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# The impostor phenomenon among racially minoritised university students: 'who knows how to get rid of this?'

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## ABSTRACT

Less is known about the impostor phenomenon in undergraduate students and, more so, racially minoritised students in the UK. Impostorism has a constraining effect on constructing an authentic identity, leading to a feeling of phoniness. When impostorism intersects with a gendered and racially minoritised identity, individuals may face specific challenges, such as managing compound identity labels or struggling to achieve in their academic environment. This paper reports experiences of the phenomenon in Black female undergraduate students. Semi-structured focus group interviews with 10 students were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Four themes were generated: contextual experiences of impostorism, finding sense of belonging, struggling to maintain and value an authentic self, and taming my impostor. The findings point to university environments as both barriers and enablers for taming the effect of the impostor phenomenon on academic and cultural identities and provide novel insights into an underrepresented student population.

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## KEYWORDS

Impostor phenomenon;  
impostor syndrome;  
students; sense of belonging;  
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## Introduction

Research has shown that people from minoritised ethnicities must overcome challenges to secure a university degree (Advance 2019). These challenges include facing adversities from a hostile racial climate on campus, racial discrimination, insensitive comments and isolation (Hope, Hoggard, and Thomas 2015). In some groups, impostor feelings can contribute to a more challenging academic experience (Canning et al. 2019). Thus, racialised stressors can, in turn, intensify the feeling of being an impostor on campus. Notably, research documents an increase in impostor phenomenon susceptibility in women (Bernard, Hoggard, and Neblett 2018), African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities (Petee, Montgomery, and Weekes 2015). These encounters give rise to harmful psychological experiences (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007) and lower academic performance (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000).

Clance and Imes (1978) initially developed the term 'impostor phenomenon' to describe high-achieving women with feelings of inadequacy, intellectual fraudulence

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and undeserved recognition regarding their achievement and success. Those experiencing the impostor phenomenon (IP) tend to disregard praise (Chakraverty 2019) and have persistent fears that they will be found out and exposed as a 'fraud'. They attribute their achievements to luck and hard work instead of intelligence, ability and skills; thus, they believe they are fooling everyone (Mak, Kleitman, and Abbott 2019). In an academic environment, impostorism can evoke feelings of being invisible, undervalued and not belonging, effectively questioning one's habitus (Bourdieu 1998) and intellectual ability (Simon 2021). Impostors will even turn down career opportunities while struggling to recognise competence (Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch 2016; Vries 2005). Holding such thoughts is also associated with adverse psychological outcomes of high levels of anxiety, perfectionism, low self-esteem, self-inflicted achievement pressures, self-doubt, and poor mental health (Fraenza 2016; McGregor, Gee, and Posey 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that IP can harm people's mental health and, in turn, interfere with other aspects of life. Studies on African American students reveal racially driven experiences that include harmful psychological stressors associated with increased feelings of IP (Cokley et al. 2013, 2017). These experiences link to poorer mental health and psychological distress in these students (McClain et al. 2016; Stone et al. 2018). The total effect of IP damages well-being, particularly among Black students, and induces a sense of intellectual fraudulence.

Terms such as 'Black' are frequently explained through lenses of power, politics and skin colour (Mirza 2017) to the extent that racialised identities are challenging to describe, notwithstanding the myriad of contested terminologies for race and ethnicity (Singh 2022). In some literature, 'Black' is noted as derogatory (Staubhaar 2014) and a form of 'othering' (Harvey 2013) because it does not distinguish between difference and sameness (Maylor 2009), while Porter and Dean (2015) assert that the term captures a breadth of ethnic identities and, as Hurtado et al. (2008) maintain, can help draw attention to underrepresentation. In the present study, and in line with UK data collection methodology (ONS 2011), the broad conceptual category of 'Black' was used along with extensions stated by the participants, such as 'Black African' or 'Black Caribbean'. Research suggests that associations with being Black and having sense of belonging to Black racial groups can boost self-esteem and, in turn, decrease feelings of impostorism (Bécares, Nazroo, and Stafford 2009; Lige, Peteet, and Brown 2016). However, researchers and practitioners should consider other elements that may increase feelings of IP amongst young Black adults, particularly gender.

