (2023). Imposter phenomenon and mental health in Black graduate students.
31. Scheepers, D., & Ellemers, N. (2019). Social identity theory. Springer.
32. Schubert, N., & Reiner, P. (2021). The imposter phenomenon. Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development, 8.
33. Scotland, P. (2025). Conquering impostor syndrome in graduate school.
34. Soules, K. (2024). Imposter syndrome in graduate school. University of Rochester.
35. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior.
36. Villwock, J. A., Sobin, L. B., Koester, L. A., & Harris, T. M. (2016). Impostor syndrome and burnout. International Journal of Medical Education, 7, 364–369.
37. Zebastian, D. (2024). You're not alone: How to cope with impostor syndrome.