

OS COLLECTIVES BRINGS YOU

Creativity in Crisis:
The Hidden Cost of
Imposter Syndrome &
The Inner Critic



OS Collectives

Ozlem Tuskan & Susan Wallbrook

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Artwork by Kat Kristof

About OS

OS Collectives is a global advisory and movement on a mission to give power to creatives. Founded by industry leaders, Oz and Susan, the pair have set out to flip the lid on imposter syndrome in order to remove the fear that holds back creative potential. OS Collectives provides training, talks based on real time global research to disrupt the creative industry with truth people resonate with. By focusing on empowering creatives and entrepreneurs, we help them recognise their potential, acknowledge their creative genius and celebrate their success with confidence.

Our ongoing global research study amongst creative leaders and entrepreneurs across multiple sectors, together with our own lived experiences, allows us to shape specialised talks and workshops that creative hearts and minds resonate with. Our mission is to inspire, inform and enable creative leaders, entrepreneurs and their teams to overcome imposter syndrome and reach their full potential.



Susan Left, Ozlem Right

What has your inner voice said to you today?

Most of us have an internal monologue that we use to make sense of the world around us. As we move through life it adds punctuation to moments of sudden pain, surprise, or delight. It's there as a companion when we're struggling with a problem. In times of extreme stress, it enables us to vent in private. Inner voices manifest in curious ways. Some people have described it as sounding different from their own speech – a British woman interviewed by The Guardian reported that her internal voice was actually a dialogue where a man and a woman argue the toss in exaggerated Italian accents.

While inner voices are inextricably tied up with self-perception and meaning-making (it develops as we learn to speak as infants) the contributions of these narrators aren't as constructive as they once were. Inner voices have had enough of things like kindness, generosity and encouragement. Instead, they seem just as likely to jeer from the sidelines. Many describe these inner confidantes turning into inner critics – a second-guessing, ridiculing, and taunting voice rooting for a downfall. Negative or toxic self-talk has become a pervasive problem and drives an even bigger issue – imposter syndrome. That is, an unyielding doubt when it comes to our skills, expertise, or self-worth. At its worst, the afflicted feel like fraudsters. One day, the world will recognise it, and call us out.

Meanwhile, the physiological sensations tied up with imposter syndrome make it a visceral (and uniquely unpleasant) experience. There is dread ahead of a big date in the calendar. Fear that surges up with little warning. Heart palpitations, perspiring, nausea and brain fog.

This report is the start of a multi-year inquiry into the phenomenon of imposter syndrome. In the following pages we have tried to offer a primer of the issue, and a snapshot of its impact on the creative industries and entrepreneurs. Our findings here are informed by qualitative interviews with over sixty creative professionals and entrepreneurs. We drew on experiences from professionals in fashion, advertising, architecture, marketing, design, luxury, tech and lifestyle. Encompassing agency executives and authors, to political strategists and CEOs. The results were staggering. Our initiative unearthed a silent fracture present in teams and organisations in the UK and USA. In thousands of offices and studios, talented individuals are hobbled by a tendency to doubt themselves.

But what happens when we are more forthcoming about this issue? What happens when we understand its origins? When we find solutions for it rather than live with it. Can we be a greater force for good? Spark greater creative ideas as we chart the unknown? Be more imaginative and inclusive? Build greater sustainable human businesses? We also hope that you'll join us in our journey to unpick the nuances and intricacies of this phenomenon. Stay tuned for a roster of launches and events in the coming months. But for now, ask your inner voice to settle down for the time being – and allow you to take in the contents of the pages below.

See you soon.

Özlem & Susan
Co-founders, OS Collectives

Executive Summary

Introduction

The creative industries, the very heart of global innovation and cultural dynamism, are grappling with a silent yet devastating challenge: Imposter syndrome. This insidious condition, marked by relentless self-doubt and the haunting fear of being unmasked as a fraud, is wreaking havoc on professionals in fashion, advertising, design, architecture, and film. OS Collectives' enlightening new report, "Creativity in Crisis: The Hidden Cost of Imposter Syndrome & The Inner Critic" reveals the profound impact of this phenomenon and issues an urgent call to action. This groundbreaking report is the first of its kind, drawn from in-depth interviews with 60 industry leaders and founders, equally representing both male and female perspectives.

As we journey through life, this inner voice adds punctuation to moments of sudden pain, surprise, or delight. Many of us have a voice in our heads that guides us through our daily lives.

It stands by our side when we're grappling with a problem and offers a private outlet during times of extreme stress. However, these inner voices don't always remain supportive. Over time, they can lose their tone of kindness, generosity, and encouragement, turning into critical commentators. This negative self-talk fuels a bigger issue – imposter syndrome.

Key Findings

1 The Silent Epidemic: Normalisation of Self-Doubt

Imposter syndrome is a widespread issue, with 82% of US professionals and two-thirds of UK professionals affected. Many accept it as an inescapable part of life, creating a culture of crippling anxiety and self-doubt that stifles creativity and innovation. This normalisation embeds self-doubt deep within the industry's fabric, creating a pervasive and destructive cycle.

Professionals often feel a chronic sense of inadequacy, regardless of their achievements. This feeling is particularly pronounced in high-stakes environments where the pressure to continuously innovate is immense..

"While imposter syndrome is common, with roughly 8 out of 10 people experiencing it, I would caution against normalising it. When we normalise something, the next step is to accept it, and we don't want to accept this."

Sheryl Anjanette, Bestselling Author, The Imposter Lies Within, TEDx Speaker, Founder and CEO, Parsley360.

2 The Economic Assassin: Hidden Costs of Self-Doubt

Imposter syndrome is a silent economic drain, arguably costing US businesses and the economy \$0.96 trillion and potentially costing the UK £14 bn in loss of productivity and engagement. Companies reported that employees with imposter syndrome are less likely to ask for raises or promotions, leading to a significant gender pay gap. This not only affects their financial well-being but also impacts their self-esteem and career progression.

"In the creative industries, where innovation is the lifeblood, the economic toll of imposter syndrome is particularly alarming. We can't afford to let self-doubt stifle our most talented individuals."

Creative Director, Advertising Agency

3 Creativity Under Siege: The Battle for Innovation

The very soul of the creative industries is at risk. Creative professionals, revered for their emotional sensitivity and brilliance, are particularly vulnerable. The high incidence of imposter syndrome leads to diminished productivity, rampant burnout, and suppressed innovation. The pressure to perpetually generate groundbreaking work exacerbates these debilitating feelings.

Our study found that 80% of creatives feel their best ideas are often discarded out of fear of criticism, causing hesitation in sharing their work.

“Creatives are emotionally driven people, and usually, we feel things very deeply. The process of having ideas is giving over a part of yourself in a vulnerable and personal way.”

Laura Jordan Bambach, Founder and Chief Creative Officer, Uncharted Studio.

4 The Class Divide: Social Inequality and Self-Worth

The issue of imposter syndrome is exacerbated by social class. Individuals from less affluent backgrounds often feel like outsiders, leading to heightened self-doubt and stunted career advancement. This hidden crisis exposes the deep fissures of inequality within the creative industries. A startling 75% of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported feeling out of place in their professional environments.

The report highlights that creatives from underprivileged backgrounds often feel the need to work twice as hard to prove themselves.

“If you have been to private school, you are instilled with a different level of confidence. It’s not about just putting responsibility on the individual to find intrinsic motivation, it’s about looking at the role the system has to play.”

