

FACTORS INFLUENCING LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: This study examines how self-esteem, the impostor phenomenon, and perfectionism shape life satisfaction among Vietnamese university students. Using survey data from 406 students and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the study identifies both direct and indirect psychological mechanisms influencing life satisfaction. The results show that the impostor phenomenon and maladaptive perfectionism significantly reduce life satisfaction, whereas adaptive perfectionism enhances it. Most importantly, the impostor phenomenon is found to mediate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction, indicating that self-esteem may undermine well-being when it triggers impostor feelings in competitive academic contexts. This study offers novel empirical evidence from Vietnam by clarifying the mediating role of the impostor phenomenon and distinguishing the contrasting effects of adaptive versus maladaptive perfectionism. The findings provide a robust empirical basis for developing targeted psychological support and student mental health policies in higher education.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary society, where individuals are required to continuously adapt to academic demands, competitive pressures, and social expectations, life satisfaction has emerged as one of the most important indicators reflecting quality of life and mental health. According to Diener (1984), life satisfaction constitutes a core component of subjective well-being, encompassing individuals' cognitive evaluations of their lives as well as their experiences of positive and negative affect. Beyond merely capturing "happiness," life satisfaction reflects individuals' capacity to cope with stress, adapt to challenges, and maintain a sense of meaning in life.

A substantial body of international research has demonstrated that life satisfaction is shaped by a wide range of psychosocial factors, including self-esteem, social relationships, economic conditions, and cultural context (Campbell, 1981; Veenhoven, 1991). In individualistic societies, self-esteem often plays a central role in fostering happiness and positive life evaluations. In contrast, in collectivist cultures, satisfaction with life is more strongly nurtured through connectedness with family, friends, and the broader community (Triandis, 1989).

In the Vietnamese context, university students represent a distinctive population group undergoing a critical transition from adolescence to adulthood,

during which they face multiple pressures related to academic performance, employment prospects, financial constraints, and future orientation. Coupled with the pervasive influence of mass media and social networking platforms, societal ideals of “success” and “perfection” exert substantial psychological pressure on students, increasing vulnerability to anxiety, self-doubt, and diminished self-worth. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the growing prevalence of the impostor phenomenon, a psychological state in which individuals persistently perceive themselves as incompetent or undeserving of their achievements despite objective evidence to the contrary (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Previous studies have consistently documented close associations among the impostor phenomenon, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Kamarzarrin et al. (2013) reported a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and impostor feelings, suggesting that individuals with lower self-esteem tend to undervalue themselves and experience greater difficulty attaining happiness. Moreover, Islam et al. (2024) found that the impostor phenomenon negatively affects life satisfaction, while adaptive perfectionism may serve as a positive regulatory factor by helping individuals sustain motivation and a sense of personal control.

Collectively, these findings suggest that life satisfaction is a multidimensional construct, simultaneously influenced by cognitive, emotional, and social factors. For Vietnamese university students - who face intense academic competition, social comparison, and identity formation - psychological variables such as self-esteem, impostor phenomenon, perfectionism, and social support may play a particularly salient role in shaping life satisfaction. However, empirical research on this topic in Vietnam remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on academic stress or depression, with relatively little attention given to the interplay between positive psychological factors and life satisfaction.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to identify the key factors influencing life satisfaction among Vietnamese university students. Specifically, it examines the relationships among core psychological constructs - self-esteem, perfectionism, and the impostor phenomenon - while also considering the role of social factors such as peer relationships, family support, and financial conditions. By integrating theoretical frameworks of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) with recent empirical evidence, this study seeks to provide a robust scientific foundation for the development of psychological

support programs, academic counseling services, and policies aimed at fostering a more supportive and positive learning environment for Vietnamese students.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Theoretical background

To address the research gap identified in the literature, this study is grounded explicitly in Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987) as its central theoretical framework. This theory provides a coherent psychological explanation for how discrepancies among different self-representations shape individuals’ emotional experiences, self-evaluations, and overall life satisfaction. By adopting this framework, the present study establishes a systematic basis for selecting research variables and interpreting their relationships.