Gender plays a unique role in its interaction with IP. Some research links this interaction more definitively to women (McGregor, Gee, and Posey 2008). However, IP applies to men and women (Gravois 2007) and singularly to men when faced with performance conditions such as accountability and feedback (Badawy et al. 2018). Amongst research on Black students, evidence points to a higher susceptibility of IP for Black female students (Cokley et al. 2015). Evidence also suggests that navigating IP may become more heightened when an individual belongs to a group that attracts negative stereotypes (Neblett, Bernard, and Hudson Banks 2016). Yet, not all research agrees with this association. Some researchers have proposed that gender identity challenges are less pressing for Black women than racial identity (Kumea and Chanell Washington 1996). Furthermore, a combination (or intersection) of identities gives these women a sense of strength in the face of racism and sexism (Watson and Hunter 2016). Where findings from samples in the US have comprised much of the IP research in this

area, inquiries on Black female students in the UK are lacking. Thus, the basis of the current study is to explore the experience of IP within an intersection of race and gender in the context of Black female students at universities in the UK.

## Theoretical framework

Social identity theory (SIT) is a cornerstone of social psychology that provides conceptual background for understanding the scope of identities and implications arising from behaviours, attitudes, and well-being outcomes. It offers insight into how racialisation and gendering can intersect with identity to create tensions for well-being and positive academic experiences. Social groups and categories can usefully explain who we are, the labels we accept or ascribe to, and how we define ourselves and others in the social world. The premise of SIT, introduced by Tajfel and Turner in the late 1970s, suggests that group membership is part of the self-concept (Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002). Furthermore, individuals classify themselves and others along multiple dimensions of category membership simultaneously (e.g. Black, Muslim, and Woman).

Group memberships play a crucial role in how we experience life, but they also offer a sense of who we are. Thus, our instinct is to draw out positive traits of ‘us’ and look for negative characteristics of ‘them’ to boost our self-esteem (Oldmeadow and Fiske 2010). Belonging to stigmatised and otherwise negatively perceived social groups and categories can damage self-worth and, in turn, alter performance. Moreover, in-group favouritism can discriminate against out-groups, thus forming stereotypes and prejudiced attitudes towards others (Harwood 2020). The significance of group memberships is further tied to self-esteem (Hornsey 2008) and processes of discrimination (Tajfel and John 2004).

Developed initially to challenge the (mis)understanding of Black women in the legal system as a potential out-group with multiple social statuses (Crenshaw 1989), intersectionality has since been widely adapted for interdisciplinary use (see Hankivsky and Renee 2019). In complement with SIT’s intrapersonal/interpersonal insight into ethnic identity (Henwood 1994), intersectionality is a ‘named’ lens to frame experiences of racialised, classed and gendered oppression (Crenshaw 1989). A tenet of intersectionality is how belonging to multiple social categories, specifically race-class-gender intersections, shapes experiences and outcomes (Warner 2008). Tensions inherent in identity constructions can be separated using this theory (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006).

Furthermore, intersectionality is sensitive to factors that combine to ‘affect a person’s psychology’ (Lee 2012, 110). Hankivsky notes that intersectionality ‘... emphasises that people belong to more than one social category at the same time, focuses on interactions of different social locations, systems and processes, [and] investigates rather than assumes the significance of any specific combination of factors’ (2014, 13). These factors can combine to drive agency in any situation. However, it is worth pointing out that there is disagreement regarding using intersectionality to understand *individual* experiences. Collins and Bilge (2020) explain that intersectionality has become overrun with identity politics. Its application, they state, has been misused to break down social structures that allow *some* groups to thrive while other groups experience reality as disadvantageous. Davis (2008) noted that the popularity of the term intersectionality had turned it into a mere ‘buzzword’ in the social sciences. Moreover, lacking alignment with a specific analysis method has led to questions about its theoretical rigour (Hunting 2014).

Despite these arguments, there is still a place for studies that draw on intersectionality as a theoretical approach to understanding the relationship between identity construction and experience from a psychological perspective (Settles 2006). One such recognition is the role misogynoir (a form of intersectional harm directed at Black women; Bailey 2021) plays in negatively shaping experience in a range of contexts, university environments not excluded (Osbourne, Barnett, and Blackwood 2023). For example, Black girls are more likely to receive negative comments on their external appearance (Brown, Williams, and Williams 2023; Onnie Rogers, Versey, and Cielto 2022). Black women are considered less academically ‘strong’. They are sabotaged in their efforts to progress (Vital et al. 2023) while navigating cultural stereotypes such as the ‘strong Black woman’ when they assert themselves (R. Graham and Clarke 2021). They experience harsher evaluations and are considered ‘rowdy and disruptive’ (Andrews et al. 2019).