Kian Baktiari, Founder, The People.

5 Gendered Shadows: The Gender Battle Against Imposter Syndrome

Contrary to existing belief that IP is a female phenomenon research shows both men and women equally experience it (49% of men and 51%). However the experience of imposter syndrome differs between men and women. Women tend to internalise their self-doubt, self-sabotaging and hesitating to seize opportunities. Men, on the other hand, may suppress or project their insecurities, adopting a mask of confidence while struggling internally. These gendered differences demand bespoke solutions. Notably, 70% of women reported turning down opportunities due to imposter syndrome, compared to 50% of men. Additionally, 65% of women in leadership roles feel that their gender exacerbates feelings of imposter syndrome, often questioning if they truly deserve their position or if they are just filling a quota.

“Imposter syndrome is a result of consistent and persistent feedback. As a female founder, you have a choice: to make that strengthen your beliefs, or allow it to hurt your self-esteem.”

Jo Forster, previously Industry lead for the Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship (an initiative by NatWest Group) and on the advisory board for Pathways Forward in Scotland.



6 Seeds of Doubt: Educational Interventions for the Young

The seeds of imposter syndrome are sown early. Addressing it within educational settings is paramount. Training educators to spot and support students grappling with self-doubt can prevent these toxic feelings from taking root, nurturing a generation of resilient and confident individuals. Statistics show that students who receive early intervention are 40% less likely to suffer from imposter syndrome in their professional lives.

Teachers who adopt a more supportive and understanding approach can significantly impact students' self-perception.

"Our educational institutions should normalise struggle and failure. We need a framework to mitigate the negative effects of imposter syndrome, both in education and business."

Dr. Knatokie Ford, Founder and CEO of Fly Sci® Enterprise and former Senior Policy Advisor at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) during the Obama Administration, TEDx Speaker on Imposter Syndrome

7 The Power of Vulnerable Leadership

Vulnerable leadership is the solution to this crisis. Leaders who bravely share their own struggles with imposter syndrome foster environments of openness and trust. This revolutionary approach dismantles hierarchical barriers, allowing teams to express doubts and collaborate more fearlessly.

Leaders who exhibit vulnerability can transform organisational culture, encouraging teams to be more honest about their own challenges and fostering a more supportive work environment.

"Training leaders to share their own vulnerabilities makes them more forgiving, and encourages teams to more readily approach them. Companies flourish when leaders express their human traits."

Jo DiSante, VP of Current Programming, ABC Entertainment.

8 Growth at All Costs: The Toll on Mental Health

The relentless pursuit of growth and success in the creative industries is causing severe mental health issues, leading to increased sick days and burnout among creative leaders. This "growth at all costs" mentality is not sustainable and is contributing to a significant decline in overall well-being. Many leaders feel the pressure to achieve continuous growth, often at the expense of their health, with the expectation to constantly deliver groundbreaking work becoming overwhelming.

"We need to draw ourselves back to what it is that we're doing wrong that's causing so many people to be unwell, and have so many mental health days that stop them coming into work."

Sarah Rutson, Brand Advisor, Global C Suite Creative Merchant, Former Vice President of Global Buying, NET-A-PORTER & Lane Crawford.

9 Creating Connections and Support Networks: Overcoming Isolation

Building robust networks and connections is essential in addressing imposter syndrome. Initiatives that bring people together to share experiences, provide mentorship, and create supportive environments can have a profound impact. Developing platforms where creatives and founders can share their experiences and uplift one another fosters a profound sense of belonging and combats the isolation imposter syndrome breeds. Regular gatherings, both online and offline, can create supportive networks.

"Many of our members have told me that getting comfortable with networking has helped them gain the confidence to talk to investors about raising funding for their businesses."

Emmie Faust, Founder, Female Founders Rise and Angel Investor.

Impact on Creative Industries

Imposter syndrome's devastating impact on the creative industries is manifold.

The Productivity Paralyser:

This silent destroyer leads to procrastination and inefficiency, bleeding billions from the economy annually. The creative process, a crucible of risk-taking and innovation, is especially crippled by the paralysing grip of self-doubt. The financial implications are immense, affecting both individual and corporate prosperity.

The Mental Health Crisis:

The chronic self-doubt and anxiety inflicted by imposter syndrome fuel a mental health emergency, with British workers taking more sick days than ever before—averaging 7.8 days in 2023, according to the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD). The relentless pressure to perform takes a dire toll on mental well-being.

The Innovation Suppressor:

Fear of failure chains creatives, preventing them from daring to innovate and showcase their best work. The relentless pressure to perform and the culture of business significantly suppress innovation and creativity.

The paralysing grip of self-doubt...
the financial implications are
immense, affecting both individual
and corporate prosperity.

Enticing Solutions: A Preview

Imagine a world where supportive cultures are the norm, where vulnerability in leadership is celebrated, and where early educational interventions shape a generation free from the chains of self-doubt. Our report delves into transformative strategies that promise to dismantle the insidious grip of imposter syndrome. From forging environments where open dialogue flourishes to innovative mentorship programmes that guide and uplift, the solutions are both profound and practical.

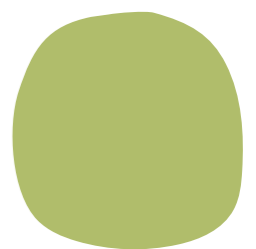
We explore how community platforms can foster connections and combat isolation, empowering female founders with confidence-boosting tools and creating pathways that address socio economic barriers. Discover the secrets to promoting a healthy work-life balance and supporting the next generation of creatives, ensuring they thrive without the weight of traditional expectations.

Our journey into these recommendations is just beginning. Dive into the full report to uncover the detailed, actionable steps that can transform the creative industries, fostering a culture where every individual's potential is fully realised.

Conclusion

"Creativity in Crisis: The Hidden Cost of Imposter Syndrome & The Inner Critic" is a call to action for the creative industries to address and overcome this pervasive challenge. By fostering supportive cultures, initiating open dialogues, and integrating robust educational and mentorship programmes, we can help creatives overcome self-doubt and unleash their full potential. OS Collectives stands at the forefront of this movement, urging industry leaders to join us in shaping a more inclusive, empowered future for the creative community.

For more information and to join the movement, please visit www.oscollectives.com.



“Create an environment
where *you’re free to express*
what you’re afraid to
express”

— Rick Rubin, Author, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*

One

The Imposter Cost

Imposter syndrome isn't new. And according to psychologists, it isn't a syndrome (at least in the strict sense of the word). Self-doubt has been a feature of the human psyche for innumerable years. This specific form of insecurity was first given a name in 1978 by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. The pair articulated the term as the "Imposter Phenomenon", and described it as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness." Clance and Imes went on to conduct a study with over 150 high-achieving women, ranging from those working in law and healthcare to social work. Then the duo produced a landmark paper, "The Impostor Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention." The women Clance and Imes spoke to experienced real fear that "some significant person will discover that they are indeed intellectual impostors." The findings resonated with the two researchers. The feelings described were exactly like those that they had struggled with since youth. This experience of imposter syndrome is described similarly by our creatives today:

“My school wasn't one of the big schools and wasn't a full BA or MA. When I was promoted to my first senior position, it felt way too quick. This made me have self-doubt. I had cheated — I wasn't good enough. This feeling still makes me feel stuck on projects. I don't see solutions when I'm in the grip of it.”