Within the self-discrepancy framework, self-esteem is conceptualized as an outcome of the perceived alignment between the actual self and the ideal self. When this alignment is weak, individuals are more likely to experience negative self-evaluations and diminished life satisfaction. At the same time, discrepancies between the actual self and the ought self -standards imposed by society or significant others-are theorized to give rise to the impostor phenomenon, characterized by persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as incompetent. These impostor feelings, in turn, undermine individuals’ capacity to experience satisfaction with their achievements and life circumstances.

Furthermore, perfectionism is incorporated into the framework as a self-regulatory response to self-discrepancies. Drawing on prior theoretical and empirical work, the study distinguishes between adaptive perfectionism, which reflects flexible goal striving aimed at self-improvement, and maladaptive perfectionism, which represents rigid, self-critical striving driven by fear of failure. While adaptive perfectionism may reduce self-discrepancy and enhance life satisfaction, maladaptive perfectionism is expected to intensify psychological strain and reduce well-being.

Based on this theoretical integration, the proposed research model conceptualizes life satisfaction as a distal outcome shaped by self-evaluative processes (self-esteem), discrepancy-driven psychological responses (impostor phenomenon), and differential forms of perfectionism. The impostor phenomenon is further hypothesized to function as a mediating mechanism linking self-esteem and life satisfaction. This framework not only clarifies the theoretical logic underlying variable selection but also provides a unified lens for interpreting the empirical findings, thereby strengthening the explanatory power and theoretical contribution of the study.

2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to individuals' overall evaluation of their own worth and competence, reflecting the extent to which they feel confident, proud, and respectful toward themselves (Rosenberg, 1965). It is considered a central construct in personality psychology, playing a pivotal role in shaping individuals' emotions, behaviors, and overall quality of life. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to have greater confidence in their abilities, display perseverance in the face of adversity, and experience life more positively (Baumeister et al., 2003; Orth & Robins, 2014).

A substantial body of research has demonstrated a close association between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Individuals with higher self-esteem generally hold more positive self-evaluations, experience fewer negative emotions, and are more likely to achieve psychological equilibrium (Diener, 1984; Baumeister et al., 2003). Within the student population, self-esteem reflects the capacity to affirm personal value, sustain academic motivation, and adapt to various pressures inherent in the learning environment. Students with stable self-esteem tend to be more open, proactive in social interactions, and effective in building positive interpersonal relationships, which in turn reinforces their sense of happiness and overall life satisfaction (Orth et al., 2012).

2.3. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is conceptualized as a state encompassing both cognitive and affective components (Proctor et al., 2009), reflecting the extent to which individuals positively evaluate the overall quality of their lives (Veenhoven, 1996; Kurnaz et al., 2020). Such evaluations are typically based on self-defined standards (Diener et al., 1985) as well as individuals' perceived achievements in both material and psychological domains (Ha & Tam, 2013).

Life satisfaction is widely regarded as the central cognitive component of subjective well-being (Proctor et al., 2009). According to the 'integrated life' perspective, an individual's global appraisal of their life is not an isolated judgment but a reflection of satisfaction across multiple domains, including social contacts, family, health, and finances (Rode et al., 2005). Among these, social contacts and family generally exert the most significant impact on global life satisfaction, whereas income often has the lowest relative weight. This suggests that a student's overall happiness is more heavily dependent on the quality of their interpersonal relationships than on their material resources (Kapteyn et al., 2010).

Theoretical models propose that self-esteem acts as a critical mediator that translates personality traits and social experiences into global life evaluations (Rey et al., 2011).

Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. Studies by Rey et al. (2011) and Ye et al. (2012) indicate that individuals with higher levels of self-esteem tend to report greater life satisfaction, whereas those with lower self-esteem are more likely to experience dissatisfaction. Moreover, individuals with high self-esteem generally exhibit more adaptive coping responses and greater psychological resilience when confronting life challenges or adversity (Moksnes & Espnes, 2013). These adaptive processes enable individuals to maintain positive life evaluations even under stressful conditions.

Based on these theoretical arguments and empirical findings, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Self-esteem has a positive effect on life satisfaction among university students.

2.4. Impostor phenomenon

The impostor phenomenon is a psychological condition in which high-achieving individuals persistently doubt their intelligence, skills, and accomplishments despite objective evidence of competence (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). Individuals experiencing this phenomenon tend to attribute their success to external factors such as luck or favorable timing rather than to their actual abilities, while simultaneously harboring a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud" (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). Consequently, they often feel undeserving of praise and recognition, which can be regarded as a form of self-devaluation (Parkman, 2016).