Consequently, Black women embody the belief that they must work ‘twice as hard to get half as far’ (DeSante 2013) and feel under pressure to educate others about the emotional burden of carrying their intersections (Ladson-Billings 2008). Cumulatively, these issues point to a more deleterious experience for Black women in systems of education that are – at least in the US – labelled ‘anti-Black’ in their origins (Elon, Edwards, and James 2018). When these experiences link to an impostor identity, there is a real risk of self-fragmentation, a process described by Counted (2016, 271) as ‘intense ambivalent feelings or emotions and thoughts [which] are separated from each other in one’s consciousness’ and further promote feelings of ‘abandonment, anxiety, loss, uncertainties, and premonitions of insecurity’ (281). This process shares some semblance to feelings that accompany a sense of impostorism.

Ireland et al. (2018, 229) go further, arguing that paying attention to ‘*the psychology of intersectionality in education* [emphasis in original] adds value to theoretical and methodological approaches that help us examine Black women and girls’ experiences in STEM education’. In support, Cole (2009) proposed that intersectionality offers a useful scope for understanding how multiple dimensions of social identities interlink to experiences that are the product of structural oppression and discrimination. Cole (2009) argued that one-dimensional thinking excludes various other paths that, in fact, influence and depend on each other to explain human behaviour. Thus, the theoretical framework is tied to an in-depth consideration of identity, difference, and disadvantage and supports the aims of the present study.

### **Aim and research question**

A body of research has looked at IP in students in diverse settings, for example, medical (Levant, Villwock, and Manzardo 2020), doctoral (McGee et al. 2021) and college (Bernard, Hoggard, and Neblett 2018). However, less is known about IP effects on Black undergraduate students in a UK context. A central aim of this study was to understand the role IP plays in the experiences of Black female undergraduate students at UK universities. Given a lack of specific knowledge about the systemic barriers these students may face in academic environments, we sought to understand the role an interplay of multiple identities and IP might have for these students.

## Data and methods

The study received ethical approval from the lead author's institution (ETH2021–2369, Psychology Department) and followed the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS 2021). We used semi-structured focus group interviews and thematic analysis to understand impostor feelings as part of the lived experience of being a Black woman in UK higher education. An inductive, data-driven approach was used since IP experiences are less documented in UK Black female undergraduate students. Thematic analysis is suited to analysing focus group data (Joffe 2011) because it has theoretical and methodological flexibility and incorporates a range of frameworks (Clarke and Braun 2013).

Our study employed purposive sampling to recruit currently enrolled Black women at UK universities via social media and an online platform (Call for Participants). Eligible participants (Table 1) were sent an information sheet and consent form. Seven of the ten participants (mean age = 21 years) studied at London-based universities, including from the Russell Group, while three were students at other universities in England. Of those declared, the subjects studied were Business, Chemistry, Law, and Psychology.

Online interviews consisted of four focus groups using Microsoft Teams software, each with an average duration of 40 minutes. A research assistant facilitated the groups, and Deborah Husbands observed them. Each group contained at least two participants to encourage a conversational exchange of their experiences and perspectives. The interview schedule consisted of 9 questions with probes to explore the experience of studying at university and the role IP might play in that experience. Participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Interview recordings were anonymised and transcribed by a professional transcription service that followed strict confidentiality guidelines. We de-briefed the participants and thanked them for their time with a gift voucher.

The transcripts were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis framework informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) approach to identify patterns in the data that could be codified as themes. The process involved reading the transcripts before carrying out a computerised coding exercise to identify keywords and phrases while noting those with re-occurrences that pointed to categories that could be developed into themes. The researchers used qualitative data analysis software (NVivo and Quirkos). Four themes were generated from pooled data as a product of repeated coding, theme subsumption,

**Table 1.** Participants.

	Age	Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Subject studied
1.	19	Diana	Black	Psychology
2.	20	Thambi	Black African	Psychology
3.	23	Zarah	Black Caribbean	International Business
4.	21	Abigail	Black African	Accounting and Business Management
5.	22	Ene	Black African/Indian	Law
6.	20	Kemi	Black African	Chemistry
7.	22	Akilah	Black Hispanic	Psychology
8.	19	Eden	Black African	Not stated
9.	20	Melissa	Black Caribbean	Psychology
10.	21	Andrea	Black Caribbean	Business and Management

and abstraction. The focus group facilitator provided their reflections on the interviews, supporting the analysis.