Torunn Myklebust, Co-Founder, Creative Director, No More Mondays

Everyone Loves a Chancer

Clance and Imes' research awakened the world to the imposter phenomenon almost fifty years ago. But at the dawn of this decade, the idea has seen a renaissance, and leapt fully into the public consciousness. Jimmy Carr, a UK comedian famed for his acerbic delivery has spoken about it on entrepreneur Steven Bartlett's podcast. David Bowie might have been a superlative musician and performer to most of the public, but he described feelings of deep inadequacy. Actor Tom Hanks, restaurateur Wolfgang Puck and Michelle Obama have all said they grapple with the feeling that they don't belong where they are.

While talented individuals in possession of integrity (and good sense) seem to struggle, one could be forgiven for thinking that society rewards those without these qualities. As the

imposter phenomenon has taken hold, we have also witnessed the resurgence of the chancer. Figures are promoted to the highest echelons of corporate life and public office by faking it until making it. FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried was hailed as a prodigy before his fall from grace. Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes held much of the investment community in thrall before being exposed. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was seen as an intellectual heavyweight, shortly before being revealed as a blunderer and cheat. Perhaps the biggest individual symbol of the success of the ruse artist is Donald Trump. His material wealth has been called into question. His knowledge of political history is infamously poor. And he is on the verge of becoming the most powerful man in the world for the second time.

“Imposter Syndrome was my secret, it had a crippling hold over my entire creative career.”

— Susan Walbrook, Professional Coach to Creatives, Specialist on Imposter Syndrome and Your Inner Critic.

New World, Old Problem

These derided examples seem immune to self-doubt. But for most of us, the imposter phenomenon lives rent free in our minds. It's the internal notion that this is all an act. That we somehow don't belong in the advantageous scenarios we manoeuvre ourselves into. We don't deserve the accolades we win. Our achievements are earned not from integrity and hard work, but rather we steal them when the world isn't looking. When anything good happens, it doesn't warrant praise – we've simply gotten away with it again.

Evidence shows that the issue is pervasive. In the US, the American Psychological Association estimates that 82% of people face feelings of imposter phenomenon. In the UK two-thirds of Britons say they have difficulty accepting compliments and praise from other people (a key indicator of IP- Imposter Phenomenon), according to YouGov, a pollster.

Why has IP become such a feature of our lives? There are some causes to do with how society has shifted in the last decade or so. Firstly, our work lives have changed dramatically. As manufacturing has become outsourced, fewer of us are engaged in the making of products. Imposter syndrome is less of a problem when you're able to see, touch, or feel the results of your efforts. When your job is about digital or service industry tasks, the yardstick for success is far more subjective. Consider the rise of executive coaching. This market has sprung up as more teams struggle with self-doubt. This industry has grown by 62% since 2019, and is worth \$4.564 billion annually according to ICF Global Coaching.

● “Imposter Syndrome was my secret, it had a crippling hold over my entire creative career. Everyday it would present itself, sitting heavy on my shoulders. I'd think: 'when will they find out I'm not good enough, I don't belong here'. It left me feeling confined, claustrophobic and paralysed, the very opposite to feeling creative.”

Susan Walbrook, Professional Coach to Creatives, Specialist on Imposter Syndrome and Your Inner Critic.

Then there is the changing pattern of career trajectories. Technology is creating new roles, and erasing old ones. It's become a trope to say, “my parents don't understand what I do,” but in truth, we have a harder time describing our jobs in simple terms than our parents did. Freelancers hop from one gig to another learning rapidly as they go. Staff workers facing straightened times are hustling harder for promotions than ever before. In this landscape, pushing yourself to imposture is necessary to get ahead. When we're successful, the disquiet over whether we deserve our winnings rapidly sets in. For instance, the issue of 'promotion anxiety' is gaining recognition as a problem in organisations.

The rise of social media is attributable, too. Facebook and Instagram enabled us to create an idealised spectacle of our lives. But a feed filled with everyone else's best bits caused us to become more conscious of our own shortcomings. Then this mechanic entered our work-lives. As LinkedIn becomes less of a job posting platform and more of a social site, the same effect is taking hold. Users are describing the feeling of being #LinkedInsecure in the face of others' achievements. Within a poll of sixty people OS Collectives conducted earlier this year, 90% said that their imposter syndrome is triggered when they look at LinkedIn.

“As a strategic planner in advertising, I was always up against the white male oxbridge planner when it came to new roles or promotions which left me feeling nervous, anxious and dreading my every brief. I had to work hard to use the fear to fuel my drive and creativity. If it hadn't been for the awards I think I would have never quite believed in my creativity”

Ozlem Tuskan, Brand Strategist, Confidence Coach, Founder of The Resilient

When people suffer from it, efficiency drops.

According to the Anatomy of Work Index, 80% of knowledge workers (people who are involved or use more information) worldwide are facing burnout. A new report from Gallup found that burnout in the workplace amounts to \$1.9 trillion in lost productivity in the US, given that only 33% of employees noted they were engaged.

With evidence showing that burnout and imposter syndrome being experienced by the same person is common. According to the Anatomy of Work Index, 46% of U.S. respondents said they were experiencing both.

Given this is the case one could argue that the cost of imposter syndrome is costing the US economy \$0.96 trillion.

Latest economic modelling from AXA UK and Centre of Economic and Business Research shows work-related stress and burnout is estimated to be currently costing the UK economy an estimated £28bn lost due to poor mental health at work. If we apply the same theoretical calculation to the UK as above we could argue imposter syndrome is potentially costing the UK economy £14bn.

Understanding and alleviating the issue isn't just a psychological priority, it's a commercial one too and one that requires deeper research and longitudinal studies. No such similar statistics exist for the UK which shows the pressing need for deeper understanding into the economic impact of imposter syndrome.

“My imposter syndrome fueled my creativity, if it hadn't been for the awards, I would have never quite believed in my creativity as a strategist.”

— Ozlem Tuskan, Brand Strategist, Confidence Coach, Founder of The Resilient

IP Five Ways

Dr. Valerie Young might be the preeminent voice in the subject of imposter syndrome. She is founder of Imposter Syndrome Institute, a leading platform that helps organisations and individuals free themselves from that fraudulent feeling. Young has defined five types of IP

1 The Perfectionist

Not perfect? Not good enough. When you fall short of your impeccable (and impossible) standards, you feel like a fraud. Prone to overworking and procrastinating.

Your inner critic says: "I haven't done this perfectly. I suck."

2 The Expert

You don't know enough. And you never will. If you can't call to mind every fact, figure and fundamental of the subject, then you're not the real deal. Experts feel like failures if there's anything left to learn (and there always is).

Your Inner critic says: "I don't know anything about this."

3 The Natural Genius

A true impresario finds everything easy, right? This type feels inadequate if they have to sweat it to get something done.

Your Inner critic says: "Working hard? That must mean you're bad at this."

4 The Soloist

Work has to happen alone, and if you get help you must renounce all credit. It's all about who has put in the work to get a job done.

Your Inner critic says: "You got help with this. You don't deserve any kudos."

5 The Superperson

This type of IP is about being able to masterfully execute everything all at once. You're the hardest worker, and reach the highest peaks of achievement. If you don't (or can't), you're a phoney.

Your Inner critic says: "Say yes to more things. If you can't handle them, you're a fraud."