Empirical studies by El-Setouhy et al. (2024) and Egwurugwu et al. (2018) have demonstrated a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and the impostor phenomenon. Any increase in self-esteem is associated with a corresponding decrease in impostor feelings, and vice versa. Low self-esteem reflects individuals' tendency to undervalue their personal worth or underestimate their own abilities, accompanied by feelings of unworthiness and inferiority-core characteristics of the impostor phenomenon (Szczęśniak, Mazur, Rodzeń, & Szpunar, 2021). Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Self-esteem has a negative effect on the impostor phenomenon among university students.

In academic settings, Islam et al. (2024) reported that the impostor phenomenon exerts a negative effect on life satisfaction, particularly among university faculty members. Individuals experiencing impostor feelings are more likely to suffer from anxiety, self-doubt, fear of failure, and chronic stress-psychological states that are fundamentally incompatible with the positive emotions

underlying life satisfaction (Egwurugwu et al., 2018). As a result, such individuals often feel dissatisfied with their lives and struggle to enjoy or feel deserving of their achievements compared to others (Islam et al., 2024). Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: The impostor phenomenon has a negative effect on life satisfaction among university students.

Furthermore, Diener et al. (1999) identified self-esteem as one of the strongest antecedents of life satisfaction. The impostor phenomenon frequently emerges among individuals with low self-esteem, leading to diminished positive self-evaluation and reduced experiences of happiness (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Characterized by persistent self-doubt and fear of being “exposed” despite actual success (Clance & Imes, 1978), the impostor phenomenon may function as a psychological mechanism through which self-esteem influences life satisfaction. Therefore, this study examines the mediating role of the impostor phenomenon in the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction, leading to the following hypothesis:

H4: The impostor phenomenon mediates the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among university students.

2.5. Perfectionism

Perfectionism is regarded as a widespread phenomenon that has been increasing, particularly as younger generations face growing demands from society and parental expectations (Curran & Hill, 2019). In this context, perfectionism can be understood as a complex personality trait characterized by individuals setting excessively high standards for themselves and engaging in overly critical self-evaluation (Frost et al., 1990).

Empirical studies have reinforced the view that perfectionism is a multidimensional construct (Slaney et al., 1995; Slaney et al., 2001). Building on the seminal work of Hamachek (1978), perfectionism has been commonly classified into two main types: adaptive and maladaptive (Lo & Abbott, 2013).

Furthermore, Saha and Vijayan (2024) demonstrate that the relationship between impostor phenomenon and perfectionism is bidirectional, whereby the impostor phenomenon can intensify individuals’ perfectionistic tendencies. Specifically, students with a strong impostor

tendency often strive to maintain a flawless image in order to avoid being perceived as incompetent. They frequently adopt perfectionistic self-presentation strategies, such as attempting to display superior competence or concealing personal shortcomings. These behaviors function as psychological defense mechanisms that help alleviate anxiety about being exposed as a “fraud”. This suggests that perfectionism often originates from defensive psychological processes aimed at preventing the risk of being identified as an impostor. Based on these arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₅: The impostor phenomenon has a positive effect on adaptive perfectionism among students

H6: The impostor phenomenon has a positive effect on maladaptive perfectionism among students

Evidence from a survey conducted among Chinese university students indicates that maladaptive perfectionism may undermine life satisfaction (Wang & Wu, 2022). Specifically, students characterized by maladaptive perfectionistic tendencies tend to fear making mistakes, hesitate in taking action, and experience pressure stemming from high parental expectations. These characteristics make them more vulnerable to academic burnout, leading to diminished self-confidence and self-esteem, which in turn negatively affect their level of life satisfaction.

In contrast, other empirical evidence suggests that adaptive perfectionism is positively associated with life satisfaction (Rice & Lapsley, 2001; Ashby et al., 2012). For example, individuals with adaptive perfectionistic tendencies typically set high personal standards without engaging in harsh self-criticism when goals are not achieved, and they tend to view failure as an opportunity for learning. As a result, they are more likely to maintain motivation and pride in their achievements (Burnam et al., 2013).