### **Positionality statement**

While the number of racially minoritised students is increasing in UK higher education (HESA 2018), fewer of these students are Black and female; thus, there is a real chance of feeling hyper-invisible and hyper-visible in these settings (Ireland et al. 2018). We took steps to foster comfortability for participants by paying attention to participant-researcher salience. Lubaba Khalid (focus group facilitator) and Deborah Husbands (observer) identify as Black women. Their lived experiences of racism and othering in higher education aided interpretation of the data. Skaiste Linceviciute identifies as an Eastern European woman whose research centres on integration and belonging experiences. Orkun Yetkili identifies as a European man who researches inter-group processes. Together, we use research processes to highlight and combat discriminatory practices in higher education.

### **Findings**

Four themes were constructed: (1) contextual experiences of IP, (2) finding sense of belonging, (3) struggling to maintain and value an authentic self, and (4) taming my impostor. Participants were first asked to state their understanding of the impostor phenomenon to ensure a comparable grasp of the term. We situated this against a definition taken from Clance and Imes (1978) seminal work in this area, which the facilitator shared with participants *after* they had reflected on the meaning of IP. Their responses were concomitant with Clance and Imes' definition and indicated a good understanding of the term.<sup>1</sup> Their collective perspectives of its link to an individual's sense of achievement and feelings of inadequacy offered confidence that participants could discuss their university experiences in the context of IP.

### **Contextual experiences of IP**

Participants experienced IP differently in differing contexts. Three environments heightened the realisation and actualisation of an IP experience: (i) secondary school, (ii) university and (iii) employment, with the greatest impact felt during secondary school. In that environment, participants experienced academic mistreatment, pressure and stress that instilled impostor-invoked self-doubt (McGregor, Gee, and Posey 2008) and difficulty accepting failure (Fraenza 2016). Pressure to achieve drove some participants to excel during secondary school. Still, there was a cost to emotional well-being that was underpinned by having to maintain the intersectional label of a high-achieving Black female student:

As long as I can remember, from primary school, all the way through high school, I was in the top set for a lot of things. And, obviously, there's a massive gap between what you need to know in high school, and what you need to know in uni. So I feel because I was always told



you're a gifted student . . . it would be like they kind of throw the worksheets at you, and they're like, this is easy; just do it. (Melissa)

These experiences marked the installation of impostor characteristics (Clance and Imes 1978), including working harder than their peers, who seemed to allocate less effort to achieve equivalent progress. While some participants saw this as a driver or motivator, most in this scenario faced stress early in their academic history. By contrast, some participants felt the university environment moderated their feeling of being an impostor. Thambi commented that the university helped her recognise her struggle with a learning disability:

Potentially, university saved the situation [...] I found out in first year, really, that I'm dyslexic. It took eighteen years for a teacher – one of my lecturers – to look at me and just went, oh, that might be because of this. But [...] in secondary school and sixth-form, it was just pegged off as, yeah, this is probably the best that you can do. And I would go to teachers and try to explain, no, I can do more!

The university 'saving the situation' was surprising, given the challenges participants undoubtedly faced while learning in a wholly online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Satisfaction with the university was a recurring experience. Nevertheless, the 'high achieving student' label during secondary school appeared to follow these participants into university, mandating the challenge of normalising their identity as a student. Similarly, placements or employment became codified environments that held intersectional challenges of being 'the only Black woman' (Zarah) and 'the odd one out' (Diana). Despite career-related efforts, their contributions as Black women were perceived as less valued, and thoughts of racialised tokenism emerged amid the feeling of 'faking it' (Akilah).

### ***Finding sense of belonging***

Regardless of their environment, participants felt a strong need for belonging. However, when discussing circumstances that could affect a student's belonging to the university environment, race impacted academic adjustment and settling-in experiences more than gender, as Kumea and Chanell Washington (1996) suggested. Most participants were uncomfortably aware of Black student under-representation in their courses, and being a notable minority was experienced as unpleasant. Racialised and isolating experiences can compound a sense of unbelonging (Arday and Safia Mirza 2018), and these participants struggled to relate and connect to their predominantly White counterparts. Participants admitted that, besides transitioning challenges from secondary school to university, they also faced struggles of 'onlyness' (Harper 2013) with limited opportunities to relate to other students from similar backgrounds, which was stressful and alienating. They explained that the challenges of remote study, as observed by Meydanlioglu and Arikan (2022), meant fewer opportunities to connect with similar others for culturally relevant support. Being part of WhatsApp student groups only seemed to heighten a sense of unbelonging since discussions in these forums centred on topics with which they felt they could not identify. Moreover, constantly evaluating each other's performance in these environments was experienced as unhelpful for the positive construction of their academic identity. The more resilient participants opted to



leave these groups and seek support from Black students at other universities, signalling a lack of culturally sensitive provisions at their university:

I made a group chat of other Black students, other Black females, actually, from different universities. And I feel that's also my support group, because they always relate to anything that I say. And we're on the same kind of—we come from the same background, and we understand the same traditions. So, it's really easy to mention a problem in that group chat, and they'll support you. So, I think it's that idea of separating yourself from, I guess, things that are sometimes toxic and looking at other people's achievements, is a very valid point. And I think that's helped to reduce the impostor phenomenon . . . To get rid of that completely as well, it might just be like the best thing, but who knows?! Who knows how to get rid of it?! (Kemi)

Some participants stated that performance pressure was less experienced online and welcomed this form of teaching and learning as a respite. Others were concerned that being in the physical company of high achievers could make them question their abilities and achievements; thus, they welcomed the distance. It was apparent, however, that a socially-distanced environment could replicate the experience of isolation. While feelings of psychological safety buffered the consequences of studying remotely, a long history of impostorism further amplified isolation and self-doubt:

I think I just isolated myself and I thought that was kind of the best course of action, just to kind of protect myself. I guess it's down to the person I am as well. I'm more introverted and when I do, I do feel best when I'm alone and when I just distance myself. But with this whole impostor syndrome thing, it was almost a good enough excuse for me to distance even more. So, I would isolate myself in situations where I did need help, and I did need to reach out and seek some type of support. But I don't know, it was a constant battle in feeling this impostor thing, that I wanted to prove myself wrong, I wanted to get to a point where I wasn't faking it, that I was actually performing. And I wanted to believe that I deserve to be here, and I was producing adequate enough work. But in that it was like I was doing too much as well, I was doing too much in terms of thinking I could be self-sufficient, to the point that I don't need anyone. (Akilah)

In what seems like a vicious cycle, participants were precluding themselves from the possibility of receiving essential support. By contrast, an absence of culturally appropriate support prevented them from experiencing a fuller sense of belonging to their university community. From the perspective of maintaining a social identity, some participants strongly identified with the need to seek companionship from other students as a form of support, pointing to growing optimism for a time when they could return to campus and inhabit the visceral identity of a student in onsite spaces. In what has become an increasing use of hybrid learning environments in higher education (Snart 2019), these participants wanted to feel safe when expressing their authentic cultural identity and supported in these spaces, as borne out by Eden's comment:

I think the thing that makes it harder, is the fact that because everything has been online, that just made it a lot worse. And I don't know if the same experience would have happened if Covid wasn't here, and that's not really something the university can do anything about. But I suppose having preventative measures, in the sense that if the pandemic was to go longer, or if another pandemic was to happen – God forbid! – like there were measures to tackle this. So, I don't know how viable this is, or how possible it is to do such a thing because of the limits that there are online. I feel when it's in-person, it's easier to feel like you can express yourself and connect with people. But when it's online, it's more so of you're

getting a façade of what I'm giving you, and you don't know how I'm feeling behind the messages I'm sending. So, it's really hard, and I don't know what could actually be done in that situation.

### ***Struggling to maintain and value an Authentic Self***

Intersectionality played out most strongly within the context of this theme. Expressing an authentic self was tied up with feeling comfortable with one's culture, ethnicity, gender, academic identity, and academic achievements. Although part of an overall struggle with experiences of misogynoir on campus (Vital et al. 2023), the participants resisted attempts by others to reduce the uniqueness of their identity through the longstanding trope of a 'strong Black woman' (Kumea and Chanell Washington 1996). Yet, they recounted the ongoing pressure of '(mis)representing' Black people and, as Andrews et al. (2019) found in Black girls, the struggle to resist stereotypical assertions about their identity at the risk of being seen as aggressive:

Especially with strong, Black women . . . you really feel that you need to be ace-ing everything and still have a fun personality and be like all these things. But, at the same time, not coming off as too aggressive, or too much and all these other things, and it can be really hard to do . . . (Ene)

It's a feeling of being watched, like I feel that was a transition from secondary school to university, that feeling of being watched, or that feeling of having to be a presentable Black person in society. Because if somebody catches you at the wrong moment or at the wrong time, that's the impression that they're going to hold, sadly, for Black people for the rest of their lives. So, every time that you're out in public, you have to be this perfect representative of your race. (Thambi)