Two

“Creatives are emotionally driven people, and usually we feel things deeply”

— Laura Jordan Bambach, Founder and Chief Creative Office of Uncharetered Studio.

Creative Industries Focus

The Imposter Phenomenon (IP) is present wherever there is pressure. And in the creative industries, it has become a feature of life. Why is it so pervasive in fashion houses, advertising agencies, architecture practices, design studios and anywhere that relies on imagination and innovation? One answer might be the evidence that creative jobs attract personalities who are more emotionally sensitive.

Anecdotally, we assume that a harp player might be more attuned to their inner world than a police officer, an accountant, or a bank clerk. Creativity is associated with vulnerability, a questioning mindset and a willingness to absorb – rather than reject – criticism. At the same time, leveraging the IP of team members to drive results has become a cynical means of motivation. The sufferer will overwork to prove their value.

“Creatives are emotionally driven people, and usually we feel things very deeply. The process of having ideas is giving over a part of yourself in a vulnerable and personal way,” says Laura Jordan Bambach, founder and chief creative officer of Uncharted Studio. “If the work isn’t good enough, or the personal dynamics with the client are off, you take it very personally.”

Studies show that people within the creative industries suffer from this issue acutely. A poll from Funding Guru discovered that creative arts and design outstripped all other categories when it comes to the percentage of people who had imposter syndrome – 86.96% of respondents from that group declared they’d experienced it. Other high marks included media and internet businesses (72.73%), information research and analysis (78.57%) and publishing and journalism (70%). Evidence like this affirms our assumption – that creative businesses represent a fitting place to study the impact of IP. Such a proportion of creative professionals suffering from IP is bad news for prosperity. Consider that in the UK, creative industries generated £126 billion in gross value added to the economy in 2022. The same year, the creative industry employed 2.4 million people according to official figures.

The Pressure of Perfection

It also takes a heavy toll on the mental wellbeing of those who work within the creative industries. While this category is an engine for economic growth, companies within it are facing straightened times. For instance, nearly half of marketers (47.7%) have seen their team budgets squeezed in the last 12 months, according to Marketing Week's 2024 Career and Salary Survey. When capital diminishes, the onus is routinely placed on staff to over-deliver. This leads to that sinking feeling where creatives are drowning – and never winning.

Francesca Burns, a fashion journalist who has held senior roles in Vogue, ID and LOVE magazine explains how the cult of busyness contributed to her IP. She also describes an uncanny feeling of failure, even as she surged from one success to another. In 2019, the inevitable happened: "I had a breakdown – total burnout. In this world, busyness is a barometer for success. When good things happened, I felt nothing, not even indifference," she says. "My anxiety and imposter syndrome was out of control, I couldn't sleep and would wake up with panic attacks. There was a sense of utter failure with every job I did. And I was consulting with some of the biggest brands in the world. I'd anticipate terrible consequences, then clients would email me to say 'thanks, we're so happy'. That didn't make me feel any better."

87%

of professionals in creative arts and design say they have experienced Imposter Syndrome

"They want you to feel 'not good enough' that way they keep you aiming for absolute perfection, an unattainable goal that leaves you broken."

– Senior Creative at a Top Parisian Fashion House

"Imposter Syndrome happens because you have this insane expectation on an industry that is completely unsustainable. You work from 7 until 11, even after years of being in the industry and they expect the younger generation to do the same regardless of its cost on mental health - there is this 'I did it and so should you' mentality amongst our leaders. It's just not a very nurturing environment, for people to come out and admit they're actually really scared to make a mistake."

Senior Designer at Leading Fashion Brand

"The culture is such that they want you to keep striving for perfection and the pressure is stifling. Even a look of the eye would make you feel not good enough."

Brand, Marketing & Commercial Partnerships Lead, Large fashion e-commerce retailer.

Counting the Cost

These accounts show how imposter syndrome ruins lives and diminishes potential. But the true economic impact of the problem is only starting to be understood. Firstly, people in the grip of IP are prone to underplaying successes. The issue prevents team members from touting their achievements, and using them to leapfrog to better appointments and more lucrative projects. In this way, IP is likely to sabotage the best, most daring, or audacious work from happening. After all, when you're afraid of being found out, it's safer to fly under the radar. Where your career is concerned, honesty might be the best policy – but modesty isn't.

Succumbing to imposter syndrome is a productivity killer too. Self-doubt is proven to cause procrastination, urging us to put off tasks that feel confronting. Research shows the toll that chronic procrastination takes on individuals and the economy. According to Zippia, 20-25% of people in the US procrastinate chronically. And 88% of workers spend one hour or more procrastinating while at their jobs. This kind of dilly-dallying is estimated to cost the US economy \$70bn per year.

Then there is the monumental mental health impact of IP (Imposter Phenomenon) and its cost to business. While feeling like an imposter is not a malaise in and of itself, it is linked to feelings of stress, anxiety and burn-out. A renewed interest in IP has coincided with a surge in work absences in the UK. British workers are taking more sick days than at any point in the last decade – on average 7.8 sick days in 2023 – according to the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD).

“I just think everyone's under so much pressure, growth, growth, gross profit come what may - and not understanding that there are natural levels where you don't hit a gross trajectory, you can stay in a place and it doesn't mean that you're failing. We need to draw ourselves back to what it is that we're doing wrong that's causing so many people to be unwell, and have so many mental health days that stop them coming into work.”

Sarah Rutson, Brand Advisor, Global C Suite Creative Merchant, Former Vice President of Global Buying, NET-A-PORTER & Lane Crawford.

Overwork, Get Sick – Quit

While it isn't solely responsible, IP contributes to the pattern of creative workers chronically over-working, becoming ill or burnt out, then deciding to jack it in altogether. In a study by WeTransfer in 2022, an astonishing 75% of creatives said they were experiencing or were close to burnout. Researchers say that this proportion doubled from the year before.

One explanation for this might be the state of the creative industries themselves. Consider advertising, the broader macroeconomic climate is putting the squeeze on brand clients, who are looking at ways to get more from their contractors for less. S&P Global, a market researcher reports a real decline in ad spend in 2023 and 2024. It reckons on a decline of 0.6% in 2023, and a further drop of 0.7% this year.

Even as the grim economic figures roll in, creatives toil on. Mark Shanley is a creative director at advertising agency adam&eveDDB. He describes how his insecurity has driven him to pursue work over everything else. While this approach certainly delivers results, it doesn't make for a well-balanced life.

“Being so insecure and suffering from imposter syndrome drove me to work harder than I ever imagined I would. I'd work weekends, and late into the evening. Nobody was demanding this of me,” he says. “But I would negatively prioritise work constantly. I've cancelled weddings and not attended funerals in order to get ahead.”

Jo Forster, previously Industry lead for the Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship and on the advisory board for Pathways Forward in Scotland describes a similar feeling. “My inner critic was definitely there when I worked previously on the advertising agency-side. I would often think 'no, this isn't good enough' or 'we can't let anything drop'”, she says. “I would worry about over-servicing the client. But that's probably what kept me in the job. I was always over-delivering. The agency liked that.”

Hayley Lai is a Creative Stylist & Art Director who works across fashion, events and sports for some of the global leading brands in the industry. She talks about how the pressure can get so bad that it drives deep insecurity around career choice and being a freelancer: “At times it can paralyse you. I think it gets to a point where you begin to question yourself a lot and if you've made the right life decisions”, she says.