Based on the foregoing discussion, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

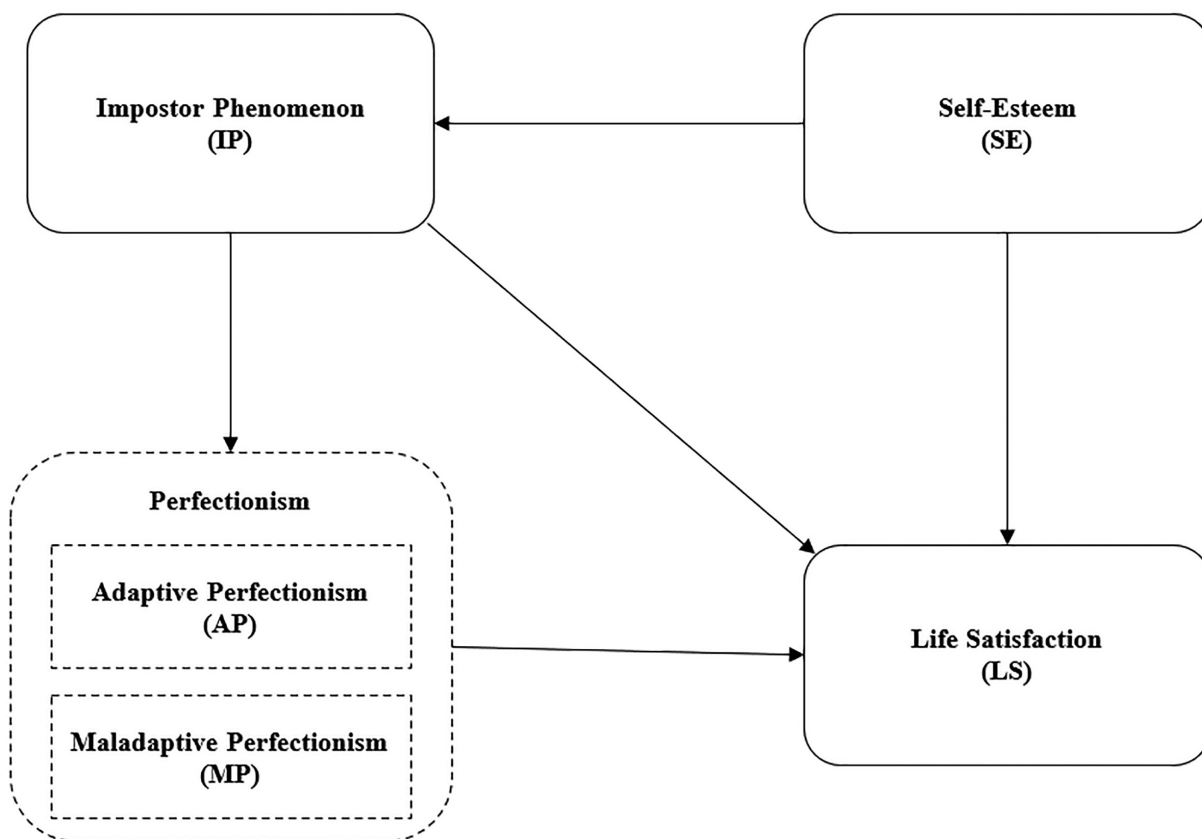
H7: Maladaptive perfectionism has a negative effect on students’ life satisfaction

H8: Adaptive perfectionism has a positive effect on students’ life satisfaction

2.6. Research Model

Based on the foregoing arguments, the authors propose the following research model.

Figure 1. Proposed research model



Source: Authors' analysis

3. Research methodology

3.1. Measurement

The questionnaire was developed using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 5), where (1) indicates “Strongly disagree,” (2) “Disagree,” (3) “Neutral,” (4) “Agree,” and (5) “Strongly agree.”

The Life Satisfaction scale was adapted from the study by Margolis et al. (2019). This scale was designed to measure the latent construct through two groups of items: nine direct items and fourteen reverse-scored indirect items. The content of the items reflects individuals’ levels of envy toward others’ lives, regret over past decisions, as well as their desire to change their current life circumstances, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of overall life satisfaction.

The Self-Esteem scale was adapted from Rosenberg (1965), who conceptualized self-esteem as encompassing two dimensions: (1) individuals who perceive themselves as “very good,” reflecting high

self-esteem, and (2) those who evaluate themselves as merely “good enough”. This scale consists of ten items, including five positively worded and five negatively worded items, capturing individuals’ positive or negative attitudes toward themselves.