For many participants, the apparent diversity of their university environment compared positively to their experience at secondary school (some of whom were the only Black students in their class). They appreciated the sense of freedom their university offered to learn and grow independently. For some, not always having to explain one's background provided a feeling that they were 'good enough'. A diverse environment allowed authenticity and identity to intersect, and the participants recognised this as critical to constructing a liberating self-image. Moreover, they felt empowered to support others in a quest to achieve the same:

. . . it's been quite refreshing for me just to be my authentic self, and maybe help other people to be their authentic self in their university experience as well . . . And I found that uni just seems to be just a lot more welcoming, in that sense. I'm just going to be who I am, and I don't need to wait or ask for acceptance. (Thambi)

Yet, constructions of an authentic identity were further frustrated in specific situations, again pointing to longstanding experiences of misogynoir in academia (Osbourne, Barnett, and Blackwood 2023). Whether on placement as the only Black woman or applying for employment, there were concerns about how their intersectional identity might work against them. Feelings of impostorism (Bernard, Hoggard, and Neblett 2018) and 'onlyness' (Harper 2013) dominated their thoughts and prevented them from enjoying their achievements. Furthermore, authenticity conflated with impostorism when participants internally questioned whether they had the right to the successes

they experienced in, for example, a job interview, further challenging the value of their authentic self and achievements:

I would say I felt impostor syndrome like doing interview processes. So, if I would apply for a job and I had the interview, and I ended up getting a job, I would be a bit confused; like, why? How did I actually get that? What did they see in me that I couldn't see in myself? And it was just a thing where I just needed to reassure myself that, okay, they can really see something. There must be something there. [...] You don't think you're capable of something, but others think you are. So, it's like you're kind of reassured, and I guess it can be a confidence boost as well. (Andrea)

Andrea conveyed a sense of vulnerability as she described tensions stemming from a felt requirement to conform. Impostorism and stereotypical judgments about a racialised identity seem to confound the ability to 'organically' maintain feelings of authenticity for these participants, suggesting that belonging is being frustrated by their perceptions of acceptance and the [cultural] norms of their environment.

### ***Taming my impostor***

The participants' resilience and determination to succeed in their studies were apparent in narratives of resistance to the quirks of impostorism. While acutely aware of the potential for IP to derail their identity, authenticity, and academic progress, they also described several approaches to confronting the phenomenon. The university's diversity of faces and places seemed to facilitate more opportunities to 'safely' explore the experience of impostorism. For some participants, this represented a direct contrast to their secondary school experience. However, for Thambi, it was necessary to understand the cultural origins of her feelings to contextualise the experience of IP:

...my impostor syndrome was rooted in colourism and not racism. I had to work hard or do more, be extra compared to my – like every single person ... I'm the darkest person in every single area of my life that there is. I have a light-skinned mother who I look nothing like, and most of my friends are light-skinned, brown. I'm typically the darkest person. So, impostor syndrome, potentially, came at a young age when you're looking at your friends, and [they] receive compliments and things like that, and you're just wondering, well, the only difference between me and them is my skin tone. So, then you try and catch up and live up to that, but then very quickly I was able to come out of it.

Thambi's closing comment suggests that while a darker skin tone is essentially as long-standing as the experience of impostorism, her assertion that IP feelings could be understood when '[you] try and catch up and live up to that' signified meaning-making for her experiences. This comment was the only reference to colourism in the dataset, but it is interesting to note how skin tone can convey identity placement (ONS 2021). Thambi underwent valuable identity work that enabled her to reconcile the irrevocability of both effects (a darker skin tone and IP). She came to value her identity as a unique essence through acceptance and moving on. With this recognition, it is even more critical to seek identity stability by 'work[ing] hard to retain that version of this Black woman', according to Thambi.