Ladies first?

Back in 1978 the term was first coined by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes after a study that led people to assume that 'the imposter phenomenon,' as it was called at the time, was only a female experience. What people don't know and don't talk about is that when it was first identified it was amongst female students, within a university environment. Furthermore, the first article they published about Imposter Syndrome was titled 'The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women' which aided this false perception and narrative even further.

Gender norms have shifted dramatically since 1978 when the study was first written. It might be more socially acceptable for men to articulate their feelings, and spring forth with their weaknesses. The age of emotional eMANcipation is revealing that men have felt like imposters all along. More recent studies are showing that men and women are experiencing imposter syndrome almost equally. (49% male and 51%).



However, evidence suggests that men and women experience and exhibit imposter syndrome behaviours differently. In her book 'The Imposter Lies Within' and in our conversations with Sheryl Anjanette Founder, CEO Parsley360, Author, Imposter Lies Within, TED X Speaker explains 'Whereas women are more likely to play small and pass on opportunities, men will suppress their imposter feeling, hide emotional wounds, and still actively seek professional advancement. Despite both natural and conditioned gender differences that are apparent in observed behaviour, internalised anxiety and fear of being found out are remarkably similar. This similarity is a classic example of the difference between perception and reality.'

“Men can in some cases project imposter syndrome onto others through lashing out. Women do too but it seems to be one of the ways imposter syndrome manifests more in men than women. Women on the other hand seem to internalise it as a personal inadequacy. Self-doubt is part of the creative process. But imposter syndrome magnifies that doubt irrationally”

John Goldwyn, Landscape Architect and Master Planner, Founder 'Studio Wild 1'

“My parents had no money. The notion of even going to secondary school was quite frowned upon. There's no history of entrepreneurship. From the beginning, it wasn't just about being an imposter. There was no sense that you should achieve anything. I was unconvinced about my own abilities. But it had the opposite impact. It made me go and prove my ability. So I went out and became a journalist to find the answers. For me it was about finding out what I needed to know to overcome it.”

Martin Raymond, Co-Founder, The Future Laboratory

“In imposter syndrome we have found yet another way to pathologize women, and make us problematic. The implication is that there is something wrong with us, that we suffer from a "syndrome", when the reality is that we are simply growing and stretching our comfort zones. I only half-jokingly wonder if someone will try to come up with a pill for imposter syndrome so they can cash in on something that exists largely because we have talked it into existence!”

**Rupal Patel, author, From CIA to CEO
Leadership & Talent Development Expert, Best-selling Author,
International Speaker, "One of the Most Influential Women of 2023"**

49% male
51% female

More recent studies are showing that men and women are experiencing imposter syndrome almost equally.

Meanwhile, the patriarchal structures of companies have put women at a historical disadvantage.

While IP is a feeling that manifests in the minds of those who suffer from it, it's also likely a reaction to a work environment that has been inhospitable to women. Consider how the creative industry has failed to shake off its gender problem. Women are underrepresented in creative organisations compared with the proportion who undertake education in that area. The issue is particularly pronounced in the UK, where just 22% of the creative and design workforce are female. This figure is inconsistent with the fact that women account for 60% of students in arts and design courses.

“Fashion is a predominantly female industry but at the top it's predominantly men. You find yourself in a male environment and there are simply not enough female role models at the top. As creatives, we generally lack confidence so this combination can be challenging.”

Hannah Middleton, KE Lead Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion, UAL and Board Trustee at FARA Foundation Charity.

Jo Forster, previously Industry lead for the Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship believes that a lack of funding creates a barrier to women running high growth businesses. Despite women owned businesses representing 18% of all UK SME only 2% of VC funding is going to women founded businesses. Investors are losing out on millions in revenue from an unwillingness to back female founders.

“Women often don't set their ambitions high enough. Meanwhile, men regularly shoot for the moon, this is inhibiting the economy and stopping women reaching their career potential.”

The problem that Jo Forster articulates could be approached with more resources and training that supports female founders with more confidence despite the bias. One leading female angel investor stating 'women sometimes apologise before they start pitching whereas men don't. Even though women have great business ideas, they don't always include the amazing stuff they've done but mention it at the end like it's not of importance, when in fact it really is something to shout about.

Nearly all female founders who we interviewed expressed the need to 'man up' when speaking to male investors pre or post investment in order to be taken seriously. We heard from nearly all founders that comments received from investors were often inappropriate, biased and condensending, leaving them feeling insecure. One Ed tech digital platform Founder told us:

“I was put down so many times by investors, I would walk in with confidence but their language and questions would make me question everything, doubt myself.. I came to the edge of wanting to give up everything I worked for. Thank goodness I didn't. I now have an ex Twitter founder as an investor”

Many spoke about the need for mentorship and role models in order to beat the bias with greater confidence.

“As soon as an investor meets you, they'll pick up on any of those limiting beliefs you have, like imposter syndrome. If you lack confidence, they'll smell it like a shark will smell a drop of blood in the water. If you're not confident, they won't feel confident to invest in you. The cost of this is huge, both to the individual female founder who doesn't raise the money they need, to the investors who miss out on the opportunity, and to society that ends up with a gender imbalance in high growth business leadership.”

Julia Elliott Brown, Serial Entrepreneur, Board Advisor, Female Founder Ambassador.

Penalised For Motherhood?

The truth is our life stages play a big role and we get to find or create cultures that hold space for it. For many women Imposer Syndrome kicks in on becoming a parent, when women feel ostracised for not being able to stay late after work as they fight in a male senior world. Again, patriarchal structures and lack of flexibility play a big role.

- “When you become a mother your hours change, not the amount you work. You might need to go home early but you always log on after, but it’s not seen the same as when you stay late at the office. It isn’t favoured and this makes you feel vulnerable and like an outsider.”

Hannah Middleton, KE Lead Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion, UAL and Board Trustee at FARA Foundation Charity.

- “It’s not our gender that impacts our capabilities, it’s the reality of our responsibilities and the changing life stages we face. This is why connection and support is so key - we get to create our own belonging. Often women shy away from networking. Getting women comfortable in networking is key to helping them gain the confidence they need to talk about their businesses.”

Emmie Faust, Founder of Female Founders Rise and Angel Investor

As a lead in a major, design-led commercial firm it wasn’t until I had children that it kicked in. We need greater understanding and flexibility. It’s not that we don’t do the hours, we just do different hours. The flexibility isn’t there and when you can’t hang back with the most senior people, you feel like you start to miss on important conversations and opportunities.

Laura Morales, Director, Studio Wild 15 and freelance Interior Architect

- ‘As a single mum in senior strategic roles I dialled down the reality of my load for fear of being sidelined for the next promotion or career opportunity. I have made it my job to make it look easy’.

Ozlem Tuskan, Brand Strategist, Confidence Coach, Founder of The Resilient

Artwork by Kat Kristof



The Inner Critic — Is there a healthy face?

Your subpersonality might not always sound friendly. The inner voice that your psyche uses to process thoughts might seem capable of sudden caustic put-downs. But while it can never be silenced, experts are putting forward methods that enable people to soften their internal monologue in trickier moments. Paul Gilbert, a clinical psychologist and founder of the Compassionate Mind Foundation, is one proponent of self-sympathy. Rather than seeing negative self-talk as a problem that requires fixing, it's more helpful to view it as an evolutionary tick that is sometimes at odds with the complexities of the modern world. Gilbert describes the brain's habit for inner criticism as "tricky", in that the processes that gear us for analysis, prediction, and – ultimately – survival, can cause some to spiral. Such thoughts are akin to a fight or flight response.