The Impostor phenomenon was measured using the scale developed by Freeman et al. (2022), which comprises twenty indicators describing individuals’ internal psychological characteristics. This scale provides a robust foundation for identifying individuals with impostor tendencies and for developing effective support and intervention strategies.

Finally, Perfectionism was assessed using the scale proposed by Rice et al. (2013), which includes eight indicators divided into two dimensions: adaptive perfectionism and maladaptive perfectionism. This scale aims to evaluate perfectionistic tendencies as personality traits, reflecting relatively stable and enduring individual characteristics.

Table 1. Measurement scales

Variables	Items	Sources
Life satisfaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am satisfied with the way my life has turned out. 2. When I look back on my life, I feel satisfied. 3. Overall, I am satisfied with my life. 4. My life is going very well at present. 5. like the way my life is going. 6. I feel content with my life. 7. I am satisfied with my current position in life. 8. I would be satisfied if my life continued on its present path. 9. When I think about what I want from life, I feel that nothing is lacking. 10. If I could change my past, I would change many things. 11. I wish I had made different decisions in my life. 12. I wish that certain aspects of others' lives were also part of my own life. 13. I feel envious of other people's lives. 14. I want to change my life. 15. I am not truly satisfied with my life until I achieve certain important goals. 16. Sometimes I wish my life were very different. 17. There are aspects of my life that I strongly wish to improve. 18. I wish I could exchange my life for someone else's life. 19. People around me seem to be living better lives than I am. 20. I want to change the direction my life is currently taking. 21. I am considering starting a new life. 22. There are things I would do differently if I had the chance to choose again. 23. When thinking about important decisions, I wish I had not made so many mistakes. 	Margolis et al. (2019)
Self-Esteem	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others. 2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities. 3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people. 5. I feel that I do not have much to be proud of. 6. I take a positive attitude toward myself. 7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. 9. At times, I feel that I am useless. 10. Sometimes I think that I am no good at all. 	Rosenberg (1965)

Variables	Items	Sources
<p>Impostor phenomenon</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I often perform better on tests or tasks than I expect, even though beforehand I worry that I will not do well. 2. I am sometimes able to make others believe that I am more competent than I actually am. 3. I tend to avoid evaluation and dislike it when others assess or judge me. 4. When I am praised for an achievement, I worry that I will not be able to maintain others' expectations in the future. 5. I often believe that my current achievements or position are mainly due to luck or being in the right place at the right time. 6. I fear that people who are important to me will discover that I am not as capable as they think. 7. I frequently think about things I have not done well or could have done better. 8. I rarely feel satisfied with completing a task exactly as I intended. 9. At times, I feel that success in my life or work is merely a matter of luck or coincidence. 10. I find it difficult to believe compliments or positive feedback about my intelligence or achievements. 11. Sometimes I feel that my success is largely attributable to good fortune. 12. I am often disappointed with what I have achieved and think that I should have performed better. 13. At times, I worry that others will realize that I truly lack knowledge or ability. 14. I often fear failure when taking on a new task or responsibility, even though I usually perform well. 15. Even after achieving success and receiving recognition, I still doubt whether I can replicate that success. 16. When I receive a great deal of praise or recognition for an achievement, I tend to downplay the value of what I have accomplished. 17. I frequently compare myself with others and believe that they are more intelligent than I am. 18. I often worry that I will not succeed in a major task or will not pass an important exam, even when others are confident in my abilities. 19. When about to receive a scholarship, award, or special opportunity, I often hesitate to speak up because I am unsure whether I truly deserve it. 20. I feel disappointed or discouraged when I am not the best or do not stand out in achievement-related activities. 	<p>Freeman et al. (2022)</p>
<p>Perfectionism</p>	<p>Adaptive perfectionism</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I always set high expectations for myself. 2. I often impose very strict standards on myself. 3. I always expect myself to perform at my best. 4. I feel that I must put in maximum effort to achieve excellent results. <p>Maladaptive perfectionism</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Even when I try my hardest, I still feel that it is never enough. 2. My academic/work performance rarely meets the standards I set for myself. 3. I rarely feel satisfied with the results of my work. 4. After completing a task, I often feel disappointed because I believe I could have done better. 	<p>Rice et al. (2013)</p>

3.2. Data collection and processing

According to Hair et al. (2006), the minimum sample size for structural equation modeling should be at least five times the number of observed variables. With 22 observed variables in the proposed model, the minimum required sample size was 110. This study collected 413 responses, of which 406 valid questionnaires were retained after data screening, indicating that the sample size was adequate for model estimation and hypothesis testing.