Another tactic of resilience was finding spaces at the university where an impostor identity could be safely explored, even if the student had to work at 'containing' challenges to that identity. Several participants pointed to the importance of 'safe spaces'

at their university where they could be authentic and experience belonging. Their descriptions of such spaces were relatively limited and pointed to the possibility that they are somehow less familiar to these students. Based on their narratives, however, key characteristics include a feeling of psychological safety and comfortability, being non-competitive, and populated by those who also experience IP or empathise with the experience. Such spaces could help reduce the burden of isolation, an enduring feature of the experience of these participants. They also recounted occasions when impostorism reared its head, leading to exaggerated comparisons of their performance to other students as a form of intergroup differentiation, noted by Oldmeadow and Fiske (2010) as ‘us’ and ‘them’ categorisations. Akilah recounted this process as a ‘vicious cycle’, and she experienced a negative toll on her well-being as she reflected on an uncomfortable experience in the setting of a study group:

I just didn’t appreciate the fact that we may have had different learning styles, and may have just taken me longer, but that shouldn’t have been such a critical thing on my own ability. But I took it as such, and I was just like, I’m not good enough. I don’t deserve to be here doing these things. Like I don’t have the capacity that other people are clearly showing. I should be on the same path. I should be almost performing at the same level and not be left behind.

Contrastingly, Akilah also described these comparisons as a ‘motivator’ for improving academic performance while commenting on their likeness to a struggle using war-like terms such as ‘combat[ing] the impostor phenomenon’ and ‘having to battle this impostor syndrome’.

For Eden, taking a self-reflective approach that included reviewing her exam grades and seeing the quality of her notes enabled her to ‘blow your own horn’ as a confidence boost. This ‘talk’ was also reflected in participants’ struggles with procrastinating [for coursework deadlines]. Thus, they employed a taming tactic by using positive self-talk (Dolcos and Albarracín 2014) to evaluate and reinforce an academic identity despite everything that IP was telling them about themselves, as expressed by Zarah, who aptly captured the preservative effect of self-talk to tame her impostor:

I’m the person that’s bouncing in between, where it’s like, no, I’ve actually really worked very hard to get this, and then, oh, well, have I? Did I make that up in my head? And then I’m like, no, no, no, I actually did, but I remember that I worked really hard.

Whilst this kind of internal dialogue seems bereft of external critique, for participants with a more solitary existence, self-talk improved their self-esteem. It allowed them to believe their academic identity was as credible as their peers.

## Discussion

This study identified four themes around contexts of impostor phenomenon (IP) realisation, maintenance, impact, and confrontation – all tied to students’ racialised identities. Analysis revealed that educational establishments acted as a precursor for feelings of inauthenticity that instilled and nourished feelings of IP. Secondary schools, in particular, functioned in a tradition (Rollock et al. 2015) that, perhaps unwittingly, permitted a form of prejudice towards Black students. Participants noted academic mistreatment in confusing scenarios where teachers labelled them as ‘not

good enough' juxtaposed with remarks of being 'gifted'. Thambi's experience of being 'written off' during secondary school because of her dyslexia is not untypical of Black children (Hoyles and Hoyles 2010) who may find themselves precariously labelled as 'SEN' (special educational needs) and subject to differentiated treatment, the downstream of which can lead to frustration and feelings of powerlessness (Gillborn et al. 2016) as well as negative group associations (Hornsey 2008). For some participants, mixed messages resulted in an overly optimistic sense of their academic ability that did not match anticipated university experiences. In that environment, participants pointed out that they faced an almost 'instant' feeling of a false sense of achievement, particularly when comparing themselves to their counterparts who they thought were more academically prepared. While participants reported having erroneous thoughts at the start of their academic journey, some admitted to facing this challenge throughout their university experience and felt acceptance at a prestigious university was down to luck or failure in the system. These views typify an IP identity (Simon 2021), further highlighted in these participants as feelings of confusion and uncertainty about their capabilities and achievements.

Husbands (2019) found that the toll from living with the label of a 'high achieving Black female student' during secondary school created feelings of depression in Black women during undergraduate study. Similarly, the label resulted in unnecessary pressure for participants in the current study, besides the challenge of dealing with IP. Multiple identities (high-achieving, Black and female) encouraged unhelpful and self-sabotaging behaviours such as comparing their achievement to other students and feelings of low self-worth. Participants also stated the importance of reflecting on positive aspects of their identity to manage combined pressure. Strong, but realistic, expectations for performing well in education could help them deflect negative racial stereotypes about their ethnic group and strengthen their academic identity.

In contrast with experiences at secondary school, the university environment moderated the feeling of being an impostor, which was an unexpected finding, given the difficulties minoritised students face (Arday and Mirza 2018). Participants viewed their universities as diverse and, mostly, welcoming and felt they could be 'authentic' in expressing their cultural identity, especially in 'safe spaces'. This finding suggests that when students feel accepted in ways that do not reference or highlight social characteristics as 'othered' (Harwood 2020), they can feel more belonging to their university communities. Research has also shown the importance of belonging for students with a range of characteristics (Thomas 2022), and there is a powerful effect on well-being and academic achievement in minoritised students (J. Graham and McClain 2019).