In her book, *The Imposter Lies Within*, imposter syndrome author and expert, Sheryl Anjanette, talks about a concept she's coined 'The Healthy Zone', which shows how most emotions, traits, and behaviours we associate with imposter

syndrome do not need to go away; we just need to keep them in an adaptive zone.

"The answer to getting into The Healthy Zone lies not in rejecting our human range of emotions or fighting our biology, but in accepting the positive attributes underlying all of these emotions and keeping them in a range where they serve us rather than diminish our wellbeing," Anjanette explains.

Practising self-criticism isn't always corrosive according to Anjanette. When your inner critic is tempered with self-compassion the results for mental wellbeing, productivity and creativity tick upwards fast. Listening to your inner critic to gain discernment and gauge whether you're working at the upper regions of your abilities is an example of how our inner critic can serve us. Initial doubt in the process is normal and in fact necessary as long as it does not turn into persistent feelings of fraudulence. "To be clear, the other side of testing these limits should be a healthy feeling of accomplishment and pride," Anjanette continues.

'Working through fear, doubt and worry as part of the process enables you to discover new territory beyond your comfort zone. Comfort is an interesting concept in this process. It's like a temperature reading. It may feel hot or cold at those outside limits but eventually you acclimate and what was once uncomfortable begins to feel comfortable. Your new normal!'

What's the bottom-line?

"We need doubt, it's our great discernment muscle. Fear is our friend; it keeps us safe. Comparison is how we gain insight into where we are in our journey. It provides an opportunity to find role models further along and help others along the way who haven't come as far as we have," says Anjanette. "This is all in The Healthy Zone—that adaptive place where we can be imperfectly wonderful humans," she continues. "The trick is to know when we are in maladaptive territory so we can kick ourselves back into the zone."

“The answer lies in...keeping them in a range where they serve us rather than diminish our wellbeing.”

— Sheryl Anjanette, Bestselling Author, *The Imposter Lies Within*, TEDx Speaker, Founder and CEO, Parsley360.

Educating Peter

The Peter Principle is an idea that was first floated by academic Lawrence J. Peter in 1974. It proposes that professionals who excel in their fields inevitably discover that they have been promoted to the point of incompetence. For instance, a gifted mechanic working in a franchise of auto shops finds herself in charge of the garage. She's no longer working on cars, but is running the office – with no training or zeal for the tasks she's responsible for. In most of these cases, craft skills are substituted for executive or managerial ones. When that happens, workers' self-confidence plummets and their careers come to a standing stop. This is especially prescient in the creative economy. When it happens, imposter syndrome sets in.

Martin Raymond, co-founder of consultancy The Future Laboratory was immersed in trend forecasting and decoding the future for clients when he opened his business. Sometime later, he found himself as a CEO, and a to-do list that demanded a totally novel set of skills: "I started life as a journalist, then ended up being a co-founder and more recently, the CEO," he says. "When I set out on the journey of building the company, I was so ill prepared that I didn't have any theory or business knowledge to work from. When I set out into the marketplace, I had to acquire it from my network, peers, and mentors. If these people feature in your life, you're lucky."

Practitioners like Raymond are usually the best poised to step into such roles. Team members who understand how the nuts and bolts of a business screw together benefit from a deep expertise. The failing isn't one of natural ability, but adequate training. A survey of over 4,500 workers and managers by the Chartered Management Institute, and carried out by YouGov, found that a staggering 82% of people who enter management positions have had no training. Researchers dubbed these individuals as accidental managers. When the same study found that 31% of managers and 28% of workers have left a job because of a bad professional relationship with a senior leader, we can get a glimpse of what a drag this issue has on our ability to perform well and be happy at work. Managers in the grip of IP gum up organisations by prevaricating, making bad calls and then – possibly – venting their frustrations on underlings.

Creatives are often poorly prepared to take the reins as executives or managers. Mae Yip runs ERIC, the app that vows to connect the next generation of talent to creative organisations. She has seen creatives flung into leadership roles with little training. The result is sometimes an unrealistic image of what their new-starters should be capable of.

“We have to invest more as a sector in training entry creatives. It will take up-skilling and nurturing them,” she says. “But those at the very top aren't thinking like that. Everyone seems to imagine a perfectly packaged candidate who can slot in without any effort or investment. That doesn't exist right now – and it never will.”

Mae Yip, Co-Founder of ERIC

“Mentoring used to be shameful. It was an indicator that you didn't know enough. But my journey as a leader would have been very different if I'd had a mentor. I believe mentoring is so critical – bottom up and top down – we have so much to learn from each other. I think for women it's a double problem because I think traditionally a lot of business was set against them. And even though they had ambition, unless they were surrounded by networks and contacts who really nurtured their view that their end goal wasn't defined by their beginning trajectory, then they couldn't aim for the sky and reach it.”

Martin Raymond, Co-Founder, The Future Laboratory

“Having a female role model is so important, I would have loved a female mentor as it would make me think 'they have done it, so I can too'. It would discredit imposter syndrome. We see many students with positive role models around them do much better than those that don't.”

Hannah Middleton, KE Lead Fashion Business School, London College of Fashion, UAL and Board Trustee at FARA Foundation Charity.

“Even though women had ambition, unless they were surrounded by networks and contacts that nurtured their view that their end goal wasn't defined by their beginning trajectory, then they couldn't aim for the sky and reach it.”

– Martin Raymond, Co-Founder, The Future Laboratory

Diversity Equity Inclusion

Cultural and socio economic background plays a key role in the experience of Imposter Syndrome with those from less favoured social and educational backgrounds claiming to experience it more. The creative industry has a poor record for DEI. D&AD reports that only 11.4% of industry jobs are filled by black, Asian, and minority ethnic people in the UK. In the US, just 11.5% of creative directors are women. While there is work to be done in encouraging non-white, non-male candidates into job roles, there is even more when it comes to supporting DEI workers as they grasp the slippery ladder that points to the higher echelons of creative organisations.

One social enterprise that aims to break the class ceiling in the UK creative industries is the creative mentor network. The group supports young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and offers one-to-one mentoring designed to support them as they vie for creative industry roles. Established players are

matched with 16-25 year olds, and so far the initiative has helped land candidates into feted agencies and brand-side.

Laura Jordan Bambach's new agency Uncharted, intends to bring more people of different backgrounds into the creative conversation: "We hope to build bridges, not islands. An agency where we can lift each other. Good people of the industry coming together that want to see change and to help everyone rise," she says. "So we are gathering a diverse and inclusive community of freelancers, colleagues, business owners running their own business, students and or young professionals with great strengths in one area to come together as a pirate crew."

Greater inclusivity in the creative industries makes sense ethically and commercially. James Woods, founder and creative director at Studio Wood, thinks that it would result in an upsurge of an overlooked aspect of design: empathy.

"Relative to the UK, I grew up under disadvantaged circumstances, both financially and socially. As a creative, that makes me a minority. The creative sector lacks social mobility to the effect that it would need to hire a quarter of a million working-class people to be as socioeconomically diverse as the rest of the economy. Having better equity in design leads to more empathetic decision-making. If you haven't experienced something directly, you can sympathise, but you can't have empathy for it. For our collective design decisions to represent society accurately, our teams must reflect our society as much as possible. The more experience and diversity around the table, the more empathetic the output will be."