The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in Vietnamese universities across different fields of study and academic years. Data were collected using a non-probability convenience sampling approach via an online questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The survey was distributed through social media platforms, including Facebook, Messenger, and Zalo. The final dataset was analyzed using SPSS version 20.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results analysis

4.1.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics indicate that, among the 406 students who participated in the survey, female students constituted a larger proportion (66.9%) compared to male students (33.1%). In terms of academic year, the majority of respondents were third-year students (48.76%), followed by second-year students (20.94%) and those in their fourth year or above (23.9%), while first-year students accounted for the smallest proportion (6.4%). In addition, most respondents reported that their parents were still living together (92.12%), with only a very small percentage indicating divorced, widowed, or separated family statuses. These demographic characteristics provide an overall profile of the research sample and establish a necessary foundation for subsequent analyses examining factors influencing students' life satisfaction.

4.1.2. Scale validation

4.1.2.1. Reliability analysis

The research team assessed the reliability of the measurement scales using Cronbach's alpha for each construct in the research model in order to evaluate the internal consistency among observed variables and their ability to adequately represent the underlying latent constructs. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), observed variables are considered acceptable when the Corrected Item-Total Correlation is greater than or equal to 0.3. In addition, Nunnally (1978) suggested that a scale is regarded as good when Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.8, usable when it ranges from 0.7 to 0.8, and acceptable when it is above 0.6, particularly in cases where the research construct is relatively new or applied in a novel research context.

The results indicate that the Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, and Perfectionism scales yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.840, 0.891, and 0.926, respectively.

Based on Nunnally's (1978) criteria, no observed variables were eliminated. The observed variables exhibited high corrected item-total correlations, indicating that the Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, and Perfectionism scales demonstrated high reliability and were suitable for subsequent analyses.

Following the first reliability assessment of the Impostor Phenomenon construct, the results showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.721, with two observed variables (IP9 and IP10) exhibiting corrected item-total correlations below 0.3. Specifically, the corrected item-total correlation values for IP9 and IP10 were 0.089 and 0.126, respectively. As these values did not meet the required threshold, IP9 and IP10 were removed from the scale. A second reliability assessment was then conducted, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.770, with all remaining observed variables demonstrating satisfactory corrected item-total correlations. Therefore, the results of the second reliability test were deemed acceptable for use in subsequent analyses.

4.1.2.2. Exploratory factor analysis

Following the reliability assessment using Cronbach's alpha, the research team conducted Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to examine the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement scales across four constructs: Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, Perfectionism, and the Impostor Phenomenon.

The results of the rotated factor matrix indicated that most observed variables exhibited factor loadings greater than 0.3. However, item LS12 loaded on two factors, with a loading difference of 0.153 (0.515 - 0.362), which is below the recommended threshold of 0.2. In addition, items LS16, IP3, and IP6 showed factor loadings below 0.5. Therefore, based on the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2009), the research team removed items LS12, LS16, IP3, and IP6 from further analysis.

A second EFA was subsequently performed, and the results demonstrated satisfactory model adequacy. Specifically, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.879, which falls within the acceptable range of [0.5, 1], indicating sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant (Sig. = 0.000), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. All extracted factors had eigenvalues greater than 1, and the Total Variance Explained reached 55.980%, exceeding the recommended threshold of 50%. These results indicate that the EFA model was appropriate for the study.

Furthermore, the rotated factor matrix revealed that the initial set of observed variables was grouped into six factors. Based on the EFA results, item content, and prior research by Rice et al. (2013), the Perfectionism scale was divided into two distinct dimensions. Specifically, items PF1, PF2, PF3, and PF4 loaded onto Factor 1 - Adaptive Perfectionism (AF), while items MF1, MF2, MF3, and

MF4 loaded onto Factor 2 - Maladaptive Perfectionism (MF)..

4.1.3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS version 20.0 was employed to test the proposed research model. The structural model was designed to examine the effects of four factors: (1) Life satisfaction, (2) Self-Esteem, (3) the Impostor phenomenon, and (4) Perfectionism. Notably, Perfectionism comprises two

subdimensions: Adaptive perfectionism (AF) and Maladaptive perfectionism (MF).