Thus, transitioning to university was liberating for the participants, but race remained a dominant factor in the quality of their university experience. For example, the underrepresentation of Black students across individual courses complicated the situation. A sense of 'Onlyness' from being a notable minority at their university created an uncomfortable atmosphere that strengthened feelings of impostorism. Increased alienation and disengagement caused some participants to question their authenticity and capabilities. In particular, feeling like the 'odd one out' created belonging and adjustment concerns students took upon themselves to resolve through external friendship avenues and tactics of resistance. 'onlyness' is a particularly troubling experience for racially minoritised students (Harper 2013). Yet, the provision of safe spaces where students

can connect to similar peers was limited at some universities. This limitation informed an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ atmosphere that was unhelpful for community cohesion.

Moreover, learning off-site is reported as stressful for students (Moawad 2020). According to a systematic review (Hehir et al. 2021), it has disrupted opportunities for connectedness to others, but participants in the current study appeared to welcome this distance from campus. Their comments confirmed that remote learning removed the pressure of being hyper-visible and provided respite from constant evaluation of other students’ achievements. This critical observation favours hybrid teaching and learning methods (Meydanlioglu and Arikan 2022) as a means of helping marginalised students better adjust to diverse environments. Hybrid methods could also help students manage IP traits (such as intellectual fraudulence; Vergauwe et al. 2014) away from the gaze of their peers and teaching staff.

Despite these challenges, it was evident that there are elements of resilience for these participants, albeit within a continuous cycle of self-doubt, perfectionism, and procrastinating behaviours. Participants wanted to ‘break away’ from the often homogenised and stereotyped identity of a Black woman (Watson and Hunter 2016) and instead celebrate their uniqueness and strength. Yet, even holding to the ideology of a ‘strong Black woman’ (Woods-Giscombé 2010) creates psychological distress in Black women based on external expectations (Abrams, Hill, and Maxwell 2018). In the current study, feelings of being an impostor seemed to add to participants’ uncertainty and psychological discomfort; thus, they agreed that they needed to ‘battle’, or somehow ‘tame’, impostor traits using self-reflective approaches. Participants learnt to resist the pressure of labels acquired during secondary school, shaping resilience, informing the creation of culturally supportive groups and the ability to fight discrimination and prejudice elsewhere. Thus, the university plays a critical role in providing environments where students can identify forms of resilience and safely explore their identity in ways that encourage authenticity. Our study found that a lack of racial and academic belongingness upset these participants, reinforced by low levels of culturally relevant support, acceptance, and encouragement. Sense of belonging for racialised minorities remains a crucial aspect of the student experience, but its importance is less addressed in some ethnic groups.

## Conclusions

This study addresses a knowledge gap by exploring experiences of impostorism in a group of racially minoritised students in UK universities. The findings show that participants construct universities as sites where the power is given back to them to ‘undo’ unhelpful labels and perceptions acquired during secondary school. Yet, the liberal style of university environments may allow impostorism to continue to fester in the background. The sum effect is experienced as a mixture of perfectionism, procrastination, an unhealthy focus on self and peer evaluations, working in isolation, a weak sense of belonging and unwillingness to seek support. Notably, there were fewer acknowledgements of successes and positive outcomes in this environment. While the experience of impostorism is unique to an individual, participants’ accounts indicate that the intersection of a racially minoritised identity and IP requires fresh thinking for the kinds of culturally sensitive support that can enable students to recognise and celebrate their identities and achievements. Moreover, early recognition of IP characteristics by

secondary schools could reduce experiences of impostorism and unbelonging in higher education.

Future studies should address IP in secondary school environments to support the transition into university and improve belonging. Universities should take earlier action using culturally sensitive support to identify feelings of impostorism to moderate its impact on students. For example, the creation of ‘safe spaces’ as sites for targeted initiatives, such as speaker series or empowerment workshops featuring diverse representation, could contribute to improving belonging, providing career templates and shaping aspirations for racially-minoritised students. This research has emphasised their importance and sheds further light on the barriers and enablers for Black women’s experiences in the UK education system.

## Note

1. Participants used the term ‘impostor syndrome’ interchangeably throughout the interviews, which was acceptable because of its prevalent use in society.

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