James Wood, Founder and Creative Director at Studio Wood

"I look at women in fashion and they have a much harder time than men especially as a creative and designer. It's not that they aren't good enough, it's about how the industry makes you feel."

Patricia Lindo, Founder & CEO, Style Incorporated



James Wood, Founder and Creative Director at Studio Wood

Hannah Matthews, Laura Jordan Bambach and Fern Miller, Co-Founders, Uncharted

"I look at women in fashion and they have a much harder time than men."

— Patricia Lindo, Founder & CEO, Style Incorporated



Next Generation Creatives

IP is emerging as a severe issue for young entrants into the creative industries. On joining as juniors many discover their inner critics have arrived into the studio early, ready to undermine them. To prevent the best talent fleeing before they have made their mark, organisations must listen, mentor and hold space for new ideas from young minds. Allowing young talent to flourish is part of the formula for a world-beating business.

“I felt like an imposter at points throughout my career but then I realised it was just my personal difference and not about my ability. If you have a different gender, ethnicity and background you can feel like an outsider. But actually we all have something to bring and it's down to leadership to create that safe space for everyone to show up as themselves. This is particularly important for emerging talent and this is why we are passionate about supporting them and the diversity within the industry.”

Miranda Hipwell, CEO, adam&eveDDB Advertising Agency

To bring these values to life, adam&eveDDB have launched a ground breaking, industry first placement scheme called First Bite, where applicants don't need any specific qualifications or previous industry experience. 'We're looking for applicants across varied backgrounds, with a curious mind and an appetite to learn about advertising and marketing. We believe this will bring the diversity of talent needed for more a more inclusive industry'

And there is a growing consensus that the pressure is mounting from grass routes up. Fashion consultants and leaders we spoke to believe that the next generation won't be standing for this. That the industry will be forced to move and react to certain things. One designer that wanted to remain anonymous from a leading fashion house told us, 'The next generation don't want to deal with what we dealt with, as in being paid nothing and being treated badly and working extra hours all the time and just having no say about it.'

“I don't think the next generation will put up with extreme conditions. It's extreme enough to work on a movie. I have a real sense that Gen Z will be the ones that will crack it, they will radically change the movie industry with new era leaders embracing vulnerability and better balance in their lives. They'll have babies; they will just have a life and still have a successful career.”

George Mooradian, Emmy Award Winning Cinematographer, Director of Photography, Member of The American Society of Cinematographers.

Universities are squarely in the frame when it comes to supporting young people through IP. As students approach the end of their academic careers, they are faced with an intimidating set of choices. As competition intensifies, more are feeling the pressure of the jobs market before they have even entered it. It is up to educational institutions to provide support for this troubling period in young peoples' lives.

And support is needed at university level to circumvent it kicking in as students start to compete for places in the big wide world

“I have spoken to a lot of my male design engineers and almost all experience it, with certain points that usually trigger it for them. Especially in our third year as we go on a six month placement, where this can sometimes bring out a slightly competitive environment. Generally, us university students are overrun with negative self-talk and imposter syndrome surrounding internships, which is typical in higher academia.”

Fergus Inns, Design Engineer, Imperial College London

“I don't think the next generation will put up with extreme conditions.”

— George Mooradian, Emmy Award Winning Cinematographer, Director of Photography, Member of The American Society of Cinematographers.

“I have written eleven books, but each time I think, ‘uh-oh’, they’re going to find me out now.”

— Maya Angelou

Three

Key Findings

The qualitative study that underpinned this report was an undertaking where OS Collectives interviewed sixty creative professionals and entrepreneurs. In reams of recordings, we unearthed shared pain points, patterns, and emerging trends. The experiences of these individuals offer an insight into how we might better support and innovate around IP.

1. Imposter Syndrome has become normalised

Despite its corrosive effects, most sufferers believe that IP is simply a part of life. The feeling has grown up around them as they have climbed from one achievement to another. If you can't fix something, you must learn to live with it. We don't believe it has to be this way.

"While imposter syndrome is common, with roughly 8 out of 10 people experiencing it, I would caution against normalising it. It's tempting to normalise something uncomfortable because it makes us feel better. We can say, 'we're not alone, everyone has it.' But here's the danger... when we normalise something the next step is to accept it, and we don't want to accept this. We don't want to acclimate to a temperature of chronic anxiety, rumination and that forever feeling of 'not good enough.'

“We can solve this if we learn how to get in and stay in The Healthy Zone, let's be real. If 8 out of 10 experience this, that also means 2 out of 10 don't, and wouldn't you want to be part of that 20%?”

Sheryl Anjanette, Bestselling Author, The Imposter Lies Within, TEDx Speaker, Founder and CEO, Parsley360.

2. The cult of over-achievement

Creative professionals appear to be under more pressure now than at any other stage in history. A competitive jobs market means candidates are fighting harder to prove their worth to employers. And social media has made us more aware of the achievements of our peers.

“Brands are built on people. The greatest ones are created with talent that has the space to breathe and dream. In fashion and creativity, if this kind of culture isn't emanating from the c-suite, then those further down are never going to feel that they have the power to be heard or listened to.”

Sarah Rutson, Brand Advisor, Global C Suite Creative Merchant, Former Vice President of Global Buying, NET-A-PORTER & Lane Crawford.

3. Still a female phenomenon?

Not quite. Male professionals that we interviewed described pronounced feelings of IP. The difference between men and women is that women speak more openly and men stay silent.

It isn't gender that defines whether you are more prone to experience it - it's your education, culture, society, or lifestage. Whether that's a poor leader, a toxic culture of competition, or condescending language used by an investor, female and male leaders are beginning to wake up to the voice that sits not just inside their heads but the increasing volume of the one that sits outside.

“Imposter syndrome is a result of consistent and persistent feedback. As a female founder you have a choice: to make that strengthen your beliefs, or allow it to hurt your self-esteem. It's not about gender. It's your culture, your education, the society in which you find yourself. The leaders for which you choose to work for drives imposter syndrome - not your gender.”

Jo Forster previously Industry lead for the Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship (an initiative by NatWest Group) and on the advisory board for Pathways Forward in Scotland.

4. Affluence and social class

What impact does wealth and social capital have on IP? This is a big question. A very high proportion of our respondents cited things related to social standing as drivers of IP. Factors such as their parents' income, whether they attended a prestigious school, or which area they grew up in. Coming of age without these markers of social, cultural or commercial capital causes some people to doubt themselves from the moment they embark on their careers.

“It's a question of self-belief. Education plays a major role. Those with business school education believe in themselves, are self-assured and feel like they belong. Some believe they have talent when they don't. Others who are more gifted usually lack confidence. On the flip side, I see those with no or little education with extreme determination and belief go as far as those with IVY school business education.”

Patricia Lindo, Founder & CEO, Style Incorporated

“If you have been to private school you are instilled with a different level of confidence - I wonder if the wider context of this is a symptom of groups being excluded, unbelievably, under researched; is it a symptom of a wider problem? If you don't have people around you that don't support you, believe in you then it can be debilitating. It's not about just putting responsibility on the individual to find intrinsic motivation, it's about looking at the role the system has to play.”