The results below present the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable, Life Satisfaction. The estimation of the relationships among the research constructs indicates that six out of seven hypotheses were supported at the 5% significance level (p-value < 0.05). The detailed results of hypothesis testing are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. SEM structural model results

Hypothesis	Expected Sign	Standardized Estimate	P - value	Hypothesis Testing
H1	Negative	-0.196	0.004	Supported
H2	Positive	0.237	***	Supported
H3	Negative	-0.322	***	Supported
H5	Positive	0.356	0.080	Not supported
H6	Positive	0.109	***	Supported
H7	Negative	-0.139	0.003	Supported
H8	Positive	0.245	0.005	Supported

Source: Authors' calculations.

An examination of the standardized path coefficients reveals three positive and three negative associations among self-esteem, the impostor phenomenon, perfectionism, and life satisfaction. Overall, six of the seven hypothesized relationships were supported, as their standardized estimates were consistent with the proposed directions and reached statistical significance, whereas one hypothesis was rejected due to insufficient statistical evidence.

Specifically, self-esteem showed a statistically significant negative effect on life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.196$, $p = 0.004$). Although this finding appears counterintuitive, it may reflect the competitive academic context in which students' self-esteem is closely tied to performance and external evaluation. In such settings, higher self-esteem may be accompanied by heightened pressure to maintain competence, thereby reducing overall life satisfaction. In addition, self-esteem was positively associated with the impostor phenomenon ($\beta = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students with stronger self-evaluative concerns may be more prone to doubting their own abilities despite objective success.

Consistent with this interpretation, the impostor phenomenon exerted a strong negative effect on life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.322$, $p < 0.001$). Persistent feelings of being intellectually inadequate or undeserving of achievement may prevent students from fully experiencing satisfaction with their academic and personal lives. This finding highlights the impostor phenomenon as a critical psychological risk factor for student well-being.

Regarding perfectionism, the effect of the impostor phenomenon on adaptive perfectionism was not

statistically significant ($\beta = 0.356$, $p = 0.080$), suggesting that impostor feelings do not necessarily promote constructive goal striving. By contrast, the impostor phenomenon significantly increased maladaptive perfectionism ($\beta = 0.109$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting a tendency toward excessive self-criticism and fear of failure. Maladaptive perfectionism, in turn, negatively affected life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.139$, $p = 0.003$), whereas adaptive perfectionism was positively associated with life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.245$, $p = 0.005$). This distinction underscores that high personal standards enhance well-being only when they are accompanied by flexibility and self-acceptance.

To assess the indirect effect of self-esteem on life satisfaction via the impostor phenomenon, a bootstrap mediation analysis was conducted following the procedure recommended by Hayes (2022), with 5,000 resamples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval. The results indicated that the indirect effect was statistically significant (BootLLCI = 0.0006; BootULCI = 0.0754), as the confidence interval did not include zero. The estimated indirect effect was 0.372, providing robust evidence that the impostor phenomenon functions as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction.

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal three positive and three negative relationships among self-esteem, the impostor phenomenon, perfectionism, and life satisfaction. Overall, six hypotheses were supported, as their standardized estimates were consistent with the proposed directions and reached statistical significance,

whereas one hypothesis (H5) was rejected due to a p-value exceeding the 0.05 threshold.

With regard to H1, the negative effect of self-esteem on life satisfaction diverges from the dominant view in the literature that self-esteem is a universal predictor of greater well-being (Rosenberg, 1965; Diener, 1984). However, this finding is consistent with more recent theoretical perspectives emphasizing contingent or defensive self-esteem (Orth & Robins, 2014). From the lens of Self-Discrepancy Theory, presented in the theoretical background, high but unstable self-esteem may reflect a large gap between the actual self and ideal or ought selves, thereby generating psychological strain rather than satisfaction. This result suggests that in highly competitive academic environments, self-esteem may operate differently from what has been observed in less performance-oriented contexts.

Consistent with H2, the positive association between self-esteem and the impostor phenomenon aligns with the findings of Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), who argued that individuals with unstable self-esteem in high-achievement settings are more susceptible to impostor feelings. This result also reinforces the discussion in the literature review that excessive self-evaluative focus can intensify perceived discrepancies between self-representations, thereby fostering impostor experiences. In line with previous studies (Clance & Imes, 1978; Vergauwe et al., 2015), the impostor phenomenon was found to negatively affect life satisfaction (H3), confirming its role as a critical psychological risk factor that undermines subjective well-being through anxiety, fear of failure, and chronic self-doubt.

Regarding perfectionism, the rejection of H5 indicates that impostor feelings do not significantly promote adaptive perfectionism. This finding contrasts with some studies suggesting a positive link between impostor tendencies and high personal standards, but supports the distinction emphasized in the literature between constructive striving and defensive perfectionism (Lo & Abbott, 2013). In contrast, the support for H6 is consistent with Thompson and Bigatti (2020), indicating that impostor feelings are more closely associated with maladaptive perfectionism rooted in fear of failure and self-criticism. This pattern aligns with the theoretical argument that impostor phenomenon emerges primarily from discrepancy-driven self-regulation rather than growth-oriented motivation.

Furthermore, the opposing effects of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism on life satisfaction (H7 and H8) are consistent with prior empirical evidence (Stoeber & Otto, 2006; Slade & Owens, 1998) and reinforce the multidimensional conceptualization of perfectionism discussed in the literature review. While maladaptive perfectionism amplifies stress and dissatisfaction, adaptive perfectionism appears to enhance life satisfaction by reducing self-discrepancy and fostering a sense of

competence and achievement.

Finally, the mediation analysis extends previous research by empirically confirming the impostor phenomenon as a key mechanism linking self-esteem and life satisfaction. While earlier studies have examined these constructs separately, the present findings integrate them within a unified framework grounded in Self-Discrepancy Theory. This contribution is particularly meaningful in the Vietnamese context, where empirical evidence on these psychological pathways remains limited. The results thus strengthen the theoretical coherence of the proposed model and provide new insights into how self-evaluative processes shape students' life satisfaction.

5. Conclusion and policy implications

Based on the analytical results and discussion, this study identifies several key contributions in both academic and practical terms. Academically, the study extends the theoretical foundation and adds empirical evidence regarding life satisfaction among Vietnamese university students. Notably, a novel contribution lies in the development and empirical testing of the relationships among self-esteem, impostor phenomenon, and perfectionism within a single research model, thereby clarifying the mediating role of the impostor phenomenon. This integrative approach addresses a gap in prior studies, which have largely examined these psychological factors in isolation. Practically, the findings provide a scientific basis for the refinement of policies and governance practices in higher education with a stronger emphasis on students' mental well-being. Furthermore, the results support higher education institutions, lecturers, and educational administrators in designing psychological support programs, innovating teaching methods, and fostering personal development, thereby contributing to improved educational quality and sustainable human resource development.

For the State and educational authorities: The national policy framework for student mental health care within the higher education system needs to be further strengthened and refined. Specifically, indicators of students' mental well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction should be incorporated into higher education quality assessment systems alongside traditional academic criteria. At the same time, the Ministry of Education and Training may provide strategic direction for the implementation of programs aimed at developing personal skills, managing academic expectations, and enhancing students' psychological adaptation, thereby facilitating sustainable human resource development.

For lecturers: The research findings indicate that teaching approaches and lecturer-student interactions exert a significant influence on students' self-esteem. Accordingly, lecturers should prioritize supportive and encouraging feedback that emphasizes individual progress rather than comparative achievement. In addition,

lecturers may integrate activities such as prompting students to self-assess their level of understanding, facilitating discussions on learning difficulties, and guiding students to set learning goals aligned with their abilities, thereby contributing to enhanced student satisfaction and mental well-being.

For educational institutions: Higher education institutions should prioritize the systematic provision of counseling and psychological support services to facilitate early identification of impostor phenomenon symptoms and maladaptive perfectionism among students. Moreover, assessment policies should be reoriented toward a more holistic approach that extends beyond grade-based evaluation to recognize individual effort and

growth-oriented attitudes. Such reforms may help reduce perfectionistic pressure and enhance students' satisfaction with both academic life and overall life experience.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional online survey may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the sample was drawn from only a limited number of universities, which may not fully capture the diversity of students nationwide. Future research is therefore encouraged to expand the scope and sample size to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among self-esteem, the impostor phenomenon, perfectionism, and life satisfaction among Vietnamese university students.

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