Kian Baktiari, Founder The People

5. Open Conversation

The true struggle of IP is that it dominates a person's internal world. While they may be struggling mentally, many employ coping mechanisms that cultivate an appearance of calmness or control. In other cases respondents described a process of denial, where they were afraid to concede their self-doubt. But talking is imperative to solving the problem. Most interviewees said that feelings of relief occurred when they shared their experience with others.

“Talking about imposter syndrome is particularly important in the creative industry. We work in the business of idea generation. Not every idea will be suitable or perfect, that is part of the process. Sometimes you need to have bad ideas to simply rule them out. This can be quite hard on (particularly, less experienced) team members. Talking about imposter syndrome, as well as clearly communicating that 'no idea is a bad idea'—promotes a healthier work environment.”

Founder of Leading UK Design Agency

“When you talk about it to others, they relax, they feel they're not alone in this problem. You know when you feel you're not alone in this problem, the big part of the problem is resolved.”

Samira Rafi, Creative Director Boomerang, Cannes Lions Jury Member 2020, D&AD Jury Member

7. Vulnerability of Leadership

Want to know where IP starts? Look at the person in the corner office. We discovered that feelings of chronic self-doubt are more likely to be present in companies with an authoritarian, hierarchical, top-down structure. When leaders are unimpeachable, teams feel less able to bring their authentic selves to work. No truth means no trust. No trust means no connection. No connection means no collaboration. It takes a vulnerable leader to quash IP in an organisation.

“Training leaders to share their own vulnerabilities makes them more forgiving, and encourages teams to more readily approach them. Companies are starting to be more intentional about communication styles, and the form for favouring extroverts was still present until recently. When leaders express their own human traits, companies flourish.”

Jo DiSante, VP of Current Programming, ABC Entertainment

“The nature of impostor syndrome is changing. We are being made to feel like an imposter because we have our growing natural sense of negotiation that is one of collaboration and consensus. But the business world, it's not about that, it's about being competitive. Someone wins and someone loses. Now, the evidence points to it being collaborative, it being cooperative, requiring consensus. Suddenly the person who would have felt bad can now share in the not knowing.”

Martin Raymond, Co-Founder, The Future Laboratory

8. IP: just another word for personal growth?

Some respondents recognise their IP as a sign that they are working at the limits of their abilities (which, incidentally, is exactly where they'd like to be). This appraisal makes sense. If you are operating in unfamiliar, uncomfortable conditions, wouldn't it make sense to feel a little out of sorts? A healthy feeling of 'wow, did I just do that?' is a positive framing of the phenomenon.

- “In hindsight my imposter syndrome had a very positive effect on my business, it was crippling in my own mind as it was all about not having a formal education in interior design. It made me work harder for my clients, I had to overcome my self worth with regards to charging, I've learnt so much about myself.”

Sophie Rowell, Interior Designer, Founder of Côte de Folk.

- “When we're operating at our growth edge, we are transforming ourselves. We're on the cusp of learning something that might truly revolutionise our lives. Often this comes with some disruption. It's natural to feel incompetent or even in a state of panic. When in doubt, focus out on your mission, on the learning opportunity the discomfort presents, and stay curious for what you can create.”

Ozlem Tuskan, Brand Strategist, Confidence Coach, Founder, The Resilient

9. Taking responsibility

We can't continue to allow IP to grow unchecked. We must assume responsibility for (i) ourselves, and (ii) for the next generation of creatives. Until recently, professionals didn't possess the tools to alleviate or cope with IP. That's changing.

- “Our educational institutions should normalise struggle and failure. We must also examine learning cultures and systematically find ways to foster a greater sense of belonging, emphasising that young people do not need to change who they are to be accepted. We also need a framework to mitigate the negative effects of imposter syndrome, both in education and business.”

Dr. Knatokie Ford, Founder and CEO of Fly Sci® Enterprise and former Senior Policy Advisor at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) during the Obama Administration, TEDx Speaker on Imposter Syndrome

- “Education needs to speak up and support with tools that this is what creatives suffer and prepare them for lies ahead better. The 'harsh' lesson environment needs to change.”

Mark Shanley Creative Director at adam&eveDDB Advertising Agency

10. Lack of belonging and cohesiveness in work cultures

Work life is best when there is a sense of camaraderie, support, and alignment on a core mission. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and work-from-home culture, some of this feeling has vanished from organisations. While it's a misnomer to describe your company as a 'family' (and those that do are to be avoided), evidence points to a decline in belonging and cohesiveness in work cultures. Reviving this would help alleviate the acceleration of IP.

- “Mine was triggered in a moment; one comment by one leader and it never left me. It's vital to cultivate a sense of belonging where all creatives can stand together in their power. A lot is being done for teams' wellbeing at work. There's more awareness of people with mental health struggles, but there is much more work to be done. When people feel part of something bigger, it's hard to feel isolated.”

John Goldwyn, Landscape Architect and Master Planner, Founder Studio Wild 15

Four

Conclusions and The Post-Imposter Mindset

The Imposter Phenomenon is a deeply complex issue, but one that must be tackled with urgency. This final section details some approaches through which we may develop a healthier relationship with our inner critics, and diminish feelings of self-doubt. Through focus and allyship, we might arrive at a moment in our history where growth no longer feels like fraudulence. Can we reach a post-imposter mindset?

1 Supportive cultures that destigmatize

This is the most effective way to reduce imposter syndrome. When people in its yoke are able to share their feelings, the fear vanishes.

How – Facilitating and incentivising a culture of safe failure. Championing honesty. Open doors to opening conversations that remove stigma. Give credence to the emotional involvement each team member has at work.

2 Educate earlier

Our research indicates that IP often begins during school. The feeling is, therefore, something that people associate with work generally, and it emerges when the pressure is on. Finding ways to equip people for IP in education means vanquishing the problem upstream.

The fix – Training teachers to spot and identify young people with IP. Offering one-to-one coaching for students who suffer from it acutely. Awareness classes that propagate a supportive culture among classmates and peers.

3 Mentor upsurge

Creative professionals are struggling in silence, and many believe that they are beyond help. But all our respondents who had some form of coaching said they would recommend it as a way to overcome IP.

The fix – Reminding mentees of their experience, strengths and expertise. Assisting them in discovering a niche. Conducting self-belief resets and boosting morale. Networking and self promotion opportunities, and validation from mentors.

4 Community platforms

IP is an isolating experience. It creates a mirage – that everyone else is soaring, while you are struggling. Community platforms are an effective riposte to this assumption. Group settings enable people to share, but also foster a sense of cohesion.

The fix – Leaders join and share their own vulnerability. Luminary figures take part as guests, enabling teams to experience the seniority and notoriety of those who are also afflicted.

5 Confident female founders

The world looks less foreboding when you're armed with confidence. Sadly, many virtuoso female founders have learned to doubt themselves. Ultimately, the world loses when great ideas and innovations aren't allowed to thrive.

The fix – Public speaking opportunities and tools, more women in senior Venture Capital investment roles or creative leadership positions, greater levels of networking and networks collaborating, psychological training, mentoring. A universal landscape of support and allyship.

“Doubting yourself can lead to a sense of hopelessness, of not being inherently fit to take on the task at hand. All or nothing thinking is a non-starter. However, doubting the quality of your work might, at times, help to improve it. You can doubt your way to excellence.”

— Rick Rubin, Author, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*

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For more information and to stay updated sign up to our newsletter at OS Collectives. www.oscollectives.com.

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